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A LETTER TO BOB WETTACH

FROM ALBERT COATES*

[This letter was delivered to Mr. Wettach during his illness and is published here with the permission of his family.

THE EDITORS.]

Dear Bob:

When I came from your office on Saturday morning after the Friday evening accolade for you, I found two of your students waiting for me with a copy of an article I had written about the Law School in 1946. They read me this paragraph I had written about you:

In Dean Wettach it has a leader who joined its ranks in 1921 and has spent twenty-five years in its service. Starting with McGehee and McIntosh and working through the administrations of successive Deans, acquainting himself with the problems of legal education in North Carolina and throughout the country, he unites today in his experience the old Law School traditions with the new. His work with Bar Association committees, with state commissions such as the Commission to Revise the Insurance Laws of which he was Chairman, with the Attorney General's office where he served as Assistant Attorney General, with the National Textile Labor Relations Board and the National War Labor Board, gives him a practical awareness of the problems of the legal profession. He has guided the Law School through the difficulties of the war years. . . . The Law School student body today includes the largest number of students with the best academic training and the greatest maturity and variety of experience of any student body in the Law School's history.†

They asked me if I could give them further information which they could use in their speeches at the testimonial dinner your students were planning in your honor. Here is the substance of what I told them. I can tell it to you—now that your illness has called off the dinner.

There were 131 students in this Law School when Mr. Wettach became its leader in 1941. He saw it dwindle to 13 by 1943

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† Coates, *A Century of Legal Education*, 24 N.C.L. REV. 307, 399-400. (1946).

as students left for the armed services of World War II. He was left with three faculty members to keep the Law School going, maintain a standard three-year curriculum, handle the administrative duties of his office, serve as faculty editor of the *Law Review*, and hold buckle and tongue together through the war years.

He saw the student body returning and growing—from 131 in 1941 to 288 in 1949—the largest number of students with the best academic training and the greatest maturity and variety of experience in the Law School history at that time.

He saw the core of the old faculty returning to the Law School and growing—from 7 in 1941 to 11 in 1949. There were Wettach, Van Hecke, McCall, Coates, Breckenridge, Hanft, Daltzell, Brandis, and Miss Elliott as Librarian, and he added Baer and Aycock in post war years.

He saw the 1949 General Assembly respond to his urging with an appropriation to double the size and facilities of the law building he had inherited in 1941.

In short, he turned over the Law School to his successor in 1949 as a going concern with the largest and best equipped faculty, student body, building and facilities in the hundred and four years of its history. There are around 2200 living Alumni of this Law School, and three fourths of them have gone through his classrooms in the years from 1921 to 1964 and touched at least the hem of his garment as teacher, dean, and friend.

He never had any particular love of deaning and he took on the job partly as a matter of personal pride and partly because he was the obvious choice. The secret of his strength is a love of people and of teaching which has never worn thin in the forty-three years that he has lived and worked among us.

I never saw a finer recognition of those qualities in any man than I saw last night when the president of the Law School Association introduced him to a convocation of law students: "Students in this Law School never agree on who is the best teacher, or what is the best course, or how is the best way to handle a class—that is, with one exception: Mr. Wettach." The whole student body applauded and kept on applauding, and then stood up and swelled into an ovation—unplanned, spontaneous, and beautiful. When I bring the history of the Law School up to date, I shall tell his story in detail and it will not suffer in the telling.

All of this discussion brought up memories I could not share with your students but which I have already shared with you. One of those memories relates to as great a service as you ever did for the Law School—in changing the climate, restoring the fellowship,

uniting the faculty. You did it—effectively, beautifully, and quickly. I doubt if another person could have done it. That performance is one of the crowning glories of your deanship.

There is another memory of the evening toward the end of your deanship when Gladys and I invited you and Alpha to break bread with us on the back porch of the little house in Guy Phillips' back yard. Some years before, a friend had given us the finest bottle of champagne that money could buy in return for a service I had done him. We had saved it through the years for opening on some great occasion. We could think of no greater occasion to celebrate than the difference you had made in my life and work—and that goes for Gladys too. That was why we opened it for you.

We were in the home of Fred and Sally Bowman a day or two ago. Fred was recalling your year as Assistant Attorney General and the quality of your work there which brought pressures from your friends to run for the office of Attorney General, and your laughing inquiry: "Who would vote for a man from Pittsburgh with a name spelled and pronounced like Wettach?"

Here is one belated answer to that inquiry: I have known many men born and bred in North Carolina who are alien to its spirit and its institutions. I have known others born and bred as far away as Pittsburgh, and farther, who have come to Chapel Hill and taken root and grown and flourished in this soil. In my book, they are the authentic native sons of North Carolina and the University of North Carolina and Chapel Hill. You are one of them, and Alpha is another, and your children, of course, are first generation natives.

Fred's remembrance reminded me of a story Billy Carmichael told of his father in an Alumni meeting in New York while he was listening to a football game report and heard that Sniscak was carrying the ball for Carolina. "Sniscak!" he exclaimed, "Sniscak! What is my Alma Mater coming to? It doesn't sound like a North Carolina name to me!" And then reports came in: "Sniscak gains twenty yards for a first down. . . . Sniscak completes a forward pass. . . . Sniscak carries the ball for a touchdown." And Mr. Carmichael turned to Billy and said: "Son, Sniscak did sound a little unusual the first time I heard it. But when you hear it over and over and over again it begins to sound as good as Carmichael." And

so we all say of Wettach, particularly when it carries Robert as a modifying adjective.

I am sure you know, without being told, that your failure to come to your office the other day, followed by your going to the hospital, brought a stillness at this end of the hall. When Ruth Strong told me you were on the "critical" list, I told her you had never been critical of anybody in your life. When she said you had to have "transfusions," I told her there ought not to be any difficulty about that, for I had seen you giving and getting transfusions over and over again in the fellowship of friends. When she said you had a "rare" type of blood, I told her I had known that ever since I met you in the fall of 1921. "Oh, you know what I mean," she said. "Of course I do," I answered, "and you know what I mean too." She said she did.

This morning Ruth came in and said you were doing fine. I replied: That news makes me understand what Henry IV meant in the television performance of the Age of Kings the other evening when good news came to him in the middle of the gloom: "Westmoreland! thou art a summer bird which ever in the haunch of winter sings the lifting up of day."* So say we all!

* SHAKESPEARE, HENRY IV, Part II, Act IV, Sc. iv, Ll. 93-95.