

Robert Longwell Memorial Tri-County Bar Association Midwinter Meeting, January, 2009

This is a true story. The events depicted took place in Wisconsin from 1950 through 2008. At the request of the survivors the names have been changed. Out of respect for the dead, the rest has been told exactly as it occurred.¹

Robert Longwell, Jr., 58, died Sunday, September 28, 2008. He served as Trempealeau county Family Court Commissioner. He was an enthusiastic member of the Tri-county Bar Association. His friends, family and fellow lawyers met at Wasons after the service at Zion Lutheran Church, Galesville for his eulogy. Rob started his practice with John Quinn. After John's death, he practiced alone until joined by Don Hellrung for two years.

Rob once remarked at the memorial service of a fellow attorney that he hoped that those who spoke at his service wouldn't make him out to be a saint. Almost in unison all within earshot said, "Don't worry." But then one of the younger attorneys remarked, "He was a good teacher." As Family Court Commissioner, before that attorney's first hearing, Rob had taken the time to explain what was expected. Those who practice in the Tri-County Bar would not be surprised by that. It is tradition to mentor those young lawyers, and Rob could not have handled this young attorney any differently. It wasn't in his nature.

If there was ever a movie made on the Life and Times of Robert Longwell it would be a combination of Animal House, European Vacation, Fargo, and The Blues Brothers. John Belushi would have played Rob's role. But there were serious aspects to Rob's practice of law. He accepted appointments as Guardian ad Litem to represent those who could not speak for themselves. In many instances these cases involved those who had been institutionalized for years. One of his prouder moments was arranging for the independent living for four ladies who had lived most of their lives in the Northern Colony mental facility at Chippewa, Wisconsin. The ladies were able to live out their lives in an apartment.

One summer for the Tri-county Bar Association annual meeting, the group including Longwell, Rob Hagness, Jim Ritland, Fred Berns, Mike Chambers, and a few others decided to ride up the Mississippi on a pontoon boat. As they neared the Tri-county Bar cottage, Longwell, Ritland and Hagness walked to the front of the pontoon boat. The idea had been to beach the craft on the sand. Mike Chambers was at the controls of the pontoon, and as the three large men went forward, their combined weight exceeded the crafts ability to remain above water. The pontoon must have looked like a submarine diving to those on shore who had by now gathered to watch the landing. The pontoon

¹ Fargo opens with the following text: THIS IS A TRUE STORY. The events in this film took place in Minnesota in 1987. At the request of the survivors, the names have been changed. Out of respect for the dead, the rest has been told exactly as it occurred.

started to go down bow first. Chambers is still at the throttle, which is at full speed in order to get up on the beach. Longwell, Ritland and Hagness are starting to get wet and are now standing up to their knees in water. The back end of the pontoon has lifted out of the water and the propeller is screaming. The little guys on the boat along with the sleeping bags, suitcases and beer coolers are all rolling toward the front of the boat. As all arrive at the front, the boat loses its forward momentum and pops backwards knocking Ritland, Longwell and Hagness off their feet. Now the boat has regained its center of gravity, and the propellers are back in the water. With a lurch that sends everyone backward, the boat is gaining speed rapidly, the bow now airborne. Longwell, Hagness and Ritland regain their feet just as the craft lands on the beach and stops with such suddenness that the three are propelled onto the beach. Longwell is the first to extricate himself from the tangle of humanity and strides up toward the bar cottage like Douglas McCarthur.

I wanted to stand up at the service for Robert Longwell to say what he meant to me, but two things stopped me. Sue Fischer on one side had my arm in a hammer lock and Rob Hagness had my other arm. It is just as well they stopped me. I had running around in my head the 23rd Psalm. Many of you can quote it, but I knew that the version that I had wasn't quite right.

It went like this:

*Yea though I walk
into the valley of death,
I fear no evil,²
With Lawyers to the right of me,
And lawyers to the left of me,
Lawyers in front of me,
Boldly I rode and well
Into the jaws of death.³*

² Even though I walk
through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil.

Saint Joseph, Holy Bible 1962

³ . . .
Their's but to do or die
Their's not to reason why
Into the valley of death
Rode the six hundred.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volley'd and thunder'd
Storm'd at shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of death,

. . . The charge of the Light Brigade, Alfred Lord Tenneson., 1870

I'm pretty sure someone at Zion Lutheran church would have been offended.

When Rob Longwell and another member of the Tri-county Bar Association would appear before Judge Thomas Barland in Eau Claire, this quote always ran through our heads:

*"I prayed hard for you. It saddens me that two young boys whom I have taught come back to me as two thieves with filthy mouths and bad attitudes. Get out and don't come back until you redeem yourselves."*⁴

And we always expected Judge Barland to peer over his glasses and say something similar. He rarely disappointed us.

Robert Longwell had an interest in automobiles and spent many hours tinkering with a variety of vintage autos. In part because of this interest he became a part owner of an auto supply store.

There is no doubt that Rob was happily married. With his wife Barbara he traveled by car through Central America, in a trip that must have been both exciting and dangerous. It was a trip long before there were any really passable roads. Years later he would recount the trip always mentioning Barbara.

One who knew Longwell very well stated, "I most liked his ability to listen to people and try to help them with their legal difficulties." He seemed to enjoy challenging others to pursue new careers. Don Hellrung was working as a private building contractor and went to Rob for legal advice. Rob knew Don had finished law school but never taken the bar exam. When Rob suggested that Don give up his business and take the bar exam, Don's first reply was, "I'd rather shoot myself in the foot." After time, Don took the exam and joined Rob in his practice.

His small town practice was exciting, demanding, and challenging. He learned that his clients needed his advice not a judgmental lecture. He will be remembered by his clients and friends as a man who enjoyed life. Rob's own life ended too soon.

Respectfully submitted by Fred Berns, Bruce Kostner, Don Hellrung and Robert Hagness.

Note: One of the survivors of the pontoon trip says it didn't happen quite that way. He claims that he didn't have any ideas that afternoon and suggested that we post a link to the Burlington Liars club. So here it is: <http://burlingtonliarsclub.com/> This person also thinks the Tri-County Bar Association might qualify for a group rate. All of the contributors had other stories that required editing, some of them true first person accounts. See footnote No. 1.

⁴ Quote from Sister Mary Stigmata, Memorable quotes for the Blues Brothers (1980).