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McMurry celebrates 50 years in legal field

Continued from 1D

week and on most weekends," Livingston said.

McMurry continues to work each day and has no plans to retire.

Elected county attorney in 1953, his work over the next16 years was crucial in the development of the county outside of the city.

McMurry began his political career in 1953 by defeating Albert Barnes for county attorney. He was unopposed in 1957 and defeated challenger Andrew Palmer in 1961.

As county attorney, McMurry was instrumental in doing the legal work that resulted in formation of most of the county water, sewer and fire districts. The districts have been a major factor in the development of the county outside of the city.

McMurry said he had an interest in seeing the services expanded in the county because of his own experience.

He was living just outside the city limits and his well went dry. He said the city water line ended not far from his house and he asked the city to extend it down his street. The city refused. "After that, I dedicated myself to helping get those services in the county," he said.

McMurry said the work as county attorney was less complex in the 1950s and '60s. He said it took only one afternoon a week to prosecute criminal cases. Now, McCracken County has two courts that are in session each day.

Helping with the county's administrative duties also was easier because there were fewer regulations and the county budget was less than $500,000 a year.

As county judge from 1966 to 1969, he advocated many changes in government which at the time were considered innovative and radical. Most have since been implemented.

He felt the state court system needed change to remove judicial duties from county judges. That idea was endorsed in 1975 when voters approved a constitutional amendment.

McMurry felt sheriffs should be allowed to run for re-election to improve the quality and consistency of law enforcement. Voters in 1983 approved an amendment that allows sheriffs to run for consecutive terms.

He was an early and vocal advocate of reforming bail bonding laws to eliminate corruption that he said was caused by professional bail bondsmen. McMurry convinced Paducah's Julian Carroll, a state representative at the time, to submit legislation that would change some of the laws. The legislature approved the first reforms in the mid-1960s. The reforms included a provision that allowed people to post personal property bonds rather than a cash bond or a bond posted by a professional bondsman.

In 1976, Carroll as governor pushed through legislation that banned professional bail bonding.

McMurry also opposed the system of financing county offices with the fees received for services. In some offices, he said, the fees weren't sufficient to pay expenses while in others, officials would require unnecessary services just to collect fees.

In McCracken County, the fiscal court in recent years has taken most county offices off the fee system and placed them on a centralized budget.

McMurry also predicted in 1966 that the county would someday be forced to impose a payroll tax to fund county government. Such a tax was imposed in the mid-1980s to pay the rising costs of operating a landfill and a county jail.

As a judge, he was tough on juveniles. He said he had no qualms about locking a juvenile up for several days as punishment. McMurry said there were few restrictions in locking up juveniles then. Now, most jails are limited to holding a juvenile for 24 hours or less.

Glenn Cochrum, a Paducah Sun copy editor who was a reporter when McMurry was judge, said McMurry would allow him to attend juvenile court sessions, a practice now forbidden.

"He was always open and wanted us to know what was going on," Cochrum said. "We could sit in but couldn't report names. He always told us we had to clear what we wanted to report through him ... but he always let us report what we wanted."

Cochrum remembered the time a prominent citizen's son was arrested on alcohol charges. He said the youth didn't seem to be fazed by the court system or by the idea of punishment.

"(McMurry) asked him if he was scared of his daddy, and he answered no," Cochrum said. "He then asked if he was afraid of him (McMurry), and he again answered no. Pelham then leaned over and pointed to the boy and said he'd better be scared, because if he was ever back in court again, he was going to lock him up for a long time."

Cochrum said it was the last time the youth went before McMurry.

As county attorney and county judge, McMurry urged construction of a juvenile detention center for those convicted of nonviolent crimes. It was never built, and county officials today still talk of the need because the county pays more than $150,000 a year to house juveniles in detention in other counties.

McMurry also was an early advocate of countywide zoning, which he said was needed to ensure orderly development. In a January 1966 speech, he said: "If you don't make a zoning plan, you are going to be disappointed in what you see 25 years from now."

He tried to pass zoning laws for the county but couldn't get the support of the public or other members of the fiscal court. "I was able to get a referendum on the ballot for zoning and it failed miserably," he said.

McMurry said it was easy to leave public office. He missed working with the public and in the courthouse, "but it was time for me to leave," he said.

He main motivation for leaving was the need to devote all of his time to private law practice. He said it was difficult to raise a family that included four children on the $7,200 a year salary he received as county judge.

As county attorney, McMurry faced challenges every day, but none so great as the case against Charles "Rocky" Rothschild.

McMurry said one of his most gratifying acts as a public official was the role he played in helping clear a Georgia death row inmate of a murder he didn't commit.

McMurry, as county attorney 1958, led worked to overcome a mountain of legal obstacles so that Charles (Rocky) Rothschild could be sent to Georgia to be prosecuted for a murder for which an innocent man had been convicted and sentenced to death.

Rothschild lived in Cairo, Ill., and authorities there had refused to arrest him on outstanding felony warrants from two other states. He was a former Cairo police officer.

"Rocky was really popular because he was a basketball referee and had a good reputation," McMurry said. "The police over there didn't want to pick him up."

McMurry was contacted by a prosecutor from another state and agreed to have Rothschild arrested during one of his frequent visits to Paducah.

He eventually was arrested by a Kentucky State Police trooper and held on an out-of-state fugitive warrant from South Carolina.

Rothschild refused to be extradited and, because of the legal delays, he was released on $15,000 bond. He immediately skipped town.

McMurry said the Johnson Bonding Co. was responsible because it had signed the bond. "I was under a lot of pressure to revoke the bond and told Jimmie Johnson (its owner) that if he didn't get Rothschild back here, I would forfeit the bond and gave every road in McCracken County."

After a series of events, Johnson informed McMurry that Rothschild would be in a certain bar in the northern Kentucky town of Newport at a specified time. McMurry instructed a deputy sheriff to go to Newport and stake out the bar. Johnson's tip was correct, and Rothschild was arrested.

However, police in northern Kentucky felt that McCracken County deputy sheriff had acted improperly in arresting Rothschild and threatened to charge the deputy with kidnapping. McMurry had to obtain an order from the state Court of Appeals to clear the deputy and allow him to return Rothschild to Paducah.

This time, Rothschild agreed to go to South Carolina to face robbery charges.

The next time McMurry saw Rothschild was on a national television news cast from Georgia. Rothschild had confessed to a Georgia murder. "Rocky was on the national news shaking hands with the Georgia inmate who had been convicted of the murder and was facing the electric chair," McMurry said. "He said he didn't want to see an innocent man die."

McMurry said that if he had not helped clear the legal obstacles, the innocent man in all likelihood would have been put to death.

Over the next few years, Rothschild confessed to at least five other murders. In 1978, Rothschild died in a North Carolina prison.

Robots filling prescriptions

HUNEDIN, Fla. — A pharmacist working 24 hours a day for three hospitals, has filled 250,000 orders without a mistake.

It's the flawless work of Merrase — a $350,000 robot.

Morease has been filling as many as 1,000 prescriptions a day since installation at Morton Plant Mease hospitals in Pinellas County.

Human pharmacists at the three hospitals type prescriptions into computers linked to the robot. Morease fills the prescriptions and stores them to be shipped by technicians to the appropriate hospitals.

The national average for pharmaceutical errors is about 2.5 for every 100,000 pills dispensed.

Biography paints Stewart as evil

BY DAWN FALLIK
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Book Review

Could Martha Stewart, the doyenne of domesticity, really be the devil incarnate?

After reading "Just Desserts" (Morrow, $24), no one will want to be around Stewart when she picks up a cake knife. Written by Jerry Oppenheimer, this mean-spirited, unbalanced portrait is doused with vinegar, leaving readers with a bad taste in their mouths.

Stewart is known as a domestic goddess who teaches the masses to use pantyhose as a garden tool and tree leaves as gift wrap. No one would expect life with such a blatant perfectionist to be butter cream.

But Oppenheimer portrays Stewart obsessed with ambition, perfection and presence. According to 400 interviews with family and friends, she takes credit for others' ideas while her unrealistic expectations and constant demands make life a living hell for those around her.

The author takes pity on ex-husband Andy Stewart, painting him as a good-hearted guy sorely abused and mistreated by the demanding Miss Martha.

When she allegedly pulls out some of her hair to persuade Andy to stay, the shock is that she wants him back — not the extent of her temper tantrum.

One feels more sympathy for the child in this clashing marriage. Now 32, Alexis chose to hide in her room rather than deal with constant renovations and familial rages. According to this book, Martha is no maternal figure, choosing to shower more affection on her pets than on her husband and daughter.

Oppenheimer writes nothing good about Stewart, which is as unfair as a sycophantic portrait. This is a woman who grew up with little money, became a model and developed a standard of living that many aspire to.

The point of her books and TV shows is to brighten up little things to improve the general environment. A few rose petals here, a little lemon cake there — the major farmhouse renovations are more for information than adoration.

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