

Tribute To Ford Ross

Ford can celebrate 4 things this year:

65 years of marriage to Anne

57 years as a member of this Rotary Club

70 years of active legal practice

In September, he'll reach 95 years of age

Ford was Club President in 1955-56 (and attended the 50th year celebration of RI in Chicago. This year, we're celebrating the 100th anniversary at the Chicago convention.) Ford and Anne took the train to the convention along with a group of Wooster Rotarians and their wives. That group included Harry Sands (Club Secy), Harold Cook and Oscar Martin.

When he was President, our Club was about half its present size and met upstairs in Weitzel Hall (where Murr Printing is now located at the corner of North and Buckeye streets). One of the members was Dr. Ed Brown - who many will recall was wheel chair bound - and members of the club carried him each week up the stairs on their backs-- exhibiting, literally - as Ford says - service above self. The club moved when the new YMCA was built.

Ford graduated from the College of Wooster in 1932 and Harvard Law School in 1935. He notes that it was a great time to be a student - it was the middle of the depression and there were no jobs. Cash was scarce. Bartering was common. Upon graduation, his classmates gravitated toward Washington, lured there by of the New Deal legislation; but Ford returned home to practice with his father William Ross, and Karl Hoover.

Ford has had a distinguished career as a lawyer. He can trace his practice back to his Dad and the firm Smyser, Weygandt and Weiser. This eventually evolved to Weygandt and Ross, with William E. Weygandt, whose son Carl went on to become Chief Justice of the Ohio Supreme Court. Justice Carl Weygandt came to Wooster to personally swear Ford in as a new lawyer. His practice continues with his two sons Bill and Jim and, perhaps someday, will include his grandson Brian who is in his third year of law school.

Ford's dad was a trial lawyer and during his years of active practice - until about 1940, defended nearly every homicide case tried before a Wayne County jury. By the time Ford arrived, the senior William Ross and Karl Hoover were still active in trial practice; mostly civil litigation, often on behalf of insurance companies defending personal injury claims. Ford saw the emergence of some new probate and estate tax legislation and his own interests gradually evolved toward estate and business planning which is the bulwark of his practice today.

Ford has served the community as city solicitor and on various boards and commissions. He is particularly proud of managing the Myers Educational Trust for more than 40 years. This fund established college scholarships for Wooster High School Graduates.

Ford can say that he has witnessed the enactment of virtually every major piece of legislation controlling today's tax and business climate. When Ford graduated from law school, in 1935, FDR was completing his first presidential term and the New Deal was already underway.

Within two years of graduation,
 America went off the gold standard
 Social Security was enacted
 The Federal Estate tax was implemented

He also witnessed FDR's attempt to pack the Federal Courts. FDR was unhappy with Republican appointed judges. His plan included a proposal to keep adding judges to the Supreme Court - to a total of 15 - until he could get the legal results he wanted.

I want to pause here and comment on Social Security. By my reckoning, Ford has been drawing social security payments for at least 25 years. But true patriot that he is, he has continued to work and pay into the system. Now if the rest of you retired guys would get off your duffs and get back to work, Social Security would not be in its current mess today.

Ford likes to quote James Madison who said:

It will be of little avail to the people that laws are made by men of their own choice if the laws be so voluminous that they cannot be read, or so incoherent that they cannot be understood, if they be repealed or revised before they are promulgated, or undergo such incessant changes that no man who knows what the law is today, can guess what it will be tomorrow.

When I read that, and heard that Ford started his practice with then new federal estate tax laws, I figured he would plan to end his practice in 2011 when the federal estate tax is due to expire.

Well, Ford I have bad news for you. I recently read that Congress is about to adopt compromise legislation which will continue the estate tax. Your window of opportunity has now been closed. Apparently, you will have to keep practicing in the hopes of explaining this law to yet another generation.

As a young man, Ford was an accomplished piccolo and flute player. He is the last surviving member of the Wooster Board of Trade band which played Wednesday night concerts on the square in front of Annats (that's the Rubbermaid store for you newcomers). He has played with Dan Parmalee's Wooster Symphony, in various jazz and dance bands and even founded his own orchestra called the Boys Independent Orchestra which was eventually put out of business by the musicians' union.

A few years ago, Ford was found jamming with a small trio at a bar association function. His skill on the flute that night earned him the nickname AHot Lips@ from some of his fellow lawyers. Playing by ear, he has often played the piano for our Rotary meetings.

Ford and Anne have enjoyed travel, especially cruises on the paddlewheelers the Delta Queen, America Queen and Mississippi Queen. They were on the maiden voyage of the America Queen when it traveled from Pittsburgh to St Louis. They have also traveled to Europe on the QE2 and by return on the Concorde jet.

I haven't said much about Anne - but I've wondered how she kept him out of the house all these years. I suspect it was a vow she made at their wedding - for better or worse, but not for lunch. Ford cites a poem which best expresses his sentiments about his long career:

**They say I'm in my sunset years
A phrase that makes me glower
I much prefer to think of it
as in my cocktail hour.**

Actually, I think that what really has kept Ford going, over a lifetime of change, has been the constancy of honesty, integrity, professionalism, hard work and the pride of helping people solve complex problems.

Congratulations Ford on a long and productive career, for your service to this club, your community and your profession. Here's to another 95 years!