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THE QUINTESSENTIAL PUBLIC SERVANT

Otis M. Smith *

I first heard about Wade McCree in the fall of 1941 when I entered Fisk University, a small black liberal arts college in Nashville, Tennessee. Wade had just graduated from Fisk the previous June, leaving behind a legacy of achievement which was still the subject of more than casual reference by faculty and students alike.

This was more than ten years before I actually met the man at a legal seminar on the University of Michigan campus in the early 1950s. In the intervening years, we had served in a racially segregated Army during World War II, had completed law school, married, and chosen Michigan as our home. But what really brought us together was a sharing of mutually supportive goals in public service by appointment of then Governor G. Mennen Williams.

Wade was appointed a Workmen's Compensation Commissioner in 1952 and later Wayne County Circuit Court Judge, while I began in Lansing as Public Service Commission Chairman and progressed through the Auditor General's post to the Michigan Supreme Court. Positions of this type were somewhat rare for Afro-Americans at this time in our nation's history and this made Wade and me keenly aware that many skeptical eyes were upon us in parts of the white community — as were many hopeful eyes in both the black and white communities. We knew that only the highest performance was likely to be acceptable and, therefore, we were determined to excel and consequently to leave no doubt.

That Professor McCree excelled there is absolutely no doubt. Over the years, I have been privileged to know a large number of federal, state, and local officials of various political persuasions. None has rated higher than he did, not only in my estimation but in that of many others who were familiar with his work. He was the quintessential public servant.

Other writers in this memorial tribute to "the Judge" have attested to his intellect, his legal scholarship, his wit, and his humanity. I can agree with all of this. But there was more. In better than thirty years of close friendship, my admiration for him as a public servant grew

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with every passing year. He was most diligent about the public's business, scrupulously fair, and possessed of the highest sense of honor.

Honor, to Wade McCree, had to do not only with what was or could be made visible to the public eye, but applied equally to those things done behind closed doors. It applied even to the private conversations with a close friend. One example will suffice.

Over the last fifteen or twenty years, Wade and I travelled together all over the country, mainly to meetings of lawyers, and on such trips we engaged in hours and hours of "lawyer talk." Much of this time he was still a judge but with my judgeship in the past I was again a lawyer with one large client, General Motors, a frequent defendant in the federal court system. Not once did Judge McCree ever mention to me what was going on inside his court. Not issues. Not personalities. Nothing. He knew and I knew that to do so could possibly give my client, through me, some insight and potential advantage that would not be available to the other side. So, when we were not solving the problems of the free world, we discussed arcane issues of law.

When Wade had completed his tour of duty as Solicitor General in 1981, he was besieged with offers from a number of major law firms in Washington, New York, and elsewhere. He could have named his salary, but he chose to remain in the public service as a teacher in the law school of this great public university.

We should all be eternally grateful that he made this choice. Judging from this and other more tangible memorials planned in his honor, I think we will have the opportunity to show that we loved him as he loved and served us all.