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Interview with Henry DuLaurence, Jr., Class of 1929 (transcript)

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Henry DuLaurence, Jr., 1929 graduate
DuLaurence & DuLaurence
Interview with Oliver Schroeder, October 27, 1988
transcription by Kerstin Ekfelt Trawick

We are sitting in the office of Henry duLaurence, Jr., Room 615 the Hanna Building, Thursday, October 27, 1988, for the purpose of an oral interview with Henry duLaurence.

I don't know what I can really tell you. Naturally all this is second-hand and hearsay evidence. But Father was always very proud of having gone and been in the first class at Reserve Law School. He said it was different from some of the others because of the fact that it was in a large city. Being in a large city, it permitted some of the students to work part time.

Your dad was in the first class, and his name was Henry duLaurence Sr. Is that correct?

Well yes, we had really a hyphenated name, but my father decided to drop part of the name. "DuLaurence" came from the fact that he was in the Napoleonic forces that attacked Moscow, and then he was wounded in Poland and left there. So he kept his French name and assumed the name of the family into which he married.

Anyway, he said it was different from many of the others because of the fact that a lot of these people lived at home, and they could afford to go to law school here. He said that many of them had very little money, and there was some kind of a street car running from Public Square, around which most of the people lived, out to the University Circle. He said that cost five cents. He said a lot of the students couldn't afford that, so they walked from the square or nearby the square where most people were congregated.

He said it wasn't a very large law school, but it started out with very high ideals. And he was always very proud of that. He said a great many of the students read law with lawyers, as was the custom at that time. He said there were no cases reported with a synopsis of the contents. So you had to do a lot of reading in order to accomplish your purpose of finding out what the heck the case was all about. And so everybody was reading law more or less, mostly more, because they had to.

He also said that some of the men, some of the students, were involved in athletic activities, like Charlie Stage. He was very proud of knowing Charlie Stage and liked him a great deal apparently. I knew his kids after that.

And he said there were others like himself who had to work because when he came over to this country he was disqualified [sic] by my family, who thought America was only valuable to Indians and not to any white people. So he was disinherited. So he worked his way through school. Fortunately he had had two years in Vienna Law School, in Vienna, Austria. And it was on that summer vacation that

he decided to come to Cleveland, which horrified his family. So he was given credit for his two years in Vienna. They quizzed him on the various laws and the Napoleonic code and one thing and another, and they decided to give him two years' credit. So he only spent one year at Reserve and got his diploma. [Note: there is no record that Henry DuLaurence Sr. received a degree from Western Reserve University.]

It might be also of interest to know that the fee for attending law school was \$100 a year. That shows how the dollar has depreciated. But that's about all I can tell you about it. He said they were in that little building which was originally a farmhouse and was transformed by somebody or other into a townhouse before that area was built up.

That house was located, I believe, on the corner of Adelbert and Euclid.

On the southeast corner.

That was the old Ford farmhouse. David Ford's family had the farm there. We have a picture of that first class, sitting on the steps of that old farmhouse which had been turned into a school, and your dad is sitting there prominently in the front row.

Well, he couldn't say enough about the law school. So he said, "I don't know where you want to go to college, but I would advise you to go to college in Cleveland, because of the fact that you will meet many men that you will know in business later on, and that will help you." But he also said this, "As far as the law school is concerned, if you intend to practice law, you'd better get the heck down to Reserve Law School because you'll meet all your fellow lawyers and some of the people that are practicing at that time, and you'll know them." So that's exactly what I did. He said, "Why don't you try Adelbert for a year or two?" He was very smart that way. Because I did try it, and before I knew it I was involved in a fraternity, I got to know people, and then I didn't want to go away." And then I had my three years at Adelbert, and one year in absentia, and two years at law school--really three.

Your dad graduated in 1895, I believe. Was that the year?

I think that he took his bars in '93, because he was given that extra credit of two years.

And your class was 1929. What kind of law practice did your dad do? Was it a general practice, or did he have a specialty?

Well, my father happened to speak a great many languages. Poles always had to learn other peoples' languages because their own language was so damn hard. If you ever get into the CZ's, you'll know what I mean. So he got a foreign practice. He was the first Polish lawyer in the country, and the first really foreign lawyer that could speak Italian and French and German and Russian quite fluently. So that he had a practice mostly of foreigners that had come over here and had inadvertently gotten into trouble. I was so impressed with

all his efforts in their behalf that I wrote a column for the foreign newspapers called "Law for the Layman." I wrote them in Polish, because I could read and write in Polish, and then they were published by these various papers. I wanted to keep our people out of trouble. I was convinced that many of them got into trouble because they didn't know the law. And they had no way of finding out. The language was difficult, they couldn't speak our language. So I thought I'd help them that way, and I did, for about three or four years.

I recall your father coming into my dad's store, Schroeder's book store, in the Cuyahoga Building. My father sold many foreign papers, and magazines, imported from Europe, and he had a big business. Your dad I remember very well was a great reader, loved to read, and he would come in-- That goes back to the early '30s. That's over 50 years ago.

That goes back to the early '20s.

Well, I wasn't at the store at that time, I was small. But when I got into high school in 1930 I worked down at my dad's store, Saturdays and in the summer time, so a lot of these people I knew. I remember your dad as a very nicely dressed gentleman. I did not know his background until this moment. A cultured man, that's what I'm thinking of. A pleasing personality, good wit. It's really remarkable that you and I should come together and talk about someone that I had contact with in that way. At home, when you were growing up, I assume from what you say that your dad's being a lawyer impressed you. Did you have any desire to do something else besides become a lawyer?

Well, I always tended toward business and investments. But basically, I wanted to be a lawyer. He wanted me to be a doctor. He said, "You can do so much more good as a doctor than you can as a lawyer." But he didn't sell me on that one.

What were your impressions when you first got into the law school? The type of fellow students you had, the type of faculty.

Well, I didn't know much about the faculty when I got into it. But I certainly gained a great deal of respect for them--Throckmorton, and people like that, they were great. Who was in Contracts? Brightman, yes. People that had a reputation. We all respected them. I was also impressed by the fact that there wasn't much monkey business and child's play and student activities in law school. Everybody was there for business. Many of the men in my classes had downtown jobs; some of them needed them, but many of them took them because it was an adjunct and taught them another phase of the law. And they got a great deal out of that.

Did you work while you were studying at the law school? Help your dad, or another firm?

My father always had me coming down here, right. It probably would have been better if I had worked for somebody else, because sometimes I sneaked out. But he had me coming down here. He felt the same way.

He had me running the docket and one thing and another, and I got to know about that. And incidentally, the practical phases of it were not taken into consideration much at the law school. They figured you could pick that up, and have to pick it up.

What building was your dad's office in? Do you recall? Was he ever in the Cuyahoga Building?

Oh yes, he was the oldest tenant in the building for many years.

That's where I would see him walking through my dad's store.

That's where I would walk through too. Was that nice blond lady that was there, that was so helpful-- Was she your mother?

No, that was my aunt, my dad's sister Ada. That's right. Now as you studied law, was there any particular area that attracted you? Knowing that you've ended up as a real authority on real estate, did that attract you at the time?

I was involved in real estate because of the fact that my father by that time had accumulated a few buildings. And that was part of my chore--to run the buildings, collect the rents, and so forth. So naturally I got to be interested in that phase of it, because I had a direct contact from another angle. I did learn a little bit about real property law. I remember that one year I got the bug about feeling that black people weren't getting a fair shake as far as rentals were concerned, as far as a place to live. So I decided to buy a building, and I did buy a building, at 46th and Scovill I think, a 16- or 18-suite building, and asked everybody to leave, much to their displeasure. And I went into it, went all over it, even fumigated it, deloused it, did everything to it, took all the wallpaper off the walls because it's pretty hard to get rid of bedbugs and that sort of thing without it, and then when I began to run it he wouldn't let me go out there to protect [sic] the rents, he always went with me--to protect me, in case I needed it.

You have developed over the years a nationally recognized reputation in the area of real estate. Tell us a little about what you have done, and how your legal education has helped you.

It's helped me both directly and indirectly. I was just beginning to do this when the Second World War came along. (We didn't have rent control in the First World War.) So everybody from all over the country was told to come to Washington to see what we could do about this. And of course as a part of that we had to hold down our taxes. Taxes were going up all during that time, real estate taxes, and the rents were frozen. So I got studying constitutional law. And then in 1953 we finally--

And incidentally I met some very fine men in Washington. I was working the Hill, as they call it--really a contact man. I met people like Kennedy, whom I didn't agree with at any time but believe me he was a great man, John Kennedy. I voted for him, and I voted for several other Democrats who I thought were constructive.

And then we tried to prevent taxes going up as much as possible, and especially the fact that the problem in real estate taxes was that they were not universally the same. Some people were taxed on this base, and others on another base. Finally I went around and showed people how they could bring actions under the Constitution--you know, equal treatment under the law--and file an action, you know, if Joe is assessed for \$100 a foot, and you are assessed for \$200 a foot, bring that out! I went around, especially in the East. I think in the East they needed it more, because they were still working under the old English law which hung over even after the Revolution. So I did that for three or four years. It was gratis, of course. Some of them worked out very well--Boston, Springfield, Mass. The queer part about it was, that in all our efforts-- Oh yes, and then I became the chairman for the Realtors National Association Legislative Committee. And there again I had to contact up on the Hill.

But the interesting thing about it is that when we finally got things lined up to get rid of rent control, we had to do it kind of step by step. Because we couldn't sell Congress on the idea of doing it all at once. They said no, that would create havoc and everybody's rent would be raised 100 percent and one thing and another.

So finally I decided that we would make a survey of all the cities that were already decontrolled. And some of them were. And even my association wouldn't go along with that, so there were four or five of us that believed in this idea. They said, "You can do this, but you'll have to put up money so we don't lose money on what we think is a far-fetched idea." So each one of us put up 5,000 bucks of our own money. We made a survey and I printed a book, 160 or 170 pages, and we sent it to every member of Congress, every senator, everyone in federal government. And that finally persuaded people. Also, the interesting part of it was that the New York crowd said, "Well, if we can't do better than you other people (meaning all of us from smaller towns), we'll go our own way." It shows how you ought to stick together. Because a large part of New York is still under rent control, and we've been out from under rent control for almost thirty years.

Well, you've got me running on--

Your son also came to our law school. He was a student of mine.

Yes, he did.

From your point of view, was he enamored with your activities in the law, and your father's activities?

No, you see my father was a great trial man. And I tended to grab the books. I needed to, of course, when your constitutional questions were involved. But Henry liked to try cases. And he now is second-to-top trial lawyer for Liberty Mutual in Boston. So he's doing what my father loved to do--trying cases every day. Every day. And he's good. I ask him how he does it and what he does, and he has a lot of the ideas that my father had. I said, "Henry, where'd you get that

idea?" And he says, "Oh, I just figured it out." It just came naturally to him, as it did to my father apparently.

Do you recall any particular cases that your father tried, that had some interesting twist to them or importance to them?

Well, I tell you, I got involved in two or three first-degree murder cases. And I ceased and desisted when Peter Treadway was electrocuted. Peter Treadway supposedly killed the sister of a very good friend of mine. And this friend, Harlan [?] Gillmore--you might remember the Gillmore Construction Company--called me and said, "Look, I don't think he did it. You go ahead. If you want to do it, you go ahead. Try and protect him." So we did, and then the goddam fool Peter Treadway broke out of jail. Well, of course that was the worst thing he could have done. So they picked him up and found him guilty. And then Governor Lausche, I think it was, said that he didn't think so much of that and would be willing to commute his sentence from the chair to life. And Peter Treadway wouldn't take it. So he died. I couldn't take it either.

What about your father? Do you recall any cases when you were growing up?

Well, he had some in a small history about him. I could dig it up and send it to you-- My father tells a story about their hazing the so-called freshmen in law school. They had hazing, and they were going to throw him in the Wade Park pond. He said, "Boys, you'd better not do that. It's the only suit I have. I won't be able to come to school for a week." So he didn't get thrown in.

Incidentally, Henry is very much interested in the law school. He would like to have his son come too. His son got into Harvard, and then they found out that he had Hodgkin's disease. So the son kind of fell apart. He figured he didn't have more than four or five years, so why should he go to school. But maybe we can turn him around, and maybe we can get him into law school. We'd like to have a fourth generation.