



Gavel to Gavel: 'Supreme' history

By Gene Howard, Guest Columnist

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The Oklahoma Supreme Court scandal was taken seriously only after it was disclosed in a speech on the floor of the Oklahoma House of Representatives that a former Supreme Court justice had made a sworn statement admitting that he had taken bribes.

The former justice went on to name two other justices who accepted bribes for favorable opinions.

This was on Jan. 21, 1965, but it took over 30 years for the full story to emerge as to how the shocking details were forced on the public by a federal judge, a member of the Oklahoma Supreme Court, and the speech of a legislator.

Former Oklahoma Supreme Court Justice William A. Berry first detailed the facts behind the public disclosure in his book *Justice for Sale*, published in 1996. It was still a revelation to most who had heard of the corruption charges made by Rep. G.T. Blankenship.

How this came about, and how a confidential statement by former Supreme Court Justice Corn surfaced, was finally explained in Berry's book. This statement might have languished in secret court documents if U.S. District Judge Stephen Chandler, disgusted by what he had read, had not decided to expose the situation. Judge Chandler called Justice Berry and let him read the explosive confession. Justice Berry, also sickened by the document, sat in shock as he contemplated how to handle the matter.

Finally, it was agreed between the two jurists that Berry would take a copy of the statement, but obtain Chandler's permission before disclosing it to anyone else. The original disclosure would have to create strong public support for a full and thorough investigation or the forces allied against them would prevail.

Considering all of the options, Justice Berry finally suggested to Judge Chandler that Blankenship should make the shocking disclosures in a speech to the House of Representatives, and Chandler agreed.

On Jan. 21, 1965, the hour arrived, and Blankenship dropped the bombshell that changed not only the personnel of the court but the entire judicial system in Oklahoma.

The House of Representatives authorized an investigation that resulted in the impeachment and removal of Justice N.B. Johnson and the resignation of Justice Earl Welch.

Public support for change in Oklahoma's judicial system gained support, and on July 11, 1965, Oklahoma's judicial system was drastically restructured by a constitutional amendment adopted by the voters.

This was brought about because a federal judge cared more about justice than his own career and a member of Oklahoma's highest court took it on himself to ensure that sufficient light was turned on a corrupt and abhorrent situation. However, it was necessary that we wait 30 years to hear the full story from one of the courageous judges that revealed the corruption in our legal system. It was worth the wait to know there are such jurists and that our state can respond to such a challenge.

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