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ROBERT SPROULE STEVENS

Gray Thoron†

The Cornell Law School lost one of its great figures on November 17, 1968, with the death of Robert Sproule Stevens, Dean of the Law School from 1937 to 1954, and Edwin H. Woodruff Professor of Law, Emeritus. His service as an active member of our faculty covered a forty-year period, the longest in the history of the School. His seventeen years as Dean also make his the longest tenure in that demanding position of educational leadership.

Dean Stevens was a master teacher, a renowned and productive scholar, a wise and understanding Dean, a congenial and beloved faculty colleague, and a dedicated Cornellian. He was universally recognized for his fairness, his integrity, and his deep sense of professional and public obligation. He was always unassuming, modest and considerate of others. He was a good companion and a warm and generous host, held in deep affection by a wide circle of devoted friends and former students.

The roots of the Stevens family were firmly imbedded in upstate New York, where Robert S. Stevens was born on May 29, 1888. His was the fourth Stevens generation to be born in Attica. His grandfather served in the United States House of Representatives. His father held public office as a New York State Senator, and subsequently as Superintendent of Public Works under Governor Charles Evans Hughes.

His college and law school education were at Harvard, where he earned his A.B. in 1910 and his LL.B. in 1913. He was admitted to the New York Bar and began nearly four years of active practice in Buffalo. From 1913 to 1916 he was with the firm of Rogers, Locke & Bab-

cock, serving as managing clerk, a position once held by Presidents Millard Fillmore and Grover Cleveland. In 1916, he and his college classmate Eustace Reynolds formed their own firm of Stevens & Reynolds. On our country’s entry into World War I in the spring of 1917, Dean Stevens withdrew from practice and volunteered for military service, attaining the rank of Second Lieutenant in the field artillery and air service.

Dean Stevens’s career of teaching and scholarship began in 1919, following his military discharge. In that year, he joined the Cornell law faculty with a one-year appointment as Lecturer on Law. After a second one-year term, he received a permanent appointment as Professor of Law. Thus began a distinguished career as a law teacher, scholar and dean.

Dean Stevens taught a broad spectrum of courses. His principal teaching specialties were corporations, business associations and equity. He also taught on one or more occasions courses in partnerships, agency, torts, practice and procedure, restraint of trade, taxation and conflict of laws. In teaching he utilized a masterful socratic approach. He also made his courses, especially those in equity, a means of developing the student’s conscience, and of instilling a strong sense of fairness and ethics.

As a scholar, Dean Stevens was best known for his work in the field of corporations. His two editions of Stevens on Corporations, though prepared primarily for students, won wide recognition from scholars, practicing lawyers, and judges. He collaborated in the preparation of two leading corporate casebooks, the first with his then Cornell colleague Professor Arthur Larson, now of the Duke University Law School, and the second with his Cornell colleague Professor Harry G. Henn. He was also a frequent law review contributor.

His work in the corporate field was not limited to teaching and writing. He was a leader in the movement to bring about modernization and reform of corporation statutes. While a member of the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws, he drafted the Uniform Business Corporation Act. In 1935, he served as a Special Assistant to the Attorney General of the United States, to study the feasibility under the commerce power of a federal incorporation law. As a consultant he was prominent in the drafting and enactment of the Ohio Corporation Law. From 1957 to 1964, he was chief consultant to the New York Joint Legislative Committee to Study Revision of Corporation Laws, playing a leading role in connection with
the drafting and enactment of the present New York Business Corporation Law.

When in 1937 Dean Stevens succeeded Charles K. Burdick as the Cornell Law School's eighth Dean, the school was in a period of steady development and growth, which continued until temporarily interrupted by World War II. Dean Stevens was primarily responsible for several important educational innovations of this period.

Prior to becoming Dean, he experimented with and developed the problem approach to legal education, organizing one of the first of two novel problem seminars to be offered at Cornell. These were designed to expose small groups of students to demanding problems typical of those likely to be met in actual practice. They not only afforded a stimulating educational change of pace, but gave to students needed training and experience in research, drafting and solving legal problems. They also became a welcome vehicle for close faculty-student contacts. As Dean, he initiated a substantial expansion in the number of such course offerings, with the taking of at least one problem course becoming a graduation requirement. These seminars remain an established feature of a Cornell legal education. Similar courses are now widely offered elsewhere.

In the decade prior to World War II, Dean Stevens was also primarily responsible for Cornell's adoption of a program of comprehensive examinations for seniors. These were given in lieu of course examinations in the final term of the senior year. They began in the middle of that term with a difficult practice type exercise, referred to as the "library problem," for which students had one week to conduct intensive library research and to prepare a well organized and comprehensive memorandum of law. This was followed by an individual conference at which each student met with two members of the faculty and responded to probing questions relating to his solution and supporting research. At the end of the term, each student took a demanding three-day examination made up of questions which crossed traditional course lines and related to the full three-year curriculum. Further developed and utilized throughout the Stevens deanship, the comprehensive examination served an important educational function for approximately three decades.

Other landmarks of the prewar period for which Dean Stevens was responsible were the school's first legal aid program and the development of an orientation course designed to introduce entering students to law study and the legal process.
During World War II, Dean Stevens again responded to the call of government service. This time his responsibilities were in a legal capacity, involving a variety of assignments principally in Washington, D.C. Successively he served with the Office of Lend-Lease Administration as Assistant General Counsel, with the Foreign Economic Administration, and with the Office of Contract Settlement as the first Chairman of the Contract Settlement Appeals Board. He assisted in the preparation of the case against the Nazi saboteurs who landed by submarine on Long Island and Florida. He also participated in negotiating economic aid arrangements for the USSR, making preemptive purchases of critical materials in foreign countries, in order both to keep them out of enemy hands and to make them available for our own use, and hearing appeals in cases involving the termination of war contracts.

In the fall of 1945, Dean Stevens resumed his active role as Dean and Professor at Cornell. Under his leadership and guidance the school greatly expanded, offering an accelerated program to meet the needs of returning veterans. From a war time student body which averaged about thirty students in 1943-44, enrollment mushroomed temporarily to more than 450 by 1950, before leveling off at about 325. New faculty appointees were needed. Dean Stevens succeeded in attracting a highly talented group of faculty replacements and additions, who have contributed greatly to Cornell's strength and reputation.

In this same period increasing amounts of the Dean's administrative time and energy became necessarily devoted to fund raising and promotional activities. Between 1949 and 1954, four new professorial chairs were established, each with a substantial endowment. 1952 saw the inauguration of a vital law school alumni annual giving program, now in its seventeenth year, which has provided the school with essential and increasing support in this era of ever rising costs. New courses were added to the curriculum, such as those in comparative law and legal accounting. A specialized degree in international affairs was established, as was a combined degree program with the Graduate School of Business and Public Administration.

In 1954, Dean Stevens elected to retire both from the deanship and from teaching, though continuing his scholarly activities and his close connection with the law school. Following my appointment as Dean in 1956, I was able to induce him to return to active teaching as Edwin H. Woodruff Professor for three more years. In this period he undertook a half-time teaching assignment, giving in each year two courses in equity. In 1959, he retired as Edwin H. Woodruff Professor of Law, Emeritus, when he decided to devote his time principally to
the proposed revision of the New York Business Corporation Law. He continued to work actively on this subject until 1964, when the new law was enacted.

From the time I came to Cornell in 1956, I had the privilege of Dean Stevens's warm friendship and of his enthusiastic and undeviating support. No successor Dean could have asked for a more understanding or helpful predecessor.