

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?



L. DALE COFFMAN

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?

WUTKEE: Yes. You can review this and, of course, seal it.

COFFMAN: What is not generally known, and Mr. Dickson told me, [was] that the Legislature was getting concerned about the communist influence on the campus. The Legislature was about ready to pass some legislative requirement as to qualifications for teachers of the University of California. Then Mr. Sproul went to the regents and said, if they would require an oath or affirmation by all members of the faculty that the persons are not members of the Communist party, that would forestall any action by the Legislature. So the man who objected to it was John Francis Neylan, a great American. He said that he didn't think that was necessary. Sproul insisted upon it. Neylan told me this, too.

So the regents did pass the requirement that a member of the faculty should say either under oath or by affirmation or, Mr. Dickson told me, just simply by a plain letter, in writing, stating that the person is not a member of the Communist party; that was all that was required. Well, after there was the big stink raised by the Academic Senate of the university, then President Sproul took the position that he was acting as a go-between between the regents and the faculty, which irritated Mr. Dickson no end, and Mr. Neylan quite a bit. As a matter of fact, that's where Sproul and Neylan just broke completely. The oath had been requested by President Sproul, and then after the stink was raised by the faculty, Sproul was taking the position that he was conveying the wishes of the faculty to the regents, as though they had been the sole ones responsible for this so-called oath requirement. Mr. Dickson, I know, was not at all pleased with that, and he told me so.

But that was finally resolved, and then we had the act of the Legislature, of course. Even so; after the regents' action was stricken by the [U.S. Supreme] Court, which I think was a wrong decision myself, because I think the regents have a perfect right, constitutional right — they are a constitutional corporation —

WUTKEE: Did Mr. Dickson share with you his attempt to get John Caughey [professor of History at UCLA] to acquiesce to Mr. Dickson's opinion?

COFFMAN: I know John Caughey called on Dickson at his home. Dickson liked John Caughey as a man, but he couldn't understand why in the hell he wouldn't say he wasn't a Communist. I said I couldn't see why, if a

man isn't, why isn't he willing to say so. Now [Roscoe] Pound was raised a Quaker, and he had — always has had, of course — some objection, because of his raising, to taking an oath. But in this instance he had no objection whatever. The regents' requirement was oath or affirmation; if you didn't want to take an oath, Mr. Dickson told me that just simply a plain statement in writing, not under oath or affirmation, would be sufficient.

WUTKEE: Did Mr. Dickson ever discuss with you the fact that perhaps this loyalty oath controversy just stemmed primarily, say, in John Caughey's case, from perhaps overstating an intellectual concept? In other words, did Mr. Dickson realize that that might have been part of the problem?

COFFMAN: Oh, yes, but he couldn't understand why anybody would say that it interfered with his academic freedom, and I couldn't either.

WUTKEE: Did this really make Mr. Dickson mad about John Caughey, or did he sort of let it slide off?

COFFMAN: Oh, Mr. Dickson was not a one to hold grudges, never, never. He liked John Caughey as a man; he told me so. And he couldn't understand why Caughey would object to taking an oath.

WUTKEE: Did you ever have occasion personally to meet John Caughey?

COFFMAN: Oh, yes.

WUTKEE: And did you get into discussions about this at all?

COFFMAN: No, I knew where he stood, he knew where I stood.

WUTKEE: How about [University Librarian] Larry [Lawrence Clark] Powell? Did Mr. Dickson talk to you about that incident? He phoned Larry Powell and attempted to dissuade Larry Powell from joining the growing list of dissenters.

COFFMAN: Yes, well, of course, Larry Powell did admit before a [State] Senate committee that he had been a member of the Communist Party.

WUTKEE: And Mr. Dickson then helped him live that down or not have suffered from it.

COFFMAN: Oh, yes, Dickson was never a man to hold any grudges, never. He liked Larry Powell as a man. Of course, he couldn't understand why an intelligent young man would join the Communist Party, because Dickson

was always, if he was anything he was a good American and he did not like Communists.

WUTKEE: Yes, I well know that from my own knowledge of him. Was there another individual that came in to this situation? I don't know of any without doing research. We've got John Caughey and Larry Powell. Was there any other individual that consternated Mr. Dickson? I can't think of any.

COFFMAN: Oh, yes, there were. Well, the whole Academic Senate, of course, did. The great majority of the faculty, of course, were on record as opposed to the oath.

WUTKEE: But yet only a minority group actually chose to not sign the oath. Is that correct?

COFFMAN: That's right.

WUTKEE: In other words, the whole situation, though, caused Mr. Dickson, even if he didn't hold grudges, to be pretty unhappy about it.

COFFMAN: Indeed so. As a matter of fact, that's why he came to me to see if Pound and I and other members of the faculty would make public statements in that regard. I did to the *Examiner*. Pound did, too.

WUTKEE: Speaking of Pound, did Mr. Dickson get to know Roscoe Pound quite well?

COFFMAN: Oh, indeed so, yes. Yes, we have attended many social gatherings together with Dean and Mrs. Pound and Ed and Wilhelmina Dickson.

WUTKEE: I wanted to ask if Dean Pound gave you a summary of Edward Dickson ever that we can get into the record or [if he] gave you some opinion about what he felt toward Mr. Dickson?

COFFMAN: Pound and Dickson had the utmost admiration for each other..

WUTKEE: Pound then became aware of Mr. Dickson's work in reform politics in California?

COFFMAN: Oh, indeed, yes. Pound was fully aware of Dickson's supporting of Theodore Roosevelt. Pound and Dickson saw eye to eye on so many things.

WUTKEE: I see. It was at that cocktail party at the Dykstras' that Dickson first met you?

COFFMAN: Yes, that's right.

WUTKEE: Had someone brought you to his attention?

COFFMAN: Owen D. Young. He was the chairman of the board of General Electric Company, and he was the man responsible for my going as counsel for General Electric Company. Two men who probably had more effect on my professional life than any other two would be Owen D. Young and Roscoe Pound.

WUTKEE: I see.

COFFMAN: Young was, in my opinion, an industrial statesman. He was my mentor in General Electric Company, and I could never get out of his office, even if I just needed a signature. Why, I'd have to come in and sit down and he'd load up my pipe with his pipe tobacco and we'd visit for a half an hour or so. Young was a great man. I understand from Dykstra that Young did write out here about me. Young was a law teacher himself at one time. As a matter of fact, I didn't leave General Electric Company until I had talked it over with Young at his home down in Van Hornesville, New York, in October, I think it was, of 1945. I left G.E. on March 1, 1946, to accept the deanship of Vanderbilt University. Young had asked that I come down to Van Hornesville, and so Mrs. Coffman and I drove down there. It was his birthday, as a matter of fact, seventy-second birthday as I recall, and we had a delightful afternoon with him. That's when he said that the happiest days of his life were in law teaching at Boston University, which he did before he became counsel for General Electric Company and then was later made chairman of the board. Young and I always got along beautifully. I went to Vanderbilt from General Electric Company. I was dean down there until I came out here in '49. Young wrote, I believe it was, to Dykstra and, of course, I think that Mr. Dickson probably saw that letter.

WUTKEE: I see. Mr. Dickson wasn't a friend of Owen D. Young, then, or an acquaintance?

COFFMAN: I don't know whether they knew each other, but certainly Mr. Dickson knew Young by reputation. He was the author of the Young Plan after the First World War. I know Dickson had great admiration for him; even though Young was a Democrat, he was a "good" Democrat.

WUTKEE: Well, tell me: how did Mr. Dickson buttonhole you and try to persuade you? Can you give us a little bit of his technique?

COFFMAN: It was all very forthright, very forthright. At this party that the provost, as he was called then, [gave] at his house here on the campus, why, Dickson simply came to me and said, “I hope you will come” — just that forthright. I didn’t tell him that I hadn’t had an offer yet. [laughter]

WUTKEE: What other activities brought you together then until his passing in 1956?

COFFMAN: Oh, almost daily, certainly weekly. He would call me on the telephone, I would be at his home for dinner, he would be at my home for dinner. We’d discuss the university. Yes, he even suggested me for some higher positions in the university.

WUTKEE: Can you name those?

COFFMAN: Chancellorship.

WUTKEE: Which year would have that been? Before Allen came here?

COFFMAN: Yes, before Allen came.

WUTKEE: I see. Did he ever discuss Western Federal Savings with you, or business?

COFFMAN: Yes, I put some money in his savings.

WUTKEE: Could you characterize his approach to making money, or did he ever discuss his philosophy of making money with you?

COFFMAN: I don’t think that Ed Dickson was concerned primarily with making money. He was concerned primarily with what good he could do in the community. If he had been concerned solely and primarily with making money, he would have made a lot more than he did. I know Wilhelmina thought that, too, and I think that’s true. But Ed Dickson was so involved in so many community affairs here in Los Angeles that I think Los Angeles and the university — or maybe the other way around, the university and Los Angeles — were his great loves, his business life.

WUTKEE: Did he ever mention to you whom he particularly liked or disliked as a person, either a political individual or —

COFFMAN: Well, you’re going back a few years now. I know he admired Robert Taft very much. He admired General [Douglas] MacArthur very

much. In fact, he thought a ticket of Taft and MacArthur would have been an ideal ticket.

WUTKEE: Rather than Eisenhower and Nixon?

COFFMAN: Eisenhower and Nixon, yes.

WUTKEE: Did he at all begin to move towards pulling strings that way, do you know?

COFFMAN: I don't know. Of course, Eisenhower had the thing pretty well buttoned up, he was such a popular man. But Ed Dickson was thinking not just of popularity but of ability to do the job. He thought Taft had the political ability, political savvy, and that MacArthur is a man who would learn the politics very quickly and he could learn it quickly from Taft, and he certainly was a man of intelligence and honor and integrity.

WUTKEE: In other words, Edward Dickson was still thinking —

COFFMAN: Oh, of course, of course. And he was a great supporter of Dick Nixon, of course, in his early career.

WUTKEE: He was? Can you expand on that for the record at all?

COFFMAN: Well, I think he was probably one of a group who got Nixon to run for the Congress.

WUTKEE: I know Wilhelmina Dickson highly regarded Richard Nixon, especially because of the Whittaker Chambers incident.

COFFMAN: That is right, and that's what sold him to Ed Dickson, too.

WUTKEE: I see.

COFFMAN: If Ed Dickson were alive today [1971] and under the present circumstances, whether he would be as enthusiastic, I don't know, but I have my suspicions.

WUTKEE: Yes. Do you remember Edward Dickson assessing the Chinese Communist drive on North Korea at all and the fact that MacArthur wanted to bomb the Chinese group? Did Mr. Dickson ever give an opinion on that?

COFFMAN: Oh, yes, we talked about it. I'm sure that we both thought that if MacArthur had been given his head, the whole thing would have been over a lot sooner, and we would have saved probably ninety percent of the casualties that did occur in Korea.

WUTKEE: The Army–McCarthy hearings: now how did Mr. Dickson express himself on those? Maybe at the outset one way and towards the end of them did he change or did he stay the same?

COFFMAN: I think he respected McCarthy for his objectives. I believe that Ed Dickson felt that there were traitors in our government — call them by the right name. I think there still are. And so I don't believe that Ed Dickson would ever criticize Joe McCarthy's objectives. He might have used bad judgment sometimes, but never his objectives would he criticize.

WUTKEE: Did Mr. Dickson ever convey to you a philosophical approach to life or religious approach to life in a moment of conversation?

COFFMAN: Oh, yes, yes. Ed Dickson was a man who believed in the dignity of the individual man under God and the law. He believed a man should make his own way in life. He should not be handed success on a platter. Of course, he can't be handed success, but he shouldn't be handed material things on a platter without working for them. Everybody should earn his way. Ed Dickson belonged to that same school, I think, that my father belonged to. When my father wanted to say something, the worst that could be said about any man was to say, "He acts as though he thinks the world owes him a living."

WUTKEE: Did he express an opinion to you about Dwight Eisenhower?

COFFMAN: Oh, he supported Eisenhower, yes. He thought Eisenhower's heart was in the right place. I believe that Mr. Dickson thought as I did and as Roscoe Pound has said many times, "It's a wonder this nation has succeeded as well as it has, because so few times have we elected as president of the United States the best-qualified man for the job."

WUTKEE: How about Adlai Stevenson? Did Mr. Dickson say anything about him?

COFFMAN: He didn't like him.

WUTKEE: He didn't?

COFFMAN: No, no.

WUTKEE: Did he ever state specifically why or what attributes he didn't like particularly?

COFFMAN: He was a glib liberal.

WUTKEE: Plus the policy of ending testing of atom bombs at that time especially, 1952, perhaps would have seemed incongruous.

COFFMAN: Yes, Mr. Dickson was against anything that would weaken this country.

WUTKEE: Irrevocably against it.

COFFMAN: Yes, absolutely. If anything, you could convince him, would weaken this country or weaken the people of this country, he was against it. And so was I — am I.

WUTKEE: Had Mr. Dickson passed on before the problems within the law school, where Raymond Allen stepped in — did that occur after he died, or did it occur before he died?

COFFMAN: The last telephone call, so Wilhelmina told me, that Mr. Dickson made to Raymond Allen was to tell Allen to stay away from some of the younger members of this faculty. Dickson called me then and said Allen told him that he was not seeing any younger members of this faculty. I have it in writing, after Dickson died, that he [Allen] was at the time seeing some of the younger members of this faculty, not the older members.

WUTKEE: Yes. But in other words, Mr. Dickson died before you were no longer dean here? Is that right?

COFFMAN: Oh, no, I was dean when he died.

WUTKEE: You were.

COFFMAN: He died on February 22, 1956, and I had at that time received an appointment with the United States Commission on Government Security. That spring of '56. I was commuting between Los Angeles and Washington, really. Then the next year I took a leave of absence for the year, and that's when Allen put in the constitution and bylaws of the law school whereby the dean has no authority to make appointments to the faculty. There is a faculty committee on appointments. He does not have any say about the curriculum of the law school. There's a faculty committee on curriculum. The dean has a vote only if there's a tied vote in the faculty. So when I saw that, I told Mr. Allen what he could do with the deanship, because I would stay on the faculty and at least have a vote.

WUTKEE: Yes, yes. Did Mr. Dickson ever give you an opinion of Raymond Allen?

COFFMAN: Yes.

WUTKEE: Well, give it to us for the record, which can be sealed if you want.

COFFMAN: Well, maybe I shouldn't say, because Allen is gone and so is Mr. Dickson gone. But, let's say, there was not any love lost between them.

WUTKEE: Well, it's been documented by Ann Sumner and Vern Knudsen and a number of others that Mr. Dickson, later especially, didn't care for Mr. Allen in a number of ways, especially as a speaker, and felt that he was weak. Probably he was more definite about this. But was there any one particular thing that you could say that Mr. Dickson definitely stated about his ability to handle the university?

COFFMAN: Well, he indicated to me that he thought he was extremely weak and could be led by others.

WUTKEE: In other words then, Mr. Dickson came to your defense as much as he could. There wasn't a real reason before he died to change any of the events that occurred.

COFFMAN: Always he certainly did object to — I told Dickson that I thought that Allen was meeting with some of these younger members of the faculty, and that's when Dickson grabbed the telephone and called Allen and [asked], "Are you doing that?" and Allen told him no. I later, after Mr. Dickson's death, had proof that at that time he was.

WUTKEE: Were there critics of Mr. Dickson in those years in the law school that you know of?

COFFMAN: Oh, I hired some people who didn't think as I did. I thought there ought to be a balance on the faculty, which we don't have now. Yes, there were some.

WUTKEE: But they never interfered or really had any effect on Mr. Dickson, I'm sure.

COFFMAN: Well, he really didn't know what undercutting was going on prior to his death. He suspected some, and that's one reason for the phone call to Allen.

WUTKEE: I see. But other than that there were no other contacts between you, I mean, socially and business, university business?

COFFMAN: We had many social contacts as well as business contacts. If Mr. Dickson had lived I'm certain that the law school would not be put back under the Academic Senate as it has been.

WUTKEE: Who was responsible for that?

COFFMAN: Sproul.

WUTKEE: Sproul. How about Franklin Murphy, while you're on that subject? Could he change — well, you had no reason to see him anyway.

COFFMAN: No, I knew Franklin Murphy. He was on the commission with me back in Washington when he was president of Kansas University.

WUTKEE: Suffice it to say Mr. Dickson would have approved of Murphy, do you think?

COFFMAN: Oh, I think so, yes.

WUTKEE: As a person and as a mover. How about Chuck Young? Again, this is certainly going a little beyond to ask you what you think Mr. Dickson would have thought of Charles Young.

COFFMAN: That is pure speculation.

WUTKEE: Pure speculation.

COFFMAN: I wouldn't care to speculate on that. I know Mr. Dickson would want to have somebody in the job of chancellor who would stand up to left-wing elements on the campus.

WUTKEE: Did Mr. Dickson ever speak about Abraham Lincoln and the Lincoln Club.

COFFMAN: Oh, yes. Oh, heavens, Mr. Dickson sponsored me in the Lincoln Club here in Los Angeles. As a matter of fact, [at] my first meeting of the Lincoln Club I gave the principal address.

WUTKEE: What year was that? Probably '52 or — ?

COFFMAN: Oh no, that was 1950 I believe. My first year here.

WUTKEE: Now, that's right, you were here, obviously, before the dedication of the law school.

COFFMAN: Yes, I was here in '49. I came on March 1, 1949. We opened the school in September of 1949, only to a first-year class and in temporary quarters.

WUTKEE: Do you have any anecdotes that stand out, besides the several that you've given me about Mr. Dickson, that you'd like to have in the record, things that you remember he did over and over?

COFFMAN: Oh, I just remember him as a true friend and, I think, a really great man.

WUTKEE: Did he speculate on the university or UCLA as a whole?

COFFMAN: He wanted to reverse the trend towards the left of the university.

WUTKEE: He very definitely saw that as a continuing trend then?

COFFMAN: He spoke to me about that in 1948 when I was here. He didn't think that the university was any place for any indoctrination of students in any left-wing philosophy. A member of the faculty should teach his course and in class confine himself to the subject that he is supposed to be teaching. And with that I thoroughly agree.

WUTKEE: OK. Well, unless you have some further comment to make on him, why, that probably covers the situation.

COFFMAN: I think probably so. We spent many, many fine hours together. We worked very closely during this oath controversy, of course. I think the history of the university, the recent history might have been changed had he lived.

WUTKEE: Thank you very much, Dr. Coffman.

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