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Remembering Professor Joseph McKnight

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REMEMBERING PROFESSOR JOSEPH MCKNIGHT

*Leland L. Coggan**

DURING the summer of 2014, my grandson from northern Virginia decided he wanted to be a lawyer. He informed me that he would like to visit my law school, the SMU Dedman School of Law. His viewing of the movie, *The Caine Mutiny*, motivated him.

So, I arranged with two of my law professor friends that he be introduced to the law. Professor John Lowe had him, his mother (my daughter), and me sit in on an LLM class in Oil and Gas Contracts. Since the boy was sixteen years old, it was unlikely any momentous decisions would be made.

However, at lunch, in the dining room in the formerly called “Lawyers’ Inn” (as it was known in 1955 when I first arrived), we were joined by Professor Joseph McKnight. He was introduced to Conner McBride, who in turn told Joe of his aspiration. Immediately, Joe recognized him as a candidate in spite of his youth and soon discovered that the student was a winner of national championships from the Virginia Classical League.

Latin was a language Joe knew well. Joe then invited us to spend the afternoon in the Rare Book Room in the Underwood Library. Inevitably, Joe had the student and his mother (also a Latin scholar of note) read some of the tomes in Joe’s collection. The legal terms were often mentioned to them, but the venture was astonishing. Several hours were spent by the great teacher with neophytes. The patience that was shown was another demonstration of his thoughtfulness towards those who were not as skilled in the law. He was never disdainful of those just introduced to the law. The experience became a story in our family lore.

Joe and I arrived at the Law School in September of 1955. He was fresh from New York City and I was fresh from Japan and the Marine Corps. I experienced his teaching in a Domestic Relations class, as well as an International Law class while a new LLM candidate. He sought me out and told me of his naval service and his trip to the Far East as a junior officer. I was always grateful for his ability to bring comfort to the uninitiated. Never was he merely a legal scholar of great renown. His secular and spiritual thinking was as important to him as the law.

Currently, those words “intellectual elite” are used as a pejorative. In fact, Joe was on an intellectual level that transcended even the brightest

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intellect. A holder of the Bachelor of Civil Law from Oxford University, Joe was the first American to be the leader of the Law School's Student Bar Society. He was also known for his prodigious work ethic. To demonstrate: he earned an additional M.A. at Oxford and an extra LLM at Columbia University while employed in New York City. This should be proof enough of his standing with the great minds of the past century. He was never ignominious in his view of others as compared to himself.

Joe, of course, was known for his very valuable Rare Law Book Collection, which he donated to the Dedman School of Law. One of his prosaic skills was as an expert bookbinder. With very few exceptions, he found and repaired the books contained in that collection. He was an instructor and mentor to others in the skill of bookbinding. He taught my wife, Patricia Conner Coggan, so that she became quite skilled.

It was at the Craft Guild of Dallas that Joe introduced Pat to the Texas Old Missions and Forts Restoration Association (TOMFRA). Joe was a co-founder of this group of Texas history buffs. Joe's love of all things Texan was begun in his youth in San Angelo, Texas. He would describe at length his family-owned ranch near San Saba, Texas. I first heard of the ranch during my first class with him. It was a tale I remember well, but I never saw the ranch until recent years when TOMFRA went there during their annual Spring Trip to observe Texas Missions and Texas Forts. Upon his demise, he was buried at his beloved ranch. TOMFRA, a state-wide organization, was noted nationally for its collaborations with and support of the Texas State Historical Association, the Texas Historical Commission, and the Center for Heritage Conservation in the Department of Architecture at Texas A&M University. Joe personally selected Pat Coggan as a President of TOMFRA (in which capacity she served twice). TOMFRA has become her first philanthropic love. Joe's most interesting contribution to TOMFRA was his arrangement for the group to travel to Spain where Premier Francisco Franco welcomed them personally. Through the years, Joe and Pat Coggan would have wide ranging discussions on Texas history and folklore on trips to old missions and forts of Texas.

Once, Pat Coggan and I were "invited" by Mimi McKnight, Joe's spouse, to transport Joe to the Annual TOMFRA spring trip to Fredericksburg, Texas. During the drive, he regaled us with a great number of stories about his family ranch and his rare book discoveries both nationally and abroad. He was a master of understatement and conversation.

Joe was a long-time member of the Town and Gown Club of SMU, which is composed of half SMU Gown members and half Town members. We would sit enthralled at his table at their monthly dinners listening to his interesting tales.

Professor McKnight spent over forty years assembling his rare book collection. Every summer, he would take up residence near Oxford, England and "invade" local book sellers for additions to his collection. The oldest book in his collection is a law book dated 1481. Joe McKnight was

truly a Texan with a world-view worthy of the name. Language was never a barrier to his understanding of the evolutionary nature of the law. His myriad writings and works were a recognition of that fact.

Joe was my teacher in an International Law class, which guided me to a more spiritual understanding of the law in the world order. He believed that man could progress without limit, if he chose a lawful life. Joe McKnight was, by all accounts, a national treasure. His impact upon those who served the law and mankind was without parallel.

Joe made great strides in writing and speaking on legislation that released women from lives of forbearance to lives of energy and character. Joe wrote the Texas Family Code and the Texas Matrimonial Property Act. The field of women's rights was his specialty, and he succeeded mightily in advancing the lives of women through legislation. We should honor Joe McKnight, above all else, in this endeavor. He was a gentle, quiet spirit, who moved people to heights they could not achieve by themselves. He always battled for the defenseless.

Joe and his wife, Mimi, were greatly honored by SMU Adjunct Law Professor Alexander McCall Smith, author of the *No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* and other books, by dedicating two of his books to them. Professor McCall's greatest contribution to British literature was the creation of his famous character, Precious Ramotswe.

God bless you, Joe McKnight, for entering our lives and sharing yourself with us. Joe's beloved spouse, Mimi Aldredge McKnight, passed away on April 3, 2017 and was interred at the McKnight ranch near San Saba, Texas, close to her husband.