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Two weeks ago from this writing, Truett Smith, a leading San Angelo attorney, died at home after spending the weekend in the country. He was hooked up with a big stable of fixers and arrangers down at the Central National Bank building. Partners in his firm reached back to 1960. All parties concerned, the deceased, the gray-whiskered, and the smooth cheeks alike, rank as very nimble minds in the courtroom and the field of settlement and compromises.

However, I am not telling this so you can go out in the morning and match a big fight with Exxon/Mobil, or challenge Wells Fargo Bank to a battle, then run to Mr. Smith's firm for protection. I am telling you this so I can pass on the advice Truett gave many a hothead: "Fights are a lot easier to start than they are to stop."

First time I met him over in the backyard at a party in the 1950s, he didn't act like he minded a fight. He was engaged in a furious badminton match. He smashed the feather bird in and over the net. He fit right in as the host, a trial lawyer too, played every game from bridge to dominoes to mumble peg with the passion of a sword fighter.

We were introduced after the players had knocked all the feathers off the bird. I asked Truett if he played lawn tennis, too. He replied, "Nah, I don't like games where the first bounce is still fair." His style sure suited my location, as about that time, herders west of Mertzon weren't around the tennis set.

The same year, he and the host's son came dove hunting at the ranch. The week before he had tried a case in fall court in the ranch's county. The jury didn't know him. Worst of all, he didn't know the jurors or the judge, so he'd gotten his wish about bounces. To offer an opportunity to increase his exposure to country justice on his first dove hunt, we fell out at the first gate to chase a covey of out of season quail. When we returned to the car, he was holding his hands over his ears. His first words were, "I lost my hearing in the war because of gunfire. Now I am going to lose my law license for hearing gunfire in a hostile venue." (In those days, we were the raw product of provincial upbringing. We knew a game warden resided in San Angelo, but didn't know why.)

Until I heard Truett's eulogy, I was unaware he was a war hero. I knew he was a great patriot. On the night of the third of July in 1951, we fished in a rented 14-foot aluminum boat on Angelo's North Concho Lake. The lake was a wide pond, two feet deep, stocked in white bass. On this holiday occasion, fishermen covered the surface in small boats rigged to fish at night by lanterns. Mired in a reed bed, inspired by Truett's knowledge of the Constitution, we began to deliver Fourth of July declamations. He possessed a terrific advantage, knowing such words as "henceforth" and "hitherto." (Note, ships or skiffs capsized or in danger, elevate man to oratorical heights. i.e. THE BOY STOOD ON THE BURNING DECK.)

Past midnight, our boat became further aground. Unaware of the transmission of our voices on the water, we had driven so many fishermen ashore that removing the displacements of all those boats had lowered the water level of the small lake. All we had left for illumination was our faltering lantern. Spirited by adversity and charged with optimism, Smith stood up and exclaimed, "Hark, the skies have darkened, the water level dropped, and soon our boat will be filled in fishes!"

The last occasion I had to tell those stories was in the Methodist Church at Truett's funeral. I drew the number five spot following two judges, a son-in-law, and a member of the law firm. No, number six spot, because the minister opened and closed the ceremony.

The only position any worse than following a slate of legal spellbinders, speaking to row upon row of the same ilk, would have been trying to speak in between handing out programs after the funeral. Glancing over my shoulder, a dozen fixers stared down on us, thinking how much better job they could do eulogizing Truett. Straight on, I faced the preacher's disapproving stare for taking from his time. (Understand right here, "talkers" don't like other "talkers." We cherish the rarest breed of man, "the listeners.")

Just because the judges were accustomed to having their way didn't mean they needed top billing. The son-in-law deserved his time, but the preacher would have cut five

minutes off each ending. But in the throes of competition for the limelight, I remembered one last part of the legacy of Truett Smith: "Always charm your adversaries."

Stunned by the loss, I left the church thinking of those words...