

LIVING WITH AND GROWING UNDER ROBERT M. SPIRE

THE HONORABLE JOHN F. WRIGHT†

I preface my remarks by saying that I know of no one in Nebraska who was more loved and respected than Bob Spire. I first became acquainted with Bob around 1970. The Spires lived on Lafayette Avenue next door to the Howard Johnsons, whose daughter Debbie is my wife. Bob moved there because he liked the neighborhood. He and his wife Elaine were friends with the Bergens, Wagners, Langdons, Johnsons, and the rest of the folks in the 5100 block. Bob stayed there because he liked the people.

Bob and his family were good neighbors, and he always liked to visit. He talked about social issues and his passion for the law and the rights of the indigent and poor. As a man of action, he promoted legal aid and championed its cause.

In the Winter of 1978, Debbie and I were in Omaha and needed a car to take our 18-month-old daughter back and forth to Children's Hospital. Bob came next door and gave us the keys to his orange Pinto. The Pinto was symbolic of Bob's lifestyle. It was plain, unassuming, and reliable. My father also drove a Pinto. Because of his generosity, Bob had to ride the bus to and from work for the cold, snowy month that we needed his car.

Bob loved the law, and he loved lawyers. Although he had many different and interesting acquaintances, I suspect he liked to be with and talk to lawyers more than any other group. It was "lawyer bonding."

When I took a new job in Lincoln in 1992, I needed a place to stay for a few months before my family could move. I asked Bob if I could live in his basement, and the next day I received a nice note with the house key enclosed. This is the way he was toward people.

Bob was busy traveling in and out of Washington, D.C., as Robert Kerrey's Chief of Staff. The job was demanding, but I know that Bob contributed midwestern common sense and advice that was unequalled in Washington. Bob felt that the lawyers in Washington tried to sell influence instead of serving the public. That was the only time I ever heard him say anything derogatory. To Bob Spire, all people were good.

† Judge, Nebraska Supreme Court.

I cherish those months that I lived with the Spires. Although I was away from my family, I got to visit with Bob and Elaine on a regular basis. We talked about everything. On one such occasion, Bob's snowy-white hair was not combed back in the usual style that characterized his appearance, but instead was fluffed out, and I wondered whether this was going to be the new Washington haircut. He looked like Ben Casey's partner, Dr. Zorba. Bob had simply forgotten to wet his hair down and comb it back.

I would be remiss if I did not mention how proud Bob was of his family. He thought Elaine was the prettiest woman he ever knew, and she was his best friend. Ruth, his oldest daughter, lives in Philadelphia and coaches swimming. Louise, named after Bob's mother, lives in Omaha and works at Richard Young. Jessie, the youngest daughter, is a lawyer and lives in Minneapolis. Bob's children are all very lovely, honest, and forthright individuals, and they reflect the characteristics of their father. They are his greatest achievement.

Bob Spire lived to be the servant of the rest. He should have done one thing differently. He should have spelled his name "Inspire."