

HON. ALFRED P. MURRAH SR.

CHIEF JUDGE, U.S. COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE TENTH CIRCUIT

THE MAN AND THE JURIST

JUDICIAL PROFILE BY VON CREEL

On April 19, 1995, “Judge Alfred P. Murrah Sr.” became a household name. Yet not many knew more than the name. This profile attempts to describe the man and the jurist that Alfred P. Murrah Sr. was.

When you first met Judge Murrah, you were immediately captivated by his flashing, piercing, and bluest of blue eyes. And when you had been in his presence for a time, say 30 seconds, you knew his was not a plain vanilla personality; it was Neopolitan with generous dashes of Tabasco. Judge Murrah once asked Dan Gibbens, one of his law clerks, to describe him in one word. After much pondering, and perhaps with some hesitation, Dan said, “volatile,” an opinion with which the judge concurred without reservation.

Judge Murrah was born in the Chickasaw Nation of yeoman parentage. He was orphaned in his early teens and became a “knight of the road” until a railroad police officer in Oklahoma City rudely evicted him from his freight car domicile. Murrah then hitchhiked his way to Tuttle, Okla., and was taken in as a family member by the MacPhails. As he would recall years later, he was given a home in exchange for milking the family’s six cows. While in Tuttle, he also worked behind the counter in the Star Pharmacy and observed the owner, who was also a justice of the peace, holding court. From that time on, Alfred Murrah dreamed of becoming a lawyer and perhaps even a justice of the peace.

His education had been less than regular, and he had to talk his way into high school, from which he graduated as class valedictorian, member of the debate team, and senior class president. He then worked his way through undergraduate school and law school at the University of Oklahoma, was admitted to the bar, and—in his own words—“started to practice law in a Klondike oil town representing drilling contractors, roughnecks, whores, and bootleggers until they decided to put me on the federal bench.”

One of his professors at the University of Oklahoma was Josh Lee; Murrah was one of the principal Rover Boys responsible for Josh Lee’s successful campaigns for Congress and the U.S. Senate. With Josh Lee’s support, Murrah became a federal district judge at the ripe old age of 32. He was appointed to a new district judgeship and became Oklahoma’s first roving district judge, being commissioned in all three districts.

Judge Murrah did not tarry long at the district court, however; at the age of 35, he was appointed to the Tenth Circuit. He served as chief judge of the Tenth Circuit for 11 years, and was known as the “Schoolmaster of the Federal Judiciary” for his teachings on the creative and effective use of pretrial procedures. Murrah played a major role in the creation of the Judicial Panel on Multi-District Litigation and served as its first chair. He took senior status to serve as the second director of the Federal Judicial Center, succeeding Justice Tom Clark.



For more than three decades, Alfred P. Murrah Sr. graced the federal bench with learning, intellect, integrity, and an unswerving fidelity to his oath to “administer justice without respect to persons and do

equal right to the poor and to the rich.” His thousands of opinions for the Tenth, Third, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, and Ninth Circuits—opinions that Judge Armistead Dobie would say are as clear as crystal and as crisp as bacon—made major contributions to the defining and shaping of American law. Judge Murrah’s untiring labor to improve the administration of justice began with his very first days on the bench and that goal was his passion for the rest of his life.

Still, he had time to be a loving husband to his gracious and lovely wife, Babe, and proud father of Ann, Paul Jr., and Sue. He also had enough time, as the judge said, “to pay back the community and state that have been so good to me” by heading the “Big One” charitable fund-raising drives in Oklahoma City, chairing the Law Center Commission for the University of Oklahoma, and—one of the delights of his life—teaching Sunday School classes at Crown Heights United Methodist Church. His many contributions to his community and state were recognized by honorary degrees from Oklahoma City University and the University of Oklahoma, induction into the Oklahoma Heritage Hall of Fame, and selection as Humanitarian of the Year by the Oklahoma City Chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. In the words of Tom McDaniel, president of Oklahoma City University, Judge Murrah was a servant leader.

And Judge Murrah never forgot Tuttle. One ritual in his chambers every Friday was reading *The Tuttle Times* from cover to cover—something that didn’t take very long.

Those who were blessed to come to the law as Judge Murrah’s clerks have a special obligation not to forget the achievements and accomplishments of this good and great man during the all too brief span of his three score and 10 years. In the mists of time, we must remember Judge Murrah not because of the tragic events of April 19, 1995, but for the imperishable legacy of a life well lived as a good and faithful servant of the rule of law. **TFL**

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