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WADE McCREE'S MICHIGAN LEGACY

*G. Mennen Williams**

Few in our time have contributed as much to the improvement of the human condition as did Wade Hampton McCree, Jr. He was not only a public benefactor, but a pioneer in the field of civil rights when it was a risky thing to do. The irony of it all is that the revolutionary changes which Wade McCree instituted are now accepted as so commonplace that not many realize how great and pervasive his pioneering was.

The fact of the matter is that when Wade McCree accepted appointment to the Wayne County Circuit Court bench, few thought he would have a chance to be elected in the open election that would follow. Indeed, most thought he would have no chance at all, and many thought his appointment would kill the chances of re-election of the governor who appointed him.

No black judge had ever been elected. Even the one black judge appointed to the Detroit recorder's court failed to be re-elected in the city of Detroit itself. The Wayne County Circuit Court to which Wade McCree would be appointed included not only the city of Detroit but the predominately white, if not practically all white, suburbs surrounding the city.

At the time Wade McCree was appointed in 1954 the cause of civil rights had not progressed too far. Not only had the civil rights proponents in the 1952 Democratic Convention suffered humiliating defeat, but the Michigan Legislature, despite the urgent insistence of the Governor beginning in 1949, had not yet been able to enact the mildest and most rudimentary of civil rights legislation, a fair employment practices act.

Despite this dismal outlook of an untimely end to a so-far distinguished career, Wade McCree accepted the challenge and confounded the skeptics and Cassandras. His low key, good-humored, and easy way permitted him to establish that his was a class act of outstanding merit. Bench, bar, media, and litigants recognized that in Wade McCree the Circuit Court possessed an outstanding personality, jurist, scholar, and statesman. He was esteemed not only for his gentle but firm manner, but also for the justice and wisdom of his actions.

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In a non-partisan election in a predominately white district, he won the right to retain his seat by running first in both the primary and general elections in a sizeable field, which included able and well-established judges. Four years later in an even larger field of twenty-eight candidates, he finished fifth with an even larger vote total than in 1955.

The impact of Wade McCree on the Wayne County and state judiciary was to encourage able black lawyers to compete for judgeships. Where there were no black judges, today there are many. No longer in Wayne County is a black judicial candidate considered to be facing insuperable odds; it is a normal thing to do. A black appointee to the Michigan Supreme Court, Justice Dennis W. Archer, won his confirming election running statewide. After Wade McCree, it wasn't necessarily easy but, in the vernacular, it was a new ball game.

More than Jackie Robinson, Wade McCree had changed the rules, opened new gates of opportunity, and made us all not only prouder of him, but of ourselves.

Wade McCree, of course, subsequently was appointed by President Kennedy to the United States District Court, by President Johnson to the Court of Appeals, and by President Carter to be Solicitor General of the United States. With a president of a different persuasion, he would have been a top candidate for appointment to the United States Supreme Court.

The only part these later offices play in this tribute is to indicate the remarkable improvement in Michigan human relations produced by Wade McCree: his underlying legal competence and humanity overcame all the reluctance and prejudice in our society three decades ago.

Then, too, it made it more difficult for a later generation to comprehend that not only was Wade McCree an outstanding jurist and gentleman, but also a pioneer and human being who brought many of his fellow human beings out of the strictures of skepticism and even prejudice. Wade McCree was not only an outstanding jurist but was a superb human being who helped make the world a better place to live and helped make his fellow human beings better people.

As for myself, I am proud and happy to have been a colleague and friend of Wade McCree.