

[Home](#)

THE FORTNIGHTLY CLUB

OF REDLANDS, CALIFORNIA - *Founded 24 January 1895*

MEETING # 1530

4:00 P.M.

DECEMBER 16, 1994

Doctor Ray Lyman Wilbur
Third President of Stanford
& Secretary of the Interior



by Northcutt Ely

Assembly Room, A. K. Smiley Public Library

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Mr. Ely is a graduate of Stanford and Stanford Law School.

His wife is Marica McCann Ely, a graduate of the University of California at Berkeley and Pratt Institute of Art in New York.

They have three sons, all doctors. One is a Redlands resident, Dr. Craig Northcutt.

After practicing in California and New York, he became Executive Assistant to Secretary of the Interior, Ray Lyman Wilbur, in the Hoover Administration. He represented Secretary Wilbur in negotiating the Hoover Dam power and water contracts.

After leaving the Interior Department, Mr. Ely practiced law in the District of Columbia for nearly 50 years. He and his wife moved to Redlands in 1981, but he has not retired.

His specialties are international law and natural resources law.

He has argued before the United States Supreme Court seven times. His Supreme Court cases of most interest to a California audience were the representation of California in *Arizona v. California*, and of Imperial Irrigation District in the 160 acre limitation case.

Mr. Ely's current cases include the representation of the City of Los Angeles and Southern California Edison Company in the renewal of the Hoover power contracts that he negotiated for the government 54 years ago, advice to Imperial Irrigation District in their water conservation program, and representation of other clients in several international matters.

He is a member of the Board of Overseers of the Hoover Institution at Stanford, and a trustee of the Hoover Foundation.

STUDENT YEARS

The time is mid-September, 1892. The place is Stanford University, about to open its doors to some 740 students in the second year of its existence. The student to whom I direct your attention is a bright and friendly freshman from Riverside, California, 17 years old, about to top out at 6 feet 4 inches. His name is Ray Lyman Wilbur. He had graduated from Riverside High School, so did not have to take that fearsome entrance examination that Fritz Bromberger has preserved for us, and that had been the undoing of freshman Herbert Hoover in English the previous year.

Young Wilbur had come up by steamer from Redondo Beach to San Francisco, and was still feeling the effect of seasickness. The train would have been quicker and more comfortable, but would have cost a few dollars more, and Ray did not have those extra dollars. The family orange grove near Riverside was not doing well, the panic of 1893 was just over the horizon, and he would have to work his way through school.

The youngster was destined to become famous in three overlapping careers: in medicine, as Dean of the Stanford Medical School and as President of the American Medical Association; in education, as President of Stanford for 26 years; and in public service, as Secretary of the Interior, as well as the holder of other honors and responsibilities too numerous to list. But he did not foresee any of that. All he knew was that he wanted to be a scientist some day, but right now would have to find a job and a place to live.

The going wage, he discovered, was 15 cents an hour. He was housed in the dormitory, Encina Hall, but there was a shortage of blankets, and he had to sleep between two mattresses until blankets became available.

Stanford was an exciting place, still under construction. Wilbur fell in love with it at first sight, and the love affair lasted all his life. The President, David Starr Jordan, and all the faculty, were young. The oldest students were sophomores. Jordan had an advantage that no successor was ever to have: Stanford had no alumni to second-guess him.

Wilbur discovered that he had a natural talent for laboratory work. It got him into trouble. He completed a whole semester of experiments in two weeks. The instructor accused him of cheating. Wilbur, in characteristic fashion, demanded that the department head come to watch him repeat the experiments,

running several at a time. He told me that this experience had taught him never to prejudge a controversy between a teacher and a student in favor of the teacher.

He wrote home that he particularly liked a sophomore named Hoover, who, unlike other sophomores, was not stuck up, but was friendly and quiet. Hoover, too, was working his way. The boys became lifelong friends.

Wilbur wrote in his memoirs: "All through my student period at Stanford, I made it a rule not to do any studying on Sundays.

This gave me recreation and a complete break from the routine of the rest of the week. I closed up my work on Saturday night and opened it up again on Monday morning. This arrangement gave me time to write family and other letters and do some general reading and to get outdoors. Above all, it gave me a day of relief from any responsibility, and freedom from what I called the nag of the undone job."

These work habits stayed with him the rest of his life— no undone jobs, and be smart enough to know when to break away from your work.

In Wilbur's junior year, Herbert Hoover came to say goodbye. About to graduate, he was going to work in a gold mine at Grass Valley for \$2 a day. He surprised Wilbur by advising him to get a job on the faculty, saying "You will be President of Stanford some day."

By the time that Wilbur graduated in 1896, as President of the senior class, he had established a reputation as a superb student, all the more to his credit because of the long hours of work required to earn a living; not averse to a little mischief.

He wrote home that when Stanford won its case in the Supreme Court, a decision that restored Senator Stanford's fortune to the University, someone, name unknown, had painted the post office red. President Jordan said he knew that Ray Wilbur had done it, because he was the only boy in school tall enough to reach the eaves with a paint brush. But there was no punishment; Jordan said that if he wanted to get anything done, he gave it to Wilbur. Dr. Wilbur, perhaps looking back on his own school days, once told me that when students have time to get into too much mischief, the curriculum needs tightening.

Wilbur had hoped to go on to Johns Hopkins Medical School in Baltimore, but did not have the money. After two more years of graduate work in physiology, and as a part-time instructor at Stanford, he married his college sweetheart, Marguerite Blake, and enrolled at Cooper Medical School in San Francisco. Once more, he had to work his way. But in a short time he was teaching as well as studying, giving lectures in physiology. When he graduated, he was again president of his senior class.

PRACTICE AS A PHYSICIAN

There followed a period of successful private practice in the Palo Alto area, interrupted twice by study in Europe.

He told of making house calls at night in his buggy, relying on his horse, Bob, to find the way home when he fell asleep, exhausted. An epidemic of typhoid broke out. It was traced to a dairy. Wilbur got himself appointed Assistant County Medical Officer, and went to the dairy each morning at 4:30, armed

with a shotgun, to see that all the milk was dumped, not shipped. He had eighty-three students to care for. As there was no hospital nearer than San Francisco, he converted a floor of his old dormitory, Encina Hall, into a hospital. He saw some patients six times a day, and sometimes worked all night. All 83 recovered. One of his patients spoke for all: "If Dr. Wilbur said you were going to get well, that was an order, and you got well."

Along with his practice, Wilbur was teaching physiology. A visitor, describing the faculty, wrote "There was young Dr. Wilbur, friendly, humorous, and able".

STUDY IN EUROPE

He told me that he had never hesitated to invest money in himself. Against all advice except his wife's, he interrupted his practice and borrowed money on his life insurance to make two extended visits to Europe with his growing family to study in the laboratories of the foremost researchers in medicine. Wilbur said that he "had to know". He was contemptuous of the dogmatic practice of medicine by men who wore plug hats and drove fine horses, but had had no experience in the laboratory or with the microscope. He found medical instruction in Europe far ahead of that in the United States. He attended literally hundreds of autopsies there. He wrote much later that his medical career spanned the period from "plug hat to plasma".

DEAN OF STANFORD MEDICAL SCHOOL

Stanford acquired the Cooper Medical College, and Dr. Wilbur was asked to become the first Dean of the Stanford Medical School. It was a wrenching personal decision. He had demonstrated that he could earn several times as much in private practice as in teaching, but Stanford won out. He became Dean in 1911, organized the new school, and served in that capacity until 1916, when he became President of the University.

The transition from medicine to the Presidency of Stanford, and then on to the Cabinet, did not end Dr. Wilbur's career as a physician. He was elected President of the American Medical Association in 1923, seven years into his presidency of Stanford. He also chaired a Commission on the Cost of Medical Care, while President, continuing after he became Secretary of the Interior. He served for many years as president or guiding spirit of the Social Hygiene Association, which he formed in the first world war to fight venereal disease, and served as trustee of the Rockefeller Institute and on a score of professional committees. And, as I shall recount, he performed an emergency operation while a Cabinet officer.

THE PRESIDENCY OF STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Dr. Wilbur, the third President of Stanford University, served from 1916 to 1942, 26 years. He took leave of absence twice, in 1917 to serve as Herbert Hoover's second in command in the Wartime Food Administration, again in 1929 to serve as Hoover's Secretary of the Interior.

Wilbur found Stanford a good medium-sized college, and passed it on to his successors as a first-rank university. Let me offer a few sound-bytes from his memoirs, published after his death.

The first is an extract from his account of his inauguration, on January 22, 1916. He refused to wear an academic gown, despite heavy pressure from some of the trustees.

He later wrote:

"I came here as a boy twenty-three years ago, and my thoughts go back to those early days . . . the charm has never left me. The freedom, the wholesome, unconventional ways, the personal association with enthusiastic teachers, the absence of traditions, the presence of both Senator and Mrs. Stanford, the beautiful buildings, the University's surroundings, all conspired to foster in me a deep love for Stanford . . . My own growth has been alongside that of Stanford; my heart has been with it through all of its years. . . . -

"It is to the young men and young women of Stanford who are coming here now, as we alumni did at the beginning, that I propose to devote my life...."

The second sound-byte is his account of his reorganization of the university.

"I started to see what could be done in the organization of a Lower Division for the first two years and in developing schools—particularly in bringing related departments together into schools so that the student could move about more freely in a general field. There is always quite a herd of sacred cows that browse about in the academic field, and any disturbance of them is a cause of real commotion among the herders.

". I candidly said that I planned to do a little experimentation on the University. Trying to change an established curriculum is about as difficult as trying to move a cemetery—one can expect just as much opposition. I realized that it would be disappointing to some of the Stanford faculty to have one of their own former students challenge the major department system, but it had to be done..."

He went on to observe:

"Generally speaking—for there are always exceptions—faculty members are more temperamental than prima donnas, and with more reason... The professor has to perform from one to four times daily, often on as many different subjects, to as many audiences—young audiences that are the most critical in the world..."

"With such personnel, any attempt to run a university as 'big business', particularly on the academic side, defeats its own ends...."

Here are a few anecdotes, illustrating how President Wilbur looked to others.

My sister, Helen Ely Richardson, did a bas-relief portrait of Dr. Wilbur in his office, working during intervals between visitors, remaining at her easel while he conferred with callers. She remarked afterward on the kindness that he showed to members of the faculty, particularly the older ones, who were bringing him their troubles. Problems that may have seemed small to him loomed large to the caller, so they were treated as such.

In his memoirs, Dr. Wilbur said:

"One of the privileges I have had practically all my life has been intimate and extensive contact with

many young people... Almost unconsciously I am inclined to take a somewhat naive attitude on many things, just as the young student beginner does. I have been interested in him and his problems, not in various ways of saying 'no' to him."

If he was "naive", no one ever caught on. The accepted wisdom among students was that it was dangerous to try to fool him. You might find yourself being dropped off the edge of the campus, to borrow President Wilbur's elegant euphemism.

When a group of kids were brought before President Wilbur the third time for getting into mischief, and he asked why they were always in trouble, one of them answered: "I think we are just trying to find ourselves." Wilbur answered, "I would discourage that search; it might prove successful."

He told me about a confrontation with an influential alumnus who was trying to get him fired, possibly because the football team was not doing very well. Wilbur told him: "You won't make it. You are a busy man, and can't afford to put in more than 25% of your time getting me fired. I am just as smart as you are, and I am devoting 100% of my time to not getting fired."

After Wilbur retired from the Presidency, he wrote:

"The greatest responsibilities of a university president are familial. He is necessarily the head of a faculty dependent upon him to a considerable extent for appointment, reappointment, promotion, assignment of functions, and increases in salary... I found it easier and much simpler to administer the large Department of the Interior in Washington, with its thousands of employees, than to handle a university of moderate size with the concentration of its family problems. In the presidency of a university there is no escape from the immediate evaluation of the qualities and services of each member of the faculty, young and old..."

"It is much better to make decisions, even though they may be only partially right, than to let things drag along indefinitely. The selection of what can wait and what must be acted upon in a day's program is a large factor in the success of a president. He must have the ability to say 'no', to make decisions that cause discomfort and pain, and yet be able to sleep."

He remarked once that the people who disliked him the most were not the people whose feelings had been hurt by his decisions. They were the people who had done him an injustice, and had to make him out to be a bad actor in order to justify their own behavior.

THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Dr. Wilbur was sworn in as Secretary of the Interior on March 4, 1929. I became his executive assistant, his personal lawyer, to work on special assignments. We had become good friends when I was a student at Stanford.

I am going now to circulate two pictures of Dr. Wilbur as he looked at that time. One is the bas-relief portrait in bronze, done by my sister, Helen Ely Richardson. The other is a photograph taken on the occasion of his induction into an Indian tribe. The Indians named him "Peta", meaning "Eagle".

The Department of the Interior, established in 1849, was a catch-all. It included the General Land

Office, the Office-of Indian Affairs, the Bureau of Pensions (which accounted for 70% of the Department's budget), the Office of Education, the Geological Survey, the Bureau of Reclamation, the National Park Service, the Alaska Railroad, four eleemosynary institutions and the federal government's relations with the territories of Alaska and Hawaii. For some reason, the Alaskan reindeer were under the jurisdiction of the Office of Education.

SECRETARY WILBUR'S PHILOSOPHY OF GOVERNMENT

In all of Secretary Wilbur's administration, a central theme is constant: The desirability of vesting responsibilities and authority in the states and local communities, rather than in the federal government, wherever possible. The Secretary proposed that the public lands be transferred to the states, reserving minerals to the federal government. He said that schools were a local responsibility, and warned against the establishment of a Department of Education, and the intrusion of federal control, with federal money, into local education. He agreed with his legal advisors that the federal government had no authority to control oil production and that this was a responsibility of the states, which should be carried out through an interstate compact. He proposed that the Bureau of Indian Affairs work itself out of a job in 25 years and that the 350,000 Indians be taught and equipped for full citizenship, but he vigorously defended their property rights on every occasion.

Time constraints require that I be selective. Out of the multitude of Secretary Wilbur's actions and decisions, I have picked a few that remain particularly important in our every-day lives today.

KETTLEMAN HILLS

The country was flooded with oil, and waste of oil and gas was universal. The great fields of Oklahoma City, Seminole, East Texas, and Kettleman Hills in California were discovered in rapid succession. Oil was selling at ten cents a barrel in East Texas.

Kettleman Hills was particularly worrisome, because public lands were checkerboarded with lands that the government had patented to the railroad companies as a subsidy to promote the transcontinental railroads. Oil had been discovered on public lands by the holders of prospecting permits, and gas was being blown to the air at an alarming rate—enough to supply a city several times the size of San Francisco. Under the Mineral Leasing Act, the holder of an exploration permit who discovered oil in commercial quantities was entitled to a long-term lease, and a lessee was under no restrictions on production. The permittees were all racing to complete their wells. Catastrophe was imminent.

Wilbur found a solution. He would have made an imaginative lawyer. He offered to accept, as proof of discovery, a core of rock, taken many feet below the surface, which was saturated with oil, instead of requiring, as in the past, that the well be completed, blowing oil and gas into the air, in order to earn a lease. He next obtained from Congress authority to enter into unit operation agreements with the producers on private lands, under which a minimum number of wells were drilled, and the production was shared among all the owners on the structure.

THE COMMITTEE ON THE COST OF MEDICAL CARE

In 1927 Dr. Wilbur, then President of Stanford, accepted the chairmanship of a committee on the cost of medical care, appointed under the auspices of the American Medical Association. It rendered its final report in 1932, while Wilbur was Secretary of the Interior. The majority recommended prepaid medical care, to be funded by insurance, which would cover both doctors' bills and hospital costs. The editorial comment in the Journal of the American Medical Association said that the majority report of the Committee was socialistic and even savored of communism. This was an unaccustomed characterization for a member of President Hoover's cabinet.

In Dr. Wilbur's memoirs he had this to say:

"Legislation for universal medical care could not automatically conjure up the requisite number of capable physicians for such a vast and unwieldy scheme. Even if it were remotely possible to get enough physicians promptly for the operation of a universal federal plan I am still convinced that compulsion of the physician and of the family is not the answer. This compulsion would be applied to too many unwilling people to have it work well. This is not a question of economics alone. It is not three per cent of so many payrolls divided among so many doctors. It involves quality in medical care, in medical education (which is expensive), and in medical research.

"Our problem requires that we make full use of existing medical facilities, which can best be done by organizing many of them into medical centers; that we retain in any program the confidence and support and leadership of the trained medical profession; and that we provide some form of prepayment for medical services which will spread the load over both sick and well and over all elements in the population."

Dr. Wilbur was several decades ahead of his time.

THE WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON CHILD HEALTH AND PROTECTION

One of President Hoover's first acts was to create a White House Conference on Child Health and Protection under the chairmanship of Secretary Wilbur. Several thousand people participated, over a two year period, in conferences in nearly every state. It produced 40 volumes of reports, and a condensed document, called The Children's Charter". This identified nineteen "aims for the children of America". Some of them have an eerie timeliness today, sixty years later. The first three paragraphs set the tone:

"1. For every child spiritual and moral training to help him to stand firm under the pressure of life.

"2. For every child understanding and the guarding of his personality as his most precious right.

" 3. For every child a home and that love and security which a home provides; and for that child who must receive foster care, the nearest substitute for his own home."

Some paragraphs read as though the author had been watching television this week:

"8. For every child a school which is safe from hazards, sanitary, properly equipped, lighted, and ventilated. For younger children nursery schools and kindergartens to supplement home care...

"14. For every child who is in conflict with society the right to be dealt with intelligently as society's charge, not society's outcast; with the home, the school, the church, the court, and the institution when needed, shaped to return him whenever possible to the normal stream of life."

THE BOULDER CANYON PROJECT

I come now to the story of Hoover Dam and the Colorado River.

Four great public works that enrich our lives today in California were launched in the Hoover administration: Hoover Dam, the All American Canal, the Metropolitan Water District's Colorado River Aqueduct, and the San Francisco Bay Bridge. The federal share of responsibility for the first three was delegated to the Secretary of the Interior.

Congress had passed the Boulder Canyon Project Act in December, 1928.

Its major objectives were the authorization for construction of the dam now known as Hoover Dam, authorization for construction of an All-American canal to bring Colorado River water into Imperial Valley, replacing the old canal which crossed lands in Mexico, and the ratification of the Colorado River Compact.

The Act stipulated that before the Secretary could obtain an appropriation for the construction of the dam, he must have in hand contracts for the sale of power which would repay the government's investment in fifty years.

By September, 1929, the Bureau of Reclamation was able to reassure Secretary Wilbur as to feasibility and cost of the project and the quantity of power it would produce. It was up to Wilbur to allocate the power and fix the rates.

Before making an allocation, Wilbur asked the States to make another effort to agree. They met, but got nowhere. I remember one bit of repartee. Utah's representative said, "We are all reasonable people. With a little give and take, we should be able to reach an agreement." Arizona's representative replied. "Quite so. What will Utah give?" So much for the Christmas spirit.

The authorization to the Secretary to allocate the power was an invitation into a spider's web. The controversy between advocates of public ownership and private ownership of power projects on the nation's streams had reached a level of bitterness even more extreme than the controversies today over environmental issues.

Wilbur's own attitude was that if the lights came on when he pressed the button, and the price was fair, he didn't much care who generated the electricity. He believed that the dominant public interest was the recovery of the government's investment. All sides had to be convinced that this was a water project; power was secondary; the statute said so. He was prepared to take a huge gamble by awarding a major share of the power to The Metropolitan Water District for pumping. The District was only three years old, had only eleven member cities, and no one knew whether it would be able to vote bonds and sell them. And he insisted on reserving power for future use by Arizona and Nevada, despite their present inability to pay for any power at all. This meant that Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and the Southern California Edison Company—the two arch rivals— would have to underwrite the project.

In March 1930, Secretary Wilbur sent me to Los Angeles, supported by experts from Reclamation, with instructions to get an agreement. I have told this group, on an earlier occasion, of my adventures. Suffice it to say that the necessary contracts were signed in April, 1930.

The power contracts were put before Congress with the Secretary's request for an appropriation for construction. It was resisted by Arizona, and the appropriation committees were hostile. Wilbur followed his own advice: "Go to the sickbed; that's where the germs are." He sat across the table from his opponents for a week, defending his recommendation.

Wilbur prevailed, the appropriation was made, and construction commenced in September, 1930.

Arizona brought suit against Wilbur, as promised. I have told you of the conflicting bits of advice he received on postcards mailed from Arizona. One said: "I never wanted to be President before, but I do now, just for ten minutes, long enough to fire you." The other: "My state says you are building an illegal dam. Go ahead and build it. If it isn't legal, tear it down, and build a legal dam."

He didn't have to tear it down. The Supreme Court ruled in his favor, on May 18, 1931, the same day that it sustained his refusal to grant oil prospecting permits on public lands.

THE SETTLEMENT OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA'S INTERNAL WATER FIGHT

When the Metropolitan Water District contracted to buy Hoover power to pump Colorado River water in its proposed aqueduct, it naturally needed to be assured that it would have water to pump. Wilbur accordingly signed an agreement to supply 1,050,000 acre feet of stored water annually. This raised the hackles of Imperial Irrigation District, which had a senior appropriative right. Was Metropolitan getting a **contract right** superior to Imperial's long-established appropriative right? Did Wilbur claim authority to allocate the waters of the Colorado River?

This brought to a boil an old controversy, still simmering today, over the relative power of the federal government and the state governments to control the consumptive use of the waters of a navigable stream. Wilbur was not about to step into this fly paper. He asked the State Engineer to recommend an allocation, which the Secretary would include in all California contracts. The State Engineer, after hearing all sides, recommended an allocation, which was agreed upon by all seven claimants to Colorado River water. Secretary Wilbur incorporated it in all water contracts. He was thus able to say that by this triple process of agreement, allocation by the State, and federal contracts, the problem of federal versus state control had been finessed, and everyone was assured of a water right good under both federal and state law.

"WATER ALONE IS THE KEY TO MAN'S FUTURE"

Wilbur's success in getting the warring elements in Southern California to agree was due to his conviction that the survival of what he called the "oasis civilizations" of Southern California, Arizona, and Nevada was dependent on "controlled water", the harnessing of flood waters. He said in one of his annual reports that "West of Nebraska, water and **water** alone is the key to man's future." He remarked, on another occasion, that one of the smartest things that the human animal had done was to make water

run uphill; the power generated by falling water at Hoover Dam was being used to pump water over the mountains to the coastal plain of Southern California. He wrote the Governor of Arizona, who had complained that he was not charging Southern California enough for power, that "N power is being sold to build the dam; we are not building the dam to sell power". He wrote in another annual report that Reclamation was the back bone of the far West; its dams had substituted "controlled water" for the gamble of rainfall. His boyhood in Riverside was showing through.

THE DAM

So Hoover Dam was built. There it stands, the beautiful "Queen of the High Dams". It is 726 feet high from bedrock to crest, the highest dam in the United States, half again as high as Washington Monument. It impounds two times the annual flow of the river. The flood waters that would otherwise ultimately destroy Imperial Valley, below sea level, are instead made available to Central Arizona and Southern California by pumping with the electricity generated at Hoover. The power that it generates is available instantly to the power systems of all the western states. Marica insists that I tell you that my name is on a plate at the dam that lists some of those who worked on the project.

ON THE LIGHTER SIDE

It was not all heavy lifting.

Dr. Wilbur had a gift for what today would be called one liners.

He quoted a lady who had brought her son to register at Stanford. She said "President Wilbur, I want you to raise his sights." Wilbur had said that she had put the whole objective of education into one sentence.

I saw many a grim faced man go into Secretary Wilbur's office, but I never saw anyone come out who was not smiling. The visitor had a new friend, whom he liked, even if they disagreed.

Speaking of an emotional demagogue, he said, "That fellow is thinking with his glands instead of his head."

He said that "We will have great difficulty competing with the Chinese. They can do more work and have more children on less food than we can."

TRAVELING WITH DR. WILBUR

Secretary Wilbur traveled through the west a good deal.

When Mrs. Wilbur was with him, he liked to say, when making a speech, "I visited this place many years ago with my first wife." This caused some buzzing. He had only one wife. She was good-natured about it.

When Dr. Wilbur was visiting a new national park, before its opening to the public, the park superintendent fell desperately ill. Dr. Wilbur diagnosed it as acute appendicitis. The new park had a fully equipped little hospital and a nurse, but not yet a doctor. Wilbur phoned a doctor in a nearby city,

had himself associated in the case, and proceeded to operate. When he told me this story, he added that he hadn't performed an operation in twenty years. I asked if he was nervous. He answered, 'Not at all. I remembered what one of my professors had said: Students, when you perform your first operation, don't worry. Just take that scalpel in your hand and cut down through a lot of Latin names until you get to the gut.'

WILBUR IN RETIREMENT

After finishing his four years as Secretary of the Interior, Dr. Wilbur returned to the Presidency of Stanford. When he reached retirement age at 65, the Trustees asked him to stay on while they searched for a successor. He served thereafter as chancellor. I visited him several times. His wife had died. He was tired, and his health was deteriorating, but he retained his fine intellect and sense of fun to the end. I recall his reaching up to the rain-trough of his house, feeling for birds' nests, as he had done as a boy. He confiscated an egg here and there from nests of birds that he did not care for, such as blue jays, which he said kept the other birds in agony. He also had a figure-four trap, in which he caught surplus squirrels, unharmed. His practice was to transport the squirrels to the lawns of professors who, in his opinion, needed more squirrels, but do avoid getting caught at it.

Dr. Wilbur died in 1949, at age 74. Parenthetically, Mr. Hoover survived him by fifteen years.

DR. WILBUR'S FUNERAL

At Dr. Wilbur's funeral, the Stanford Memorial Church was filled with his friends, from all walks of life. Some had been his classmates. Some had been his faculty colleagues. Some had been his patients. Others had served under him in the government. Others were lifelong neighbors on his beloved Stanford campus. He had written that his "three roads of destiny" -- as physician, as President of Stanford University, and as volunteer for public service -- all converged on one central point, this campus. As I sat there, waiting for the service to begin, I remembered his saying that 'man's only real assets are life and time'. I recalled some of his stories about this church. Mrs. Stanford, who had been his friend and patient, told him that while the University was a memorial to their dead son, the church was her memorial to her dead husband. When the earthquake demolished most of Stanford's new buildings at dawn on April 18, 1906, Dr. Wilbur, from his bedroom window, had seen the four sides of the steeple collapse in as many directions, demolishing everything. As President, Dr. Wilbur had attended his own inauguration in the rebuilt church, as well as a quarter century of baccalaureate services for thousands of new students.

He hated funerals, saying that their exposure of private grief to public gaze was a relic of barbarism. Nevertheless, I think the minister's eulogy would have pleased him. I remember a line from it: "Dr. Wilbur's great life enriched our lesser lives."

He would have put it more simply: He raised our sights.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Annual Reports of the Secretary of the Interior, for Fiscal Years Ended June 30, 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932; U.S. Government Printing Office.

Mirrielees, Edith R., *Stanford The Story of a University*; G. P. Putnam & Sons, 1959.

Robinson, Edgar Eugene and Paul Carroll Edwards, Editors, *The Memoirs of Ray Lyman Wilbur*, Stanford University Press, 1960.

Wilbur, Ray Lyman and Elwood Mead, *The Construction of Hoover Dam*; U.S. Government Printing Office, 1933.

Wilbur, Ray Lyman and Northcutt Ely, *The Hoover Dam Power and Water Contracts and Related Data*; U.S. Government Printing Office, 1933.

Wilbur, Ray Lyman and Northcutt Ely, *The Hoover Dam Documents*;

House Document 717, 80th Congress, 2nd Session; U.S. Government Printing Office, 1948

[Home Page](#)

Copyright © 2007 [The Fortnightly Club of Redlands, California](#)
Website maintained by [RedFusion Media](#)