

Oklahoma City University School of Law

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Top o' the Day t'Ya, Professor von Creel

Lawrence K. Hellman, *Oklahoma City University School of Law*



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TRIBUTES

TOP O' THE DAY T' YA, PROFESSOR VON CREEL

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Did you know that Von is the *first* name of Von Russell Creel, not part of his *last* name? If you knew this before reading this tribute, was there once a time when you didn't? It is altogether possible that some readers of this remembrance of Von will be discovering this for the first time.

I've often wondered why so many people who first hear Von Creel's first and last names spoken together assume that his *last* name is von Creel. Having served on the same faculty with him for thirty-four years, this still puzzles me. Could it be because of his sometimes (deceptively) stern and stiff demeanor and his penchant for insisting on precision in language that causes a new acquaintance to mistakenly attribute to him a Germanic background? Or is it nothing more than the relative rarity of the first name Von that causes some to assume when they first hear it that it must be part of our subject's last name?

Whatever the explanation, as he nears retirement, let it be known by all that Von is the *first* name of the person who is the longest-serving faculty member in the history of Oklahoma City University School of Law. When he teaches his last class on April 27, Von Russell Creel will

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have completed his fortieth year as a professor at OCU LAW.¹

Von Creel's record-setting tenure as a faculty member here provided him with a close-up view of the maturation of this institution. While OCU LAW traces its origins to predecessor institutions dating back to 1907, its modern incarnation did not begin until 1952, when it officially became a part of Oklahoma City University. Von has been a member of the faculty here for two-thirds of the years that have passed by since then. Thus, when I proposed that the history of OCU LAW should be recorded in a book, it was obvious that Von should be asked to participate in the project. I was grateful when he agreed to collaborate with our alumnus (and his long-time friend) Bob Burke on the project. The resulting *Oklahoma City University School of Law: A History*² was published in 2008, creating a permanent record of the not-always-easy development of a resilient law school that has changed the lives of thousands of graduates, enhanced the standing of its parent university, and become a valued contributor to the development of Oklahoma's legal system and governmental infrastructure.

Von Creel has been not just an observer of these developments; he has played an active, personal role in them.

THE LAW SCHOOL'S DEVELOPMENT

It was only a short time after Von joined OCU LAW in 1971 as one of its first full-time faculty members when the school made the decision to begin offering a full-time day curriculum to complement the part-time evening program that had constituted the only scheduling option the school previously had offered.³ While part-time scheduling options are still available, currently more than 90% of the students who matriculate at OCU LAW enter its full-time program.

With the growth of the full-time program came growth in the full-time faculty. Von was a key player in the recruitment of new faculty in the formative period of the mid-1970s, and he has participated in the hiring of the thirty-five faculty colleagues whom he will leave behind and numerous others who have come and gone during his forty-year

1. Von Creel became a faculty member at OCU LAW in 1971, and he will finish his tenure in 2011.

2. VON RUSSELL CREEL & BOB BURKE, OKLAHOMA CITY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW: A HISTORY (2008).

3. The full-time program was added in 1972. *See id.* at 43.

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tenure.⁴ He was involved in the law school's move from the "old barracks" to the Gold Star Building in 1979⁵ and also the transition in 1994 when the law school's operations expanded again—from being housed entirely in the Gold Star Building to having them divided between that structure and the more modern Sarkeys Law Center.⁶ He has participated in every institutional decision, large or small, for four decades, from the adoption of written standards and procedures for promotion and tenure in the late 1970s, to revision after revision after revision of the curriculum, to the professionalization of our legal research and writing program, to the faculty's collective decision to undertake an application for membership in the Association of American Law Schools, to the creation of a clinical legal education program.

CHANGING THE LIVES OF STUDENTS

During my time as dean, I have heard countless alumni affectionately recount their memories of their very first law school class, taught by none other than a faculty member whose name some of them then thought was Professor von Creel. The tellers of these stories remember harboring the fear that theirs would be the name first called upon for an hour-long standing recitation. For all but forty students over the past forty years, these stories continue with a remembrance of the unforgettable sense of relief when the name called out by the professor was not theirs. Von long relished knowing that he instilled this trepidation in students—not just on the first day of a class, but in each class period during the first year Civil Procedure course. But this did not reflect a mean spirit in our subject; rather, it demonstrated Von's desire that every graduate of OCU LAW would be prepared to handle whatever harshness, intimidation, or uncertainty he or she might encounter during a career in law.

Von always carried himself as a professional, understanding that every encounter with a student was a teaching opportunity. In conversation with students, he would display precision and accuracy as well as an uncanny memory of case names and citations. But he would also display humanity, humility, and humor, so as to demonstrate that a lawyer should be, and *could* be, both courteous and civil, even while

4. *Id.* at 195–200.

5. *Id.* at 71–72.

6. *Id.* at 84–88.

being rigorous.

Over the years, as Von's hair grew grey, it appeared to me that he began to feel that it ceased to be necessary for him to project the stern demeanor that he may have adopted during his early teaching years for the purpose of deterring those students who might have been tempted by his youthful appearance to test his authority in the classroom. Still, outside the classroom, Von always revealed his fondness for students by, for example, attending bar swearing-in ceremonies, graduation parties, and many of the students' social events. An unabashed fan of University of Oklahoma football, he readily accepted the students' invitation to be the play-by-play announcer for the annual Powder Puff Football Game—secure in the knowledge that OCU, with no football program of its own, would never threaten to embarrass his beloved Sooners on the gridiron. These displays of good nature and encouragement were repaid by almost universal affection and admiration on the part of the students.

CONTRIBUTING TO THE STANDING OF OKLAHOMA CITY UNIVERSITY
AND THE MATURATION OF OKLAHOMA'S LEGAL SYSTEM AND
GOVERNMENTAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Von's contributions as a scholar focused on the early history of Oklahoma's legal institutions and the personalities who guided them.⁷

7. Von Russell Creel, *Fifteen Men in Ermine: Judges of the United States Court for the Indian Territory, 1889–1907*, 86 CHRONICLES OKLA. 158 (2008); Von Russell Creel, *Capital Punishment*, in 1 THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OKLAHOMA HISTORY AND CULTURE 219 (Dianna Everett et al. eds., 2009), available at <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/C/CA052.html>; Von Russell Creel, *Law Schools*, in 1 THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OKLAHOMA HISTORY AND CULTURE, *supra*, at 838, available at <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/L/LA029.html>; Von Russell Creel, *Right to Work*, in 2 THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OKLAHOMA HISTORY AND CULTURE, *supra*, at 1287, available at <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/R/RI007.html>; Von Russell Creel, Book Review, 84 CHRONICLES OKLA. 363 (2006) (reviewing ART T. BURTON, *BLACK GUN, SILVER STAR: THE LIFE AND LEGEND OF FRONTIER MARSHAL BASS REEVES* (2006)); Von Russell Creel, *On the Gallows' Edge: Capital Punishment, Appeals, and Presidential Clemency in Indian Territory, 1896–1907*, 84 CHRONICLES OKLA. 162 (2006); Von Russell Creel, *Challenge and Opportunity: The First Year of the United States Court for the Indian Territory*, 30 OKLA. CITY U. L. REV. 295 (2005); Von Russell Creel, *Vignette, Vignette*, 29 OKLA. CITY U. L. REV. 441 (2004); Von Creel & Bob Burke, *Oklahoma Law Schools: Oklahoma City University School of Law*, 75 OKLA. B.J. (CENTENNIAL ISSUE) 101 (2004); Von Russell Creel, *Capital Punishment and the United States Court for the Indian Territory*, 81 CHRONICLES OKLA. 172 (2003); Von Creel, *A Court of Its Own: The Establishment of the United States Court for the Indian Territory*, 27 OKLA. CITY U. L. REV. 231 (2002); Von Russell Creel, *The Case of the*

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His curiosity about Oklahoma's legal history led him to collaborate with the prolific author (and OCU LAW alumnus) Bob Burke in writing biographies about some important political personalities who shaped that history.⁸ As he witnessed the retirements of long-time colleagues, he also took time to publish reflections on the careers of those who had spent much of their professional lives toiling alongside him.⁹ Besides creating a lasting record of the people and events about which he wrote, Von's publications helped to elevate the profile of the humble law school he had joined in 1971. The law school's parent university also benefited by this exposure.

Von's public service has had a similarly positive effect on the legal community's perception of OCU LAW and the university of which it is a part. In 1974 and 1975, he was tapped to be a senior advisor to then-governor David Boren, as that future United States senator and Oklahoma University president began to impact the State of Oklahoma. He was also appointed to be vice-chair of the Selection Advisory Committee for the United States District Court for the Western, Northern, and Eastern Districts of Oklahoma, presiding judge of the Temporary Division of the Oklahoma Court of Appeals, and a member of a state task force to revise the Oklahoma rules of appellate procedure.

A formative event in Von's professional career was his selection for a two-year clerkship with the legendary Tenth Circuit Judge Alfred P. Murrah. Von's reverence for Judge Murrah was deep and lasting, a reflection of the indelible impact the judge had on shaping Von's approach to law and law teaching. I'm sure it gave Von great satisfaction to honor his mentor by collaborating in the publication of the

Wandering Wobbler: The State of Oklahoma v. Arthur Berg, 73 CHRONICLES OKLA. 404 (1995-96); Von Russell Creel, *Socialists in the House: The Oklahoma Experience, Part II*, 70 CHRONICLES OKLA. 258 (1992); Von Russell Creel, *Socialists in the House: The Oklahoma Experience, Part I*, 70 CHRONICLES OKLA. 144 (1992); Von Russell Creel, *Court in Peril: The Legislative-Judicial Struggle of 1927-1929*, 52 CHRONICLES OKLA. 220 (1974).

8. BOB BURKE & VON RUSSELL CREEL, OKLAHOMA STATESMAN: THE LIFE OF DAVID BOREN (2008); VON RUSSELL CREEL & BOB BURKE, MIKE MONRONEY: OKLAHOMA LIBERAL (1997); VON RUSSELL CREEL, BOB BURKE & KENNY A. FRANKS, AMERICAN JURIST: THE LIFE OF JUDGE ALFRED P. MURRAH (1996); BOB BURKE & VON RUSSELL CREEL, LYLE BOREN: REBEL CONGRESSMAN (1991).

9. Von Russell Creel, *Tribute, Fred Schwartz, Friend, Colleague, Scholar, Teacher*, 35 OKLA. CITY U. L. REV. 547 (2010); Von Russell Creel, *Tribute, In Appreciation: Richard E. Coulson—Friend, Teacher, and Scholar*, 34 OKLA. CITY U. L. REV. 7 (2009); Von Russell Creel, *Tribute, Nancy I. Kenderdine: Teacher, Scholar, Administrator, and Colleague*, 29 OKLA. CITY U. L. REV. 485 (2004).

definitive biography on Judge Murrah.¹⁰ Von later spearheaded the effort to establish at OCU LAW a scholarship in Judge Murrah's name. This scholarship is supported by the judge's former clerks, including the three who have been pillars of the OCU LAW faculty for decades.¹¹ The creation of the Alfred P. Murrah Scholarship served to link our law school's name with Judge Murrah's, helping to build our law school's reputation for excellence.

For many years, Von held an Of Counsel position with a well-regarded Oklahoma City law firm. In this role, he displayed the legal expertise that was available on the growing and diversifying OCU LAW faculty. While ABA accreditation standards now disfavor Of Counsel relationships for full-time faculty, Von's visible presence in the legal community opened doors for other faculty members to serve as ad hoc consultants and expert witnesses. These opportunities helped lawyers and judges in Oklahoma's capital city to see OCU LAW as a reservoir of legal talent that is available to contribute to the improvement of law and legal institutions in our state. Many members of OCU LAW's faculty have followed Von's lead in rendering service to the local and statewide bench and bar, raising the profile of our law school and elevating its credibility. This was important for our school and important for our students and alumni. Public service is one of the many roles that a law school in a state capital city should perform, but it is an important one. Von Creel understood this.

And so I say, top o' the day t' ya, Professor von—I mean Von—Creel. You have made a lasting impact on Oklahoma City University School of Law. Well done!

10. CREEL, BURKE & FRANKS, *supra* note 8.

11. Richard E. Coulson, Professor of Law, 1969–1983, 1988–2008, Professor of Law Emeritus since 2008; Von Russell Creel, Professor of Law, 1971–2011; Alvin C. Harrell, Professor of Law since 1972.