



1985

Tribute to Willburt D. Ham

Paul A. Willis
University of Kentucky

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Recommended Citation

Willis, Paul A. (1985) "Tribute to Willburt D. Ham," *Kentucky Law Journal*: Vol. 74 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/klj/vol74/iss2/3>

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Tribute

BY PAUL A. WILLIS*

Professor Contracts. Uncle Burt. The Ringmaster. Terms of endearment bestowed on Willburt Dunn Ham by generations of admiring students . . .

I first knew Burt Ham as a student myself—23 years ago. In his own special, quietly methodical way, he revealed the mysteries of contract law to us. What first-year student can forget the carbolic smoke ball or Rose of Aberlone? His patience was both infinite and reassuring.

And Burt was there again in our second year to introduce a more self-assured class to the fundamentals of corporate law. Professor Corporations? If anyone in the state of Kentucky deserves that appellation, it is indeed, Burt Ham. Burt was a member of the Commonwealth's Corporation Law Revision Advisory Committee and authored every Corporation Law Survey published to date by the *Kentucky Law Journal*.

As an assistant in the law library, I soon discovered that corporation materials and other loose-leaf services in Professor Ham's areas had to be filed as soon as new pages were received. Before each class Burt would check each subject and case for current material in the appropriate loose-leaf service. On the chance that these might be a few days behind, he would also scan the Wall Street Journal and financial press.

Yet, Burt's awesome expertise in the area of corporate law did not alter the comfortable, accessible teaching style we had all come to depend on in Contracts. We all knew we were learning the law from a master—but a gentle one, who skillfully taught us the intricacies of stockholder voting agreements on "Circus Day" and who made the annual issuance of the *Fortune* 500 a red-letter day.

* Professor of Law and Director of University Libraries. A.B. 1963, University of Kentucky; M.L.S. 1966, University of Maryland; J.D. 1969, University of Kentucky.

And when we were in our third and final year of law school—suitably blasè and full of rediscovered confidence—there was Burt again, to teach us corporate finance and federal corporation law, and most importantly, to serve as a reminder and a symbol of our intellectual growth during those three demanding years. We were the same students who had thought we'd never understand what "consideration" was, and now we were mastering the law of insider trading and corporate takeovers. And Burt was there each step of the way.

I am a better lawyer because of Burt Ham. His methodical, non-histrionic explanation of a particular outcome—followed by an equally persuasive argument for the exact opposite result—taught us the law, and something equally valuable besides. My life has been further enriched from knowing Burt as a colleague, during my teaching tenure at the law school, and as a friend for all these years.

If I were to choose one term to describe Burt Ham, it would simply be "gentleman". In his professional capacity in the classroom, as a member of the faculty, and in his personal life, Burt Ham's conduct has always conformed to the highest standards of propriety associated with gentlemen in the best sense of the word. He is also a dedicated family man and justly proud of the achievements of his two sons.

The student staff who publish the *Kentucky Law Journal* wish to express their appreciation to Professor Ham by presenting these tributes, and I am pleased and honored to add my own. I join all those who have known and admired Burt Ham in wishing him and his wife, Rosamond, all the best in his retirement. It has been said that a teacher affects eternity, that he can never tell where his influence stops. Willburt Dunn Ham's legacy will endure in the many lawyers he has helped to educate.