

From the Oral History of
L. DALE COFFMAN

L DALE COFFMAN (1905–1977) served as the first dean of the UCLA School of Law from 1949 to 1956, having served previously as dean of the Vanderbilt University Law School for three years. He continued as professor of law at UCLA until his retirement in 1973.¹

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WINSTON WUTKEE (UCLA ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWER): When did you first meet [Board of Regents Chair Edward] Dickson or hear of him?

COFFMAN: I met Mr. Dickson before I came out here. It was before Christmas of 1948, when I was invited out here. As a matter of fact, I got a call from — who was the provost at that time?



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¹ For further information, see the Editor-in-Chief's introduction on page 1 of this volume: 11 CAL. LEGAL HIST. 1 (2016).

WUTKEE: [Clarence] Dykstra.

COFFMAN: Dykstra — a telegram from him asking me to come out. I had just started a school there at Vanderbilt. It had been for all practical purposes closed during the last two years of the war, and so I really had to build it almost from the ground floor up. I knew they were building a new school here, and I thought that Dykstra wanted to talk to me about some of the problems of building a new school. I didn't have any idea really that I was being considered as dean.

Dykstra had a cocktail party for me and Mrs. Coffman, and during the afternoon I met Dickson there. Dickson was the first one who said anything about my coming here. He wanted me to come. He said, "I want to be sure that you come." Dykstra hadn't said anything to me about coming yet, and Dickson had remarked that the campus had had a bad reputation for too many — well, Dickson said — "Reds" on the campus, and he said he didn't want anybody like that.

I said, "Well, a lot of things can be said against me, but that's not one of them." Then Dykstra that evening did make an offer, and I went back to Nashville, Tennessee, and wrote him and turned it down. I didn't think it was enough to make a change.

So then I went on to the Association of American Law Schools' meeting. I think it was in Cincinnati that year. While there I got a telegram from Dykstra increasing the offer, asking me to come and asked me to call him. So I talked it over with Mrs. Coffman, and I called him and told him I would come. (So I turned it down once.)

WUTKEE: Did Mr. Dickson phone you after you turned it down or contact you at all by letter or any other communication?

COFFMAN: No, he was working through Dykstra. I know it was Dickson then who got the increase and, as a matter of fact, increased all the salaries up and down the Pacific Coast.

WUTKEE: The first meeting that you met Mr. Dickson, how did you size him up?

COFFMAN: Oh, I liked him from the start very much. He was my friend on this campus. He called me regularly about university business and asked me to call him. I told him one time that I understood there were

rules about any member of the faculty calling a member of the regents. He says, “With you, pay no attention to that. If you have something on your mind, I want to hear it.” So he called me regularly and insisted that I call him on any problem that I had.

After I was here a short time, I found out about this Academic Senate control of the university. I didn’t have any such business as that with Vanderbilt, and I’d had associations with three other universities: the University of Iowa, the University of Nebraska, and Harvard (Iowa and Harvard as a student, Nebraska as a member of the faculty). There was no such control in any of those schools. And as a matter of fact, I told Ed Dickson that if this was continued with reference to the law school, he’d better think about getting himself another boy.

WUTKEE: Then what did he say immediately on that?

COFFMAN: Immediately on that, he, working through other regents, eliminated that control of the law school. [UC President Robert Gordon] Sproul didn’t like it, I know, but after all, the regents did do it, and so I was not subject to Academic Senate control.

WUTKEE: Had you known of Mr. Dickson’s prior career in California at all? Had anyone briefed you prior to your meeting him?

COFFMAN: Not in any detail, no. I knew he had been in the newspaper business and he was the owner–publisher of the newspaper, which he later sold to Hearst. And incidentally, John Francis Neylan was personal counsel to William Randolph Hearst. John Francis Neylan was the best man when Ed Dickson and Wilhelmina got married. So their friendship goes way back. I got to know Ed Dickson and Neylan both very well during the so-called oath controversy here on the campus. I stated publicly that I’m not a Communist, I never have been, I never expect to be, and I don’t see wherein it interferes with my academic freedom to say so.

WUTKEE: Did you and Mr. Dickson have talks over that issue?

COFFMAN: Oh, indeed so.

WUTKEE: Can you relate Mr. Dickson’s feelings on this?

COFFMAN: Oh, Mr. Dickson, of course; was — let’s not — have you got that thing going?