IN MEMORIAM

Hon. Edward McManus
Senior Judge, U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Iowa
by Lee Hermiston

Judge Edward McManus spent more than seven decades serving his country and state. The Northern District of Iowa judge spent more than 50 years on the bench, served as lieutenant governor and in the Iowa senate, was city attorney for his hometown of Keokuk, and flew as a flight instructor for the Navy during World War II. Along the way, he picked up a tale or two, those who knew him fondly recall.

“He was quite a storyteller,” said Deb Frank, McManus’ judicial assistant for 27 years. “You can only imagine the stories he had.”

McManus, 97, died March 20 in Cedar Rapids. His son said McManus was still taking cases, nearly 55 years after his friend, President John F. Kennedy, appointed him chief judge of the Northern District of Iowa.

“I think it was just part of his DNA,” David McManus, a Cedar Rapids lawyer, said of his father’s work ethic. “His mother died at 106. He was wired for that.”

Born in Keokuk on Feb. 9, 1920, McManus would later attend St. Ambrose College before transferring to the University of Iowa. There, he joined the Phi Delta Phi legal fraternity, which also included Hawk-eye football legend Nile Kinnick and future Southern District of Iowa Judge Bill Stuart.

According to his obituary, McManus was admitted to the Iowa Bar Association in October 1941 and briefly practiced law with his father and brother before enlisting in the U.S. Naval Air Corps in March 1942, where he served as a flight instructor in Texas and Florida. He left the Navy as a lieutenant and returned to Keokuk to practice law with his father and brothers. There, he served as city attorney and wrote the city’s municipal code, his obituary states.

McManus—who had five sons with his first wife, Sally Hassett, and two stepsons through his second marriage to Esther Yothers Locher Kamealy—was elected to the Iowa Senate in 1954 and elected lieutenant governor in 1958. He unsuccessfully ran for governor in 1960.

Two years later, Kennedy appointed McManus the chief judge for the Northern District of Iowa, making him the first native-born Iowan appointed to the federal district court for the Northern District, according to his obituary. After relocating to Cedar Rapids, McManus set out to consolidate different federal court functions—which were spread throughout the district—under one roof.

“His decisions to centralize the operations of the federal court in Cedar Rapids and to implement a variety of case management reforms upon taking the bench in 1962 were truly visionary,” said Acting U.S. Attorney Sean Berry. “The changes implemented by Judge McManus left an indelible and positive impact on the efficient administration of justice for all litigants in the federal court.”

McManus was also passionate about bringing about speedy and inexpensive resolutions to his cases and prided himself in having no backlog after clearing out the initial backlog left when he took over as chief judge. He took senior status in 1985, which saw him remain a judge but with a smaller caseload.

Frank describes McManus as “stern, strict, and
Lehder was found guilty of drug-related offenses and sentenced to life in prison.

Surprisingly, the proceedings that weigh on Judge Schlesinger most heavily are not those with the most publicity or novel legal issues. Instead, like many judges, he dwells on the routine sentencings, though he joked that when he transitioned from magistrate judge to district judge, he had to learn to count past one because he no longer handled only misdemeanors. He described sleepless nights before sentencings involving difficult facts and lengthy mandatory minimum sentences. That distress is unlikely to subside. He remembered some advice from a former district judge: “When you stop worrying about sentencing someone to prison, it’s the time to retire, because it means your heart has turned to stone.”

Thankfully, the stressful moments have been balanced by moments of levity, like the time a witness called Judge Schlesinger “Your Majesty,” or when a lawyer tried to invoke a “pet-vet privilege,” or when a pro se litigant treated the court and professionalism in the bar and has set a standard that all of us try to emulate every day. … I certainly expect that 10 years from now, we will be standing in this same courtroom thanking Judge Schlesinger for his 60 years of federal service.”

In March 2017, the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Florida, Jacksonville Division, honored Judge Schlesinger for devoting 50 years to federal service, including his time in the military, in the U.S. Attorney’s Office, and on the bench. Hon. Timothy J. Corrigan, a fellow U.S. district judge, aptly summarized his career: “We all owe a debt of gratitude to Judge Schlesinger, who has promoted collegiality among the members of the court and professionalism in the bar and has set a standard that all of us try to emulate every day. … I certainly expect that 10 years from now, we will be standing in this same courtroom thanking Judge Schlesinger for his 60 years of federal service.”

Endnotes