

Winter 1991

## In Memoriam: F. Reed Dickerson

John Gastineau  
*Indiana University School of Law*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ilj>



Part of the [Legal Biography Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gastineau, John (1991) "In Memoriam: F. Reed Dickerson," *Indiana Law Journal*: Vol. 67 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.  
Available at: <https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ilj/vol67/iss1/1>

This Tribute is brought to you for free and open access by the Law School Journals at Digital Repository @ Maurer Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Indiana Law Journal by an authorized editor of Digital Repository @ Maurer Law. For more information, please contact [rvaughan@indiana.edu](mailto:rvaughan@indiana.edu).



**JEROME HALL LAW LIBRARY**

INDIANA UNIVERSITY  
Maurer School of Law  
Bloomington

## In Memoriam F. Reed Dickerson 1909-1991

Professor Emeritus F. Reed Dickerson died earlier this year at the age of 81. Those of us who are now Indiana University School of Law students did not have the opportunity to know Professor Dickerson very well. He retired almost ten years before we arrived. “Retired” in Professor Dickerson’s case meant only that he stopped teaching classes, not that he stopped living an active life. On the contrary, the perception my classmates and I had of Professor Dickerson was that although he was elderly he was obviously vigorous and busy. We saw Professor Dickerson frequently around the law school; he spent time not just on the second or third floors where the faculty offices are located but in the lounge, the library, and the halls, the places where students congregate. He usually carried a book or folders. Sometimes he would be reading alone at a table in the lounge. He wore a snappy plaid hat. These facts are not much to know about a person. I am sorry that we knew him no better than we did. There was much to admire about him.



For the record: Professor Dickerson graduated from Harvard Law School in 1934. He also earned masters of law and doctor of juridical science degrees from Columbia University. During World War II, he worked as an attorney with the Office of Legislative Counsel of the U.S. House of Representatives. Before joining the faculty of the Indiana University School of Law in 1958, Professor Dickerson was deputy assistant general counsel of the U.S. Department of Defense, which recognized his leadership in unifying and codifying military laws by giving him its Civilian Service Award. As a scholar, Professor Dickerson wrote one of the first works on products liability, but he was known internationally for his work in the areas of statutory interpretation and legal drafting. He wrote ten books, including *The Fundamentals of Legal Drafting*, *Legislative Drafting*, *Interpretation and Application of Statutes*, and *Cases and Materials on Legislation*. He played the trumpet most of his life, and as a young man leading a dance band called the Purple Knights, he met Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, and Bix Beiderbecke. He wrote about Beiderbecke in an article for *Esquire*.

He wrote . . . . He wrote . . . . He wrote . . . . That was the thread. Throughout his career, Professor Dickerson was concerned with how lawyers

write and, underlying that, how lawyers think. He believed that lawyers should write clearly but that they could only write clearly if they thought clearly. When Professor Dickerson retired, his faculty colleagues Maurice J. Holland and Harry Pratter wrote: "His basic method has been to assign his students the task of producing a piece of actual legislation for adoption by a governmental unit, beginning with thorough identification of the practical problems to be addressed, identification of pertinent policy questions to be resolved, and finally proceeding to drafting a finished product for submission to the 'client.'" One of Dickerson's students, Jim Wolfe, has said: "He invented a system of editing using numerous drafts, making each revision like the draw of a whetstone, sharpening the logic, cleaning the grammar, smoothing the syntax. . . . Some contracts would take 30 revisions just for a classroom exercise." Professor Dickerson wryly characterized his approach in a speech to an annual meeting of the American Bar Association: "We must learn how to persuade lawyers that they can charge as much for a comprehensible legal document as for an incomprehensible one."

Those of us who are now students at the Indiana University School of Law may not have known Professor Dickerson directly, but we are indebted to him nevertheless. For example, Wolfe explained in the September/October 1991 issue of *Res Gestae*, the publication of the Indiana Bar Association, that the Office of Legislative Counsel drafts or edits every piece of legislation that passes through the United States Senate. Every lawyer in the legislative counsel's office has a well-worn copy of Dickerson's *Legislative Drafting* on his or her desk. Thus, every federal statute for the past 20 years has, in Wolfe's words, "been honed across Reed Dickerson's wheel," and if the drafting of those statutes in some way makes our jobs as lawyers easier, we can thank Professor Dickerson for that.

Closer to home, one of Professor Dickerson's students taught many of us legal writing. If our writing is better because that instructor taught us to analyze what we wanted to accomplish with each part of each memorandum or brief and to determine how we were going to do that before we ever started writing, I suspect we can thank Professor Dickerson for that, too. We may even thank him for the guilty pang—the moment of uncertainty—that some of us feel when there is not time for one more draft.

For his contribution to legal scholarship and to our professional lives, the *Indiana Law Journal* dedicates this issue to F. Reed Dickerson's memory.

John Gastineau  
Editor-in-Chief

