

Roger F. Lane

Curiously, with the exception of trying one “widow and orphan” case for the Sixty-Plus Clinic, this month’s Citizen Lawyer has never practiced law. At age 87, Roger F. Lane has always thought of himself as a career newspaperman, having completed his legal studies and been admitted to the Bar at the age of 63, when most are thinking about retiring. But Lane is an attorney and has had a profound impact on preserving the legal history of the state of Michigan. The year 2004 marked the 16th anniversary of the Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society and the election of Roger F. Lane to its Board. He was a driving force behind the Society’s formation.

Roger Lane was not only an original member and now a lifetime member of the Historical Society, he also has contributed greatly to the Society by preserving, restoring, publishing, and sharing Court memorabilia. Mr. Lane is credited with proposing the Oral History Project to preserve the recollections of retired Supreme Court justices. He modestly claims the project was really Justice Mary Coleman’s idea. Lane reports that, “as the chief justice at the time, and the first female chief justice in Michigan, Coleman was a marvelous, beautiful woman. From her reign as a beauty queen in college to her term on the Supreme Court, she never considered that her gifts set her above others.”

Regardless of who first had the idea, it was Lane who volunteered countless hours to research the backgrounds and written opinions of the justices to prepare for oral interviews. Mr. Lane was solely responsible for interviewing, recording, and overseeing the transcription of all 12 oral histories of the living ex-justices. He has a hundred stories about that effort. He continues to be a driving force in the collection of new oral histories and in making the interviews he con-



The late Chief Justice Thomas G. Kavanagh and Roger F. Lane

ducted available to the public. He learned much about each justice and found some to be charmers, some very erudite. He found Justice Charles Levin to have, “about as high-powered a brain as any that I remember.”

Lane had a particular interest in another piece of legal history—the U.S. Constitution. He reports, “that on the 200th anniversary of the republic, the constitution was more or less deified for awhile and there are echoes of it today. Some idealistic corporation wanted to elevate the public consciousness of the origins of the country and the marvelous creation that the constitution represented. The Constitution was printed in attractive little booklets, which were widely distributed.” As a public service, the Bar distributed the booklets through volunteers. Lane was then a newly admitted “young lawyer,” and helped distribute 34,000 of them through the school systems. He did it because he had a very keen appreciation of what the document and the effort that went into it really means to the modern history of the world. It has now become the by-word of political movements worldwide to restore and introduce democracy and free choice.

Readers may wonder how Mr. Lane’s career brought him to be such an influential person in preserving the history of the Supreme Court. Roger Lane was born in Evanston, Illinois, in 1917 and graduated from Evanston Township High School. After attending Wabash College in Indiana, he transferred and obtained his bachelor’s degree with honors from Northwestern University in 1939.

His first employment after graduation was with the United Press Association (now UPI) and various newspapers. He entered the Army and served with distinction during World War II, attaining the grade Captain of Ordnance. He received the Bronze Star for service with the Ninth U.S. Army in France, Belgium, Holland, and Germany.

Beginning in late 1945, Mr. Lane was employed by the Associated Press (AP), covering Chicago, Springfield, Minneapolis, Lansing, and at last New York City (from 1960 to 1965). While in New York, he attended the postgraduate journalism program at NYU. In 1965, Mr. Lane joined the Detroit Free Press, Lansing Bureau, where he reported on Michigan government. While at the Free Press, he also worked as a string correspondent for the New York Times.

He resumed his journalism studies in Lansing, and completed his master’s degree in Journalism at MSU in 1970. His thesis documented a corruption scandal in the Livingston Circuit, perhaps an impetus for later studying law. (An Irish producer called him a few years ago and offered to turn his thesis into a play.)

After finishing his journalism studies, Lane was called upon to teach classes at Northwestern, and later at Michigan State, in public affairs reporting. He found teaching an interesting chapter in his life—a small chapter but very gratifying. He was immersed in his work as a reporter of state government.

He knew all the principal players, including the prosecutors and the political party chairmen, and conveyed to his students direct knowledge from his sources, who often addressed his class. After the course was over, students presented him a special plaque for the unusual experience he provided.

In 1975, Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Thomas Giles Kavanaugh invited Mr. Lane to work for the Court. Mr. Lane asked what his title would be. The Chief Justice replied, "Just pick one." Mr. Lane selected Executive Assistant to the Chief Justice. He worked for the Court from 1976 through 1983, under Chief Justices Kavanaugh, Mary S. Coleman, and John W. Fitzgerald.

During his tenure at the Court, he attended the Thomas M. Cooley Law School, obtaining his degree in 1980. At Cooley, he was secretary of the Sixty-Plus Law Center and volunteered pro bono services. He thought law school was "a pretty good idea at an advanced age if you have the patience to follow it through." Nevertheless, he was already 63 years old at graduation, so it is easy to see why Lane would say "On my headstone, they should write 'This guy was a newspaper fellow for half a century.'"

Being a reporter gave him an anchor in life, a way to look at the world. Lane comments that, "Way back, the reporter's trade was somewhat different. Today the reporter is expected to hold forth on a given subject and be an expert—a lot of these fellows get on the tube [and] tell you what the right answer is in South Carolina politics. But that wasn't the concept of a reporter back in my time. It was as the word implies—to fetch facts, to reach under the rocks and find them and to express your personality, your mental capability, your career acumen in those terms."

While at the Court, he continued to observe human behavior, as he had learned to do in his years of reporting. He regales listeners with stories. One that he remembers well involved two justices. "The most sacred place in the Supreme Court was the conference room, where justices thrashed out their views and put into preliminary form the decisions of the Court. There were very animated differences at times, and once two of the members of the court almost reached the point of fisticuffs. One was a former prosecutor of

Wayne County, George Edwards, a feisty little fellow, well advanced in years and frail, sort of a wispy man. He got into a confrontation with Eugene Black, a very independent sort of self-directed man. He ran his Supreme Court office from a room in a house in Port Huron, his hometown—that was a measure of his independent eccentricity. He was big, bulky, and appeared intimidating. To have a little judge and a big judge ready to come to blows was quite something." Lane reminds the listener that he did not witness the dispute firsthand, but adds that other members of the Court told him about it. Lane comments that, "the Bar and the public in those days thought the Court was very tame and gentlemanly, but it really wasn't, because the principles at stake often sharply divided those who were trying to reach a decision, just as the big issues today do."

Lane reminisces that, "in spite of disagreements, there was a special elevated atmosphere born of the Court's tradition of collegiality. Those who served on the court were very respectful of the other fellow's dignity and rights and the honor that he or she deserved for serving. It was a little bit like walking from the hurly burly of a streetcar into a religious chapel: high value was placed on polite recognition of the honorable qualities in another. It was nice to be in an atmosphere where, even though there were occasional outbreaks of incivility, people saw themselves as peacemakers. It was a very nurturing atmosphere." He contrasts that environment with reporting on two coal mine disasters in which 100 people in each case died, and with reporting on gangsterism in Chicago at the time of the St. Valentine's Day massacre.

Along the way, Mr. Lane did find time to raise a family. In 1949, he married Millicent Sloboda, a fellow AP news employee. They have two daughters—Rebecca who lives in Grand Rapids, and Katherine Louise who lives in Reston, Virginia. Retired since 1981, Lane does not follow the courts anymore. Instead, he enjoys his family and sports. When Mr. Lane introduced daughter Becky to whitewater rafting, he was 45 years old, and became an enthusiast himself. He has taken five Outward Bound courses on western rivers after turning 60, and a sixth at Hurricane

Island in Penobscot Bay off Rockland, Maine, when he was 69. According to Fred Baker, at Honigman Miller, "Lane still played a mean game of tennis even after hip surgery." "But the richest part of being old," reports Lane, "is enjoying his grandchildren and remembering Shakespeare and the other great writers," whom he can quote at length. He has always loved language—his journalism studies and legal education were both directed toward making him a wordsmith and he has appreciated every opportunity to that end.

According to Wallace D. Riley, 2002 President of the Historical Society, "Roger Lane lives his life, both public and private, with enthusiasm and integrity and he gives enormously to the public good—precisely those characteristics needed for a Citizen Lawyer."

Ed. Note: Several facts for this article were found in a Resolution of the Supreme Court Historical Society Commending the Services of Roger Lane. ◆

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Interview conducted by Naseem Stecker