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MR. ECKHARDT IN THE 1950s

THE HONORABLE WILLIAM H. BILLINGS*

Since World War II, the term “Big Three” is often associated with three men: Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin. But to this writer, “Big Three” will always bring to mind Willard Eckhardt, Lee-Carl Overstreet, and William Pittman. The efforts and dedication of my Big Three are largely responsible for any success that has come my way since I completed law school in August 1952. The knowledge they shared with us continues to help shape the society we live in and assist us daily in our chosen profession.

Real Property, Personal Property, Conveyances, and some exposure to Future Interests as a “hearer” were my courses under Mr. Eckhardt. The learning experience at his hands was exhilarating as well as confusing at times as we journeyed back in time to before the common law and wound our way into the twentieth century. Technical and foreign terminology was made clear and understandable when Mr. Eckhardt explained legalese and charted out the rules and exceptions on the blackboard. Diagrams he used as teaching tools can now be found in my chambers as aids to chart out problems, and class notebooks from his courses can be found in the credenza on which this typewriter sits and are still referred to from time to time.

“Don’t worry about all of those strange terms and what they mean,” my deceased friend Jim Ford (class of 1950 from our hometown of Kennett) told me. “Mr. Eckhardt will lay it all out, and all of a sudden things will fall in place,” he said. And, true to Jim’s prediction, there came that day in Real Property when the light dawned and a fee simple became an absolute and a reversion was something other than the back-up gear on an automobile.

The summer sessions of ’50, ’51, and ’52 were even more enjoyable learning experiences. Not only were the classes smaller so that there was more give-and-take between professor and student, but we students had a better opportunity to know the Big Three on a personal basis. They usually had coffee at Doc’s Drugstore across from Tate and Jesse Hall (just west of the poolhall), and we were always welcome to attend and share the wisdom and wit of the Big Three. From time to time, one of us would ask Mr. Eckhardt when he and Professor Paul Peterson were going to complete the volumes of Missouri Practice (Volumes 6 and 7) they were working on so that we would have some guidance when we graduated. Such an inquiry would usually bring forth a remark from Professor Overstreet that it was obvious we

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would need all the help we could get and that he personally hoped the form books would be forthcoming.

There are few among the countless students that he taught who will have the influence on others that Mr. Eckhardt has had during his teaching career. His annual reviews of real property cases by the Supreme Court of Missouri, his law review articles and comments, his work *Possessory Estates, Future Interests and Conveyances in Missouri* (Vol. 23, V.A.M.S.), his two volumes of *Missouri Practice* written with Professor Peterson, and his leadership in Missouri Bar committee work have continued the learning process for his former students. His students have been or are now members of the federal and state judiciaries, leaders of the legislative and executive branches of state and federal government, senior members of nation-wide law firms, leaders of the business world, successful practitioners from coast-to-coast, and teachers of law.

To say that Mr. Eckhardt was one of my favorite teachers would be an understatement. He was and is a giant as a teacher of the law. He was patient, clear, concise, and thorough in imparting legal wisdom to the unlearned. These qualities made older students (most were veterans of World War II, many were married, and some had children) burn the midnight oil in an extra effort for a man we felt was putting forth that effort for us. As a result, we benefited because of the sparks he kindled within us. He was a legal scholar, second to none, and yet practical, with an awareness that he was furnishing the basic tools we would use in the day-to-day practice of law. His interest in his students did not wane when graduation day came. His continuing interest in former students is known to many, and as in student days, his door of knowledge remains open.

This writer, with three other former students of Mr. Eckhardt, had the privilege and honor of setting the necessary wheels in motion, and, as Curators of the University of Missouri,¹ approving his selection as Dean. Through his determined leadership the School of Law was a vital instrument in keeping the Columbia campus on an even keel during the turbulent times of Kent State and Vietnam. "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops."²

A personal note to Mr. Eckhardt: Your influence continues. Thank you for being my teacher and my friend.

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1. All four of us had been appointed by another former student, Governor Warren E. Hearnes.
 2. Henry Brooks Adams (1838-1928).