

# Williston Fish's "A Last Will"



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**BY MICHAEL WIDENER** WILLISTON FISH (1858–1939) was a Chicago attorney who pursued an active literary career on the side. He published a pair of novels based on his service in the army and hundreds of short stories and poems. In 1898 he published a sentimental mock will in *Harper's Weekly*, titled "A Last Will." It was a little more than a one-column filler in an issue dominated by news of the Spanish-American War, yet this modest prose poem struck deep chords with readers for the next hundred years.

It is a lovely piece of writing. The author gives to children the dandelions in the fields and the right to play freely among them; to lovers all that they need to construct their world; to young men bravery. "And," he writes, "to those who are no longer children, or youths, or lovers, I leave Memory, and I leave to them the volumes of the poems of Burns and Shakespeare, and of other poets, if there are others, to the end that they may live the old days over again freely and fully, without tithes or diminution; and to those who are no longer children, or youths, or lovers, I leave, too, the knowledge of what a rare, rare world it is."

"A Last Will" has been reprinted at least a hundred times since its appearance in 1898. Although it constituted Williston Fish's claim to fame, Mr. Fish and his admirers have had to repeatedly reclaim it. The text often became separated from its author's name, and it was attributed to its fictitious testator, Charles Lounsbury (sometimes misspelled as "Lounsbury" or "Loundsberry"). The legend grew that Lounsbury was a destitute lawyer or mil-

litionaire who died destitute in a Chicago jail cell, almshouse, or insane asylum, and the will was found in a pocket of his tattered overcoat. It has been published under at least twenty variant titles, including *A Legacy to Mankind*, *The Happy Testament*, and *I, Charles Lounsbury*. It has been printed as a Christmas keepsake, as a children's book (*Pictures in the Fire*, 1993), and in fine-press editions by some of the leading book designers of the 20th century. It has appeared in periodicals as diverse as the *New York Times*, *American Forests*, the *Georgia Bar Journal*, and church bulletins. It was included in a 1908 Harvard Ph.D. dissertation, a Canadian school reader, and Irving Wallace's 1977 bestseller, *The Seven Minutes*. It has been translated into Spanish, French, and Portuguese, and it inspired a song by Irving Berlin ("When I Leave the World Behind," 1915). Today it's on the Internet in blogs, the Ethical Wills Web site, and the online fan club of TV actor Gene Barry, to name only a few.

Tarlton Law Library is collecting the printed editions of "A Last Will." Thanks to the support of a generous donor, the collection is dedicated to the late Mildred A. O'Donohoe (1942–2000), a poet and friend of the library's Rare Books and Special Collections. The Mildred A. O'Donohoe Collection includes fifty different printings of "A Last Will" and related works, and is always on the lookout for more. The collection includes a miniature edition only three inches tall and an ornate full-color broadside two feet high, from the press of the famous California typographer John Henry Nash. Also present are the original issue of *Harper's Weekly* containing the first appearance of "A Last Will" and the first printing in book form (1907). ➔

