

Career Advice to Graduating Students

*John Q. Barrett**

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In Spring 1931, a time of deep economic distress, the student editors of the Jamestown (New York) High School yearbook commissioned a series of special essays for publication in their annual, *THE RED AND GREEN*. The students recruited leading men of the community to write about “vocations of the world today....”

The writers were selected to address careers “in which the majority of the students would be interested.” The principal of Jamestown High School, Merton Corwin, wrote about teaching. Noted author and researcher Dr. Floyd Darrow wrote about careers in the sciences. Dr. H.A. Blaisdell, a leading local physician, wrote about careers in medicine. Architect Ellis Beck wrote about his profession. Rev. Dr. Lucius H. Bugby, a Methodist, wrote about careers in the ministry. Walter H. Edson, a local attorney and banker, wrote about careers in business. Leonard A. Bergman, the City engineer, wrote about his field. And Jamestown’s leading younger lawyer, thirty-nine year old Robert H. Jackson, wrote this about careers in the law:

No profession calls for a wider range and variety of talents than the law. The lawyer counsels in the most petty domestic controversy and in extended financial plans. He conducts litigation involving the accuracy of land surveys, the correctness of a physician’s diagnosis, the workmanship of all kinds of mechanics, the plans of engineers and the calculations of accountants. Law is an inclusive profession demanding an ability to absorb accurately and to present clearly, and upon short notice, the disputed aspects of anybody’s problem. Therefore, success will seldom come at the bar to one who has not a wide and varied reading, a broad experience and resourcefulness, to which must be

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added a command of simple, forceful and accurate speech for which the English Bible is the best example.

The income of lawyers is often exaggerated. Distinguished success in the legal profession probably pays as high a return as equal success in most professions, but the law clerk gets less than the grocery clerk, the lawyer of moderate talent will make a bare living, and the “starvation period” through which all professional men must pass brings down the average return. Many lawyers of considerable ability lack the art of attracting business and it does not always follow that financial return will be proportioned to learning in the law.

The profession attracts many because it is an open door to public life. It offers a variety of contacts with all classes and conditions of men and the intellectual stimulus of many kinds of problems.

The legal profession is so overcrowded that it is not attractive unless one has outstanding qualifications. The State of New York in 1920 supported one lawyer for each 562 persons; the United States as a whole, one for 862; Canada had one for 1,319; England one for 2,211; Germany one for 4,134; France one to 4,585; and Italy one to 2,310. In 1918, New York had 850 new applicants while in 1928 there were over 3,000, an increase of 300 per cent in ten years or 30 per cent a year. The increase in application continued but examinations have become more severe so that while in 1928 54 per cent passed, in 1929 only 45 per cent passed and in 1930 the percentage of successful was reduced to 39 per cent. Even at that rate, 2,290 passed. Excessive numbers intensify competition, reduce the financial returns and lead to a decline in ethical standards.

An applicant must complete two full years attendance at a college or university approved by the State Department of Education and 3 years study of law in an approved law school. Qualifying wholly by law office study is possible but is an obsolete method and is not

recommended. Six months clerkship in a law office after examination is required.

Many law schools are operated as profit making institutions whose standards are low and in some instances students have found their time spent in such institutions lost. The American Bar Association Council on Legal Education publishes a list of approved schools which is available in the office of any member. Schools located in New York State approved are Albany Law School, Columbia, Cornell and Syracuse. While the study of most sciences is wholly independent of location, the place where one receives legal education depends somewhat on where he intends to practice and one considering the profession should consult with officers of the Bar Association in reference thereto.

I pass along Jackson's advice for its sobriety and for its sincere encouragement. Thinking that his world was over-filled with lawyers, he demonstrated nonetheless, first in Jamestown and then on much bigger stages, that talent and effort can make space and find opportunities to be outstanding. I am confident that that remains true in law today ... and that we also need, and that life will reward, excellence in all pursuits.