

HAROLD H. FISHER, A BRIEF REMINISCENCE

*Richard A. Levao**

Writing a recollection of Harold Fisher is a most unenviable task. How does one begin to write about one of the state's true legends? One could recite his role in the Lindbergh trial, his investigation of the highway department, his novel and occasionally controversial legal arguments, his participation in founding one of the state's leading law firms. Rather, I think of him in a more personal way.

I first met Harold H. Fisher in September, 1973. My first impression was the Paul Muni character in *The Last Angry Man*. A person fiercely proud, unashamedly ethnic in our modern era which emphasizes the smoothing of all rough (and distinctive) edges, and openly rebellious against anything that smacked of the establishment or "sanctified," unchallenged wisdom. He once told me of standing up in church and challenging a minister when he disagreed with a sermon!

Either unconcerned with, or genuinely incapable of, routine and customary euphemisms, Harold was blunt, bold, outspoken, even biting in his remarks. But one had only to know him a short time to see through his charade. He once joked, "I've waited 85 years to be called cantankerous, and I'm not giving it up."

My second impression of Harold Fisher was his amazing physical vigor. While in his late seventies, I recall his standing by a bank of elevators in Newark, waiting to go up to our offices on the twelfth floor. After a few minutes he turned to me and said, "Let's walk." I asked if he meant walk down the street for a cup of coffee, and he said, "oh no, to the office!"

At about the seventh floor, my heart pounding, I was ready to call it quits and I politely suggested to Harold that we might find an elevator on that landing. He turned to me, a young man then, fifty years his junior, and said "watch this," as he disappeared, two steps at a time. When I arrived at the twelfth floor, perspiring profusely, I tottered to Harold's office to find him reading the morning paper. Looking at me he said, "Well, you had a heavy coat to carry."

I also recall visiting his beloved farm in Allamuchy only to

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have a hoe put in my hands as I tried, without much success, to keep up with this then octogenarian as he worked at planting his very large vegetable garden in 90-degree heat.

His completely unassuming manner made it easy to forget that he possessed one of the most powerful, creative, original and imaginative legal minds in the state. If any attorney had a novel or particularly thorny conceptual problem, it was good advice to chat with Harold. He could analyze and resolve the seemingly unresolvable. It was more than a gift. It was a true passionate love for the law. Even into his middle eighties, he would be in the law library late at night, quietly chuckling over a particular opinion or legal article.

His range of interests was among the broadest one could ever hope to find. I think back to long conversations with him about legal ethics, opera, evolutionary biology, painting (he loved to paint and showed his work proudly), farming, history, biography, education, his family.

Along with his stubborn and outspoken insistence on the expression of his views, he was astonishingly generous and compassionate of people truly in need, even to the point of helping one of his employee's children pay for school, purely out of a sense of merit and wanting to help.

He fiercely despised prejudice and, in one episode I shall never forget, refused to enter a prestigious luncheon club when he heard that it had an "exclusive membership" policy, as that term is now so elegantly phrased.

If there is one adjective to describe Harold Fisher, it would be passionate. Passionate about the law, his integrity, his loyalty to friends, his rejection of everything with which he disagreed. He was unreserved in his affection for friends. If he told you he liked you, it was not because you could be a useful ally, or he wanted anything from you, but rather because it was in his heart. I will always treasure my memory of him as a most extraordinary, gifted and genuine man.