



Strong Advocate: The Life of a Trial Lawyer

Thomas Strong

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In *Strong Advocate*, Thomas Strong, one of the most successful trial lawyers in Missouri's history, chronicles his adventures as a contemporary personal injury attorney. Though the profession is held in low esteem by the general public, Strong entered the field with the right motives: to help victims who have been injured by defective products or through the negligence of others.

As a twelve-year-old in rural southwest Missouri during the Great Depression, Strong bought a cow, then purchased others as he could afford them, and eventually financed his education with the milk he sold. After graduating law school and serving in the Army's Counter Intelligence Corps, he rejected offers to practice in New York and San Francisco and returned to his hometown of Springfield. Strong exhibited his lifelong passion to represent the underdog early in his practice, the "trial by ambush" days when neither side was required to disclose witnesses or exhibits. He quickly became known for his audacious approach to trying cases. Tactics included asking a friend to ride on top of a moving car and hiring a local character called "Crazy Max" to recreate an automobile accident. One fraud case ended with Strong owning a bank and his opponent going to prison. When he sued a labor union for the wrongful death of his client's spouse, he found his own life threatened.

With changes in the law that allowed discovery of information from an opponent's files as well as the exhibits and witnesses to be used at trial, Strong and fellow personal injury attorneys forced a wide array of manufacturers to produce safer products. When witnesses of a terrible collision claimed both roadways had green lights simultaneously, Strong purchased the traffic light controller. After three months of continuous testing at a university, the controller failed, showing four green lights, and Strong learned that fail-safe devices were available but had not been implemented. These fail-safe devices are now standard on traffic lights throughout the country.

In his last venture, Strong represented the state of Missouri in its case against the tobacco industry, culminating in a settlement totaling billions of dollars.

He reflects on the changes—not always for the better—in his oft-maligned profession since he entered the field in the 1950s. Thomas Strong's story of tenacity, quick wits, and humor demonstrates what made him such a creative and effective attorney. Lawyers and law students can learn much from this giant of the bar, and all readers will be entertained and heartened by his victories for the everyman.

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