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“Memorial for Sam Wilderman”

Easton Rothwell, David Weinstein, Tom McCall, Ed Whelan, and Doug McKean

January 3, 1975

Portland State University

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EASTON ROTHWELL: Friends, I am Easton Rothwell, Helen Wilderman's brother. On her behalf and that of the family, I want to express our warm appreciation for the many kindnesses and expressions of friendship and affection that have come to us in the past three to four days. Now, we're grateful that so many of Sam's friends have come this afternoon to join in what we like to think of as a celebration of his life. Certainly his was no usual life, as most of you know. In fact, it was genuinely unique. And except for those early years in Bessarabia, his life has been lived principally in Oregon and in Portland, and he had his roots very deeply here.

Now, I've known him for a little over fifty years, and in that time I've known him as a devoted family man, and I speak not just of his very special relationship with Helen, but of the constant thoughtfulness which he had and affection for his mother and his sisters, his cousins and his nieces, and especially for the children, of course, even for his in-laws. His devotion was never flamboyant because Sam wasn't flamboyant; it was just real. In fact, I think *all* of Sam was very real.

Later on, when he had obtained a high position and had become a legislator, and when he mingled with governors and other persons of high estate, the immigrant farm boy that came to the United States in the early century and the boy who sold newspapers on the streets of Portland always continued to show through in his relationships with people. He was never sentimental. He was always straightforward, matter-of-fact, but he had an absolutely unusual

capacity to make friends and to arouse affection among those whose lives he touched, and he touched an extraordinary number of lives.

Sam did so many things that he always seemed to be in a hurry. Except, I think, at the parties, which he gave with some frequency and which he loved. And in his hurry, he sometimes forgot, because he kept so many things either in his head or in his pocket, as some of you know. And it was then I think that the legion of his friends really showed their real devotion. They found dozens of ways to cover up for Sammy, or to pick up the pieces when he accidentally dropped them. There were so many facets of Sam's life that we just can't cover them all today. And we just can't hear from all the people whom we know Sam would love to have invited to speak, except he never could sit still for more than half an hour to listen. [laughter] And we're sorry that we couldn't have included them all, and particularly his friends in the legal profession: the judges, the many judges to whom he was devoted, the attorneys with whom he worked, and the great legion of his clients.

We have invited four persons we know who come from different segments of Sam's life, known him in different ways, and to all of them we're very grateful. And through them we're going to make our celebration of his life. Now to speak of Sam's career in law, we've asked a former law associate, David Weinstein, who is also the secretary of B'nai B'rith, of which Sam was a member. Governor McCall has generously consented to speak on Sam the citizen and public servant in Oregon, with a few personal remembrances also. Ed Whelan, who is presently the director of the Department for Economic Development, and was for many years president of the AF of L-CIO, is going to talk about Sam's relationships with labor, and finally Doug McKean, long with the *Oregon Journal*, will speak of Sam's career with the press. And I'm just going to let these gentlemen come up one by one and speak during the next few minutes.

DAVID WEINSTEIN: Friends, as the representative of B'nai B'rith and a former law partner of Sam's, I will attempt at this time to recite the particular Hebrew prayer in Hebrew; that is the memorial to the departed. [recites *Mourner's Kaddish* in Hebrew] In this particular prayer, which I'm not going to attempt to translate, there is no mention of death. We are glorifying the fact that a man who was with us for... gave us 76 good years of his life. As they said about Jack Benny, he left us too soon, but he had a very full career.

Sammy was a law partner of mine for a number of years on the east side, and we got along extremely well. He was admitted to practice in 1928 as an attorney. My first recollection of Sam was in 1918 or shortly thereafter, when he was just discharged from the service and was still wearing that pair of wrapped leggings around those bandy little legs. I was considerably younger than Sam was, because I had just entered into my newspaper career; I think Sam was

at that time one of the circulators for what was then the *News*. Later it became the *News Telegram*, and in those days we had the little carts with the horses, and Sammy used to drive that horse; he did a pretty good job of it.

Now, I have known and followed Sam and our relationship was always to the best. Sammy might've been forgetful, maybe he forgot to do certain things, but nobody could ever say that he had a mean bone in his body. He was honest, he was sincere, he was generous to a fault, and nobody could ask Sam to do something, and the only reason he didn't do it is because he forgot, because he had too many other things he had to do for so many people. So we have lost a friend, we have lost a real person, a unique person, who I don't think we are going to be able to replace.

TOM McCALL: I want Helen to know especially that her dear friend Audrey joins me as I bring the sympathy of the people of the state to Helen, and others in the family, and express a few sentiments about Sammy Wilderman: a friend, now departed, but a friend of about forty years. No one mentioned who was going to talk about Sammy Wilderman the outdoorsman, but he and I served on an interim committee on Indian Affairs in 1958, and with Helen and Audrey fished in Wallowa Lake one summer; we were on state business, and were taking a small respite. [laughter] And Sam caught more trout than anyone in the boat, so I want to add that dimension to a life that Bob Straub described as we came up in the elevator as one of great beauty. And I would like to say about Sammy that he was a very un-mean guy, just as David indicated, but at the same time you couldn't push him around. And he could, without being mean about it, fight back, as he did at a time we all well remember—we being the political writers and Ed Whelan—when a particularly conservative element gained control of the Republican Party in Multnomah County when Sam was a state legislator wearing the Republican label, and they proceeded at a convention in the Congress Hotel to, in effect, read Sam out of the party, and the major allegation against him at the time was that “he was too friendly with organized labor.” Well, Sam didn't sit around moaning or complaining or calling names; he simply changed parties, and he came back as a Democrat and beat the best the Republicans could put up against him. So it is especially tragic that two Oregonians of such distinct political independence should leave our midst in a period of less than one year.

No one enjoyed life more; his physical stature was slight, but no smile I have ever seen was larger. His effervescence was contagious, and you were always unhappy to miss an event that Sammy Wilderman staged, whether it was long-planned or spontaneous. No one was of such small standing in life that he or she would escape Sam's notice and his approval. Energy and generosity flowed from every pore, and only death could stay him from the completion of his

final appointed round of well-wishing and good-doing on this earthly sphere. But I think it's a very safe assumption he's already at it again in the next life.

ED WHELAN: Sam Wilderman had a love affair with people. And I think because of this great concern for people, the gravitation that drew Sam close to the labor movement in this state was only a natural happening.

I was blessed at a very early age of being taken under Sam's wing, when I was the upstart in the trade union movement in the state of Oregon. Sam thoroughly indoctrinated me on the needs that he felt that labor was not capitalizing on. One of these was a complete distrust of the media. And so at a very early age, I joined him... I was his errand boy for a while; I carried the boxes of kosher corned beef and other condiments to the press room of both the papers at that particular time on Thanksgiving afternoon. And actually, from this early relationship with Sam, I think I can count now some of the people in the media as some of my closest personal friends.

Labor was always a hotbed of differing opinions, and some of our conventions in the past had been really battlegrounds. But there, again, the wisdom of the individual came forth, and about twenty-five years ago, he started the annual Wilderman Bash at the Oregon AF of L-CIO conventions. The first one wasn't very large; there were about thirty-eight people in a hotel room in Klamath Falls. But the thing grew, and more people participated. And to show that he was not just doing this as an exercise—his timing was beautiful, it was always on the first night of the convention—and because of overindulgence, I think it caused to bring a tampering effect on the remainder of our conventions down through the years. But Sam's feelings towards the working people of this state were in complete sincerity. And because his folks at his very early age chose Oregon as a place to live, I think Oregon is a better place because of that decision. He is one of those people that I consider to be irreplaceable. His loss is going to be very surely felt, and I know all of us, not only those present here today, but all of the people in this state, whoever rubbed shoulders with him, will realize that this is a slot that just cannot be filled.

DOUG MCKEAN: Friends of Sam: it's rather difficult to talk about Sam. Not because I can't think of many things to say, but they flood in on you. You really don't know where to start or end.

I don't know. When I first met Sam, it sort of seemed to me that Sam was always here, always a part of the scene, something like the *Journal* clock down in the old building on Yamhill Street; he was just always there. I suspect that he probably was introduced to me and I to him by Dick Godfrey when Dick Godfrey and I were police reporters. But whether it was the police station or the courthouse or legislature, sooner or later Sammy Wilderman showed up, and usually with something for you.

One of the first things I noticed about Sam was that he liked to help people, and frequently there would be... he'd call up and he'd want me or one of the other political writers to have lunch with a candidate. Usually this was a candidate that he had nothing particularly to do with—he wasn't handling the campaign—but as a newspaperman, among other things, and as a politician among other things, he knew the value of the relations between politician and newspapermen and he'd have a lunch, and it'd be on him, and both the newspapermen would gain by knowing probably a future officeholder, and the candidate would gain. And Sammy would go happily on his way knowing that he had done another good deed.

Of course he also had his problems. I think one of them was, as it has been mentioned frequently, is his file was in his pocket, and I don't think IBM ever quite approved of this system... [laughter] but one time I was covering the county courthouse; at that time it was the habit of the *Journal* to publish the daily log of various events, and among them were divorces filed. And just about noon as I was making up this list, why, Sammy came bursting into the press room and said, "Doug, have you sent your list yet? No? Well, there's one I don't want you to send." I said, "What's the matter, Sammy?" He said, "Well, there's this waitress. I promised I would get her a divorce, and I've been promising and I told her it would be granted today. Actually, I'm filing it today." [laughter] I'm afraid that on this occasion my journalistic ethics slipped a bit. The *Journal* did not get a complete report on that day.

And some of you probably know that among some of his other accomplishments was that he was a photographer. And at one period he had the contract to take the pictures of the legislators and other state officials for the *Blue Book*. And this involved setting up the equipment in a room in the Capitol, and they would line up and go through. Well, Sammy arranged things, but as usual he had a nice young lady who actually took the pictures. And when they were over, it was rather late, and they decided to stop in Chuck's and have a bite of supper before they came home. She had parked her car on the roof of the *Journal* building when it was down on Front Avenue. And so when they arrived, it was getting near the curfew hour, you might say, and so he drove up on the roof, but by the time they were ready to come down, why, the night watchman was in the process of closing the door. Well, it so happened that the old night watchman was a gruff old German who spoke with quite an accent, and he took a look at Sam—he didn't like Sam very much—and Sam took a look at him, he didn't like this fellow very much, and they exchanged a few words, with the result that he went over, slammed the door shut and locked it, and walked off. Well, there was Sam, no way to get out. And so, he and the young lady had to wait until the morning crew came. So Sam dutifully took her home. Unfortunately, her husband was a longshoreman, about 6'4" ... [laughter] and as you probably know, Sammy was overmatched.

Sam explained to him what had happened and... however the longshoremen express it, anyway, he took a dim view of the explanation. Well, Sam argued for quite a while and said actually he had been falsely imprisoned. And that he was going to sue the *Journal* for false imprisonment. The longshoreman said he'd believe that when he saw it. So the end was that he and Sammy came down to the courthouse, Sam filed his complaint of false imprisonment against the *Journal*, and with that the longshoreman went home, and Sammy ran like hell for the *Journal*. [laughter] ...Explaining to publisher Bill Knight that this is what he called a "friendly suit." [laughter] Well, I don't know that Mr. Knight at first thought it was a friendly suit, but as usual, Sammy was forgiven and was back in circulation.

These are just a few of the things that I suppose any of us who have known Sammy could tell, but I think that I might say that as a newspaperman I am glad that I chose this profession, primarily because as a newspaperman, you meet people like Sam Wilderman. God bless him.

ROTHWELL: Gentlemen, thank you very much today for perceptively recreating Sammy's life. This concludes our tribute to Sam today, but I think the celebration of Sam's life is going to go on for a long, long time. Thank you all for coming.

[program ends]