



Mirrored with scales of justice that dominate his office, Norman S. Minor works far into the night on cases that have made him "winningest" lawyer in Ohio courts. He switched to "the other side of the trial table" in 1948, became defense lawyer after sending 13 men to the electric chair and winning more than 5,000 cases as county prosecutor.

# CLEVELAND'S LIVING LEGEND IN LAW

Norman S. Minor—once prosecutor, now defender—is Ohio's "winningest" lawyer

BY CHARLES L. SANDERS

**H**IS OFFICE is in the back section of Cleveland's old Reserve Building, a smoke-smudged stack of five floors that has brooded over the city's 55th and Woodland corner for nearly a hundred years.

You take the rickety, open-gate elevator up to the second floor, or, safer, climb a couple of flights of dusty stairs. You have to look for his office. When you find it, the first thing you notice is the too-big lettering that some indelicate, untalented sign painter has brushed in black paint on the mottled glass door: NORMAN S. MINOR LAW OFFICES (with, for some reason, a period after the last word).

A specialist works here—a specialist who knows his work so well that a city holds him in God-like awe as they do brain surgeons, archbishops and soldiers who've won Purple Hearts.

Behind the office door a living legend grows.

He's at work on the legend. In the twilight of his career, he's adding the last touches of color to it. Its basic structure is already built. The sidewalls of it and the roof were completed long ago, and are in place. All that's left now is the adding of the gilt, and the tidying up.

The specialist, the legend, is Norman Selby Minor. "Si" Minor to Cleveland. He is a criminal lawyer. His specialty is homicide, and it has wedged him among the few men chosen to become legends in their lifetimes.

Norman Minor's memories, covering 36 years on both sides of the trial table, are of a special kind of violence—the kind that is garnished with spilled blood and shattered lives. He has been either the pros-

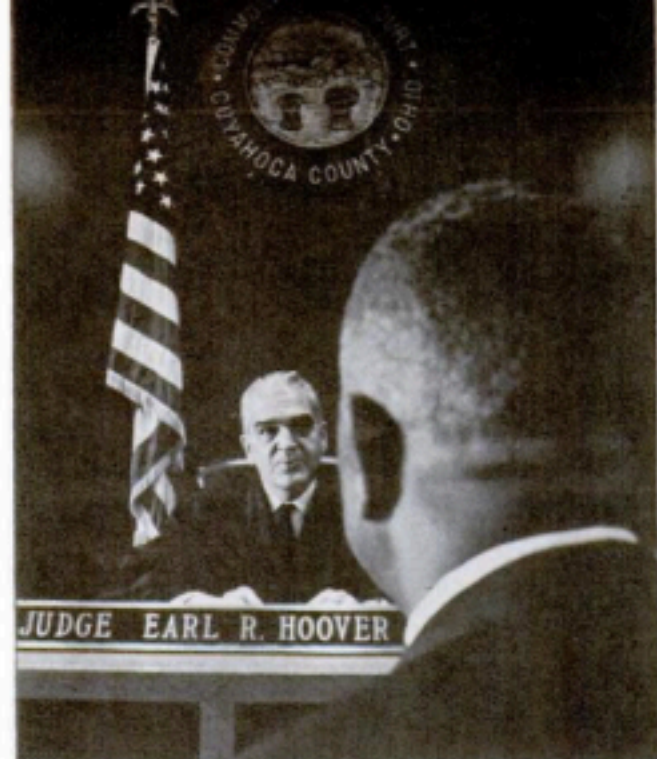
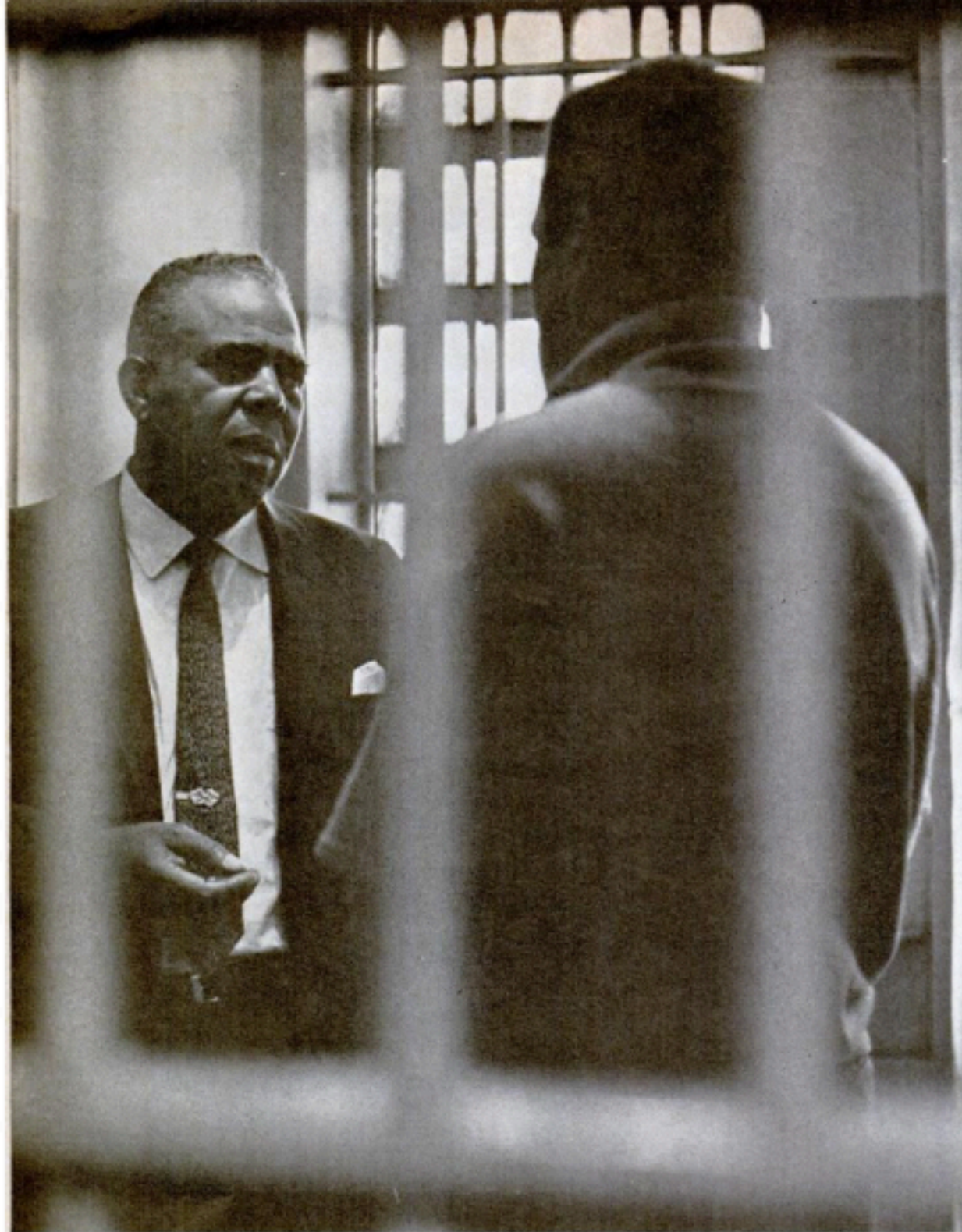
ecutor or the defense lawyer in almost every heinous crime committed in Cleveland since 1930, the year he began his trial work. To thumb through the picture album and clipping files he keeps on his old case load is to re-live a part of the incredible violence that every big city sleeps with.

His 18-year record as a Cuyahoga County prosecutor has never been matched. Thirteen men convicted of murder have strained at the straps of Ohio's electric chair and cursed Minor, the man who put them there. Every conceivable type of crime was among the 5,000 cases he brought to trial, and won. His first-degree murder convictions numbered 128, and in fewer than 200 court days one year he argued 153 cases and won 150 of them.

His most famous prosecution was that of Willie "The Mad Butcher" Johnson, believed to have committed a string of murders that made Cleveland a city of terror in the late 1930s and early '40s. Twelve women were killed. In each case, the head was expertly chopped off between the third and fourth vertebrae, and the legs and arms were severed at the exact spots that they joined the torso.

Willie was tracked down with the help of a cab driver who had picked him up at home and driven him to a lonely spot where he dumped a black trunk into a deep gulley. Children found the trunk and the chopped up body of 19-year-old Marie Wilson. Willie denied he was the murderer. He said he and Marie had gone to his room for drinks and fun. When he woke up the next morning, he said, the dis-





**Searching** for truth before accepting case, Minor questions youth (left) in jail cell. At hearing (top) he pleads case before judge who calls him "the best trial lawyer in this county." In judge's chamber (right) he discusses facts in another case with Judge Daniel H. Wasserman. Often urged to try for judgeship, he says "Not yet."



## CLEVELAND'S LEGEND IN LAW *Continued*

membered body was beside his bed. He said he was paid \$25 by "another fellow" to get rid of the corpse.

Willie was a tricky defendant. During the trial he tried to fake insanity by walking into the courtroom holding out his hand as if he were walking a dog. He'd amaze the jury by chewing "candy" that he'd plucked out of the air. At one sanity hearing, he strolled in wearing legless trousers and a sheet wrapped around his head. "Me Mahatma Gandhi," he shouted as he sat with his legs crossed beneath him.

Minor arranged for eight psychiatrists to study Willie's behavior. (One was disguised as a prisoner and placed in a cell across from Willie's.) The psychiatrists' unanimous opinion: Willie was an out and out faker, and should be given the Academy Award for the greatest performance of the year. Willie was electrocuted at 8 p.m. on March 10, 1944.

As a defense lawyer (he left the prosecutor's office in 1948), Minor has won so many "impossible" cases during the past 15 years that, now, hardly anyone in Cleveland who finds himself in sure-to-go-to-jail trouble, will risk standing trial without Minor by his side. Minor's clients, it seems, believe that tattooed on his brain is all the world's accumulated knowledge of how to open jail cells and set prisoners free. When the fall term of court began in September, his name as defense lawyer was listed on 33 felony cases that were ready for trial.

The object of all this confidence is a rather short, fleshy, straight-postured man of 61. His short-cropped, wavy, gray hair is sprinkled with black. His unusually bushy eyebrows, hanging like awnings over his small, very round, deep-set eyes, and his slightly down-turned mouth and heavy jowls, give him the mournful look of a Basset hound that's been treated awfully mean. He chain-smokes Viceroys, drinks

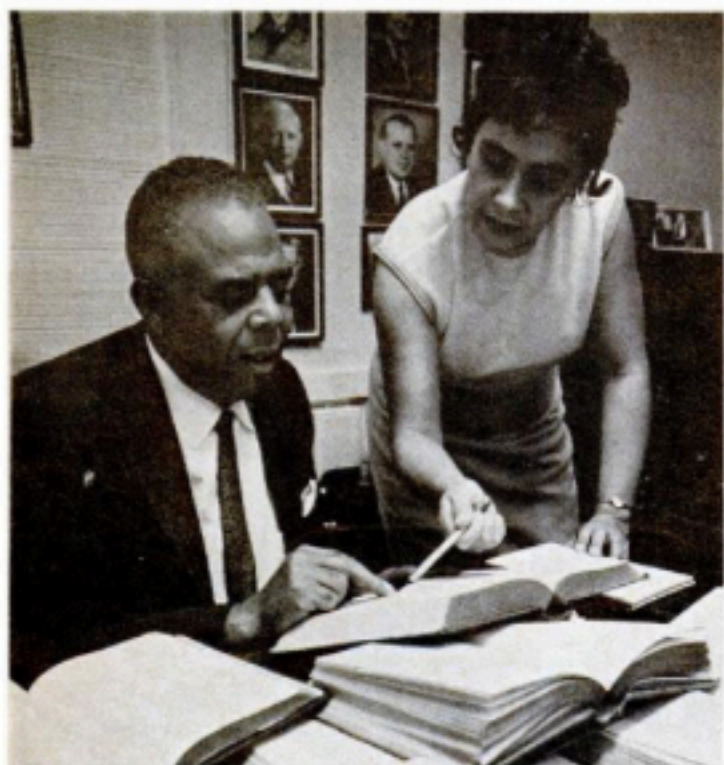
J & B Scotch, says grace before each meal, hugs his wife and kisses his 81-year-old mother each time he leaves or enters his home. His golf game is in the mid-80s, and he keeps in shape by jumping rope, turning handsprings, and lying on his back and bicycling his legs each morning before breakfast.

Watch Minor try a case and you see why he has to have a perfectly coordinated body and well-oiled thinking equipment. It is agreed by both his friends and the lawyers who'd like to have a share of his cases, he has one of the brightest and most ingenious legal minds now operative. No matter how difficult the case, he never takes notes during a trial. (Judge Daniel H. Wasserman: "His power of concentration is so great, he doesn't have to bring anything to court except that wonderful mind of his.") Like a 7090 IBM computer, he can digest a week of testimony, then re-call witnesses, recite their testimony almost verbatim, and twirl the witnesses until they smother their previous testimony in fuzz.

Few lawyers have his gift for the understated dramatic. He seldom raises his voice in the courtroom, never shouts. But he can cut a witness apart with a teeth-clenched, half-spoken "Why . . . don't . . . you tell . . . this . . . jury . . . the . . . truth?" Or he can flick off the end of his tongue a bitter, jabbing question like "You're lying, aren't you?" The sardonic aside, the spat out denunciation of a witness, come, if he needs them, with masterful timing. But seldom is he a fierce, hard, pyrotechnic cross-examiner. He prefers to muzzle a damaging witness by proceeding with gentleness, like a man leading a bothersome mouse to a trap baited with fresh cheese. He stands aside, lets the witness bite, and break his own neck.

Though he refuses to stoop to chicanery and courtroom "tricks" (He says: "No medicine yet discovered can heal a lawyer's wounded reputation when the courts lose respect for him"), when he has a tough case going and the prosecution has him pushed into a corner





Law researcher and aide since 1948, Mrs. Audrey Carter helps Minor prepare brief (left). Case conference (right) is held with partners in Minor, Stokes & Stokes firm. Carl B. Stokes (c.) is brilliant attorney, state representative. His brother, Louis, is courtroom whiz, has large practice. Firm offers services to Cleveland NAACP branch.

## CLEVELAND'S LEGEND IN LAW *Continued*

with witnesses and evidence, he'll employ any amount of clever ruthlessness to fight his way out.

To Minor, the ritual of trial is sacred, but it is, at least in part, an exciting contest—a contest between the wits and wills of himself and the opposing lawyer. The prize in the contest is the defendant. Either Minor frees him or gets him as light a sentence as possible, or the prize is lost. The contest, to be sure, has rules. But the rules are so complex, so difficult of application and enforcement, that the contest winner will be whoever can take the rules and squeeze from them all that is favorable to himself. At all times, Minor squeezes hard.

Part of the Minor legend is his genius for picking "non-convicting" juries; for getting the right person on a jury and preempting all who might harm his case. He searches their eyes and their smiles and frowns. He notices how they sit in the jury box, how they are built, the kind of clothes they are wearing. He looks at each juror's hands, sees whether there is a wedding ring, and how expensive it appears to be. He's careful because, once the jury is picked, he intends to play upon its heartstrings as gently and as effectively as an angel playing a harp.

Minor has a client on trial. It is a young woman accused of shooting to death her husband who has mistreated her for years. The woman has several children. Minor instructs her to come to trial wearing a simple house dress, clean and well pressed. She is to wear stockings and shoes with flat heels. Her hair is to be brushed back from her face and done in as simple a style as possible. She is to wear just a trace

of make up. She is to sit at the trial table with her feet flat on the floor, her hands folded in her lap. She is never to smile. She is to look as worried as possible, but she is not to resort to theatrics. She is never to look directly at the jury. Most of the time she is to look at her hands, maybe stare at her fingers and rub the ends of them. She is to look like nothing more than a housewife and mother of several children.

The case for both sides has been presented. All witnesses have been heard. It is time for Minor's final plea to the jury—for him the most important part of the trial. He moves in front of the jury, stops before a juror who he has decided is a housewife and mother of several children. He begins to communicate a special kind of emotion. He lets his shoulders hunch, his body sag, his eyes become sad. As he speaks to the key juror, he begins to establish a kind of psychokinetic rapport—a kind of invisible, direct line to the juror's mind and heart. Then he begins connecting with each person sitting in the jury box. He continues to talk, pacing himself like a symphony conductor, bringing the jury along with him in an almost frightening display of crescendos and towering passion. It may take all morning, or all day, for him to complete his plea, but he holds the jury, trying to drain each juror of any doubt that his client ought to go on home and get her children ready for school the next day. In this case, an actual one, the client did.

Like all top trial lawyers, Minor has lost his share of cases. A few weeks ago, he fell short of winning one of the biggest of his career. The defendant was Cuyahoga County Recorder Frank S. Day. The Cleveland Press dug up the story and published day-to-day proof that Day was tampering with his office payroll and forging checks drawn



County Recorder Frank S. Day (L.), indicted on 27 counts of payroll tampering and check forgery, chose Minor as his defense lawyer in case that may pay Minor up to \$25,000. Increasing number of whites are employing Negro lawyers, Minor says.



Popular lawyer gets good-natured ribbing about a case from attorney Jay White (c.). Minor is often stopped on streets by young lawyers seeking advice on trial technique. He sometimes lectures at Western Reserve University Law School.



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In office with pictures of famous judges framing him, Minor has day's appointments read by secretary for 20 years, Mrs. Alice Cox. About income from heavy case load, he says: "It's not nearly as much as some people think . . . just enough to live on."

### CLEVELAND'S LEGEND IN LAW *Continued*

in the name of a non-existent "employee" and an employee who was actually working in Day's suburban home. Day was indicted on 27 counts. It was the first time in more than 30 years that an elected county official had been indicted on any charge.

Wealthy, white, a former state senator and a magic name with Cleveland area voters who had kept him in the Recorder's office 11 years, Day was in deep trouble. He needed a lawyer. The best in town. He chose Norman S. Minor.

Minor toyed with the case for weeks. He was accused of trying to get it whitewashed. Finally it was brought to trial. The first three days were spent selecting a jury, hearing a little testimony and working out concessions that would satisfy Minor, County Prosecutor John T. Corrigan—and the Press. On the fourth day, the jury was led out of the courtroom. Minor brought his client before Common Pleas Judge William K. Thomas, announced that Day was ready to halt the trial and admit his guilt—but to only three counts, not 27. The prosecutor and judge went along; the plea was accepted, the other 24 counts dropped. Facing at the outset a possible sentence of 27 to 400 years, Day was sentenced Sept. 24 to one to 20 years in Ohio Penitentiary. He'll be eligible for parole in about ten months.

Said Judge Thomas: "No lawyer could have done any better than that. No lawyer anywhere."

But the Press was less than enthusiastic, suggested that Day had received only token justice. The Press has sniped at Minor before, once assigned a reporter to find out why Minor's clients were almost always acquitted, allowed to plead guilty to lesser offenses than charged with, or given "slap on the wrist" sentences.

Though the resulting "exposé" was burdened with statistics and no proof of wrong-doing, one case spotlighted was that of a 48-year-old man charged with second-degree murder. He was accused of killing his common-law wife, the mother of his three-year-old daughter and six other children. Minor was hired to defend the man. He got him released on \$2,500 bond, then spent several months on what the Press called "negotiation." Finally, Minor brought the man before Common Pleas Judge William J. McDermott, offered to enter a plea of guilty—to assault and battery. Judge McDermott accepted the plea, ordered a pre-sentence report, then sentenced the man to 90 days in the county Workhouse. Protesting the "stiff sentence," Minor asked that it be



Lawyer's daughter, Valena Minor Williams, is award-winning staffer on Cleveland radio station WABQ, writer, and wife of Urban Renewal Commissioner John B. Williams. Minor's son, Harold, is personnel supervisor in County Welfare office.

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**Gold trophies** numbering nearly 100 were won by lawyer's wife, Mary, a national tournament champ. Both travel throughout country playing game. Trips to Idlewild, Mich., and Florida, are summer musts for devoted couple. Mrs. Minor is former secretary to Chicago's Julian A. Black, once advisor and manager of boxing great Joe Louis.

**Backyard golf** session is morning routine for lawyer whose game is in mid-80s. He is member of The Swingers, a husband-wife golf group in Cleveland, and The Nomads, a 40-member club of golfers including such top names as Jesse Owens, Dr. T. K. Lawless, the Rev. Archibald Carey, Dr. James Nabrit, Ralph Metcalfe and Dr. Middleton H. Lambright Jr.



## CLEVELAND'S LEGEND IN LAW *Continued*

suspended and the man placed on probation. Judge McDermott thought for a while, then shook his head and said, "No, Norm, no. I just can't go that far." Resignedly, the man served the three-month sentence for the slaying.

Minor has had few run-ins with judges, but he likes to tell about the time he out-talked a judge who was about to find him in contempt of court. The judge had ordered a Minor client extradited to Buffalo, N. Y., to stand trial for murder. Minor asked for "just two hours to take the case to the Court of Appeals." The judge refused, ordered Buffalo police to take the man away. Shaking with anger, Minor turned to the judge, looked him in the eye, said "It's a lousy kidnapping," then turned on his heels and walked out of the courtroom." Ordered back to the courtroom to apologize or face a contempt citation, Minor cooled off and dramatically stated:

"Outside of my family, I have no greater love than this courtroom. Never, never would I intentionally say anything that would reflect upon this room that is so dear to my heart. I therefore, in the most humble manner, apologize to this room."

Snapped the judge: "Accepted."

Said Minor later: "He never once realized that I apologized to the room—not to him."

Minor's career has had even lighter moments. Once after making a speech in Cleveland's 11th Ward in behalf of a friend who was running for a political office, Minor was invited to have a few drinks with a group of fellows who had enjoyed the speech.

Minor recalls: "They took me to an alley joint somewhere off Central Avenue and we had quite an evening. The next day, I had on the witness stand one of the fellows who'd been out with us. But I didn't recognize him. Something came up in the testimony about liquor-drinking. I asked the witness, 'Now you're not a drinking man, are you?' He looked at me, frowned, giggled a little bit, and whispered loud enough for everybody to hear, 'Now Mr. Minor, why you wanta ask me something like that when you know how drunk me and you was last night?' I got that man off that witness stand so quick he thought the trial was over."

Though he was born in Austin, Ill., near Chicago, Minor has lived in Cleveland since he was a child. At Cleveland Central High School he was a better All-Scholastic halfback than student. A popular, four-letter athlete, he gave little time to studies, except civics, a course that fascinated him. In the days when few schools had guidance counselors, Norman was advised by the civics teacher, Charles Ozanne, to "start thinking about going into law." Norman did. After graduation he enrolled at the University of Michigan Law School, worked on a "combined curriculum" program of studies, was about to graduate when he became seriously ill with pneumonia and had to be sent home. He never went back to the university. Instead, he enrolled at Cleveland-Marshall Law School, graduated, and passed the Ohio Bar on his first try in 1927.

After case-chasing for a while for Cleveland attorneys Tom Fleming and Lawrence O. Payne, and after getting trial experience by taking

dozens of "for free" cases of men he found in jail in need of a lawyer, Minor in 1930 became the first Negro in Democratic County Prosecutor Ray T. Miller's office. Appointed at the same time was another young lawyer, Thomas A. Burke, who later became Cleveland's mayor and then U. S. Senator.

For the purpose of the Minor legend, to make it perfect, one has to delve into the complexities that helped make the man. There one finds an almost implausible simplicity—a simplicity of purpose, of motivation. It is a formless thing. It has no shadows or depths; you have to search for it. But it is meaningful, and far more compelling than any dialogue of education, dates and places, and success.

It was Race, that ever-present pressure of being an "only Negro"—a Negro on trial—in a white system that is well-ordered and with stations, for Negroes, circumscribed.

Norman Minor was a good lawyer, and he knew it. But for years in the Prosecutor's office he was "the colored prosecutor for the colored cases." It was a grind and he wanted to break the rules, but the discipline that had been pounded into him as a star athlete kept him from slipping into stubbornness. He was too proud, too conscious of his missionary role to refuse to do a good job just because his limits had been set.

"I sat down one day and had a conversation with myself," Minor remembers. "I said to myself, 'Norman Minor, some people want you to fail, but you can't. Fail and who'll take your place? There aren't many Negro boys in law school. Where will they find a fellow who can handle a case as well as you? You're paving the way for the changes that are sure to come. Stick it out, and prosecute like Hell.' It was a pretty good conversation, and I did just what I'd told myself to do."

The decision was the measure of a young man who had charted a



**Lawyer's parents**, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Minor, share son's home, proudly boast "He's the greatest boy in the world." Despite mom's warning, Norman played high school football, was badly hurt in game after earning All-Scholastic honors as halfback.





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## CLEVELAND'S LEGEND IN LAW *Continued*

course for himself and set out on it with full sail. He had decided to grow despite restrictions. This was the first piece of the good fortune that was to make him a legend.

It took three years of prosecuting "like Hell," before he was handed his first major case in which the defendants were white. The notorious "Black Shirt Gang" had killed another victim. Three gang members had been indicted for murder. It was a case that the Prosecutor, and the public, wanted won. Minor got the assignment. He won. The pieces of the legend were beginning to form. Ability was forcing them into place. Within a few years, Minor was the top trial lawyer on the Prosecutor's staff.

On the way to the top, Minor took a multitude of young lawyers by the hand and brought them along, too. His first partner and his best "student" was Merle M. McCurdy who worked with him, learned many of his techniques, and went on to follow him as a brilliant trial lawyer for the State. McCurdy later became Cleveland's first Public Defender, and, when the Kennedys took office in 1961, he was picked as U. S. Attorney for the Northern District of Ohio.

The list is long. Lawyer after lawyer came to Minor's office, worked there for a while, then moved on to success, inspired by a "preacher" whose constant sermon was, "Learn all you can, and know so much about law that no white man can ever disrespect your ability, and no Negro will ever pass your office door on his way downtown."

The respect of judges, the confidence of clients, the admiration of a city; these are the earned things that Norman Minor cherishes most of all, he says, as he begins to close the book on his career. "A lawyer is sort of like a flagpole sitter," he says, "we're always just one wrong wiggle away from an awful fall. I might have wiggled a little in the past 36 years, but, thanks to God, I've never let myself really fall."

For all the success and respect he enjoys, Norman Minor remains a simple, friendly man. His small office is free of the apparatus of prestige. There is no thick carpet and kidney-shaped desk. It's a back section office in a smoke-smudged building and you get there by taking a rickety, open-gate elevator or a couple of flights of dusty stairs. But it's where a specialist works.

It's where a legend grows.



**Trial ended,** Minor leaves court building where he is a "fixture" as familiar as trial table. He heads home, or to office where someone in trouble usually waits to hear him say "O.K., I'll take your case."

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