

“From the Chair”

Column by Honey Kessler Amado

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In 1925, Ossian Sweet, a black, medical doctor, bought a house in a lower-middle class, white neighborhood in Detroit, Michigan. He and his family moved into his home in September, aware that several other black families had been recently frightened out of the neighborhood by their white neighbors. Indeed, a white crowd began to gather in front of the house on the first night Dr. Sweet and his family occupied their new home. The crowd returned on the second night, swelling to several hundred. The milling crowd began to call out racial epithets; shots rang from the house, and a white man sitting nearby was killed. In Dr. Sweet’s home were eleven people; all of them were charged with murder. Clarence Darrow undertook to defend one of the brothers, Henry Sweet.

Mr. Darrow delivered a seven-hour closing argument. He made points about the nature of prejudice, about the psychology of a mob, which he described as “unreasoning, . . . it has no heart, no soul, and no pity, . . .” such that no one should be expected to reason with it, and about the legal right of every man to defend himself and his home. Henry Sweet was acquitted.

In addressing the jury, Clarence Darrow spoke also to us – across time and space – as attorneys. His words spoke to what we do, spending our professional lives in the practice of law. He said, “the last analysis is ‘what has man done?’ – not, ‘what has the law done?’ ” For the law, especially as embodied in the Constitution, is good. What we do with it and how we use it are the critical questions. Our task as people working within our legal system is to use our laws wisely and fairly.

Darrow said that we “must have [either] a government of law or blind force” By these words, he reminded us that what we do is important and honorable for we have chosen to participate in a government of law. We are protectors of the well-being of our society, a society governed by law – protectors against tyranny of government or of anarchy and against abuses of power or of privileges. We must be careful how we execute our duties. We must be careful to know the law and to apply that law in our advocacy with intellectual and moral integrity, mindful of our various obligations to our clients, to the court, and to the law. Then, without hesitation, we can answer Darrow’s question “what has man done?”

The goal of Los Angeles Lawyer magazine is to enhance our knowledge of the law and our skills as advocates through practice points, tax tips, and continuing legal education articles, and to enrich our thinking through book reviews, the President's Page, Barristers Tips, and the Closing Argument column. That goal is met in great measure by the vision and editorial skills of our professional editor, Samuel Lipsman, and our assistant editor, Loren Milencov Jomie. Our thanks are due both of them. Thanks are also due Richard Nakamura, my immediate predecessor, and to the several other chairs of the Board, including Kurt Schmalz, Philip Miller, Paul Supnik, and Cary Berger, for their leadership in maintaining the quality of the Los Angeles Lawyer.

In the publication year 2000-2001, as we move into the 21st century, we thought it would be appropriate to have several respected jurists and attorneys comment on the changes each has seen in the institution or sociology of the law over the course of his or her career or on the changes he or she would like to see in this new century. The various observations and comments will be published as Closing Arguments columns throughout this year. We are honored that the first such Closing Argument, to be printed in our September 2000 issue, is authored by the Honorable Justice Mildred Lillie, the longest sitting jurist in the State of California.

Your thoughts, ideas, and concerns regarding this magazine are welcome. You can reach me through the Los Angeles Lawyer magazine offices (213/896-6503) or at my e-mail HoneyAmado2@gmail.com.

I hope Los Angeles Lawyer is and continues to be a valuable tool to you in executing your duties as one able and entrusted to advocate in our government of law.

Honey Kessler Amado's professional website is archived and may be accessed at AmadoLaw.com.