



Gray Thoron

July 14, 1916 – September 8, 2015

Former Cornell Law School Dean Gray Thoron died peacefully in his sleep at Kendal of Ithaca on Sept. 18th 2015 at the age of 99. He had remained his entire life a proper Bostonian, almost always dressed with jacket and bow tie. Born in Danvers, MA, on July 14, 1916, his childhood was spent in a house there marked with a bullet hole dating back to the Revolutionary War. Educated at private schools in Cambridge, MA, and Concord, NH, he entered Harvard College and then Harvard Law School. Upon graduation he joined the Wall Street firm of Sullivan and Cromwell in New York City just a few months before Pearl Harbor was bombed. He joined the Army the next day.

During the war he was a combat infantryman with armored brigade in Europe where he eventually became a company commander with the rank of Captain. He was seriously wounded in the assault on the Siegfried Line and earned a purple heart with cluster and was awarded both a Bronze and Silver Star for his efforts. At the war's end he rejoined Sullivan and Cromwell as a litigator but found that role increasingly difficult due to a serious hearing loss attributable to his war wounds. It was then he decided upon a teaching career that began at the law school of University of Texas in 1948. While there he was active in politics and was a member of the team that successfully persuaded the national Republican authorities to seat the Eisenhower rather than Taft delegation at the convention about to choose their party candidate for the upcoming 1952 presidential election. He was asked to join the Office of the Solicitor General in 1954 where he argued a number of cases in behalf of the government in front of the Supreme Court of United States. It was from there that in 1956 he was invited to become dean of The Cornell Law School.

It becomes increasingly difficult to appreciate how different were

those days a half century ago. Faculty wore jackets and ties. There were no desk top computers, much less handheld devices that served as telephones, message stations and information booths. A wrist watch that also served as telephone and mini-computer connected to the vast outside world was grist for Dick Tracy comic strips and Flash Gordon serial movie shorts at the local cinema. A good all round grade point average was a C+, and an A unheard of in polite society. And Gray came to Ithaca to the lead a very contented country club like institution quite pleased to think of itself as the best New York law school. It was he who shook up the place and left it rapidly turning into one bent upon becoming truly a national law school.

Under his leadership the school launched a search for new faculty who shared his dream, particularly persons who demonstrated teaching ability and an interest in research and writing on topics of national significance. It must be noted that Gray's vision of the law was not confined to serving the needs of Beacon Hill style elites but included the less fortunate members of the community. To this end he set about founding what has become a magnificent legal aid clinic at Cornell, an institution that provides not only legal help to those who cannot afford it otherwise but produces graduates of the school trained to service the needs of such persons.

Throughout his academic career Gray preached the need never to rest content with just knowing the rules of law, but how to conduct oneself in a court room in order to put those rules to work servicing the actual needs of real live clients. Indeed, his teaching ranged from dealing with such a basic problem as how to find clients to the absolute necessity always to conduct oneself according to ethical norms. In this regard Gray was a national leader in perceiving the needs to teach aspiring lawyers their professional responsibilities, this before ethics became a required course in all law schools.

Gray gave up his deanship in 1963 and continued to teach at the law school until his retirement in 1987. Throughout his entire career at Cornell he was always more than willing to talk things over with students, particularly those worried about what choice they should consider as realistic given their grade point average. And in this regard, he was a superb talent scout, able to see in a not-so-hot scholar the makings of an excellent practitioner. Almost without fail, that poet no else on the faculty would recommend would indeed turn out to be a crackerjack lawyer in disguise.

Gray also oversaw a piece of major construction at Myron Taylor Hall as a new residential wing was attached. This was known as Hughes Hall, named after Charles Evans Hughes, one time professor at the law school but better known for his career on the Supreme Court. Herein were housed each first year class wherein they could support one another in an often difficult adjustment to

the pressure of law school. As chance would have it, the class living there in the year Gray died would be the last one to do so, the building to be converted to office space for faculty and administrative purposes.

Gray married Mary Dwight Clark in 1939, with whom he raised five children. They were divorced in 1968. In 1971 he married Patty Porter Holmes, who predeceased him in 2000. Though out his career at Cornell, including his emeritus years, his home was the scene of remarkable parties featuring a mix of junior faculty and old timers, as well as members of the wider community. And there always was Gray in his jacket and tie doing his best to make sure everyone was put at ease and encouraged to enjoy themselves. To recall Gray Thoron is not unlike inventing the universal solvent and finding the subject has no boundaries. So let me conclude these remarks with the thought that Gray was a man, taken for all and all, the likes of which I shall not look upon again.

Ernie Roberts

