
THOMAS McKEEN CHIDSEY

By David B. Skillman

Of the hundreds of lawyers who have been admitted to the Bar of Northampton County since Lewis Gordon became its first member in 1752, Thomas McKeen Chidsey is the first one to have achieved the distinction of having served both as Attorney General of the Commonwealth and as a Justice of the Supreme Court.

He was born in Easton into a large and well connected family on January 26, 1884. He was educated in the Easton Public Schools, Lafayette College, and the Law School of the University of Pennsylvania. After a year of practice in Philadelphia, he returned to his home town where he was admitted to this Bar on October 5, 1908. On the same day, William H. Kirkpatrick, whose career has also been uniquely distinguished by long service on the Bench of the United States District Court, was admitted.

Directly after his admission, McKeen Chidsey began to demonstrate the qualities and characteristics which first brought him to the front rank among the members of this Bar and later commanded recognition throughout the Commonwealth. He was a rare combination of good lawyer and "good fellow". He combined the knowledge, industry, integrity—all that goes to make up a good lawyer—with good looks, sociability and a vast amount of personal charm. These latter qualities attracted to him a large clientele from the first and then he handled their business with such skill and fidelity that his practice developed rapidly. He attracted public, as well as private clients. In four years after his admission to this Bar he was chosen as Solicitor to the Easton School Board. At the expiration of a four-year term in that office, the County Commissioners appointed him in 1916 to be their Solicitor. At the end of this term, in 1920, he was elected to the office of District Attorney. In this office his skill as a trial lawyer was demonstrated time and again in sensational murder cases, which this early prohibition era produced.

By the time this term was over Mr. Chidsey was so completely recognized as a leader of our Bar that he was called on to participate in nearly all of the important litigation insti-

tuted in this County during the next two decades. A review of the Common Pleas and Orphans' Court dockets would probably show his appearance entered quite as frequently as any member of this Bar, if not more so.

During these decades Mr. Chidsey twice sought a place on the Bench of our Court. In 1923, he was defeated in the Republican Primary by the late Robert A. Stotz, and in 1939 at the General Election by our President Judge William G. Barthold. However, when James Duff was elected to the governorship of the Commonwealth in 1946, Mr. Chidsey was his personal choice for the office of Attorney General.

His achievements in that office were such as to make him a popular and logical appointee to the vacancy on the Supreme Court Bench caused by the death of Justice William B. Linn in July 1950. This appointment was confirmed by general election to the full twenty-one year term in 1951. On reaching this pinnacle of professional attainment, Justice Chidsey rededicated himself to the law in this new capacity. Of his service on the Supreme Bench no more authoritative statement could be made than what Justice Horace Stern, Chief Justice during most of Justice Chidsey's term, said at the Memorial Service in the Supreme Court on June 2nd, last. This statement will be printed in the Supreme Court Reporter in due course. Judge Chidsey died quite suddenly on April 19, 1958, less than six months before completing a half century of membership in the Northampton County Bar.

While Mr. Chidsey's achievements were primarily in the field of his profession, he had a rich and fruitful life in other spheres. To enumerate all of the community, organizations and enterprises in which he served down through the years, would constitute a catalogue which would soon grow wearisome. The Community Chest, the Y. M. and Y. W. C. A., the Red Cross, the Tuberculosis Society and his Alma Mater, Lafayette College, are just a few of them. His church membership was at Trinity Episcopal in Easton where he was also a vestryman. Prior to his elevation to the Bench, he participated in business enterprises through membership in the governing boards of the Easton Trust Company, Hotel Easton Company, Fire Insurance Company of Northampton County, Eastn Cemetery Company, and others.

The long and successful career of Mr. Justice Chidsey was in no small measure due to the lady he married, Miss Ellen Lea, of Philadelphia. They were married five years after he was admitted to the Bar, and, if anyone ever fulfilled the marriage vows: "Through prosperity and adversity"; "through sickness and health till death do us part", it was she. Not only did she provide constantly and cheerfully for his physical welfare and comforts, but she acquired sufficient knowledge of the law to discuss intelligently with him legal problems of which his mind was seldom free. To them were born two daughters, both of whom are married and have children: Mrs. Donald F. Torey, Jr. of Westport, Connecticut, and Mrs. James S. Eckels, of Ogden, Utah.

Those of us who have known him as a fellow-member of this Bar have enjoyed a great privilege, and in his passing this Bench and Bar suffer a great loss.