

## **In Memoriam**

### **JOHN VESTER**

**April 5, 2004**

**Joe Tomain**

I am here to speak to the memory of Literary Club member Dr. John Vester who died just before the onset of winter.

It is a club tradition that these essays be prepared by committee and a concomitant - if unspoken - tradition that the reader not personalize the memorial. It is a good rule, but I find I must transgress upon it briefly, to make a point.

For a dozen years and more, John and I were something of the Odd Couple of the Literary Club. It will not surprise most of you to know we could not even agree on which was Felix and which Oscar.

Still, it was John who proposed me for membership here and it was I who brought him to television as Channel 12's medical expert. We were friends. John's political views were deeply conservative, mine were not. While that difference ignited many a lively discussion, it never intruded on our friendship.

That attitude is at the core of this memorial and, I submit, of this club.

There is much to know about John Vester. The focus of his talent was medicine, but its hold on his intellect and spirit was by no means exclusive. His military service led to a connection with a Korean War M.A.S.H. unit and, in turn, to his stint as technical adviser for the famous television program which bore the M.A.S.H. name, if not John's political persuasion.

He grudgingly retired as a colonel in the U.S. Army Reserves at age 69 and as dispenser of medical care to inmates at Cincinnati jail when he reached 76.

He was a Medical Fellow, a Chief, a Director, a Professor and an Associate Dean at such prestigious stops as Cincinnati General, Medical College of Virginia, Brigham in Boston, Walter Reed, Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Cincinnati Good Samaritan and U.C. College of Medicine.

In middle age, there was a catastrophic automobile accident on Cincinnati's Wooster Pike that fractured many of the major bones in John's body. For the rest of his life he dealt with more pain just putting his clothes on every morning than most of us deal with in a year. He never mentioned it, of course. The good doctor did not lack for courage in any of his endeavors.

John Vester loved this club. The reality of it and, even more, the idea of it. The celebration of words, the civility, the marriage of research and story-telling. His was by no means a blind affection. He railed mightily against those who, in his opinion, had not given their best effort. His sense of humor was irreverent. He often referred to all of us as a scene an editor cut from the first act of *The Late George Appley*.

Still, he believed what happens here on Monday nights is important. John organized an informal sub-committee of the diversity of Club which met once a month for dinner before the paper. He called it the Soiree and, indeed, it was an evening gathering, but seldom of like-minded members. He gloried in opinion and always came armed with at least one lame joke and one hot-button topic sure to launch a thunderbolt or two. The cast of characters changed and opinions did not always fall into predictable patterns. Just as in this room. He liked that.

In fact, John Vester loved the Club precisely because it had the power on a given Monday night surprise him, challenge him, move him. To remind him that, though would betray him as the years advanced, his mind could absorb and grow and learn, right to his final breath, if he remained open to new thoughts.

And he did, right to the last. John came with papers on wine and great inventions and such like, but each was more than the title portended. There would be learned references to Greek and Sanskrit, to Jack Dempsey, to modern poetry and, of course, to the horrors the Smoot-Hawley tariff.

His contributions have ended here, as will mine and yours. But it is a comfort to know that in this one small enclave, his words will be preserved in their vibrant moment when the colors were vivid and the Tanqueray sharp on his tongue.

John Vester was many things. Tonight, let us remember him as a loyal friend and a respected fellow member of that long, long line of word lovers.

The Literary Club.

Joe Tomain  
Frank Mayfield  
Nick Clooney

---