

Mr. Collett and His Friend Judge Peck

No two men are better examples of how high you can reach standing on the rock that is a Wabash education than Judge David Peck and his friend John Collett. They were fraternity brothers and became great friends at Wabash. They graduated with honors and moved on, Judge Peck to Harvard for his law degree, Mr. Collett to Harvard for an MBA.

Mr. Collett founded an investment firm in Indianapolis in 1928. He gave clear-eyed and effective investment advice, grounded in the best interests of his clients. Founded barely four years after his diploma from Wabash, and but a few years before the depression, Collett & Company survived such difficult times and built on the base he established then. Mr. Collett took Eli Lilly's little company public; he did the same for Ball Brothers, Hook Drugs and Ransburg – names now melded into the swirl of change that is capitalism – and many other enterprises. Over time his wise counsel lifted the fortunes of many and with them the circumstances of their city, their state and this small but effective college. But one small example: Mr. Collett introduced Eli Lilly to Wabash College.

While his friend labored in the economy, Judge Peck labored in the law. He had entered Wabash at 16, frustrated with circumstances at Crawfordsville High School; he walked across Grant Avenue and persuaded the faculty at Wabash to admit him. By 19 he was at Harvard Law, and by 22 he was an attorney in the U.S. Attorney's Office in New York City. By 25 he was working as in house counsel for a firm in England – think of it as his time studying abroad. By 27 he was recruited to Sullivan and Cromwell – one of the world's premier law firms – and by 31 he was a partner there, building its litigation practice and achieving results and the strength of position effective results bring.

At 42, as World War II was ending, he was appointed a judge and 2 years later – Judge Peck moved up, fast – he became history's youngest presiding justice for Manhattan and the Bronx, the pulse of New York City. His challenge: congestion and delay in the court system. His response: when he retired and returned to Sullivan and Cromwell 10 years later, in 1957, New York courts – in the busiest part of then the busiest city on the globe – had the lowest congestion and greatest efficiency of justice as any time in the 20th century. Judge Peck went on to preside over the New York state bar association, chair the American Arbitration Association, sit on the International Court of Arbitration, and – having modernized the Republican Party in New York in the 1930s – he came within a hair of serving as Special Prosecutor during Watergate. In his spare time Judge Peck also was an author, writing two books.

As distinguished and effective as their careers were, Mr. Collett and Judge Peck were – as I hope and suspect you gentlemen sitting here tonight are and always will be – classic Wabash. They were independent, self-reliant, with a solid work ethic. They were intellectually curious, with interests that grew into abilities and talents. They were men of service. They were committed to excellence, in their endeavors and results, proven out in the unforgiving arenas of law and capitalism. And they lived at an intersection at the core of the mission of Wabash College – combining talent and endeavor to solve matters of great complexity while anchored in the bedrock of unshakeable integrity and civility.

As frequently happens with Wabash graduates, the gifts they received from this College and this faculty were returned by them. The College has had few, if any, more passionately loyal alumni. They led the College as they led their communities. Both served as trustees for decades, leaders of the Board who helped select and advise the leaders of the College. Both were inordinately generous to the College. Both gave as much of their time as their treasure, supporting faculty and mentoring students at, and alumni of, Wabash. One of Mr. Collett's gifts to Wabash memorialized the work and life of his friend Judge Peck – which is how, and why, we come here tonight. The awards of this evening – the principles, the results and the potential they recognize – echo Mr. Collett and Judge Peck, who serve as enduring examples to us of what they were in their lives and what we can, and should strive to, be in ours.

David N. Shane '70