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Dedicatory Address

by **Ralph H. Demmler**

COURT HOUSE, CRAWFORD COUNTY

Pennsylvania

October 23, 1954

Mr. Chairman, Honorable Judges,
Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am more appreciative than I can tell you for the honor of being invited to make the dedicatory address on this significant occasion. It is a significant occasion because it testifies to the vitality of Crawford County's local government and the public spirit of its citizens.

I am unfortunately devoid of architectural and engineering skills but I have marvelled at the ingenuity with which this building was constructed on the site of the old Court House while the processes of government went on. In a unique way this building, part old and part new, links the past and the present. It is symbolic of the continuity of the community. My tastes in architecture are more instinctive than educated but no one with even an elemental sense of beauty and proportion can fail to be impressed by the dignified simplicity of this building which we dedicate today. This old Diamond has achieved new charm.

For a purely personal reason it is a heart warming experience for me to speak at this dedication. I spent four happy years at Allegheny College, which I love, and Meadville became a second home-town. With Homecoming days and Commencements and friends in Meadville, I have come back here so often that when I drive in on Route 19 I feel as if I were turning into my own driveway.

As I look back upon my friends and associations in Meadville, I am proud to boast that it was my good fortune to know all the judges who have sat in the Crawford County courts since the turn of the century. I can remember interviewing Judge Henderson for an article in a fraternity magazine about his experience in Ford's Theatre as a witness to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. In my college days I knew Judge Thomas as an elder statesman and as a sage adviser to both his college and his fraternity. Judge Prather was, and many of his large family are, warm personal friends. My acquaintance with Judge Kent was principally through my friend and classmate, his son Irv. Judge Mook, a contemporary, I have known well and favorably during the years while each of us as fellow Alleghenians and fellow Pennsylvania lawyers went through the normal struggles incident to getting started in the profession we both share.

I mention these names - and could mention many more, because Crawford County for years has had a great bench and a great bar - not to brag of acquaintance with distinguished people, but to bring home to you the thought that local heroes, local men of high character, are as much a source of inspiration as national heroes. From local men and women of integrity and principle with whom we associate closely in our own community, we personally draw even more strength than from the international and national greats about whom we read.

And that brings me to the point of my remarks this afternoon. We are dedicating a building which is symbolic of great strength in the American system of government. Ever since the days of the American colonies, the county court house has been the heart of community government. Not only has it been the center from which justice is dispensed and local policy made; it has been the repository of the permanent vital records of the people, covering birth, marriage, home, business, taxes, votes, and finally the last will and testament. It traces the cycle of human life from the cradle to the grave.

This matter of a strong and capable local government is something of supreme importance, and the dedication of this building is a fitting occasion to call to your attention your responsibility in sustaining and supporting strong, efficient and honest local government.

As the national government has expanded its functions - in many cases legitimately - the local sense of responsibility tends to wither. This is a tragic thing because functions, properly local, that are transferred to Washington and to Harrisburg are still paid for by the people, but they cost more and the people affected have less to say about them.

Whether something is done in Meadville, in Harrisburg, or in Washington, it is only human beings who do it. The things that can best be done locally should be done locally. That's common sense. For one reason, the people affected know best whom to praise, whom to blame, and to whom to make suggestions. Besides the more things are localized, the more effort is expended on the thing itself rather than on typing forms and pushing papers.

It used to be that the only Federal office holder that most people saw was the mailman. That's not so any more. And I am not saying it should be so. I do say that people locally can still do many things for themselves directly better than those things can be done by the national government. I am thinking about city and town redevelopment projects, programs to attract new industries, and other things of the sort that infuse new life and new pride into old communities. There have been many "operations boot strap" in American communities. Meadville has never had to lift itself out of the doldrums, but it takes the same kind of vitality and local spirit to keep from drifting into the doldrums.

At best, government from Washington is subject to the limitations inherent in remote control. Its effectiveness must necessarily depend on administrative machinery which communicates to the Capitol what the problems are out in the country. Its effective functioning depends also on the kind of people that the local communities send to the Congress to represent the points of view of their districts in the councils of the nation. On a slightly reduced scale, the same statements can be made about our State governments. Our State and National governments are a reflection of the composite of our local governments and our local communities. The moral is clear - never be indifferent to local government.

The framers of our Constitution were not mere theorists with bright ideas, but mature statesmen and scholars deeply steeped in history, government and the learning of philosophers and jurists. Their debates at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 reveal a profound appreciation of the vital role of local government. They created a limited Federal government to exercise certain designated powers only, reserving the other powers to the States and to the people.

It is essential to the preservation of our Federal form of government that the line between centralized power and local power be carefully preserved, lest Washington grow out like a weed and choke the power of our states, communities and neighborhoods. The jobs that the states and county and city governments have retained must be done well.

All this is very general talk, but it is applicable to many specific situations, and there is something you can do about every one of them. You can vote, and I mean November 2, 1954. You can encourage your neighbor to vote, and I mean November 2, 1954. You

can participate in civic movements. You can accept a post in local government if you are asked. You can run for local office. You can keep your own families from becoming problems of the community. You can keep yourselves informed about what kind of government you have and speak up if you are not satisfied. You can do these and many other things which keep the community strong; for another example, this is the season of Community Chests in thousands of places throughout the nation.

But this Court House is more than a place where your local government transacts day to day business. It is the place where justice is administered. Washington spoke truly when he said, "The administration of justice is the firmest pillar of government." Long ago Alexander Hamilton, who was a believer in strong central government, said, "There is one transcendent advantage belonging to the province of the State Governments which alone suffices to place the matter in a clear and satisfactory light - I mean the ordinary administration of criminal and civil justice. This, of all others, is the most powerful, most universal, and most attractive source of popular obedience and attachment."

It was wisely realized that since justice is so essential to democracy, local justice should form the predominant pattern.

Our Federal courts have grown in importance, of course, as the years have gone by, but in the ordinary proceeding involving the ordinary citizen, it is still true that local justice is the predominant pattern.

Not only is the court of Crawford County most intimately related to the people of this community, but in most cases the judgment of this court is the last word.

For all practical purposes, therefore, we are actually dedicating a building to house what is essentially the supreme court of this community - the court both of first and last resort. Only in isolated cases are appeals taken from its decisions. There is no Federal court in Meadville, and no other court can claim to be more intimately related to your daily community life.

Never overlook the vital role which you perform in the actual administration of justice. You serve and should serve as jurors and make decisions affecting liberty, property, and even life. If you were a party to a case, you would want a jury of good people, wouldn't you? You appear as witnesses and bring truth into the courtroom. You have the duty to respect and obey all laws duly enacted, not just those you like. This applies to your everyday life. It applies to fixing traffic tickets and the exercise of pressure. It applies to obeying speed laws, not only as a matter of principle but also as a practical method of prolonging your own life.

It is the essence of justice and inherent in every judge's oath that the rich and poor, the powerful and weak, the friend and stranger are equal before the law. Four words appear on the facade of the great building which houses the Supreme Court of the United States, "Equal Justice Under Law."

If justice fails any place in this country it poses a threat to justice every place in the country. The people must watch zealously to see that no rotten apples get into the barrel. Furthermore, the independence of our courts must at all costs be preserved.

When justice fails, the liberties of the people are lost. The nation degenerates into tyranny and terror. That is not a bugaboo or an oratorical picture. It is something that has happened in civilized and cultured nations in our own time. I don't need to mention Communist Peoples' Courts, Nazi concentration camps, political prisoners and torture chambers to convince you that when independent courts of justice fall, life for the average citizen can become miserable overnight.

No day passes; in fact, for more than a quarter of a century no day has passed, but that we read in the paper, or hear on the radio, or see on television, or in the motion pictures a story of the human misery in countries where courts have surrendered their independence and become instruments of dictators.

This ceremony today can have lasting significance. It can infuse into our thinking and our action and our philosophy something that will bear assurance to our posterity that in the year 2054, God willing, they may find this building still to be the center of a vital community and still to be a temple of justice.

But if this occasion is to have that significance it will have it not from the dedication of a building alone, but from the dedication of people and lives. I mean dedication to the service of the community and dedication to respect for law and dedication to the cause of equal justice for all. In that dedication we merge our duty to our God and our duty to our fellow men.

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