

Robert Sproule Stevens

May 29, 1888 — November 17, 1968

Robert Sproule Stevens died in Ithaca at the age of eighty, following a distinguished career at Cornell which spanned nearly half a century. He was one of the great figures on the law faculty, where for seventeen years he had served as dean and from which he had retired as an active teacher in 1959 as Edwin H. Woodruff Professor of Law, Emeritus. His service both as professor and as dean was the longest in the history of the Law School.

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.

He was born May 29, 1888, in Attica, New York. After earning his A.B. in 1910 and his LL.B. in 1913 at Harvard, he practiced law in Buffalo until 1917. Volunteering for World War I military service in the spring of 1917, he attained 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, with an initial appointment as lecturer on law, followed by promotion to professor of law in 1921.

Dean Stevens taught a broad spectrum of courses, eventually specializing in corporations and equity. In teaching he utilized a masterful Socratic approach. He delighted to make 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 also prepared, in collaboration with colleagues, two leading corporate casebooks and was a frequent law review contributor.

Apart from teaching and writing, he made many contributions towards improving the law. From 1926 to 1948 he served as a New York commissioner on the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws. He was a leader in the movement to modernize and reform corporation statutes, making major contributions as draftsman of the pioneer Uniform Business Corporation Act, as consultant in the drafting of the Ohio Corporation

Law, and as chief consultant to the New York Joint Legislative Committee to Study Revision of Corporation Laws, in drafting the present New York Business Corporation Law.

After succeeding Charles K. Burdick as the Cornell Law School's eighth dean in 1937, Dean Stevens was primarily responsible for several important educational innovations.

Prior to becoming dean, he had experimented with and developed the problem approach to legal education. His novel problem-seminars 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 also 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.

Other landmarks for which Dean Stevens was responsible were the Law School's comprehensive examination program, 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, involving a variety of legal 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.

In the fall of 1945, Dean Stevens resumed his active role at Cornell as dean and professor. Under his leadership the school greatly expanded to meet the needs of returning veterans. During this 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. The year 1952 saw the inauguration of a major alumni annual giving program, now in its eighteenth year, which has provided the school with essential and increasing support in this era of ever rising costs.

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. In 1957 he was named Edwin H. Woodruff Professor of Law, and undertook a half-time teaching assignment for his courses in equity. In 1959 he retired as Edwin H.

Woodruff Professor of Law, Emeritus. Thereafter, he continued his work on the proposed revision of the New York Business Corporation Law, a project which was completed in 1963.

Dean Stevens served the University and the Ithaca community in many ways. From 1931 to 1934 he was a trustee of the Village of Cayuga Heights, and in 1934 acting mayor of the Village. From 1934 to 1939 he was an elected faculty representative on the Cornell University Board of Trustees. In 1953-54, he was president of the Statler Club.

During the years, Dean Stevens contributed generously and anonymously to a Law School fund, adding a substantial bequest by his will, and leaving the use of these funds to be determined by the Law School faculty. Designated as the Robert S. Stevens Fund by the faculty, these funds, together with contributions from others, will be devoted to the establishment of an endowed chair in the Law School to be known as the Robert S. Stevens Professorship.

Dean Stevens is survived by his wife, Eva Howe Stevens, whom he married in 1940; a son, Robert Croll Stevens, of Pittsford, New York; and four grand-children. His first wife, Pauline Croll, whom he married in 1922, died in 1936.

On December 15, 1968, memorial services for Dean Stevens were held in the foyer of Myron Taylor Hall. Interment was in the Stevens family lot in Attica, New York.

Harry G. Henn, Gray Thoron, John W. MacDonald