Biography

Business executive and philanthropist Owen L. Coon was born on July 1, 1894 in the small town of Leroy, Illinois. His father, James S. Coon, was a bank cashier turned businessman who established the first independent telephone exchange in East Central Illinois. The Coon family later moved to Rantoul, Illinois where Owen attended Rantoul High School, graduating in 1912 at the top of his class.

That fall, he entered Northwestern University’s College of Liberal Arts, where he quickly distinguished himself. A skilled high school debater, Coon joined the NU debate team and competed throughout the Midwest. He was a member of the Gavel and Rostrum Society; was elected to the honorary debate society, Delta Sigma Rho; and won eight prizes in public speaking and debate. At Northwestern, Coon was also a member of the Phi Gamma Delta and Scribblers fraternities, editor of the Syllabus yearbook, volunteer at the NU Settlement Association, performer in various campus productions with the Campus Players and others, and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

Coon graduated in 1915 with a Bachelor of Arts and enrolled in the Northwestern Law School soon after. His legal studies were interrupted by World War I. He attempted to join the Marine Corps but was turned away for medical reasons. Coon then took over “agricultural service” on a family farm in Colorado, and continued his study for the bar exam. He enlisted in the Navy for a brief time in 1918 before returning to the Northwestern Law School in January 1919. Coon graduated with a Bachelor of Laws that spring, tying for first place in scholarship and receiving the honorary Order of the Coif.

He was a practicing lawyer from 1919 until 1925, when he and his brother Byron (NU 1925) launched the Motor Acceptance Corporation in Chicago to finance the purchase of automobiles. In 1935, Motor Acceptance merged with Detroit-based General Finance Corporation, taking the General Finance name. Ten years later, an article in the September 10, 1945, issue of Finance praised the “amazingly versatile executive” who had built General Finance into a $300 million company with interests in manufacturing and real estate as well as commercial and automobile financing.

As General Finance Corporation continued to grow and increase profits, Coon pursued his “busy man’s hobby” of helping young men. He was on the board of directors of numerous organizations and active in the Methodist Church. The Owen L. Coon Foundation was formed in 1946 to consolidate his many philanthropic activities.

Always generous to his alma mater, Coon established the Clarion Dewitt Hardy Scholarships in forensics in 1935, named after his favorite professor and debate coach at Northwestern. Hardy law scholarships were established in 1947. The James S. Coon Scholarship (created in memory of his father) endowed chairs in Law and Psychiatry, and a memorial debate tournament was established. Coon became an NU Associate in 1934 and a Life Trustee in 1936, and received the
highest Northwestern honor, the Alumni Medal, in 1942. Several portraits at Northwestern memorialize Coon, including one in the law library that bears his name, one in Hardy Lounge in Scott Hall, and one outside the Coon Forum in the Kellogg Graduate School of Management’s Jacobs Center.

Coon married Alice Elizabeth Wright (NU 1917), but Wright became mentally ill and they were divorced in 1929. Coon married Louise V. Walker in 1930. Coon had three children, Eleanor Coon Briggs, Harry H., and Owen L., Jr.

Owen L. Coon died in 1948 at the age of 54, after being ill for some time. At the time of his death he was Chairman of the Board of the General Finance Corporation, and his brother Byron Coon was President of the Corporation.

SEE ALSO: University Archives Biographical Files, Archives Reading Room, for additional biographical information.

**Description of the Series**

The Owen L. Coon Scrapbook began its life as a record of Coon’s years at Northwestern University. The scrapbook, titled “My Memory Book,” has the University logo embossed on the front cover and was intended to hold memories of “the sentiments and activities” of college life. Nearly half of the scrapbook does document Coon’s college life between 1912 and 1919. However, the balance of the scrapbook is filled with clippings, photographs, and ephemera that precede and postdate Coon’s Northwestern years—including items from Coon’s youth in Rantoul and from his travels in Europe, as well as general Coon family photographs and memorabilia. Since a few of the items at the end of the book are dated as late as 1962, it appears that someone else (perhaps Coon’s daughter, who donated the scrapbook to the University) added to the collection of memories that Coon started. Some pages bear fragments of paper, indicating that items were removed at some earlier date. Throughout the scrapbook, few of the photographs are identified.

Records of his Northwestern years include programs and ticket stubs for events that he attended, as well as numerous newspaper clippings about the debates in which he participated. The scrapbook also holds photographs of group activities, dormitory life, and campus buildings; newspaper clippings relating to Coon’s friends’ college activities (as well as a page of their calling cards); and official University forms.

Coon’s early years are documented by his grade school and high school report cards, programs for events surrounding his high school graduation, and group and individual photographs of friends (mostly unidentified). There are a number of photographs of Coon as a baby, child, and young man, as well as photographs of his parents and grandparents.
Many pages of brochures, menus, ticket stubs, and other ephemera from hotels, steamship lines, and sites in Europe and the United States, document travels undertaken by Coon or other members of his family, beginning with a menu from the Red Star Line’s “Manitou” in 1909.

One scrapbook page toward the end of the book holds the cover (with portrait of Coon) of the *Finance* magazine issue (September 10, 1945) that featured him; another holds a copy of the Owen L. Coon Foundation Accountants’ Report from 1962.

**Provenance:** The Owen L. Coon Scrapbook was donated to the School of Speech by Eleanor Coon Briggs in 1967 and was transferred to the University Archives as Accession # 78-106 by Dean Roy Wood on October 18, 1978. The Northwestern University Library Conservation Department treated the scrapbook (deacidifying newspaper clippings, reinforcing pages, replacing loose items, and building a storage box) in September of 2002.

**Restrictions:** None.

**Separations:** A few duplicate items were discarded.

**Processor:** Anna Weaver and Janet Olson; November 2002.

**Reformatted by:** Rachel C. Teuer; August 2, 2004.