



EDMUND H. WUERPEL  
1866-1958

# Edmund H. Wuerpel

No orthodontist would question the propriety of publishing the obituary of an artist in an orthodontic journal and this is particularly true of the man who exercised such a profound influence on the first great teacher of orthodontia, Edward H. Angle. Although the name, Wuerpel, is largely unknown to men of the past decade or two, there are many orthodontists living who will recall him vividly and affectionately.

The quiet and gentle mien of Edmund Wuerpel gave no hint of the turbulent and adventurous life of his early years. Born in St. Louis in comfortable circumstances, he was transported as a young boy to Mexico with his family. Travelling by covered wagon he was accustomed to frontier hardships even before they had established a home there. Never robust and with eyes that plagued him throughout life he took on the work of a man with the mining companies and the new railroads that were being built. His mother laid out an educational program for him and saw that it was followed in spite of the absence of schools. Besides English she taught him German and he learned Spanish from his contacts with those around him. He later learned French and talked fluently in all of these languages.

About 1879 Edmund's family sent him back to relatives in St. Louis for his further education and by 1885 he was graduated from the Manual Training School with the Selew Medal for the highest four-year record, in spite of the fact that he was unable to use his eyes for the last year. He immediately entered the School of Engineering of Washington University, but a severe illness interrupted his course during the second year and he made a trip to Australia to recuperate. Returning to St. Louis in 1887 he entered the School

of Fine Arts. In 1889 he was offered the opportunity of going to France to study and he seized it.

Wuerpel lived in Paris for six years, studying at the Julian Academy and the Ecole des Beaux Arts, but his interests were wider than those of the average art student. He was always interested in the problems of other people and this interest led to an ever widening circle of acquaintances. Among others whom he could claim as friends were James Whistler, Sarah Bernhardt, Whitelaw Reid, and Rodman Wanamaker.

Upon his return to St. Louis in 1894 he was immediately put in charge of the Life Class at the Art School of Washington University and advanced over the years to become Dean of the Art School. Before his retirement he was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Fine Arts in 1947 and cited for the longest term, 53 years, ever served by a member of the staff of the University.

When Angle was conducting his earliest courses around the turn of the century in St. Louis, he was trying to formulate his ideas of beauty of the human race. He knew Wuerpel only by reputation but he sought his help. As Wuerpel subsequently recounted that first meeting, it went somewhat as follows:

Angle introduced himself as an orthodontist and in those days that term had to be defined. He explained that the regulation of the teeth had far-reaching effects on the face and he wished to give his students some rule to guide them in their practices. He produced a lantern slide of the Apollo Belvedere and asked Wuerpel if that would not be a good model toward which they might work.

Wuerpel had listened patiently to

the recital thus far, but at this point he protested vehemently. "Do you want to make all faces alike and do you want them all to be Greeks?" he roared. "What a hideous idea!" Then he started to explain that beauty was not of a single type; that it was dependent on the observer and he in turn was influenced by race, color, culture and background. When he finally finished his harangue, Angle was perspiring copiously, but he was enthralled. His only response was, "Will you come and tell my students what you have told me?"

Thus began a friendship that ended only with Angle's death in 1930. Wuerpel lectured to every class of the Angle School in St. Louis, New York, and New London, Connecticut, and to many of those trained later at Pasadena. With the opening of the Graduate Course at Illinois, Wuerpel continued his lectures there until it became too difficult to make the trip to Chicago. As an honorary member of the Angle Society he and Mrs. Wuerpel attended all of its meetings until recent years and at the last meeting of the American Association of Orthodontists held in St. Louis they received many old acquaintances.

No one who ever heard Wuerpel lecture on Art ever forgot it. He introduced his listeners to a "school" by describing the environment and the times in order to explain why they painted as they did. Then he pointed out the details that characterized them and wherein they differed from other schools. His knowledge of the history of art ranged over the entire field. Nor did he neglect the field of ethics. Some

of his talks were, in reality, sermons. One of these "Ideals and Idealism" given before the Angle Society was specially printed and sent to all of its members.

Wuerpel and Angle were as unlike as two men could be and their strong friendship was a striking example of the attraction of opposites. The aggressive, sometimes intolerant Angle was a marked contrast to the gentle, soft spoken Wuerpel. Yet they had much in common in their sense of humor, their love of nature, and of all things beautiful including those man made. They loved nothing more than to share with each other anecdotes, antiques, and even vacations. They could talk together for hours and under almost any circumstances and it was no doubt during such intercourses that Wuerpel's influence on Angle's thinking was exercised. Together they designed and planned the Angle-Wuerpel orthodontic table which marked the first step in the transformation of the dental office to one that was less fearsome and more fitting for young patients.

Shortly after his return from Paris Wuerpel married Minnie Clay Johnson of St. Louis whom he had known before he went abroad. Three daughters were born of this union and it was with the second of these, Lois Bowles, that the elder Wuerpels were making their home when Edmund died in February, 1958 at the ripe age of almost ninety two years. Mrs. Wuerpel passed away on May 18, 1958, less than three months after Mr. Wuerpel's death.

A. G. B.