



Almost 70 years later, former judge Joe Morris still loves the law

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By Rita Sherrow Tulsa World

70 years after he started in the legal field, the lawyer works several days a week for Tulsa-based GableGotwals law firm

Joe Morris loves the law. Always has. Said he knew it from the time he first began to think about what he wanted to do.

"I don't know why," he said in a recent interview from his Tulsa law office at GableGotwals on the 11th floor of the ONEOK Building. "I guess somehow it was appealing."

Appealing enough that Morris, who turns 95 in April, has worked his way from being a student in a one-room country school in rural Kansas during the Great Depression to a career as legal counsel to Amerada Petroleum Corporation, dean of the University of Tulsa law school, a federal judgeship, vice-president and legal counsel of Shell Oil company, general counsel for the upstream division of Amerada Hess and an expert arbitrator. The latter is what he does these days, he said.

He attributes his success to "good luck and hard work."

"I have always worked hard and I believe in working hard even though I don't work as hard now," said Morris, who went into the U.S. Navy officers' training school and was commissioned as a U.S. Navy Reserve. He was assigned to Admiral O.C. Badger's staff in Honolulu for three years and was stationed in Hawaii when the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. It was a tour of duty that lasted until 1945 and qualified him for the G.I. Bill so he could afford to go to law school without working so many hours on the side.

Reared on the family farm, he rode his horse to the same country school his father attended, graduated from high school in Nickerson, Kansas, a junior college in Hutchinson, Kansas, Washburn University with a Bachelor of Administration, and a doctorate of Juris Prudence and a master of laws from Michigan University.

His career was launched at Michigan when he met a fellow graduate student who had worked for Shell Oil in Tulsa.

“He asked me one morning if I would have any interest in the legal department of Shell,” said Morris, who is quick to laugh. “I had never heard those words ‘legal department’ so I asked him ‘Do they practice law?’ He said ‘They certainly do’ ... So that’s what I did.”

On his way home after finishing at Michigan, he stopped in Tulsa for an interview with “Mr. Cunningham who kept wanting to talk to me about the great benefits after you retire from Shell.

“Hell, I didn’t care anything about the retirement benefits. I wanted a job. I didn’t think I would ever retire and, well, I haven’t yet.”

He got the call offering him the job for a surprising \$325 a month because he didn’t answer immediately.

“He said I’ll give you a job for \$279 a month. He came straight to the point and it startled me. I didn’t say anything and later I learned he was an impatient man. Then, he said ‘Well, you will have a graduate degree in law so I will pay you \$325 and I said ‘I accept.’ ”

The job was Morris’ introduction to Tulsa.

“I had never been here until I came to interview. But I liked it. I liked the people, the work I was doing and I kept in contact with a girl I dated at Washburn. She and I were married and we liked Tulsa.”

It was a challenge by two law school classmates that he didn’t “have the guts” to wear his cowboy hat on a trip to London that started his signature look.

“I liked it so much that I have worn a Stetson hat ever since.”

He was with Shell in Tulsa and in New York until 1960 when he was pretty sure Leon Hess wanted to talk to him about moving back to New York. But, Morris wasn’t interested.

While playing tennis with former University of Tulsa president Paschal Twyman, he was asked if he had any interest in being dean of the TU law school.

“I thought about it and I called him and said ‘Yes, I have an interest in that.’ He said ‘Well, this is an educational institution and we must have a search committee’ so they formed one and found me.”

But everything would change in 1974 when then-President Richard Nixon appointed him United States District Court judge for the Eastern District of Oklahoma, based in Muskogee. He served for about five years, the majority of it a chief judge.

He got another job offer from John Bookout, chief operating officer of Shell, while he was a judge. It had been 17 years since he worked for that company.

Morris was given an envelope that contained the job offer but he didn’t want to open it until he finished a criminal trial he was in the middle of at the time.

Four or five days later, he opened it and it was an offer to be vice-president and general counsel of Shell in Houston.

“And that’s the hardest decision I ever made,” said Morris who is an avid hunter of doves, quail and pheasant. “If you are a federal judge, you are a federal judge to the end of your life and I knew Shell had a policy that its officers and general managers had to retire at age 60 and I was age 54 or 55.”

He took the job, left the bench and stayed until he was almost 60 when Bookout, still a friend of his today, said they would waive the policy and let him stay two more years.

“I said ‘John, I can’t do that. I have made a deal with GableGotwals in Tulsa that I will come to them.’ ”

He has been at GableGotwals for 33 years this Feb. 1 and usually teaches at TU each spring semester. He isn’t teaching this semester because he and his wife are planning to go to California to watch a major tennis tournament in the middle of the semester.

He said his only bad luck was when he lost his first wife, Deane, at age 60 to ovarian cancer. He met his second wife, Donna, a couple of years later and they married in 1989. “And that was good luck.

"I've had two great wives," said Morris, who has three children Jeffrey Morris, Marilyn Morris and Jeta Morris.

So what does he like to do these days?

"I love the law best of all, but I love to hunt. I have hunted all my life, born and raised on a farm. I hunt upland game birds. I love tennis and I didn't pickup a tennis racket until I was probably 40 years old or in my late 30s. I just love it and Donna knows more about it than I do."

And he isn't planning on retiring.

"I like coming to work so I'm going to come to work as long as I can and as long as GableGotwals will have me."

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