

The Last Of The Hangin' Judges

by Laura Pryor

Oregon is one of the remaining states in the nation that retains a few of the original county judge positions. In Sherman, Gilliam, Morrow, Wheeler and Harney counties, the chair of the Board of County Commissioners is a judge. These judges perform marriages, probate wills, act as county juvenile judge, approve adoptions, approve guardianships for adults as well as juveniles and chair the County Commission. How I became the judge of Gilliam County has something to say about "where angels fear to tread."

In June of 1985 I resigned from the Oregon Department of Economic Development, where I had been serving as manager of the State Film and Video program. I was working 260 hours a month doing crazy things: locate a small elephant, find a place to stampede cattle, convince Sylvester Stallone he could film an Afghan war in the Alvord Desert, etc. I had married in 1983, and my husband and I

decided it was time to live in the same house. So I gave up the film frenzy and moved to the quiet rural life of a ranch in Gilliam County.

In January of 1987 the Gilliam County judge resigned, leaving part of an unexpired term vacant. I was asked by several citizens if I would consider taking the position. I had never heard of a county judge and had no clue what kind of a critter it might be. My husband said it was "one of the last of the hangin' judges," and that I should talk to the county clerk about the responsibilities before I thought about it seriously.

The discussion with the clerk went something like this: "Just what does a county judge do?" "Oh, not much, it's simple. You come in and look at the mail twice a month and hold County Court once a month." It sounded as though I could handle it, so I accepted.

The first three months I found myself performing marriages, committing a person to a mental institution and presiding over Juvenile Court with attorneys, District Attorneys, overwrought parents and obstreperous children, and learning probate law late at night. To add variety to my "simple" job, the largest solid-waste company in the world indicated its determination to construct a massive regional facility in the county. This plunged me into the intricacies of solid waste, conditional-use permits, EPA, DEQ, METRO, LCDC and, last but not least, the Oregon legislative process.

By the end of my first year as county judge, I was working 260 hours a month again and really understood the "hangin' judge" picture. The problem was, it felt as though I was on the wrong end of the rope.

Since I had been appointed by the governor to fill an unexpired term, I had to run for office at the next general election. I ran unopposed and filled a six-year term.

I then ran again unopposed at the end of the full term and was re-elected to another six-year term.

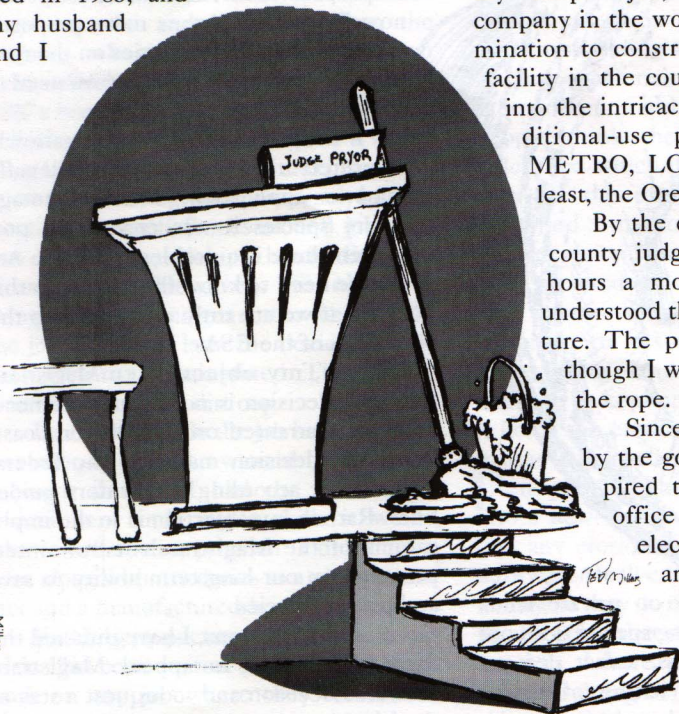


Although Gilliam County has a population of only 1,900, it also has a very complete modern society. It is a mistake to assume anything about the person to whom you are speaking. I learned early that the cowboy moving his cattle down the middle of Main Street in Condon is the former president of the Oregon Senate. The farmer running the combine just returned from a United Nations Food Council meeting in Geneva and the local chemical dealer is an international technical advisor to a variety of programs.

Another surprise for me was that there is no break for having a small population. The state and federal regulatory and legal requirements are exactly the same for Gilliam County as they are for Multnomah County. The difference is in how many county employees there are to do all the required tasks. Everyone in our courthouse has multiple jobs. I have scrubbed the courthouse stairs one day and testified before a Senate committee on transportation the next. Our planner has coded Road Department bills for payment on Tuesday and represented the county at the United States Supreme Court on Thursday.

The joys of being the judge are many. People know who you are. They care about what happens. If an ambulance leaves everyone knows who is being cared for. If you make an unpopular decision you hear about it right away, up-front and personal, in the drug store, the gas station and at lunch. Everyone is a volunteer and every citizen is involved in some way in the life of the community.

Would I do it again? You bet.



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