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NEWTON D. BAKER

AIDE REMEMBERS HIM AS A SMALL, QUIET MAN WITH AN ENORMOUS DEDICATION TO PEACE

By Ruth Hart Stromberg

When I graduated from law school in the depression years of the 1930s, I was lucky to get a job with the prestigious law firm of Baker, Hostetler and Sidlo in Cleveland.

I was hired, not as a lawyer, of course, because I was a woman. I was employed to do legal research and to act as law librarian for the firm.

I worked at my job for four weeks without meeting the three partners whose names dominated the largest mahogany doors.

Then one morning I came into the library early and found a small man sitting on the floor in one corner of the room. His attention was riveted on the book he was reading and other books were stacked in piles around him.

I knew immediately that this was Newton D. Baker, senior partner, former mayor of Cleveland and former secretary of war. What I didn't know was whether to back quietly out of the library and leave him undisturbed or whether to proceed with the task for which I had entered the room.

While I hesitated, Baker looked up from his book.

"You must be the new lady lawyer," he said. "I'm Newton Baker. Do you suppose that you could help me look up the cases cited in this footnote?"

"Yes, sir," I answered quickly and then found myself facing another quandary. Should I go over and sit down on the floor beside him or should I stand and wait until Baker decided to hand me the work he wanted me to do.

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Fortunately, Baker solved the problem by getting up off the floor. He was a short, slender man, no taller than I when he finally stood beside me, and to my chagrin, he probably weighed less than I did at my regretted 130 pounds.

His features were sharp and precise. His eyes were dark gray, and they seemed to be searching constantly for information, for knowledge or for something. Their expression was kindly but definitely inquisitive and even the thick glasses that he wore low on his nose could not hide the curiosity in his eyes.

The rest of that day passed quickly and happily while I worked for the man whom I had admired for what must have been 10 of the first 24 years of my life.

I first learned of Baker from my father who had spent part of his boyhood in Cleveland living with an aunt who, by marriage, was part of the politically active Buckley family.

During those years my father met and admired most of the young lawyers of Cleveland who later earned the title of the "brain trust" when Thomas L. Johnson became mayor of the city.

My childhood was filled with stories of these lawyers who personified to my father the Horatio Alger success stories.

Newton Diehl Baker was born in Martinsburg, W. Va., and it was in his home town that he first began to practice law after he had graduated from Johns Hopkins and then Washington and Lee law school.

His practice did not support him and soon he left it to go to work for the post office in Washington. When his federal government service was ended abruptly by the election of a Republican president, he returned to Martinsburg only to abandon it again when someone offered him a chance to practice law in the bigger city of Cleveland.

Even here his first two years of practice consisted mainly in trying cases for indigent people, but he became interested in and eventually part of the administration of Mayor Johnson who was one time described as "the best mayor in the best governed city in America."

Newton Baker became city solicitor by appointment of the mayor in 1902. Two years later he was elected to the same position, and he held it until he was elected mayor in 1912.

Tom L. Johnson was a progressive who believed that unemployment, disease, slums, crime and poverty could be eliminated, and Baker joined him in his struggle to eliminate these evils.

Between them they brought tax reform to the city, and they engaged in a seven year war with the municipally controlled street railways to establish a three cent fare for Clevelanders.

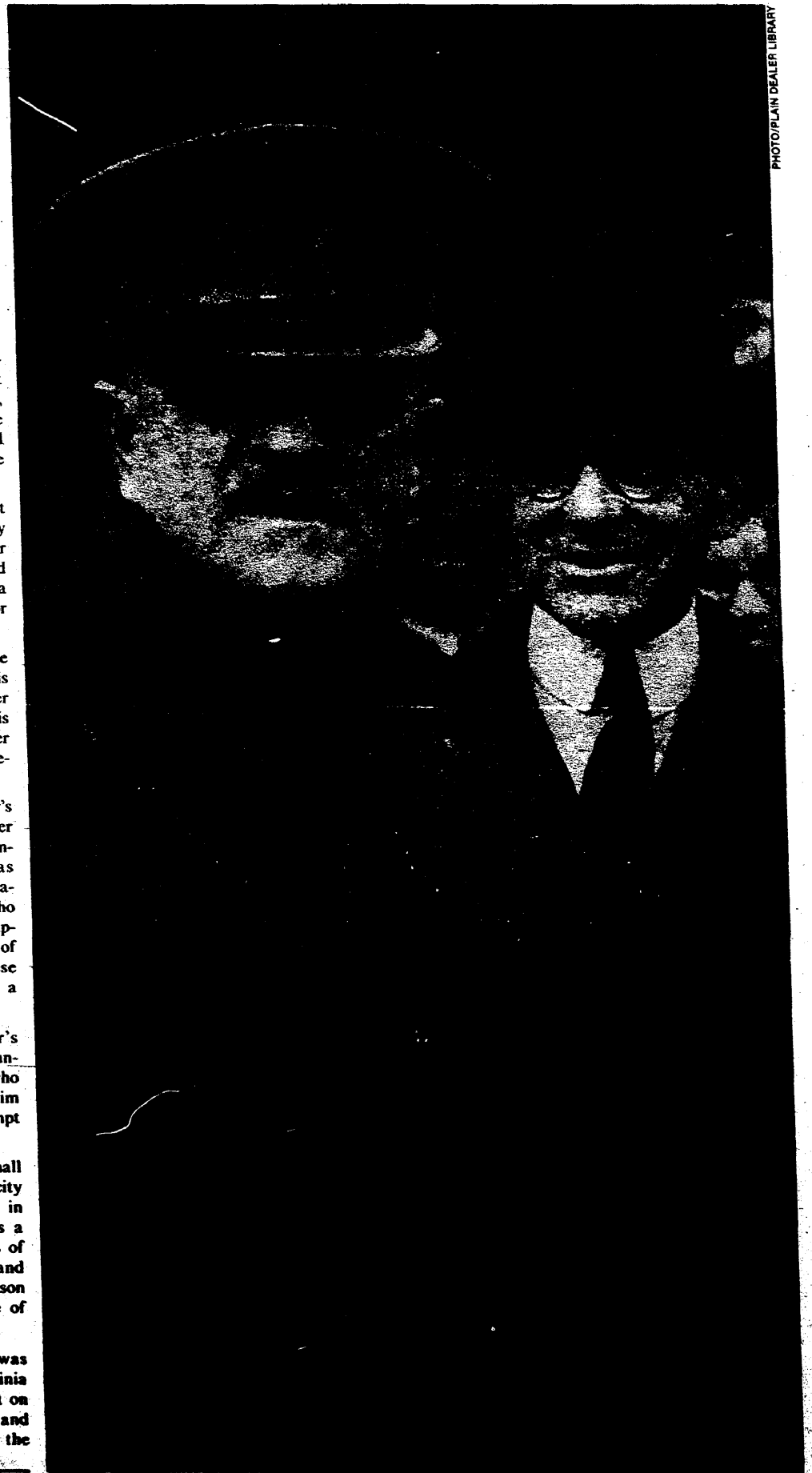
Baker became known as the "three cent" mayor. After his last term as mayor, Baker never ran for office again, and this fact caused The Plain Dealer to nickname him "Never Defeated" Baker.

During these years Baker's reputation as a public speaker grew and spread. He also encouraged women and was especially interested in the career of Florence Allen who became the first woman appointed to the U.S. Court of Appeals. And during these years Baker's reputation as a pacifist grew and grew.

The reasons for Baker's pacifist beliefs seem to be unknown. None of the people who wrote biographies about him in later years made any attempt to account for his pacifism.

He was a quiet man, of small stature, but he had the capacity to stand up for the things in which he believed. He was a great believer in the forces of reason and in the law, and perhaps this ability to reason made him deplore the use of force to solve problems.

Perhaps his pacifism was caused by his West Virginia heritage. His father fought on one side in the Civil War and his grandfather fought on the



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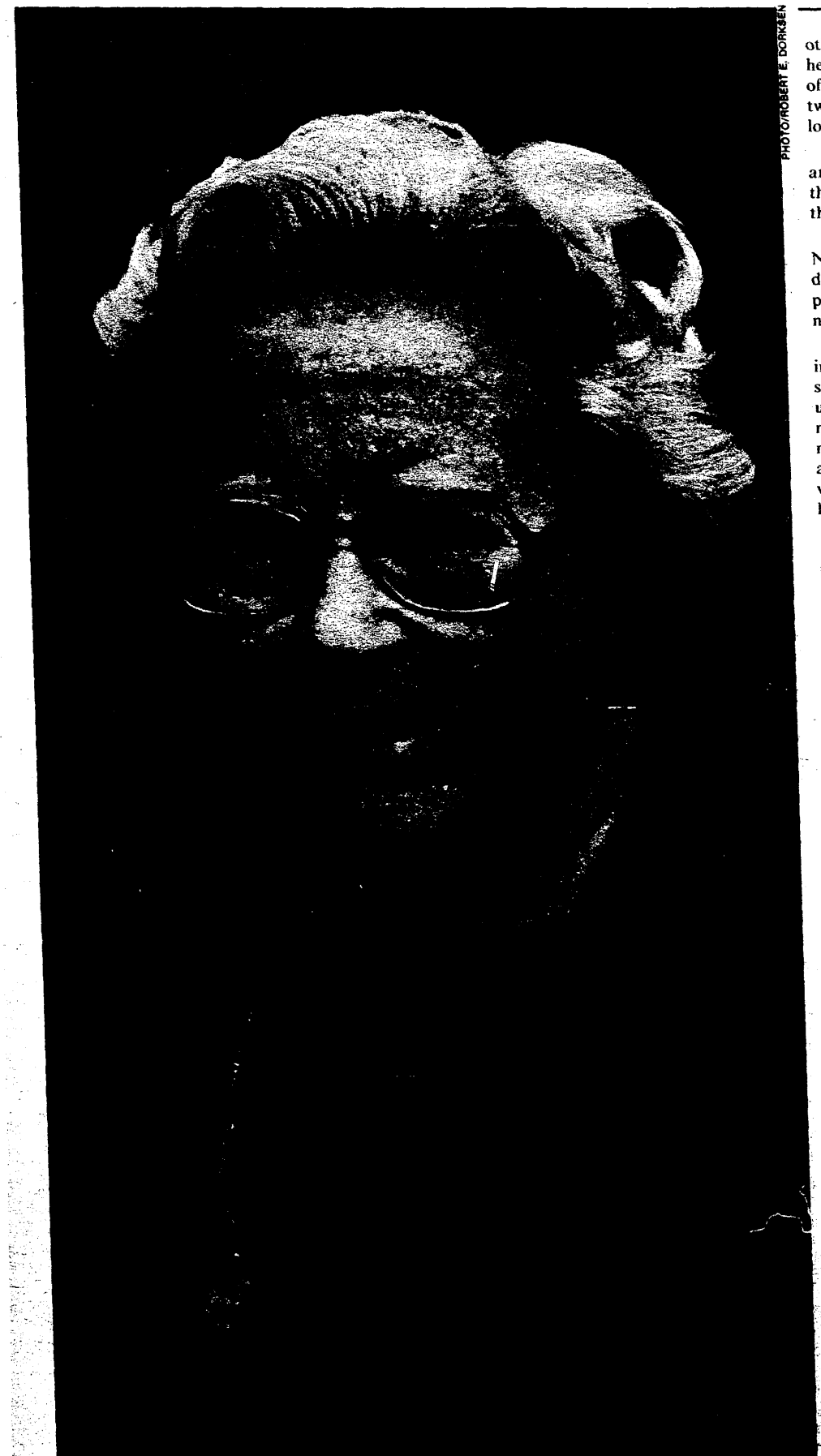

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Ruth Hart Stromberg. Opposite page: Newton D. Baker, Secretary of War, with Gen. John J. Pershing, commander in chief of American Expeditionary Forces in World War I.

other side. His mother found herself caught in the middle of an emotional problem between loyalty to father and loyalty to husband.

At any rate he was a pacifist and remained one through all the ironically unpacifist events that filled his life.

While mayor of Cleveland, Newton Baker was elected a delegate to the Democratic presidential convention which nominated Woodrow Wilson.

He was influential in bringing about Wilson's nomination since he fought to break Ohio's unit rule which contributed 18 needed votes to Wilson's nomination and in fact started a trend in favor of Wilson which eventually brought about his nomination.

The president-elect offered Baker a cabinet post which he refused in order to return to his job as mayor.

His speech at this convention, however, brought Baker national fame, and he eventually became known as one of the most persuasive speakers in the country's history. His speeches were quoted extensively in all the newspapers of the country.

Baker once admitted that he never gave a speech without feeling stage fright for a few minutes before he spoke and for the first few minutes while he was speaking.

This humility, openly admitted, was an inspiration to all aspiring college speakers, of which I was one, and probably accounted for some of my admiration for the man.

In 1916 when he decided to end his official services to the City of Cleveland, he became secretary of war under Woodrow Wilson.

He, who was an avowed pacifist, agreed to become secretary of war just before the country entered the holocaust of World War I even though the idea of entering the war was far removed from everyone's mind when he became Mr. Secretary.

He became, as someone once said, more than secretary of war. He became "secretary of a war," and it was a job which no one could or did envy him.

The names he was called during the war years were not as complimentary as those earned in his elected offices. A secretary of war is seldom a popular person, and a man who is secretary during a time of war is even less popular.

Alexander Woollcott, writing a review of Frederick Palmer's biography of Newton Baker in January 1932, wrote of "hostile critics who, as if by common consent, hit upon the silent busy secretary of war as the scapegoat upon whom they might vent their sundry wartime disgruntlements.

"Chief among these critics were the late Colonel Roosevelt ... and George Harvey (an editor), who ... found a singular relief in calling Mr. Baker Newty Cootie."

In the same Book Markers review published in "While Rome Burns", Woollcott stated that in reality Secretary Baker was thinking and working a mile ahead of his critics, but that his refusal to answer those critics except when it was necessary to protect the morale of the men working so faithfully with him in the War Department probably contributed to the volume of criticism.

Woollcott believed that Baker "was the ablest cabinet member to serve this country since Alexander Hamilton," and many people agreed with him. Many people also joined Woollcott when he was urging Newton Baker as a presidential candidate.

The secretary's lack of popularity at home did not seem to influence the men who were fighting in World War I. In fact he seemed to be very popular with them. There was a song supposedly sung by Ohio doughboys for whose accuracy I will not vouch, but I think it said:

I'm from Ohio, dear old Ohio,
It's the land of Grant and Sherman,
McKinley and Garfield too,
And you'll hear from many others
Before this war is through.
Wilson chose a history maker
When he sent for Newton D. Baker,
And he's from Ohio, too.

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Baker's pacifism reasserted itself as soon as it became obvious that the war was ending. He, as well as President Wilson, began to think about a peace that would last, and like the president he became a believer in and an advocate of The League of Nations.

The United States never joined the League even though Baker campaigned on behalf of James M. Cox with Franklin Roosevelt as the vice-presidential candidate in 1920.

The Democrats advocated the United States joining the League, and were defeated by the Republicans with Warren G. Harding. Many years later under Franklin Roosevelt the United States became a member of the United Nations.

In 1924 Baker received votes at the Democratic Convention for the nomination for president, but after a strong speech on behalf of the League, interest in his nomination dwindled.

After the Democrats rejected a platform plank advocating U.S. membership in the League, Baker lost interest in any nominee of the party.

He never lost interest in the League and devoted much of the rest of his life to work in the League of Nations Non-Partisan Association.

Practically every speech that he gave during the rest of his life after he returned to the private practice of law in Cleveland in 1921 was devoted to the cause of the League and the cause of world peace.

He was never accused of being an unknowing, dewey-eyed pacificist because he had been so instrumental in winning a world war. It was rather as if, having seen the horrors of war in such a front line position, he had to spend the rest of his life trying to persuade the world of the benefits of peace.

In spite of his fame as a speaker and his unquestioned, unchallenged ability to speak eloquently and lucidly, he never joined in the "War of Memoirs" which followed World War I.

Not only did he not write his own memoirs of war service, but he refused to answer any inaccurate accounts of the war years written about him. At one time even the prestigious Encyclopedia Britannica carried an inaccurate, although later corrected, account about him.

Although his friends were irate and clamored for its correction, Newton Baker remained undisturbed. Instead he wrote to one of his protesting friends, "I am not so concerned as I should be, I fear, about the verdict of history. For the same reason it seems to me unworthy to worry about myself, when so many thousands participated in the World War unselfishly and heroically who will find no place at all in the records which we make up and call history."

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Alexander Woollcott found Baker's attitude "a bit of evergreen which will lie fresh and sweet on the tomb of the unknown soldier" forever.

Those of us who knew him knew that it wasn't lack of words that kept him silent. His briefs and pleadings in the courts of Ohio and in the federal courts attest to his ability to speak and write lucidly and eloquently.

His speeches were captured in print much less frequently than they should have been because he refused to write speeches before he gave them. Nevertheless there are many of them preserved in the public libraries.

Only once did I see Baker angry. A group of young lawyers were discussing the presidency of Woodrow Wilson when Baker quietly entered the room. The discussion tapered to an end but not before one of the men sighed and said, "Poor Wilson."

"Why do you call him poor Wilson?" Baker asked.

"Well, sir, he never lived to see the League of Nations accepted. The thing in which he believed never became a reality, and the last years of his presidency must have been—."

"Save your pity." Baker said firmly. "He was a man with a cause. It was a cause worth living for and he lived and died for it. He was a man who believed in an ideal, and an ideal never lets you down. Mr. Wilson was a rich and lucky man. He had more than most people have. He gave many years of his life to his ideal and he died knowing that some day the ideal would be accomplished."

Baker had something worth living and dying for because he, too, had an ideal and a cause in which he believed. The cause was world peace.

He had something more than the ordinary person — something that kept him going, believing and working the rest of his life. He had an ideal and the ideal did not let him down, and he was able to communicate that ideal to many who heard him and to many who worked with him.

Ruth Hart Strombert says: "I wrote this article partly because of my retirement time and partly in resentment of recent events surrounding the City of Cleveland. I once served as an assistant law director for the city and did not think of it in the ways it is now being described."