

RESOLUTION

G. HILTON BUTLER

Hilton Butler was a member of the Nashville Bar Association for many years. Not many people knew it, because he never practiced law here. He just quietly paid his dues, and while busy with one important job or another, every now and then, he would say jokingly, or half-wistfully, "Some day I may just hang out my shingle or come downtown and start writing briefs."

Some people called Hilton Butler "General," or "Commissioner." In his lifetime he had many titles. He liked to be called just plain "Butler."

Every so often he would tell the story about how he first walked into a Mississippi courthouse with a client to see about some sort of settlement. A lawyer representing the other side said: "Let's enter a nunc pro tunc decree." Butler said he was panic stricken because he didn't know what a nunc pro tunc decree was. He had been considering an offer to become a staff writer for the Commercial Appeal in Memphis, and that was when he decided to take it.

He never practiced law afterwards, but his decision to take the job proved to be a happy bonanza for his adopted state of Tennessee. He came to Nashville and reported politics for the Commercial Appeal, and later went to Washington as its bureau chief. But he came back to Nashville and began a long and colorful career of service to the State here, during which time he was, at one time or another, executive assistant to the governor, commissioner of finance and taxation, head of the Tennessee National Guard as adjutant general, director of selective service, director of the training academy for law enforcement officers and three times commissioner of safety.

He executed all of these jobs with imagination, efficiency and energy. He often got startlingly good results. For example, he's probably the only commissioner of safety who ever actually reversed the curve of death statistics from traffic accidents. It was Hilton Butler who put the helicopters in the air, the panza units on the ground, who arranged the drunk nets and the massive roadblocks.

During the years in which he was performing energetically at the jobs I have mentioned, Butler also had a sideline which, unlike his titles, never changed. He was a writer. He would freelance magazine articles in his younger years and in 1939 he wrote a book called "The Tennessean and his Government," which was used as a textbook in many Tennessee schools: his more prolific and constant work, however, was as a ghostwriter for every governor under whom he served, starting with Governor Cooper.

For some years right up until this year, Dr. Bob White, the State historian, had been bringing out a series of books called "Messages of the Governors." He started with Governor Sevier, and had been proceeding forward in chronological order, but when Dr. White died this year, he had not gotten to the administration of Governor Cooper. It would have been interesting to see how Dr. White would have handles the gubernatorial messages from that point forward, because shelf after shelf of the official and unofficial written utterances of Tennessee's chief executives under whom Hilton Butler served are sprinkled with the unmistakable Butler touch.

Butler never took himself or his talent for eloquence too seriously, though. In his textbook he describes the history of county fairs. He points out that at an 1854 Nashville fair one of the prizes offered was for "the best speech." "Since that time," he goes on, "fair managements have shown the good judgment to withdraw prizes for oratory and to save their blue ribbons for hogs and jellies."

Once, while he was commissioner of safety, Butler was driving on the highway. He saw a trooper writing a ticket. The trooper had a big cigar stuck in his mouth. Commissioner Butler stopped his own car, walked over to the trooper, personally removed the cigar, and, without a word, drove off.

For many years before his death, Butler was a widower. He lived alone in an apartment. Every now and then he would get bored with his surroundings, would call a furniture mover, load all his furniture on a truck, give the driver the names of a few of his friends, send the furniture to them, then he would start over from scratch. One of his mottos was "keep portable."

For all his flamboyance, Hilton Butler had a simple pride in some things he regarded as fundamental. He was unfailingly cheerful. If he ever had a pessimistic thought, his associates never knew it. He was proud of his military service and of the various offices he had held in the American Legion.

Not least he was sort of secretly proud of being a lawyer. The lawyers who had the unique privilege of knowing Hilton Butler are equally proud of that common bond.

Milton Rice

Henry Foutch

Douglas Fisher, Chairman