

April 10, 2019

Ed Noble

As a minor real estate developer, I had known the late Ed Noble by reputation for years; I knew that he had developed one of America's first regional shopping malls, Lenox Square in Atlanta, and had opened it in 1959, when he was 31 years old. I knew that he was the son of the founder of Noble Oil Company, and that he had made a losing bid for a seat in the U.S. Senate from Oklahoma. I knew that in 1980, the Carter Administration had established the Synthetic Fuels Corporation in response to the OPEC Nation's creating the fuel crisis in the 70's, and President Reagan had appointed Ed Chairman, a Cabinet level position in 1981.

(I later learned that it didn't take Ed very long to learn that with the then technology, enough fuel not be produced to significantly change the dependence on imports, and in the early 1980's oil prices were coming down. Ed wanted Synthetic Fuels Corporation to be shut down, and by 1985 when it closed, the world was awash with oil. The media where amazed that Ed had a budget of 88 billion dollars while he was there, but he only spent 1.8 billion dollars. Bureaucrats don't do that.)

I first met Ed, personally, in 1987 when we both where among the founding members of Church of the Apostles in Atlanta. Michael Youssef, the Pastor of the new church, opened the first bank account with a check from Ed Noble. Ed and I became good friends, and during the next twenty years I had the privilege of spending a lot of quality time with him. In spite of his many accomplishments, and wealth, he remained a man of humility.

We had many lunches and dinners, and traveled together, including to board meetings of the Heritage and the Noble Foundations. He sincerely liked people, and he had the talent, or the gift, of treating everyone the same way, no matter their station in life. When I was with Ed, I always felt like I was "the most important guy in the room." When he told me about his father, I understood where he got it from. His father Lloyd Noble was an oilman and philanthropist, who had the same leadership qualities.

A quote from a contemporary of Lloyd Noble:

"The fellows liked working for Noble Drilling, liked Lloyd Noble because he would come out on a rig...he was just one of them. He always complimented on a job well done. He was generous with praise as well as criticism." - Ed Holt

Ed's mother died when he was 8 years old, but his grandmother, Vivian lived until he was a teenager, so he had a loving family. His father was one the most influential men in Oklahoma's history. Having lived through the Dust Bowl, he established the Noble Foundation in 1945 to engage in agriculture and medical research. In 1948, Oklahoman's still had a complex from John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath." The 1940 movie version shows the great poverty, and "Okies" heading west to California. Lloyd Noble was on the Board of Regents of Oklahoma University in 1948, and he

thought a winning football team would improve Oklahoman's self-image. The Regents interviewed Coach Jim Tatum, who brought a young assistant coach with him to the interview. They agreed to hire Coach Tatum only if he would bring his assistant with him. In 1950 the young assistant became the head coach. His name was Bud Wilkinson, and he soon started a string of 47 straight victories. Lloyd Noble is widely credited with the successful football program. Sadly, he did not live to see it. He had a heart attack and died in 1950. He was 53 years old.

Ed originally had planned to build what later became Lenox Square, in Kansas City. He put a site under option, and as he was getting ready to fly back to Ardmore, his lawyer kept him waiting a long time in the hotel lobby. They had a corporate airplane and pilot waiting for them at the airport. It was a Stagerwing Beach. (It was fabric covered, and had a retractable gear, with a cruise speed of 200 mph. I only mention that because I love vintage airplanes.) Ed finally called the lawyer's room, and he said he, "was waiting to see how much the zoning was going to cost ... in bribes." Ed told him it was going to cost nothing, and to cancel the option.

He came to Atlanta and bought the Ottley farm. William Hartsfield was Mayor, and Ed said that nobody asked him for a payoff for zoning, or anything during construction. Atlanta still had an honest government in those days. The remnants of the Pendergast "Machine" was Kansas City's loss, and Atlanta's gain. Ed's family encouraged him to come home to Oklahoma, and get into the oil business, "where the real money is," and get out of the real estate business, even after he developed Lenox Square. Lenox opened the same year the buses were desegregated in Atlanta, and Herren's was the first restaurant to integrate in 1962. Ed quietly, worked with a group of other prominent businessmen and restaurant owners, to speed the process.

He ate very slowly. When we ate together, I would be finishing as he was putting salt and pepper on his food. He took his pillow with him when he traveled. Ed was one of the founders of the Heritage Foundation. My wife went with us to a Heritage Board meeting, and she said, "It's easy to like a man who travels with his own pillow."

One time I was piloting the airplane back from Europe, and I was in the back socializing with the passengers. I met a Government official, and when he found out I was from Atlanta, he asked me if I knew Ed Noble. When I said the Ed was one of my best friends, he told me a story. He said that he and Ed were part of a group of six men on a flight. Five were in first class, and Ed was in coach curled up with his pillow. He laughed as he said they took a poll, and they all agreed that Ed's net worth exceeded all five of them combined.

In the 1960's, Ed was instrumental in forming a Political Action Committee (PAC) called the Loose Group. It was called the Loose Group, because it didn't have any rules or bylaws. It had a President, but he didn't have term limits, and he called a meeting about once a month. A new member had to be voted in by a unanimous vote, and political contributions were made by a majority vote. In 1988, Ed invited me to join.

The Group numbered about forty when I became a member, and I soon learned that any Georgia Republican who was running for a state or national office wanted to make his pitch to the Loose Group. The late Senator Paul Coverdell was a member. He was the second Republican elected to the U.S. Senate since Reconstruction, and the first to win re-election. Newt Gingrich gave the Group a cocktail party in a private club in Atlanta, when he was Speaker of the House, and he said the Loose Group was a main factor in turning Georgia into a Republican State. He said he had lost twice in bids to win a House seat, and he said, "I told my wife, I'm going to Atlanta, and have lunch with Ed Noble, and if he says that he will back me, I'm going to give it one more try." They had lunch in what Ed called his club, the Piccadilly Cafeteria at Lenox Square. In the words of Newt, Ed said, "Yeah Newt, we will back you."

Ed would call and invite me to dinner with politicians who running were running for national office. One time, after a Loose Group meeting, he invited me join Ollie North and him for dinner. I was scheduled to take my wife out, and I thought I would make points with her, so I turned Ed down. I couldn't wait to tell her who I turned down for dinner with her, she response was, "I think you should have had dinner with Ollie and Ed." So much for points.

Ed invited me to lunch one day in 1995 with two other members of the Loose Group, and they said they wanted me to run for Congress. They said it would cost about 2.5 million dollars, and I would lose the first time. They didn't say I would probably lose the first time, but that I would lose. They said, "I would get name recognition, and probably win the second time." To say I was surprised would be an understatement, and It took me a minute to collect my thoughts. I asked them why they wanted me to run, and they said you were a member of the Pilot's Labor Union, and you are as conservative as anybody we know. We think you could appeal to a broad segment, and Ed said, "I have heard you speak in church, and you can speak in public." I felt a mixture of surprise, pride, and regret. Surprise and pride because Ed had asked me to run, and regret because I couldn't.

I explained that I had a past that my wife and daughters new about from my testimony, but they didn't know all the "details." I didn't want to embarrass them by having all the "details" for all the world to see. One of the others said, "write a book, and confess, then they won't have anything to write or talk about." I said, "that it would still embarrass them." I would have had to move into another congressional district, because I was in the civil rights icon John Lewis' district.

Once again Ed had made me feel like the "most important person in the room," but Ed made many people feel like they were the "most important person in the room."

Ed was a man with a strong faith in God. Every Thursday at noon, I could depend on seeing him at the men's Bible Study, and on Sundays Ed and Maria could be found at Church of the Apostles, sitting in the center, down toward the front. Many times, we would have lunch together. Joan and I moved to the Gulf Coast to be close to our grandchildren fifteen years ago, but we kept our condo in Atlanta. When I told Ed where

we were going, he would laugh, and say, “Miss-sip-e,” in an exaggerated accent. Then we would have a laugh together.

We spent about a year remodeling a home, just in time for hurricane Katrina, and then we spent a year rebuilding, I didn’t see him very often. I resigned from the Loose Group when I moved, but we occasionally had lunch together when I was in Atlanta. He always called me the “big guy,” and while Ed was small in stature, thorough my eyes, he was the “big guy.”

Ed went to be with Jesus in December 2016. I miss him, but I have great memories, and I will see him again.