

Don Ameche, Law Grad?

BY ASSISTANT DEAN
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When Don Ameche died in December 1993, some of you may have been surprised by his obituary. It indicated that Mr. Ameche had studied law at the University of Wisconsin Law School before becoming a full-time actor.

Almost twenty years ago, when I began working at the Law School, I learned this fact, although it almost seemed an urban legend. Some quick research in the archives, however, turned up a microfilmed copy of his record card, indicating a brief and fairly undistinguished academic career here. But there was much more to the story and years of pursuing the facts before all was revealed.

In the mid-1980s, under Cliff Thompson's direction, we were busy collecting stories about the legendary Prof. Herbie Page. One of those stories, submitted by Glenn Bell ('27) went as follows:

Page hated to hear a student say he was "unprepared." He would often jump down the throats of such students. One day in Constitutional Law, Don Ameche, who was active in various dramatic productions

around campus and had performed in a student production the night before, was the first person Page called on.

"Unprepared," said Ameche.

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. At last Page said, "Well, Mr. Ameche, I enjoyed your play last night. You did a fine job. But I think the time has come for you to decide whether you want to be a lawyer or an actor."

Ameche stood up. "Mr. Page, you're right," he said, and walked out of the room and the Law School into a long, successful career as an actor.

Dean Thompson decided that he wanted first-person confirmation of what seemed a story almost too good to be true. I was assigned the task of trying to get Ameche's version of these events. A number of attempts were made without success before a chance meeting with Mark Goldstein ('81), practicing with Lionel, Sawyer in Las Vegas. Thinking that a firm in that location might do some entertainment law, I mentioned my quest to Mark. Amazingly, he mentioned that Ameche lived near a relative of his and volunteered to give me his home address.

Shortly after sending Ameche a direct letter I received a handwritten response that read:

*Dear Mr. Reisner,
I remember Mr. Page very well. He was a most remarkable man. I can say that because he is one of the very few teachers I do recall. And, of course his record speaks for itself. Whether the words . . . are exact, I don't know but the confrontation with me did occur. I hope you do justice to the man.*

*Sincere best wishes,
Don Ameche*

The obituaries also reported that Ameche left law school when the lead in a show became ill and he took over as understudy. Given the long and productive nature of his career as an actor, the coincidence of another actor's illness and Ameche's attendance in Page's class seems to have been providential. The Law School may have lost a promising student, but entertainment gained a wonderful actor who would entertain several generations of audiences for more than 65 years!