

John J. Vertrees was born at Bethpage, in Sumner County, on June 16th, 1850, the son of Judge James C. Vertrees and Susan Lee Vertrees. He read law in the office of Major W. S. Monday and was admitted to the Bar, and for some years he was associated in the practice at Gallatin with Judge S. F. Wilson, who died just a few years ago after long and honorable service on the Court of Civil Appeals. He removed to Nashville in 1881, and about that time formed a partnership with his brother, Major W. O. Vertrees, with whom he was thereafter intimately associated up until his death.

Mr. Vertrees spent a part of each year in a happy retirement from professional labors, seeking this relaxation at his vacation home in Summer Haven, Florida, with his wife and brother, who accompanied him, and where he could also enjoy again the companionship of his father and of his sister, Mrs. John W. Walton. The loss of his wife and of his father in his latter years greatly saddened his life but seemed rather to hallow and consecrate the devotion of the two brothers for one another.

His last visit to Summer Haven was in June shortly after his eighty-first birthday. A few weeks later on the night of Thursday, July 16th, 1931, he suffered a stroke of paralysis, and the next day was removed to a hospital at St. Augustine, where he died during the afternoon. His remains were brought to Nashville, where on the 20th they were interred in Mt. Olivet Cemetery by the side of his beloved wife, Mrs. Virginia Park Vertrees, leaving surviving him one son, John J. Vertrees, Jr., who resides in New York, and his brother and sister above mentioned.

It would not be practicable here to undertake to review the professional life of Mr. Vertrees. He participated in many notable cases, including the State Debt case, the Governor Turney Election case, the Vanderbilt University case and the Woman's Suffrage case, but it goes without saying that the printed record presents a very inadequate picture of Mr. Vertrees' services and contributions to his clients and to his profession.

Perhaps it would be agreed that no one in Mr. Vertrees' time had a wider acquaintance with the leading men of the country or was better qualified by mind and character and opportunity to estimate truly their qualities than the late William Howard Taft, Lawyer, United States Circuit Judge, Governor General of the Phillipines, President and Chief Justice. When he was a Circuit Judge forty years ago he came to know Mr. Vertrees and he quickly recognized his great abilities and his uncompromising honesty, and it is a high tribute to both of them that during the rest of their lives, and notwithstanding that they were of opposite political parties, they preserved a warm and almost sentimental regard for one another.

When the opportunity came to him President Taft asked Mr. Vertrees to accept the office of Governor General of the Phillipines and later intimated a wish to put him on the Supreme Court, but Mr. Vertrees was not disposed along these lines for they would have changed his habits of life and have taken away from him something of the independence and of the privacy that were a part of his nature. He did, however, respond to President Taft's request to go to Washington to assume the defense of a member of his cabinet, who was the subject of a Congressional investigation.

It may be added in this connection that some years ago the Court of Appeals at Cincinnati conferred upon Mr. Vertrees the unusual distinction of placing his picture on the walls of the Court room.

It is difficult for those who knew him well to write of Mr. Vertrees without seeming to be extravagant. He was a virile man, six feet two inches in height, with a leonine head, and with an intellectual dominance and a personal charm that corresponded with his physical stature. His courtesy and manners were of the kind that we speak of as old-fashioned, and, while he had that measure of aggressiveness that is so essential to an advocate, he never carried this beyond the limits of propriety or of the consideration that was due to the courts and opposing counsel.

There was, it seemed, no other office just like his for its tone of ease and restfulness. He never seemed to be hurried. There was no pressure of haste, no feeling of intrusion, such as are in the atmosphere of most offices. He was never too busy to lay aside his work to greet and talk with a friend or to help solve the problems of younger lawyers, who were not infrequently strangers to him.

Mr. Vertrees' life was from beginning to end a refutation of the ideas that success at the bar implies some compromise of principle, for his dominating quality and the foundation of his success was his honesty, both intellectual and moral. And this was not that he might appear honest to others but that he might be honest with himself. It was for this that he deserved and held the abiding confidence and respect of the courts, which is the chief asset of a lawyer.

He loved the law for its own sake and for the justice of it and for the rights that it protected and for the intellectual exercise that it afforded, and least of all for its monetary compensations. He felt some instinctive sense of the vulgarity of living to make money, and without criticism or unkind thought of others he moved and thought and lived upon a higher plane that was his own plane, just in the same way that he declined high honors that would have changed the currents and the simplicities of his life.

Perhaps Mr. Vertrees' rarest quality was his independence. Whatever he thought he said - and he defended. There are, perhaps, few of us who have not some taint of moral cowardice and hypocrisy. They were not in Mr. Vertrees' nature. He saw things as they were, and in his personal and professional conduct he took good care that self-interest should not enter into the decision, and resolved all doubts on the side of honesty. He felt that this was the part of a man.

Mr. Vertrees lived his life at home and in his office. He was an industrious student of the law, but he read a great deal on general subjects and retained and absorbed much of what he read, so that his conversation covered a wide range. His social contacts were principally with the members of the bar and the judges, and they are the ones who knew him best and it is their estimate of him that it is sought here to record.

While Mr. Vertrees did not conform to orthodox views in religious matters, he was a man of reverence and never gave offense by his expressions; for he was in no sense a scoffer but rather as one who was unconvinced. He held among his closest friends distinguished clergymen, who respected his views even while they regretted them. It may not be unreasonable to suppose that these views of his had their genesis to some extent in a sense of protest against the insincerity that he saw about him - a feeling that would have been instinctive in a man like Mr. Vertrees.

It is somewhat commonplace in Nashville and in Tennessee to speak of Mr. Vertrees' ability and of his intellectuality, for these have become a legend. They were a part of his professional life and reputation that established him before he reached middle age as a leader of the Bar. But too often intellectual and professional excellence is not accompanied by the less conspicuous and more endearing virtues. The rare distinction of Mr. Vertrees is that in addition to his supremacy as a lawyer he was looked upon as the highest exemplar of professional ethics, that is to say, of honor and of honesty, and that with his great ability and his rugged sense of honor he was also a generous, kind and lovable man.

Recalling how, as age came to enfeeble him, Mr. Vertrees relaxed his efforts and yielded gracefully to the limitations upon his strength, one is reminded of the words of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes a few months ago in his high-hearted farewell to a full and fruitful life:

"The riders in a race do not stop when they reach the goal. There is a little finishing canter before coming to a standstill; there is time to hear the kind voices of friends and to say to oneself 'the work is done.'"

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