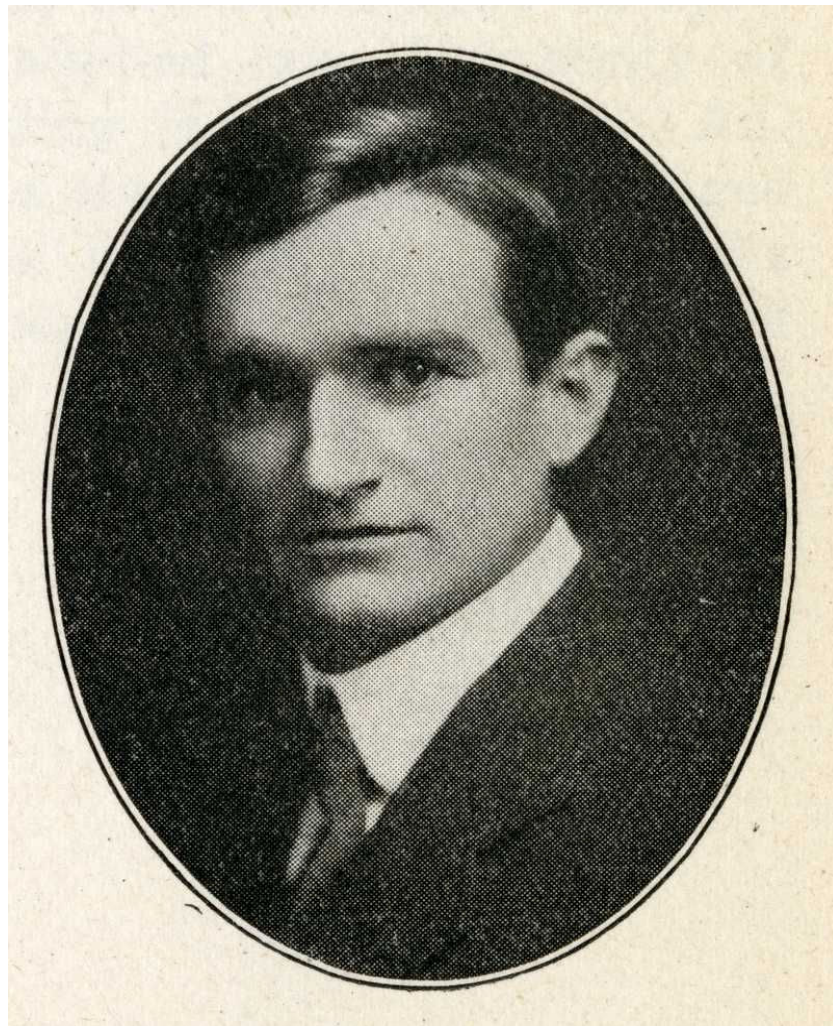


MEMORIAL
TO THE
HONORABLE WILLIS IRVING NORTON

[April 28, 1880 - June 1, 1957]



HENNEPIN COUNTY BAR ASSOCIATION
DISTRICT COURT
HENNEPIN COUNTY
FOURTH JUDICIAL DISTRICT

MAY 5, 1958

Willis Irving Norton
(1880 - 1957)

In his lifetime Willis I. Norton achieved outstanding recognition in Minnesota in two areas of endeavor — in public service as a legislative leader and in the practice of law as general counsel for one of the largest investment companies in the world.

As a draftsman of major legislation he had no equal in Minnesota. He was an outstanding lawyer in several fields and his industry, ability and devotion to the public good caused him to be recognized as the leader of the Minnesota Legislature for the two decades he served as a member. He had the touch of greatness and would have been outstanding in any area of endeavor that he chose. It was the good fortune of Minnesota that he chose to serve her interests.

Born in Plainwell, Michigan, on April 28, 1880, he moved at the age of 7 to Marshall, Minnesota. After graduating from the public schools there he came to Minneapolis to attend the University of Minnesota where he distinguished himself in debating, receiving his law degree in 1906. Upon graduation he went into the general practice of law in Minneapolis with his brother, F. E. Norton, and decided to devote a portion of his life to public service.

In 1912 he was elected a Representative in the Minnesota Legislature from the University District and thereafter served continuously in the Legislature until 1934, when he retired to become General Counsel for Investors Syndicate, presently known as Investors Diversified Services.

During the time that he was active in public life he was a powerful figure in the state's political affairs, and he had more to do than any other person with the shaping of major state laws for the two decades of his legislative service. For years he was the

recognized leader of the State Legislature. He was its parliamentarian, drafting expert, Chairman of the House Rules Committee, formulator of policy and director of the destinies of those who sought to build up political careers. Many Speakers owed their election to his organizing ability and he was a trusted advisor to many Governors, being particularly relied upon by Governor Theodore Christianson.

He was the author and principal draftsman of scores of important laws, which included the so-called Brooks-Coleman Act, placing control of inter-city street car companies in the hands of the Railroad and Warehouse Commission. He drafted the State Reorganization Act of 1925 which placed state departments on a new operating basis under the Big Three. He was also largely responsible for drafting the Cooperative Marketing Laws and the Rural Credits Act, and helped shape the Workmen's Compensation Code and the Basic Science Law which regulates the practice of medicine. He was legislative spokesman for the Prohibition forces and drafted the State Prohibition Act of 1919. Scores of other state laws bear his handiwork. He fought consistently for the appropriations he considered necessary for the University of Minnesota to carry out its destined role for the people of the state. He was also widely known for his successful advocacy of the \$400,000.00 appropriation to build the stage for Northrop Memorial Auditorium and was a true friend of the University.

After retiring from the Legislature he served as General Counsel of Investors Diversified Services for twenty years. During this period he applied his great skill as a lawyer to the solution of the major legal problems which confronted this growing investment company throughout the United States and Canada. His work at this time was primarily with regulatory agencies and the legislature. Under his guidance the legal status of this unique investment company was firmly established throughout the country, and the fact that it has since grown to become the

largest investment company in the world is attributable in a substantial degree to his efforts.

As a man he was a thorough gentleman with infinite patience and a gentle but forceful manner. He was kindly in his relations with colleagues and subordinates and was constantly attentive to advance the personal interests of his many friends and associates. His life consisted primarily of his work and his family. He was devoted to his wife and daughter, the distinguished concert pianist, Eunice Norton Lewis.

As a lawyer he was a skillful strategist and possessed an incisive mind and an almost unmatched ability to master the details of legal problems.

As a legislator he was imaginative and soundly progressive and had a reputation among his colleagues of never breaking his word. He was affectionately known as "W. I." and was respected by friend and opponent alike.

In 1954 he was elected Vice President-Law of Investors Diversified Services, and Vice President-Law Emeritus a year later, when he became ill and retired. He died on June 1, 1957.

May 5, 1958.

GEORGE E. MacKINNON

Related articles

For his brother's bar memorial, see "Frank E. Norton (1879-1937)" (MLHP, 2018).

George E. MacKinnon (1906-1995), the eulogist, began service on the United States Court of Appeals for the "D.C. Circuit" in 1969, taking senior status in 1983. For the ceremony of the dedication of his portrait, see "Presentation of the Portrait of George E. MacKinnon" (MLHP, 2012-2016) (delivered first, 1985).

The photograph on the first page is from the 1915 Legislative Manual; it appears in many later editions.