Earl B. Dickerson at 88
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To hear Earl B. Dickerson speak, one might be charmed into believing that his remarkable career was just a series of fortuitous coincidences. To follow his career, however, from the time of his graduation in 1920 as the first black to earn a J.D. degree from the University of Chicago Law School, soon leads one to the realization that he is an extraordinary man. A distinguished attorney, Mr. Dickerson was a former president of the Supreme Life Insurance Company of America; a founder of the American Legion; a former president of the National Lawyer's Guild, the National Bar Association, and the Chicago Urban League; civil rights activist; and Franklin D. Roosevelt's appointee to the first Fair Employment Practice Commission—to name but a few of his many accomplishments.

A conversation with Earl Dickerson, 88, is a history lesson told with wit and humor. Not only has he known such great public figures as Franklin Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, and Paul Robeson, but he fondly remembers former Law School professors, Ernst Freund, Harry Bigelow, Ernst Puttkammer, James Parker Hall, and Floyd Russell Mechem.

Dickerson has also participated in important historical events, particularly the civil rights movement. He says that he has always "quarreled with any vestige of inequality that makes distinctions on the basis of race," and he chose to fight through the courts and through organizations such as the National Lawyers Guild, the NAACP, and the Democratic party in Chicago politics. His most celebrated legal case, argued before the U.S. Supreme Court and won in November, 1940, was *Hansberry v. Lee*, *et al.* This landmark case broke down the use of racial restrictive covenants in the Hyde Park-Kenwood community of Chicago, opening up twenty-six city blocks for occupancy by blacks and other minorities.

During the Depression, Mr. Dickerson was instrumental in saving the Supreme Life Insurance Company of America, the second largest black-owned insurance company in this country, from financial ruin. Dickerson has stated that, "When most of the life insurance companies in the State of Illinois were going into insolvency and declared so by the Director of Insurance, I prepared [as General Counsel to the company] a policy lien for execution by policy holders of the company. By this means, we were able to raise more than one-half million dollars in company assets. This lien was tested in the Supreme Court of Illinois and found valid." The importance of this company to millions of people cannot be overstated, as blacks had been consistently denied insurance by white-owned companies.

A fighter, considered by some in the 1950's to be "subversive," Dickerson inherited this spirit from his family, who traditionally resented the indignity of racial discrimination. Born in Canton, Mississippi, in 1891, Dickerson left the South at the age of fifteen and came to Chicago via the Illinois Central Railroad. In Chicago, he was encouraged to attend the Evanston Academy, a former preparatory division of Northwestern University, and the University of Illinois.

Because blacks had not been allowed to practice law in the South when Dickerson was growing up, as a youth he never gave much thought to the legal profession. However, while in college, Dickerson was quick to see that through the law he might contribute to social change. Dickerson explained that he

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was "never the guy to sit quietly while the [racial] battle was raging," and thus he applied for admittance to the Law School, which he entered in 1915.

Dickerson's legal education was interrupted by World War I, during which he served as one of the first black lieutenants in the U.S. Army. After serving for two years in the war, Dickerson returned to the Law School and graduated in 1920.

Dickerson has been quoted elsewhere as saying, "One of the greatest moments in my life was in 1914 at the University of Illinois. I was receiving my degree and I looked in the audience at my mother who had come up from Mississippi for the occasion. And she was there when I became the first black man to earn a doctor of jurisprudence degree from the University of Chicago. Each time I almost cried."

Dickerson has since gone on to earn an Honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Northwestern University and an Honorary Doctor of Humanities degree from Wilberforce University, as well as awards from the University of Chicago, the NAACP, the Black Illinois Legislative Lobby, the Abraham Lincoln Center in Chicago, and the Cook County Bar Association.

Now Honorary Chairman of the Supreme Life Insurance Company, Dickerson still manages to go to his office at least twice a week. His physical and mental vitality belie his advanced years, and one could easily spend hours listening to him tell of a career which has spanned 60 years. His stories are not only fascinating for their descriptions of places now buried under skyscrapers and people familiar to most of us only through history books, but they are also entertaining in their own right, reflecting Dickerson's appreciation of the full and active life he has had. He is too humble to take much credit for all he has accomplished during his lifetime, yet the facts speak for themselves. Clearly, he is one of the Law School's outstanding alumni, who throughout his long career, has fought against racial inequality.