Von Creel: Oklahoma Historian

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“There are two kinds of lawyers:
those who know the law and
those who know the judge.”
Popular saying

Von Creel, teacher, historian, and Oklahoma lawyer, knows both the law and the judges. It is this wisdom that he has imparted to generations of Oklahoma City University law students.

How better than to begin one’s career as a clerk for the renowned Alfred P. Murrah, to exchange that for the Governor’s office as David Boren’s executive assistant, and from there to answer a noble endeavor, the education of young lawyers. For thousands of OCU lawyers, their legal education began by responding to Von’s first question, “Do you love the law?” Many alumni have reflected upon that question, as a mooring, during good times and bad.

Much of my education about Oklahoma history, lawyers, and judges has come from Von. His definitive history of our law school is just a starting point. Over many years, I have had the opportunity to attend Von’s seminars on Oklahoma legal history, and I have always been amazed at the way Von’s students have learned to tell the stories of famous trial judges and lawyers and weave their tales into the fabric of Oklahoma society. Von’s genius has been to open students’ minds to the possibility that they too can be an important part of that fabric through their legal careers. Hanging judges from the Indian Territories straight out of True Grit, Boomers, Sooners, booms and busts, country folk and city folk—they are all a part of Von’s legal repertoire. Al Brophy, a former colleague at OCU and recognized national authority on the tragic

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1. THE QUOTABLE LAWYER 183 (David Shrager & Elizabeth Frost eds., 1986).
Oklahoma Race Riot case and its aftermath, counts Von not only as a close friend but as a mentor, as his scholarship has matured and developed in this important area. Many of us, Von’s colleagues past and present, have shared in Von’s wisdom and knowledge.

Von’s knowledge of Oklahoma judges, state and federal, past and present, is encyclopedic. Starting with his clerkship under Judge Murrah and continuing through close friendships with judicial luminaries such as Justice Marian Opala and Judge William Holloway, Von has managed to track the affairs, both legal and personal, of the great majority of Oklahoma’s judiciary. I plead guilty over the years of playing a judicial jeopardy game with Von, walking into his office with a question such as, “Who is the presiding judge in Seminole?” whereupon I will learn not only the judge’s name, but also genealogy, former law partners, children in school at OCU, tough election contests, and often favorite football team. (Not to mention, he even knows the name of Judge Lee West’s favorite bird dog (I confess I made that one up)).

Speaking of football teams, early on, I learned to tread softly and seldom speak except in respectful tones of OU football or matters related thereto. Everybody has an Achilles’ heel. Von loves Big Red. So be it.

As Von’s retirement year progresses, all of us are constantly reminded of the loss of Von’s beloved wife, Mary, who was and is a big part of the heart and soul of our faculty. Von and Mary faced Mary’s last illness with definition of courage, grace under pressure. We will never forget Von’s devoted and loving care of Mary. We feel her loss keenly.

Without Von (and Cory) to supply it, my measure of those great Oklahoma favorites, “Hoppin’ John” and jalapeño cornbread, may fade away soon . . . maybe a good thing given the amount and strength of the jalapeños Von adds to the cornbread. All of us will miss spending time on a sunny afternoon, sitting on Von’s office couch, discussing OU football, the latest political gossip, or the legal genealogy of a now law student whose father, brother, mother, or sister started their career at OCU, always beginning with Professor Creel’s favorite question, “Do you love the law?”

A historian knows the important tales and can tell them well. Von, we can never replace you!