

## Death claims Justice Epes



**Justice Louis Spencer Epes**

Thursday, March 24, 1988

The headlines that greeted the citizens of Blackstone on February 14, 1935, were as unexpected and as shocking as the loss of the space shuttle Challenger was to the country a few years ago. State Supreme Court Justice Louis Spencer Epes had died suddenly of a heart attack while working late in his office at the State Library building. He was only 53.

“Brilliant, irreproachable honest, most profound student of law in the state, friend of man, gifted legislator, distinguished judge, gentle, deeply spiritual, modest”...said the parade of eulogies that tolled their sad news from front page to front page across the state.

“I have known no man whose character was more courageous, whose loyalty was more consistent,” said his close friend Senator Harry Flood Byrd, with whom he had worked while they were in the state senate together.

Like a rocket aiming at some unknown star, Epes took off from his small launch pad of Blackstone in 1908, after

graduating from Hampton-Sydney College and Washington and Lee University with every honor they offered. His character had been shaped by local schools and family tradition, but it was fueled by a passion for excellence that took him higher than most of his contemporaries. Each new office he held was like a stage in the Challenger’s booster rockets.

He practiced law with the firm Epes & Epes in Blackstone until he was appointed on the State Corporation Commission in 1925. But Blackstone was the center of his world and he even gave up the possibility of being on the U.S. Supreme Court years later because of the great distance he would be from it. Though living in Richmond after 1925 he still came every Sunday to the Presbyterian Church of Blackstone where he was an elder.

While he lived in Blackstone, he was Mayor from 1911 to 1918. Then he was elected State Senator for District 28 in 1919. He worked with Valley Senator Harry Byrd and among other things, was active in putting into effect legislation that brought about the pay-as-you-go policies of financing highway construction.

In 1929 he was appointed to the Supreme Court of Appeals of Virginia by Governor Byrd. "The incessant, through and indefatigable labors of Judge Epes are still the wonder and admiration of all who served there with him," said members of the Nottoway County Bar Assoc., who were watching when his rocket sputtered and stopped.

But what it like living inside his capsule where the private man revealed himself? To his only child, Julia Epes Staples, of Blackstone, he was not only a father but a teacher and her closest friend as well. "We could talk about anything, and being an only child I was with him all the time. After I came home from a dance we'd sit up late into the night talking about all these great matters, and never did he make me feel unintelligent," she said with light coming to her eyes from his memory.

Youthful, appearing relaxed but paradoxically very intense in everything he did, Epes had the unique quality of being interested in whatever the person he was with was interested in. And people loved him for it.

But what did he see in law she once asked? "I've always wanted to find the truth and to love the truth if I can for other people," he replied. He would bring home stacks of lawyers' briefs every night and pour over them for hours. Julia would read them with fascination.

"But how do you know which view is right?" she'd ask, and the judge answered that there was a line of truth in everything and if you looked hard enough and worked hard enough it would eventually hit you, and you would know this was the truth.

"The more obscure the principle of law, the better he liked it," a eulogist said of him. He seemed to touch everything with that inquisitive finger of a child, which couldn't help but turn it over to see what was underneath.

But truth was embodied in great men also for Justice Epes. Once when Julia was child, General Pershing held her in his arms at a banquet in Richmond. No event was trivial for Epes. "I want you to know that one of the great men of our times is right here holding you—don't you ever forget it!" and she didn't

His true hero—next to his father Theodrick Pryor Epes—was Robert E. Lee, whose portrait was one of his prized possessions. Like Lee he would be praised in the eulogies for his balance of strength and gentleness.

When he wasn't examining facts, papers, documents, statistics and deciding cases, he was boggling up Virginia like Lee's hungry army at mealtime. "He wanted me to know every corner of Virginia," Julia recalled, and she remembered fondly those beds made of corn husks and the planks to the out houses they walked while exploring the state.

His wife, Julia Bagley, didn't share her husband's passion for study. "Louis," she would say, "I'm telling you if we don't leave in the morning I'm leaving you. And if I have to walk, I'm going home."

"And father would laugh all the way. He enjoyed mother so much because he was so uninhibited... Mother had a beautiful voice and she'd sing and play the piano while father was working. She studied voice until he died, then she never sang again... just stopped." Her voice trailed off into reflective stillness.

Julia saw the approaching darkness as her father kept to his furious pace. He would work long hours in Richmond and then drive to Blackstone just to hear the problems of a relative who called in need, then back to Richmond, only to work some more.

“Father like to drive fast.” He had an old Ford with window curtains. Her grandmother would always say: “Well, I know I saw Louis going down the road because the curtains were sticking straight out,” and she would hold her arms out like an airplane’s wings and laugh.

He would even drive fast to old church cemeteries for family picnics. “He thought it was the greatest thing,” Julia said. But she couldn’t shake the chill. “He said he loved the people who lived there...” Maybe it was because they never asked anything of him or maybe it was the peace that comes when you’re finally free from gravity that he felt there. Anyway, he enjoyed unraveling his history behind the names that stood like clues above the ground.

Only once did Epes veer from his upward path. In 1918 he suddenly dropped everything and joined the army as a private. For a few months he had no books, no opinions to write, no meetings to attend, only the orders of an artillery sergeant to obey. But his detour was only a short intermission for the war ended and he was elected to the senate.

Always on the move in his last years Epes, and his daughter would invariably be caught by a flat tire between Richmond and Blackstone late at night. “One night when the moon was especially bright I looked at a tree as father was fixing the flat and on it was a sign warning passersby of an escaped convict. Suddenly every shadow concealed his face and I was terrified.” Something terrible was following them, but she couldn’t see what.

Go to England, go to England...take a vacation, she urged him in 1934. There was not much time, but she couldn’t explain and he just looked up from his pile of briefs and laughed.