

Wiki article, but here's Dallas Bar profile, including memories as judge:

Judge Joe Fish by LeAllen Frost

Judge Joe Fish of the Northern District of Texas has a broad range of experience with private practice, a state trial judge, a state appellate judge, and federal trial judge on his resume.

The opportunity to be in public service for more than 20 years has been the highlight of his career, he said. He describes it as "humbling" to realize the number of people to whom he is responsible.

Judge Fish attended Yale College. He remained for law school. He returned home to Dallas to begin his career at McKenzie & Baer. After practicing law for 12 years, Judge Fish began to feel that he wanted to try something new. On March 1, 1980, he took his place on the bench of the 95th District Court in Dallas. Service on that bench would be short. On September 1, 1981, Judge Fish became a justice on the Fifth District Court of Appeals in Dallas.

Prior to that time, the court consisted of six justices. However, the legislature expanded the court to 12 justices, giving it jurisdiction over criminal cases. It was with that expansion that Judge Fish became one of the six new justices appointed to the court.

While he enjoyed working at both levels, Judge Fish said that there were certain advantages to being a trial judge. As a trial judge, "you are really the captain of your own ship for scheduling purposes," he recalled. As an appellate judge, he related that it was more like a committee system, where you rarely do anything unless you get a colleague to agree with you. He also described the role of a trial judge as enjoying much more human contact. As a trial judge, he said you see attorneys regularly. Conversely, as an appellate judge, you may only encounter attorneys once a week, when the court holds oral arguments.

Like his time on the 95th District Court, Judge Fish spent only a short period on the Fifth District Court. In 1983, he was appointed by President Ronald Reagan to the bench of the Northern District of Texas. The most significant difference between being a state trial judge and a federal trial judge is docket control, he said.

As a state judge, Judge Fish explained that he had between 1200 -1500 cases at one time. In addition, he was responsible for controlling those cases on his own. There was no law clerk to research uncertain legal issues, and although it was likely frustrating at the time, Judge Fish laughed when he remembered that he didn't even have a secretary, and had to persuade the court reporter to do his typing.

He also explained that at the federal level, fewer cases go away on their own. It is rare, he explained, that cases in federal court end with a dismissal for failure to prosecute or a default judgment.

When asked what he thought was the most rewarding aspect of being a judge, Judge Fish said "the ability to do what I think is right in the vast majority of cases."

In contrast, he perceives the most difficult part of his job to be sentencing in criminal cases, particularly because he came from a civil law background. His first exposure to criminal law was while serving on the Fifth District Court of Appeals, but even that was criminal law at the appellate level. When appointed to the federal bench, he had to "learn trial-level criminal law on the job." At that time, he said, the criminal caseload was smaller, so he had more opportunity to learn the law. But "to look a fellow human in the eye and deprive him of his liberty" is the hardest thing Judge Fish has to do as a federal judge.

Judge Fish's biggest pet peeve in his courtroom is an unprepared attorney. He believes that being unprepared does a disservice to the client, as well as to the court system. Judge Fish described the court as a limited public resource that is wasted when an attorney is not prepared for his or her court appearance.

Judge Fish also related that he does not like oral argument on motions. In state court, he explained that there was argument on everything, but has learned since that time that he benefits very little from the argument. If the issues are briefed well, he can get the necessary information from the briefs. However, if they are not briefed well, his experience shows that the oral argument would probably not be very good either. In such a case, he said that the attorneys are typically ill-prepared to answer even the most basic questions.

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