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The Honorable William Wallace Lessley

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Water Master

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IN MEMORIAM

The Honorable William Wallace Lessley

May 27, 1907—March 29, 1990

On March 29, 1990, we lost Judge Lessley. He had a stroke at the breakfast table the preceding day, and slipped into unconsciousness within the hour. Thus ended the life of one of Montana's great public servants.

William Wallace Lessley was born May 27, 1907, in Fayette, Missouri, to Herbert and Anna Lessley. When he was a young boy, the family moved to Bozeman where they operated a farm along Sourdough Creek. He graduated as valedictorian from Gallatin County High School in 1925 and continued his academic excellence at Central Methodist College (B.A. English, 1929; distinguished alumnus, 1952), the University of Washington (M.A. English, 1935) and the University of Michigan (J.D., 1938).

Judge Lessley was admitted to the Montana Bar in 1938. He opened an office on Main Street in Bozeman, bringing the Bozeman bar membership up to six members. He was elected Gallatin County Attorney in 1940. His practice was cut short, however, when he enlisted as Private in the U.S. Army Air Corps in 1942. He rose through the ranks while serving three years in the China-Burma-India Theatre. "Pop," as his men called him, was in charge of coordinating the 459th Twin Dragon Squadron's intelligence gathering missions. He received a battlefield commission of Major, was awarded the Bronze Star medal, and retired as Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Air Force Reserve. Pop hosted the 1987 reunion of the 459th in Bozeman.

Upon returning to Bozeman, he married his long-time sweetheart, Eula Mae Walton, a.k.a. "Mrs. L." He made it very clear that although he was Judge W.W. Lessley, "The Judge" for short, Mrs. L. clearly was "The Boss." How many of us have heard how he walked through the kitchen door with an inflated ego and Mrs. L. brought him back to earth with a reminder for him to take out the garbage.

After serving a second term as Gallatin County Attorney, Judge Lessley embarked on what would become the longest judicial tenure in Montana history. He was elected judge of the Eighteenth Judicial District in 1949 and served in that position until 1982. During his tenure, Judge Lessley also sat on the Montana Supreme Court more than fifty times and wrote more than twenty-five majority opinions. He was appointed Chief Water Judge in 1979 and was elected Water Judge for the upper Missouri in 1982. He was serving in both capacities at the time of his death.

Judge Lessley was a role model for community and professional involvement. He was extensively involved with the Montana and American Bar Associations, serving on numerous committees. He also was highly active in the First Methodist Church, where he taught youth and adult Sunday school for many years, served on the board of trustees and was lay leader of the Montana Methodist Conference. Additionally, Judge Lessley was involved in several other community service organizations. He was a founder of the Big Brothers program, was a Boy Scout Merit Badge counselor and served as president of the popular Museum of the Rockies.

The scarlet thread throughout Judge Lessley's long career was service—service to his community, to his state, to his country, and to God. His life is a story of public service.

As those who knew Judge Lessley will attest, teaching was in his blood. He had taught English in Great Falls during the 1930s, serving as debate and speech coach as well. He always delighted in "holding class" with his Water Masters and challenging them. (While the Judge enjoyed these sessions, some of the Masters did not)

Judge Lessley was a great storyteller as well. In particular, I remember one trip to Jordan. On our way out of town, I innocently asked, "So you served in China. Were you a pilot?" And on the return trip, I asked him, "Did you enjoy being a county attorney?" The answers to those questions filled the trip; he talked for hours and the stories ranged from hair-raising to hilarious.

Another story he frequently told was about his first day as district judge. As he recounted in the *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*:

During a recess he heard his secretary politely attempting to keep out a brusque farmer intent on seeing the judge. The man in bib overalls and old hat was Lessley's father, Herbert.

"I want to tell you one thing," the elder Lessley said to his son.

"When you have finished this job I want you to be able to look anyone in the eye and tell them to go to hell."

"Through the years I think I have learned what he meant,"

Lessley said. "He meant to be honest, not to give favors and call them as I see them. I think I have done that."¹

We miss Judge Lessley. Montana water users miss him. And all of us who adhere to his model of commitment to public service do him a great honor. Far more importantly, as he would quickly admonish, we serve the public good.

—Kathryn L. W. Lambert, Water Master

1. Bozeman Chronicle, Mar. 30, 1990, at 1, col. 1.

