

Law for Life

Morris on almost 70 years of loving the law.

At 94 years old and counting, **The Honorable Joe Morris, BA '43 and LL.B. '47**, tells one heck of a story. Responding to just about any inquiry, he says, “*Well*,” followed by a deep breath and a pause. Then the memories come rushing forth.

How he grew up amid the Great Depression, riding a horse from his family farm to the one-room schoolhouse in Rice County, Kansas. Being stationed in Hawaii with the U.S. Navy Reserve when the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. How he first donned his signature Stetson cowboy hat back in 1965, when some Washburn Law buddies teased that he didn’t have the guts to wear it. (He did.)

Mostly, though, his stories revolve around the law. Morris doesn’t remember *why* he wanted to become a lawyer; he just knows that he *always* did. From there, he simply did exceptional work and stayed open to the possibilities.

“I never had any plan to do any of the things that I’ve done, really,” Morris said. “I was just lucky enough to have opportunities presented, and I had to say yes or no.”

Over time, this “country boy” has said yes to life as a law school dean, federal judge, vice president, and expert arbitrator. But it all began with his big break at Shell Oil Company in 1948. Morris was at the University of Michigan Law School — ultimately earning his LL.M. and SJD — when he met the interviewer. “He kept wanting to tell me about the great things about Shell and its retirement benefits. I didn’t give a damn about the retirement benefits. I wanted a *job*.”

When Morris received a phone call offering him \$279 a month (more than many friends were garnering), he was stunned and did not instantly answer — and his silence paid off. “When I didn’t say anything, he said, ‘Well, you will have a graduate degree, I’ll offer you three and a quarter.’”

Morris learned the ropes with Shell until 1960, in Tulsa and New York. Another 12 years ensued at Amerada Petroleum Corporation in Oklahoma, where he rose to the rank of general counsel.

So what would make him leave an established oil and gas career for uncharted territory?

“Well,” he said, laughing. “Amerada was acquired by Hess Oil & Chemical. I knew Leon Hess had on his mind the possibility of moving me to New York. And I didn’t want to go to New York. They don’t have any quail in New York, and I love to hunt quail.”

Luckily, he was invited to be dean of the law school at The University of Tulsa. He accepted and was dean for two years. But Morris was on the cusp of a career-defining role. In 1974, President Richard Nixon appointed him district judge for the Eastern District of Oklahoma. Morris cherished the office, serving as chief judge for three of his more than four years on the bench.

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“I expected to live and die right there. But out of the blue, a man whom I had never met, who was the CEO of Shell, came to me and asked me would I come be vice president and general counsel of Shell Oil Company. And that’s the hardest professional decision I ever had to make. But I decided to go. So I went to Houston for about six years,” he said, calling it “a very good decision.”

Shell mandated that officers retire at age 60 — an amusing idea now, 34 years after Morris’ 60th birthday. Since “retiring” from Shell, he’s been hard at work as a shareholder and board member with GableGotwals in Tulsa, focusing mainly on oil and gas law and arbitration law.

But Morris isn’t the only one who’s benefited from his enduring career. Just ask **Professor David Pierce, ’77**. From 1989 on, Pierce has used what he learned under Morris at Shell to build Washburn Law’s topflight oil and gas program.

“Judge Morris is the man that’s done it all in the legal world. And he’s a Kansan and Oklahoman. He’s just very personable and very open, and has helped a number of young lawyers in their careers — probably hundreds, I bet,” Pierce said, citing how Morris and eight fellow alumni began sponsoring the *Washburn Law Journal* student awards in 1977.

Morris speaks fondly of his alma mater, and especially of former Dean and Justice Harry K. Allen, “because he taught me about what the law is.”

More than 70 years after that initiation, he still marches into work three days a week, cowboy hat and all, and teaches at The University of Tulsa the other two. Looking back on the spectacular memories he’s collected, they seem to tell more of a love story than anything else.

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