



2007

## Roger

Lyman P.Q. Johnson

Washington and Lee University School of Law, johnsonlp@wlu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.wlu.edu/wlufac>



Part of the [Legal Biography Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lyman P.Q. Johnson, *Roger*, 64 Wash. & Lee L. Rev. 20 (2007)

This Tribute is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Washington and Lee University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarly Articles by an authorized administrator of Washington and Lee University School of Law Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [christensena@wlu.edu](mailto:christensena@wlu.edu).

lose contact with those folks, our teaching and writing will truly be much sound and fury, signifying very little at best. I believe there is a very real connection between Roger's extraordinary scholarly and pedagogical achievements and his work in the Buena Vista Lion's Club. I don't profess to understand it fully, but I am convinced that we should all recognize it and seek to learn from it.

In spite of the loss we all feel, we should remember and celebrate our friend's life in the way he lived it—simply, with humor and passion and concern for one another. Raise a glass, not a goblet, to a life well lived.

---

Lyman Johnson\*

*Roger*

Roger and I were colleagues at the Law School for over twenty years and hunting partners for about seventeen of those years. I have written about our hunts before and probably will do so again sometime because they were so much fun. But as my tribute to Roger for the Law Review, I offer the remarks I gave to the University faculty on March 6, 2006. I tried in those few words to show the remarkable breadth of Roger and also tried to capture his great devotion to those people and causes he cared so much about. Here is my tribute to Roger—colleague, partner, friend.

Roger Groot gave his heart and soul to Washington and Lee for thirty-two years. Roger was intellectually gifted and was well-educated at Vanderbilt and the University of North Carolina School of Law at Chapel Hill, where he graduated first in his class. Yet, a Texan, Roger also had the enduring common sense and down-home practical judgment of a man brought up close to the land. His lifelong love of the outdoors not only meant he was pretty handy—for instance, he always carried a pocket knife which he used in artful ways—but being outside also gave him great pleasure, and it refreshed his body and mind to take to the woods or field for a day of hunting. Even more rejuvenating was the time he hiked the Appalachian Trail and his yearly trips to the South Dakota prairie. Roger liked the simple but sublime delights he found outside—the break of day, the array of sounds, the smells and sights so unlike those indoors, and the pleasant tiredness of hard physical exertion.

---

\* Robert O. Bentley Professor of Law, Washington and Lee University School of Law.

Roger surprised in other ways as well. For all his remarkable academic and lawyerly accomplishments—he was, after all, an acclaimed scholar in both English legal history and criminal law, and he achieved nationwide fame for his capital defense work—he was more at ease with common folk than with the trappings of academic achievement or power. He cared deeply for those who had few allies. He served them tirelessly in so many ways, and he championed their interests with a steely determination that even opponents admired. His victories sometimes included the saving of lives from the death penalty; they always included the giving of that sweet comfort of finally having one tough hombre on your side.

Roger was hard-working and fastidious in his approach to law because he knew that the stakes are high and that justice is not just an abstract ideal but is a state gained or lost based on what we do every day. Whether defending a death penalty client where the government seeks the ultimate sanction or calmly reassuring an inmate at Alderson Women's Prison that he would take care of the family matter she was fretting about, Roger knew that clients want a lawyer who treats them like their cases are the most important ones he ever had. Roger's specialty was delivering the highest quality of representation to those at the lowest rung of society—the oppressed and afflicted.

Perhaps Roger's grave sensibility concerning high stakes was shaped by combat in Vietnam. There, as a Marine Captain, Roger prepared and reassured young men—some as green as college freshmen—who faced death every day and who, with utter trust, placed their lives in the hands of "Captain Groot." As with thousands of law students to follow, he knew that to help them, and those many others who, in turn, would one day rely on them, he had to toughen them up, drive out sloppy practices and a "who cares" mindset and instill an ethic of duty, service, bravery and zeal.

Roger contributed so much to Washington and Lee because he had so much natural energy and talent to give, and because he believed so passionately in what we do here. He turned the lights on in the morning and shut off the coffee at night; he worked so hard. Before we ever spoke of such things, he believed in our "mission." He believed in giving every student who came here, whether born into privilege or poverty, the opportunity to have their minds trained and their character molded by devoted teachers. He believed in giving to a student as much as he or she cared and dared to seek. He deeply loved, and thought it a high privilege to serve, what he considered to be a great University. He never spoke a word against it.

Roger had no greater love at Washington and Lee than his students. Students themselves eventually figured this out, even the quaking first-year

law students who lost sleep and breakfast at the prospect of being singled out for close questioning—that is, "Grooted"—in an eight in the morning Criminal Law class for what must have seemed the longest, loneliest fifty-five minutes of their lives. Roger loved to liken the first semester of law school to boot camp. Students, tried by fire, came to appreciate that Professor Groot had such high hopes and expectations for them that anything less than their very best was unacceptable. If drawing that out required that, as with young Marines, he be relentlessly demanding, or if it necessitated cajoling, chastising and seemingly never being satisfied, then that's how he would be. And he was, as legend rightly has it. His students flourished under his teaching. They are his educational legacy.

Roger also was a great colleague. On any issue, you knew where he stood because he made it crystal clear, in well-honed prose or booming voice. Incapable of hiding the ball himself, he could be impatient with those who did. With a hunter's keen eye, he could spot dissembling at fifty yards through the thickest rhetorical cover. He valued a spirited debate where the evidence and arguments were well-presented and carefully weighed. Although a man of strong views, Roger listened closely to colleagues, seeking always to learn what they thought was best for Washington and Lee, that alone being his touchstone for decisions. He especially enjoyed an untenured professor's willingness to speak up and add to the mix, taking on the old war horses if need be. To Roger, that showed independence and courage, traits he valued in a colleague.

He also liked to hear or tell a good story, humor in any form and peppering his conversation with expressive sayings. How many professors, when asked what he and a few other professors were doing as they talked together over coffee in the Faculty Lounge, would say, "We're just standing around telling lies." Or, when cheerfully greeted by a first-year law student with a "Hi," responded, "How are you?" To which, when the new law student said, "Wonderful," Roger replied, "That'll change." Roger enjoyed humor because he had immense warmth and humanity.

When Roger died, Lewis Hall sagged a good bit, as if a pillar had been struck down. But Roger would ask us to re-shoulder the load and to soldier on to do good work in the days ahead. Thank you, Roger, for showing us how to do just that.

