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It seems more and more important now to Bill Guerri that he came from Higbee, Mo.

Higbee was the paradox at the heart of his life, the poorest and richest place, a mining camp that was a life sentence for many immigrants but where he was always encouraged to form generous hopes for his own future.

At 72, summing himself up to himself, he kept thinking of Higbee. More and more, his imagination fixed on it as an experience that held a clue to the present.

"Bad as it was," he said, "there was something good about it."



Larry Williams/Post-Dispatch

**Lawyer
William
Guerri
made
doing
good a
priority**

A Pro

At Pro Bono

By Florence Shinkle
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

ASKED TO describe himself for the benefit of a luncheon date he'd never met, William G. Guerri offered promptly, "I'm bald and wear glasses."

Guerri, managing partner of the law firm Thompson & Mitchell from 1968 to 1988 and its institutional conscience, is a PR flack's nightmare—his modesty a deadly blanket on any good head of public relations steam.

Winner of awards for public service from the United Way, the American Heart Association and the Missouri Bar Association, he would also win the award, if there were one, for the world's most reluctant interview subject. Reporters waiting around for a preachment from him about how his career is a shining example of this and that are out of luck. He is utterly without self-advertisement—a shy man with a submerged gaiety whose

colleagues think he sheds light where'er he walks.

"Bill is the last complete lawyer, the last generalist, the guy who does both courtroom litigation and corporate law and who inspires the trust of the old family lawyer," raved U.S. District Judge Donald J. Stohr.

As a litigator, Guerri has argued issues ranging from separation of church and state to the longevity of trusts.

As a counselor, he has been confidant to troubled figures ranging from someone accused of violating antitrust laws to someone accused of a car bombing.

But, the consensus is, it is the ministering element he infused into the firm that made the difference in the character of the institution.

"Managing a bunch of lawyers is like herding a bunch of cats," says Michael Kahn, a lawyer with Gallop, Johnson. "Most managing partners end up like the missionary: in the pot, eaten by the group they supposedly converted."

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—Gerald Ortballs, former president of the Bar Association of Metropolitan St. Louis

In the midst of the corporate Darwinism, Guerri nudged Thompson & Mitchell's management to identify free legal service to the poor as an institutional priority, authorizing a measure of pro bono work to be counted toward the company's quota of billable hours. Part of a young lawyer's commercial obligation could be met by taking cases of indigents so that doing good was not at odds with making money.

"He just ramrodded it through," said Stohr. "You have to understand," said Bill Bay, one of Guerri's junior colleagues, "that he's listed in 'The Best Lawyers in America.' The best lawyers don't usually take up the pro bono aspect."

Last year, Thompson & Mitchell gave more than 1,400 hours to Legal Services of Eastern Missouri Inc., which provides legal aid for the indigent. Representation included intervention in eviction proceedings, securing disability benefits, protecting the rights of HIV-positive patients—"getting simple justice for the down and out," says Richard Teitelman, director of Legal Services. In addition, the firm has "adopted" Kingdom House, providing continuous legal service for the shelter's residents.

"What I like about Guerri's pro bono effort," said Gerald Ortballs, former president of the Bar Association of Metropolitan St. Louis, "is that it wasn't one of those pronouncements from on high: The underlings will do public service, and I will play golf. He got in there and ran the program and supervised the assignments."

"And he didn't make the assignments for the return yield. You know, a lot of lawyers count pro bono work as sitting on the vestry of St. Michael and St. George. You do the right sort of pro bono work, and you're likely to reap some commercial rewards. But Bill Guerri's definition of pro bono service is doing something for people who can't do a damn thing for you."

Pressed for anecdotes about Guerri, Ortballs struggled: "Wasn't he a coal miner's kid? I think he came from some little town in central Missouri, Higley?"

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In the 1920s, Higbee, near Moberly in Randolph County, was a reasonably prosperous coal-mining community. "The coal came from what was known as the Bevier field," said Denny Davis, editor of *The Democrat Leader* in neighboring Fayette. "And the Italian and Welsh immigrants came to mine the coal. It was kind of unusual in one respect: an Italian immigrant settlement in mid-Missouri. But in another way it was your emblematic American story: immi-

grants in the land of opportunity. Bill Guerri is a story straight out of Milton Friedman's 'Free to Choose,' the kid who enacted the American myth of self-determination."

Guerri's parents were both from Italy, his mother from a village near Florence, his father from Modena. They met when she was running a boarding house for miners. Guerri was the last of their eight children, six boys and two girls. None of the boys got out of high school except Bill. From his earliest consciousness, he remembered the whole family focusing on him with collaborative concern, seeing to it that he behaved courteously, did his homework and spoke English.

Unlike other Italian families that kept a sort of culture-in-exile, the Guerris embraced the New World's religion: grit, pluck, industry, education. Bill Guerri was the brightest in the one-room schoolhouse save for the one inevitable female superstar. "Norma Roselli. She always beat me."

The family lived always on the margin of real poverty. The father left the mines to run a grocery store, and

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when the store failed, he went into chicken farming. "Two for a quarter, the customer to choose from the flock." The Depression came; no one had money to buy chickens. The family ate them, and what vegetables they could raise on their 12 acres. One of Bill's chores was to take his wagon to the coal mine and retrieve any lumps of coal lost from the coal cars.

One of the father's last jobs was shoveling shale from the mine slag heaps onto county highway trucks. In 1934, when Bill was in eighth grade, his father died of lung problems. "It happened a lot, I guess. There weren't any workmen's compensation laws. There weren't any legal services."

Even then, the boy was made to understand that he would not go to work; he would go to high school in Fayette. The arrangement was confirmed and consecrated by the whole family.

"Bill had an older brother, Vic," recalled Denny Davis. "He showed up here in Fayette, oh, about 1934 or 1935. He bought the local jelly joint. And he looked after Bill and gave him room and board and made sure he was all right. Vic's appearance as a restaurateur exactly coincided with his brother's high school education."

Bill Guerri's world lifted and opened with his departure from Higbee. "Fayette," he said, "was only 10 miles from Higbee, but it was another world."

One thing, though, was unchanged: Once again he was surrounded by a magnetic field of special expectations. The entire town seemed to have a stake in his success.

"This sounds corny, but he was the most perfect student a teacher could hope to have," said Jean Smith Collins, his high school English teacher. "He always wanted to know where he could find more on a subject. Debating was a big thing among the high schools. I can remember one topic: Are chain stores good for small towns? The issue was whether they gave the consumer the price benefits of bulk buying, or whether they destroyed the economic fabric of small towns. I said, 'Now which side do you want, Bill, affirmative or negative?' He said, 'Oh, I'll just take both.' He always had that mental agility."

"We just all knew he'd be the one of us to do it if anyone did," Helen Puckett Thogmorton recalled. "He was

the president of the student body in high school. He worked in his brother's restaurant. He worked in a shoe store. I think he may have worked selling refrigerators door to door."

"I sold one refrigerator," Guerri said. "The dean of admissions at Central Methodist College bought it. He said he'd buy a refrigerator if I enrolled at Central."

The college hierarchy found him

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jobs in the campus bookstore and grading student papers. Dean E.P. Puckett excused him from compulsory chapel services so he could work in the restaurant instead. Any free time he had he spent in the courthouse watching trials. Everyone in town knew Bill Guerri was going to be a lawyer. It seemed his future was held in sacred trust.

When it came time to apply for law school, Dean Puckett took the boy into his office and advised him to try for a scholarship at Columbia University Law School that he, Dean Puckett, just happened to know about. Guerri won it, contingent on a personal interview at Columbia. Cost-wise, the trip to New York was out of the question. He told Dean Puckett. Two days later, a letter arrived, waiving the interview requirement.

He arrived on the Columbia campus in uptown Manhattan having never been out of Randolph County.

Someone helped him find a room and the local Chock-Full-of-Nuts. He got another job selling shoes.

He worked at the shoe store, got appointed to the Columbia Law Review, held on to the scholarship and finished law school in 2 years instead of three. His first job was with Root, Ballantine, one of the big-name firms in New York. He stayed there a year and a half. "But I never saw daylight. I'd get up before dawn, ride the subway, work all day in an office, go home after dark."

So he came to St. Louis, starting with Thompson & Mitchell in 1947. Almost immediately, he became involved in pro bono work, not all of it assigned by the firm.

"I came to town for legal advice once," said an old friend from Fayette. "Bill took me into an office with two other lawyers for two hours. I could not get him to send me a bill."

"Bill never can get over what people did for him," Helen Thogmorton said. It seemed to Guerri that he would remember clear across the arc of time. He hadn't left Higbee empty-handed at all.

"I worked hard and people helped me," he said, so quietly that it took a moment to feel the weight of the remark. *We worked hard and helped each other.* Engrave it on a coin next to e pluribus unum. Scrawl it on the walls of Ellis Island. Tell it to your children when defeat is black upon their eyelids.

Guerri leaned forward. What he wanted to say was suddenly very clear to him. "Sometimes, I think people forget where they came from, but I was always proud of little Higbee, Missouri."

And vice versa. ■