

Winter 1969

Hobart Coffey: Memorial Address

William B. Harvey
University of Michigan Law School

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/lqnotes>

Recommended Citation

William B. Harvey, *Hobart Coffey: Memorial Address*, 14 *Law Quadrangle (formerly Law Quad Notes)* - (1969).

Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/lqnotes/vol14/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Law Quadrangle (formerly Law Quad Notes) by an authorized editor of University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact mlaw.repository@umich.edu.

Hobart Coffey

MEMORIAL ADDRESS



An address by William B. Harvey, Dean of the Indiana University School of Law, at a memorial service held for Professor Hobart Coffey at the First Unitarian Church in Ann Arbor, on Friday, September 19, 1969.

Hobart Coffey had been a member of the U-M Law Faculty from 1922-66.

Dean Harvey, a U-M Law graduate, was a member of this faculty from 1951-66.

Our friend Hob Coffey died on Sunday, September 14. On the death of a friend it is especially appropriate that we meet and share our cherished recollections of him. Together, we neither sit in mournful silence, nor mark his going with outpourings of grief. A gentle and compassionate man who touched our lives with kindness, understanding, and warm companionship, achieved the satisfactions of honorable work well-done, of friendship and respect well-earned, and, in the fullness of years,

he died. Without exception, my recollections of Hob are happy ones; some of those recollections I want to share with you today.

I knew Hob for more than 20 years, first as my teacher, then as a professional colleague, but most deeply as a friend.

I had only the course on family law—or Domestic Relations as it was then called—with Hob. His administrative duties in the Law School left him little opportunity to teach. Yet I recall him as an excellent teacher—meticulous in his preparation, lucid in presentation, demanding of his students, and much inclined to enliven his classes with a salty wit.

During the celebration of the Centennial of the Law School, some waggish committee decided to put out a booklet of photographs of the faculty, most of them of the candid sort. Usually a member of the faculty rated only one photograph, but Hob had two. One was taken while he was teaching, seated behind the desk in a classroom. The photographer caught him, happily, with a quite characteristic expression. His head was turned slightly to the side, the chin well raised, and he looked up-

ward with a beatific smile on his face. The identifying caption, based, I assume, on a comment made in his admiralty course, was "Some captains named their ships after their favorite women!" For Hob the law was not an arid, impersonal system. It was a fabric of intensely human material to whose infinite variety and richness he could respond with interest, insight, and often amusement. As many legal memoranda and opinions left in his files indicate, however, he was also a skilled, disciplined professional.

The gulf between teacher and student in a large law school is wide and deep. Through most of his career, Hob bridged that gulf more successfully than most teachers of his time, for he liked and respected young people. I came to know Hob well, however, only after I returned from practice and joined the faculty of the Law School.

Hob's contribution to the Law School was unique, for it was his responsibility to develop and administer the library on which all of us—students and faculty alike—depended. The magnificent collection in the Michigan Law Library today

is a splendid memorial to the imagination and dedication he brought to the tasks. His achievement could be illustrated readily by accession rates, gross holdings, and other indices, but I put aside dry figures for a personal illustration. When I became interested during the late fifties in legal developments in Africa and other less developed areas, I frequently needed relatively obscure works on primitive law or colonial legal systems. In the early stages I usually assumed that my need could be met, if at all, only by a patient search of specialized libraries and by borrowing. Yet on innumerable occasions I found that Hob had bought the work for the Library many years before, out of typically small original printings or on the rare book market. Through his imagination, foresight, and diligence in urging and serving the needs of the library, qualities grounded in his own love for books and appreciation for the scholarship his duties left him little time to pursue, the Law Library became what it is today.

I will not stress his professional achievements—though they are great. My thoughts are more of the quality of the man. He recruited for the Library a dedicated and competent staff whom he treated with respect and consideration. He was interested in them as individuals; he shared their problems; and he viewed their foibles with gentle amusement. Once after he discovered that the stack marker in the canon law collection was spelled “cannon,” he nursed his secret for weeks in gleeful anticipation of the reaction of some of his associates when they discovered the error.

On another occasion when he encountered the annual difficulty in reserving a few offices in the Legal Research Building for emergency use later in the year, he decided that the task would be far easier if all offices appeared to be assigned. To the fictional occupants of the reserved offices he attached proper names, deciding after mature consideration to use for the purpose the names of the 12 apostles. The scheme worked, and

Hob had several opportunities during the year to agree with the observations of others that indeed Mr. Matthew or Mr. Bartholomew was rarely in his office and did not appear too diligent in his work.

Hob was a student of the Bible and his reading of the King James version and the ancient catechisms was reflected in his choice of words and the cadence of his speech. To indicate that he would be unavailable in his office for a few days, he once posted on his office door a Biblical citation. The diligent who checked the reference would have learned that, properly interpreted, it revealed that Hob had gone fishing. During another absence he simply posted a photographic blow-up of an announcement he had discovered in an 18th century journal which went something like this: “Being overwhelmed by the burden of my duties, I am constrained to repair to my dwelling and to remain there until I regain my customary composure.”

These small episodes illustrate Hob's most pronounced and endearing quality—a wry, detached, whimsical, but always gentle humor. It made conversation with him a delightful experience, it relieved the tedium and ponderousness of faculty meetings; it warmed his relations with his colleagues in the library and in the faculty. His humor and wit were as readily directed toward himself as toward others, and they will forever brighten our recollections of Hob. As one friend has said, “Anyone who doesn't have a Coffey remark to cherish is the poorer for it.”

Many of my own fondest memories of Hob come from fishing trips a group of us regularly made to Canada. Hob was a relaxed, even casual fisherman, but he caught his share or more. In recent years when failing health made it impossible for him to be with us, Hob remained in a special sense in the group, for we frequently recalled that special mixture of wit and wisdom which filled his conversation.

With these outings too I associate other recollections of Hob which

reveal qualities we took perhaps too much for granted in the special community of the Law School: a courtliness and grace, a warm interest in all kinds and conditions of people, and a considerateness that never suggested condescension. Those qualities were also revealed in many acts of private charity and support, the extent of which not even his close friends knew.

Hob was a complex, many faceted man. My own recollections can suggest, at best, a partial view. Some of you would recall and stress his professional contributions during 40 years of devoted service to a great University. Others would speak of the sympathy and support he gave his staff and his sensitivity in meeting institutional needs while providing opportunities to the young, the disadvantaged, and the oppressed. Out of our collective awareness we could compile a large but not exhaustive account of his generosity to the aged, the lonely, and the needy. But with all this, we would not have described the whole man. There was, in Hob, an ultimate sense of privacy, an inner reserve, that all of his friends recognized and respected.

Hob Coffey is dead. The iron will that sustained him without complaint through his final years of failing health has been discharged. Yet with those of us who knew him and for those who will continue to benefit from his labors, Hob still lives.

As long as students and teachers of the law work in this University, Hob will live;

As long as friends and acquaintances find joy in recalling his gentle, humorous, and wise words, Hob will live;

As long as men value human compassion and quiet, unpublicized acts of kindness toward others, Hob's spirit will live.

It is for these reasons that today I cannot mourn, nor can I express the grief of loss. I was privileged to know, to love, and now to cherish the memory of a fine man. I would simply pray that the God of all-encompassing love will receive and sustain him.