

JULIEN C. AND HELEN O. MONNET

NOTE: The following summary of two remarkable lives is from a forthcoming book, entitled "THE DEAN", by David R. McKown.

"There is not enough money in the whole state to induce me to take a job in Oklahoma".

In these plainly stated words, Julien Charles Monnet expressed his opinion about moving to the Sooner State. He had left his summer home, enveloped by the cooling breezes of Narragansett Bay, to travel to Norman at the invitation of the Board of Regents of the University. In April, 1909 a School of Law had been authorized and the Board was searching for a Dean. Although the meeting with the Board was to be in Oklahoma City, with characteristic prudence, Monnet came a day early so that he could visit the campus, see for himself the physical facilities, acquire some idea of living conditions in Norman and judge the future if an offer were made. The quoted sentence was a part of a letter to his wife, Helen, written the night of August 17, 1909, in the Agnes Hotel. Since, on that day, the thermometer stood at 114, Monnet never thereafter alluded to that hotel as anything but "Hotel Agony".

Few members of the faculty, perhaps none, ever came to the University better prepared than Monnet. His father, Jean Monnet, was a stone contractor, migrating from France about 1855, locating in Keosauqua, a small county seat town in southern Iowa, and producing eight children among whom Julien Charles was fifth. His father died when he was about ten years old. Young Julien was "the cross-eyed Monnet boy" -- but, with amazing fortitude, and notwithstanding his mother's fears, he sought out an eye specialist and, without the benefit of anaesthesia, submitted to an operation correcting the strabismus. Through a long and extremely useful lifetime, this exhibition of will-power and determination was to characterize the man and shape his brilliant career.

Graduating from the unaccredited highschool at Keosauqua, and having determined to secure a college education, wholly on his own he enrolled in the Iowa City Academy to complete preparatory work. He persuaded the principal to permit him to take enough work to finish in a single year, again graduating at the head of his class. It was here that he met Helen Orton of Princeton, Missouri, destined to become his wife. In the fall of 1886, Julien enrolled in the State University of Iowa at Iowa City, managed a co-operative boarding house to support himself partially, studied for two years, dropped out for two years to teach in a small Iowa town and returned for three years more study. Wholly supporting himself, he succeeded in five years to earn his Bachelor of Philosophy and Bachelor of Laws degrees which, normally, required six years. Incidentally, he stood among the top three in both undergraduate and in law courses -- good enough to achieve the coveted Phi Beta Kappa key.

In June 1893, because of the nation-wide financial panic, jobs in law offices were hard to find. Evidently young Monnet had good credit for,

by graduation time, he owed a monumental debt of \$500, equivalent to \$5,000 today. Feeling that he must first pay his debts, he accepted a contract to be principal of a highschool at Atlantic, Iowa, a position for which he had exactly zero enthusiasm. Then fortune smiled upon him. Mr. N. C. Young an Iowa alumnus of 1887, visited Iowa City to hire an associate. Although he had in mind one certain graduate, when he saw that his prospect was a "fur bearing animal" (like the 1970's sort), he turned to his next name on the list -- Monnet. A contract was quickly agreed to, providing a stipend of \$900 a year if he came single or \$1,000 a year if married. Atlantic school system promptly lost a principal, and attorney Monnet was on his way to Bathgate, North Dakota, to practice law. For the record, he went single but, before the year was out, he married Helen Orton, and with characteristic foresight, claimed the extra hundred.

Thirty months later, December 1895, a fine opportunity came his way. The only competent attorney in the adjoining county died. Business men of Langdon, the county seat, urged young Monnet to purchase the business and practice of the deceased lawyer. He paid \$2,500 for the office building, furniture and fixtures, mortgage loan register, fire insurance expirations and goodwill. It was to be a spectacular investment. During the next five years he almost killed himself by reason of over-work, lack of physical exercise and, in particular, the rigorous climate of extreme northeastern North Dakota. Because of the strain on his health and the frigid winters, he determined to sell out, enter a partnership with an Iowa classmate at Mt. Pleasant, a round hill in southeastern Iowa, and enjoy the environment of his native state. But the slow tempo of business in Iowa caused him to return to North Dakota -- this time at Cando still further west.

By 1904, discontent again overtook him. First, neither he nor his wife could overcome their dislike for the frigid climate with its long dreary winters. Second, he had built a considerable estate and recognized that money-grubbing was not the only objective in life. Third, emerging slowly from the depths of his soul was a long-nourished feeling that teaching the law was his forte. Again he sold out, moved to Iowa City with his family of three children, enrolled for his master's degree in government and political science and, in the spring of 1905, received his third sheepskin. Although he had a degree in law from a respectable university, he concluded that if he were to teach law he would first prepare himself as well as any man. So, he moved to Cambridge, enrolled as a freshman in the Harvard Law School, graduated after three years cum laude.

Helen Orton (Monnet) was almost equally well educated, especially so for women of those times. Graduating from Iowa University in 1890, she took at least one semester's work at the University of Michigan. Her parents then moved to California where, in the newly opened Leland Stanford Junior University, she did further graduate work and some teaching. Returning, in a year or two, to Princeton, she taught school for a couple of terms. But that community lost a finely qualified teacher when Julien C. Monnet married her for home-making purposes in North Dakota.

Upon graduating from Harvard, Monnet took a position on the law faculty of George Washington University. After one very successful year, regents of the University of Oklahoma requested an interview with the dean-ship of a proposed law school in mind. Minutes of the Board reveal that

perhaps a dozen candidates were seen -- many obviously unqualified though willing, others possessing fine credentials but, in some instances, disdainfully unwilling, and with understandable reasons. In December 1908, the main building, University Hall, had burned. So, in addition to a pile of rubble at the head of the oval (north), physical facilities consisted of the Science Building, the Carnegie Library, a building under construction for Engineering, a puny frame gymnasium, a few frame structures known to history as Park Row (of which two are still used) and a tiny heating plant. In contrast to the ivied halls of Princeton, Harvard, Yale, Cornell and others, the University of Oklahoma did indeed present something less than an appearance of opulence and, to one considering a life-time job as dean of one of its schools, would seem to offer a dubious future.

Direct from his summer home in Rhode Island, smartly dressed in line with New England environment, he alighted from a Santa Fe train and stepped onto a sizzling brick platform with the thermometer at 114. Picking up his old-fashioned suit case, he walked the three blocks to the Agnes, thence to the University grounds and, indubitably, observing the appearance of poverty there presented, it is no source of wonder that he wrote his wife as he did about the prospects of a job in Oklahoma.

Providentially for the University of Oklahoma, fortuitously for the State of Oklahoma and fortunately for the Monnet family, that smoking letter, which so closely paralleled, and was inspired by, the torrid weather encountered in Norman, never reached her. However, in duty bound, Monnet did meet the regents in Oklahoma City on August 18, reserved his decision, returned to the east by way of Princeton for a visit with his parents-in-law, Judge and Mrs. Hobert G. Orton. Two influences appear to have intervened resulting in a "reversed decision". First, it seems certain that Judge Orton urged his son-in-law to accept the regents' offer. Second, and of compelling weight, Monnet recognized that the University of Oklahoma presented perhaps the last opportunity to organize and head a School of law in a state-supported university. Since he was committed to teaching law as a career, and also aspired to be dean of a successful school, on August 25 he accepted appointment and moved his family to Norman on or about September 1, 1909.

The disastrous fire had deprived the University of badly needed classroom space. Finally, the new dean agreed to a make-shift on the third floor of the Science Building. The area had been used for display of geological specimens, rock samples, mineralogical oddities and, appropriately for a law school, a pair of stuffed owls. By crowding together the cases and tables of fossil exhibits, space for a couple^d classes was salvaged. The following year, the school was moved to the basement of the Carnegie Library where embryonic lawyers studied the doctrine of implied consent and the statutes against perpetuities, while the staccato voice of an aspiring opera star drilled into one ear as the impassioned voice of a young Demosthenes bored into the other. Close proximity to the departments of music and speech represented a radical change from the milieu of the very dead to the environment of the very-much-alive. In the spring of 1914, Monnet Hall was dedicated for the near-exclusive use of the School of Law.

Since first year law courses only were to be presented in the initial year, only one additional professor was needful. Professor F. H.

Randall of Iowa University was hired at \$2,000 a year -- but the regents balked and insisted on paying no more than \$1,500. Badly discouraged, but nevertheless determined, Monnet made several offers at this figure only to be turned down. School had already opened when the Chairman of the Regents, writing on an unrelated subject, mentioned that the Board had interviewed a likely-appearing young man from Alva, Oklahoma, named John Begg Cheadle, who had applied for the deanship, but because of his youth and scarcely adequate preparation, was rejected. Thus, one of the famous men of Oklahoma University history came to the campus -- and the School of Law was propelled into orbit.

Dean Monnet came to Oklahoma University on the heels of a cataclysmic shake-up when, in 1908, President David Ross Boyd, along with nine faculty members and the janitor, was summarily fired. As a condition of accepting appointment, the new dean had required an understanding that he was to be free to run his school without interference from the regents or other outside influences. In fact, he made his school almost autonomous -- more or less independent of presidential direction. Rev. A. Grant Evans, Boyd's successor, did not last long. In April 1911, he was released and the regents turned to Dean Monnet to be acting-president with the understanding, however, that under no circumstances would he accept for more than one year -- neither would he be a candidate for the presidency.

After thirty-two years, in June 1941, he retired, with all the honors a couple of thousand of grateful alumni could bestow, to become Dean Emeritus. Also in 1941, the Oklahoma Memorial Association inducted him into the Hall of Fame -- and, in 1948, "his boys" paid one final tribute by presenting a portrait of The Dean to the School of Law where it now hangs. He lived nearly ten years more. Sadly, because of poor eye-sight, on Easter morning in 1951, he fell into a shallow excavation where an addition to Monnet Hall was under construction. A badly shattered hip resulted in death two weeks later.

Mrs. Julien C. Monnet continued to live in the family home, at 772 DeBarr, for another sixteen years. With the aid of a competent housekeeper, she entertained her clubs, especially the Merry Makers, of which she was a member for more than a half century, until she was past ninety-five. For another year or two, she welcomed visitors and, in particular, loved to entertain contemporary friends of her children and grandchildren who naturally and informally gravitated to her home following football games and special occasions. Though crippled with arthritis, and moving about with difficulty and pain, she never complained. Stoically, and with a serene smile, she never permitted her affliction to slow her down. Even during her last years, with consummate skill and amazing artistry, she continued to produce the finest of needlework. She died on September 2, 1967. She had lived ninety-eight and a half years.

This remarkable couple had three children - Eugene Orton Monnet, Julien Claude Monnet and Florence Eleonore Monnet. Both Eugene and Claude became lawyers of the very highest order. Gene practiced in Tulsa, and in 1959, died of a heart attack. Claude heads a prestigious firm in Oklahoma City. Florence Eleonore married Dave R. McKown, retired president of McKown and McWilliams, Inc., of Oklahoma City.