

# Justice Has Been Served

*Logger picks up gavel  
and never looks back*

*By Debby Schoeningh*

In June 1974, Larry Cole traded his diesel mechanic overalls and his seat behind the wheel of a log truck for a 1969 Traffic Code booklet, a gavel and a hearty “Good luck young feller.”

“It was almost a double dare you,” Judge Cole says about his appointment as city of Union municipal judge. “The crew at Brookshire Logging Company, where I was working, asked me to apply for the job when Judge Hap Bechtold announced his retirement. I had a big laugh at first, but they persisted, and I threw my hat in the ring.”

Oregon, Judge Cole says, is one of the few places in the world where a regular citizen without a legal background can become a judge.

“You can be a gardener, a housewife, truck driver, whatever,” says Judge Cole. “Attorneys don’t have the corner market when it comes being a judge.”

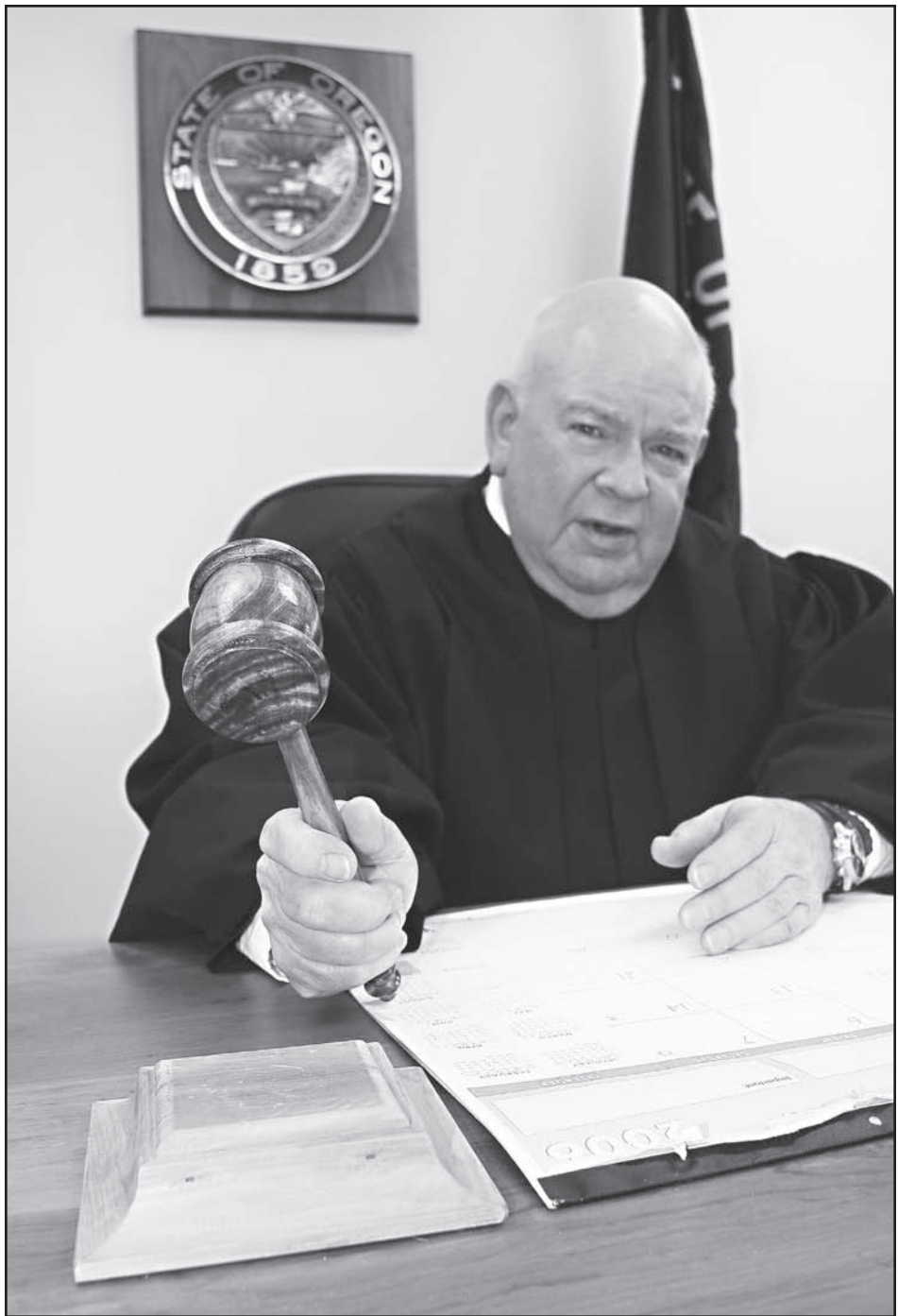
He says his first court session was a little tenuous.

“I didn’t know left from right, and I asked myself what in the Sam Hill I was doing here,” Judge Cole says.

He soon joined the Oregon Municipal Judges Association and the National Judges Association, and started attending judicial college programs. He also found guidance from several mentors, including Judge Wallace P. Carson Jr., Oregon Supreme Court’s chief justice.

“He is the greatest friend and mentor I have ever known, the best chief justice Oregon has ever had,” says Judge Cole.

In 1980, Judge Cole moved his family to Baker County and began working as a pro-tem for Justice of the Peace Earl English. When



*Above, Judge Larry Cole has been a judge since 1974. Opposite page, in September 2006 he was presented with the Oregon Justices of the Peace Association Bench of Honor.*

Judge English retired in 1988, then Governor Neil Goldschmidt appointed Judge Cole to the position. He continued to preside in both Union and Baker county courts for another year until the Oregon

Attorney General’s office advised him he could no longer hold two public offices.

“I resigned from Union on September 1, 1989, bringing to a close 15 years as municipal judge,” he says. “I

questioned the wisdom of that opinion (choosing the Baker Court) when intergovernmental agreements combined three municipal courts (Baker, Haines and Sumpter) with Baker Justice court under one judge.”

Now 70 years old, Judge Cole did not seek re-election and retired. His term expired December 31.

He says he would not have traded his 32 years on the judicial bench for anything, even though life has steered him completely off course from the original goal he set of piloting and owning a charter plane company.

Looking back on his career, Judge Cole recalls several memorable cases, including one in Union County involving an unconventional coffee house.

He says back then citizen’s band (CB) radios were the thing.

“You could tune in to catch ‘Rubber Ducky’ giving a big 10-4 to KW Daddy doing a pedal to the metal while watching out for the Smokey Bears,” he says. “Locally, we had calls to Shooting Star and Fallen Angel asking if the coffee was hot. Usually a big 10-4 was returned, or they would say a new pot would be ready at a certain time—nothing really out of place for a coffee stop. However, some of the local church ladies got wind of something they didn’t like.”

As it turns out, Judge Cole says, the CB ladies were operating a house of ill repute under the guise of a private coffee house.

“The ladies were cited for maintaining a public nuisance by reason of prostitution,” he says. “We resolved the issues and very shortly ‘The Hot Coffee House Ladies’ moved on to new territory.”

Rape and murder cases were on the courtroom docket in his early days in Baker County, before the grand jury was formed. Soon those cases gave way to traffic and parking violations, narcotics, domestic violence, harassments and animal issues, such as dog bites and “Pork Chop,” the pot-bellied pig.

Neighbors had complained about Pork Chop, saying she was considered livestock and lived in an area



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**—Judge Larry Cole**

not zoned for food animals.

“Several people testified on Pork Chop’s behalf,” says Judge Cole. “Even the mailman said he liked her. She was like a watch dog to the family who owned her.”

Judge Cole ruled Pork Chop was an exotic pet, which set a precedent. The Oregon Department of Agriculture drafted new rules regarding exotic animals.

“When all was said and done, the pig was the best mannered of anyone involved,” he says with a laugh.

Judge Cole says he has never been undecided on a case. It has always become clear to him through the interviewing process who was at fault.

“Judge Carson advised me early on to always listen intently to a witness, and to not formulate questions in my mind while they are speaking,” he says.

Judge Cole says he paid attention to body language to determine if someone was telling the truth. He

always made them stand up in front of the bench.

“I watch their mannerism,” he says. “I watch to see if they make eye contact, shift their weight from foot to foot or pace back and forth.”

He says 99 percent of the people justify their conduct by blaming someone or something else, as in, “nobody else stops at that stop sign.”

The court system has undergone many changes through the years. The Oregon State Statutes, which used to be contained in a manageable-sized book, now takes up a 40-inch shelf. Suspects can be interviewed from jail through video conferencing.

Judge Cole says mandatory fines also have changed.

When the legislature adjusted the fee schedule making minimum fines mandatory about 10 years ago, they were bombarded with letters of complaint from judges who had always been able to reduce fines to those deserving of a break.

“Legislators understood,” he says with a hint of irony. “They raised the mandatory fines 40 percent and said judges could reduce the fees by 25 percent.”

Judge Cole received numerous awards in his career, including the Kenneth L. MacEachern Memorial Award for outstanding non-attorney judge in the United States, the Award of Merit from the Oregon State Bar and, in September, the Oregon Justice of the Peace’s Association Bench of Honor Award.

He served on several boards and committees, including as chairman of the Special Courts Advisory Committee to the Oregon Supreme Court from 1992 to 1996. He also created small claims mediation and Teen Court programs in Baker County.

Judge Cole says the most rewarding part of being a judge has been the successes.

“I’ve seen people overcome incredible odds, pull it together, get everything put in the right perspective and become remarkable citizens,” he says. “That’s what it’s all about.” ■