

## Judicial Profile

SHANNON C. PELL

# Hon. Robert E. Coyle Senior U.S. District Judge, Eastern District of California

IN FALL 2003, in a crane basket high above Fresno's downtown streets, Senior Judge Robert E. Coyle, accompanied by Magistrate Judge Dennis Beck, surveyed the large steel frame structure before him — the embodiment of Judge Coyle's years of work and dedication. The U.S. District Court for the Eastern District would soon enjoy a new courthouse.

The principal and driving force behind this impressive structure was born in Fresno. Judge Coyle attended Fresno State College and graduated from the University of California, Hastings College of Law in 1956. Judge Coyle learned from faculty who, according to him, "wrote the Hornbooks" The faculty was made up of members of the "65 Club" — a group of eminent professors who had retired involuntarily from the nation's top law schools and were then recruited by David E. Snodgrass, the dean of Hastings College of Law. As a result, from 1940 to 1963, Hastings had one of the most distinguished faculties of any American law school. Because of these quality professors, Judge Coyle enjoyed his education — particularly his courses in torts and property law — stating that law school "was a snap."

Upon graduation, Judge Coyle returned to Fresno to take a position with the Fresno County district attorney's office. Following an unconventional interview with then District Attorney E. Clark Savory, during which Savory used the opportunity to put his foot up on his desk and give himself a pedicure of sorts, Judge Coyle was hired and began to handle all manner of criminal cases. Some of his most vivid memories involve his early experience with enforcement of anti-narcotics laws. At that time in the county, a deputy district attorney would accompany law enforcement officers at the time of arrest. Judge Coyle recalls the stifling heat while he lay hiding under houses, on dirt, and on and around other unknown substances in an effort to catch cocaine or marijuana traffickers.

From 1958 to 1982, Judge Coyle was a partner in one of the Central Valley's largest law firms, McCormick, Barstow, Sheppard, Coyle & Wayne. Robert



Senior Judge Robert E. Coyle and Magistrate Judge Dennis Beck surveying the construction of the new courthouse for the Eastern District of California in 2003.

Coyle was a successful trial attorney, practicing in the areas of insurance defense and business litigation. He also traveled around the world negotiating agricultural contracts in such locations as Bangladesh and Hong Kong.

Judge Coyle was nominated to the district court bench by Sen. Samuel I. Hayakawa. The judge notes that the confirmation process in 1982 was far removed from the current process. Judge Coyle particularly recalls traveling to Washington, D.C., about one week

after an Air Florida flight had gone down in the Potomac River. The proceeding itself took place in a “monstrous” and ornate congressional hearing room, which was empty except for a shorthand reporter and Duke Short, most recently the former aide to the late Sen. Strom Thurmond. Sen. Hayakawa was conspicuously missing from the hearing, which eventually began despite the senator’s absence. Halfway through the proceeding, Sen. Hayakawa hurriedly arrived, waving his hat in the air. It was “quite an experience,” recalls Judge Coyle. There was no audience or media presence.

In April 1982, President Ronald Reagan appointed Judge Coyle to the U.S. District Court. The judge never had the opportunity to meet President Reagan in person, but he remembers the receptionist at the law firm nervously advising him that “*the President*” was on the line. As the judge took the President’s call, he could see the numerous heads of his co-workers lining his office window.

During his tenure as a U.S. district judge, Judge Coyle has served as chair of the Space and Security Committee of the Ninth Circuit and has provided vision and leadership for the construction of two courthouses within the Eastern District of California. Prior to overseeing the construction of the new building in Fresno, Judge Coyle assisted with the construction of the Eastern District’s courthouse in Sacramento, which was completed in 1998.

From 1990 to 1996, Judge Coyle served as chief judge of the Eastern District of California, assuming senior status in May 1996. In the Eastern District, one of the busiest in the nation, an active district judge carries an average caseload in excess of 950 cases. The Fresno court currently has three district judges and five magistrate judges, and thanks in great part to Judge Coyle’s efforts, having enough space to conduct their business is no longer a concern.

On Oct. 18, 2005, after three years of construction, a dedication ceremony was held at the new Fresno Federal Courthouse. Among the many dignitaries present were Justice Anthony M. Kennedy of the U.S. Supreme Court and Chief Judge David F. Levi of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of California. Justice Kennedy called the building something “tangible” that “incorporates the highest aspirations of the law.” As Chief Judge Levi noted, the occupants of the courthouse will “honor and serve the rule of law ... striving mightily to be worthy” of the new building. Judge Coyle recognized the many “artisans” who had worked hard to make his dream come alive and gave credit to many individuals and companies, including Keith McCoy with Abide International Inc., the General Services Administration, the architectural firms of Moore Ruble Yudell and Gruen Associates, Dick Corporation, and Matt Construction Company. The building itself is nine stories tall, stretching 226 feet into the Fresno skyline. Crews used 5,000 tons of steel and 18,000 cubic yards of concrete in the build-



U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of California in Fresno.



Prior to overseeing the construction of the new building in Fresno, Judge Coyle assisted with the construction of the Eastern District’s courthouse in Sacramento, which was completed in 1998.

ing’s construction. Housing 14 courtrooms among its 475,000 square feet, at a cost of approximately \$140



million, the courthouse will serve Calaveras, Fresno, Inyo, Kern, Kings, Madera, Mariposa, Stanislaus, Tulare, and Tuolumne counties.

The building was designed to complement the San Joaquin Valley. Because the concrete wall panels form an irregular pattern of folds, extrusions, and corrugations, as the day progresses, the building's exterior is a continuously changing landscape of shadow and light. The grounds mimic the rich topography of San Joaquin Valley — from the beautiful stone waterfall representative of the area's many lakes to the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains as well as to the mountain range.

Judge Coyle and his wife, Faye, have two children — Rob, who lives in California, and Barbara, who resides in Mesa, Ariz. — and four grandchildren.

The judge and his wife enjoy traveling. On a recent trip to Phoenix, they learned about the cliff-dwelling Anasazi Indians, who once inhabited Arizona and mysteriously vanished from the area. In addition to traveling, when asked what he did to relax, Judge Coyle responded that he enjoys working within the court system, taking on tasks that are over and above his regular duties. He admitted that his colleagues

would say he works too much.

In a tribute that could not be more fitting, it is expected that the new courthouse will be named for Senior Judge Robert E. Coyle. **TFL**

---

*Shannon C. Pell graduated from San Joaquin College of Law in May 2006 and is a senior legal analyst at the California attorney general's office.*