



The Ninth Judicial Circuit Historical Society

**Oral History Interview  
Of Ninth Circuit Judge Kent Dawson  
By Donna Silva  
April 2022**

**Donna Silva**

Today is April 14, 2022. We are in the federal courthouse in Las Vegas, Nevada, and I am interviewing Ninth Circuit Article III United States Senior District Judge Kent Dawson for the oral history project of the Ninth Circuit Historical Society.

My name is Donna Silva. I have worked for Judge Kent Dawson for 40 years, 13 years in private practice, and now as a judicial assistant for the last 27 years, both in county and federal court.

So let's get started at the beginning. Where were you born and raised?

**Judge Dawson**

I was born in Ogden, Utah. I was raised in Roy, Utah. We were full-time fruit farmers and so I started out in the orchards at a very early age. I remember my mother was driving the tractor for the sprayers and she was trying to run the house and do the farm work too, so at age seven or eight, I came out and started driving the tractor and made her happy that she had a boy.

**Donna Silva**

And how many children did your parents have?

**Judge Dawson**

There were five boys and one girl.

**Donna Silva**

And what was your parents' education?

**Judge Dawson**

My dad had an eighth-grade education. My mom had a high school diploma. They had both been raised during the Depression. And so Dad left school in the eighth grade to go pick tomatoes for our neighbors, the Katos, who had onions and tomatoes and peppers and other produce that they sold. And Dad was thrilled to be able to have a job.

**Donna Silva**

And I know you worked pretty much full-time in school and through college, but what made you finally decide to become an attorney?

**Judge Dawson**

Well, I had graduated from Weber State, where I was attending on music and track and field scholarships. And Dad said, "What are you going to do now that you have graduated from college?" And we were out in the peach orchard thinning the peaches and I didn't want to leave him. I said, "Well, I guess maybe I will become a teacher." He said, "Well, you said at one time you wanted to be a lawyer or you might become a lawyer," and he said, "Why don't you go down to the University of Utah and see if you can get into law school right now?"

I said, "I'm not going to leave you here to do what is the worst job on the farm" -- because peaches have a lot of fuzz, and when you are knocking those peaches off so that the others size up, you get a lot of fuzz and other things and it's in your eyes and everywhere. So he finally agreed that he would take a rest if I would go down to the University of Utah and see if I could get in law school. This was in July.

And I went down and I asked the person there at the desk, "What do you need to do to get into law school?" And she said, "Well, have you taken the LSAT?" And I said, "What's that?" And she said, "Well, that's the law school admission test." And I said, "Oh, well, okay." She said, "But it's too late, the deadline was two weeks ago to sign up." And I was really relieved and I started walking for the door, and she said, "Wait a minute, you can pay \$25 and take the test in two weeks with the others." And so I went back and paid the \$25 and signed up for the LSAT.

I took the LSAT with not much preparation. When I finished, I had the worst headache I had ever had in my life. It felt like someone had put a hatchet in the top of my head. And I thought, "Boy, that was really, really hard." And it was. But about 30 days later, I get a letter from the University of Utah telling me that I had been accepted into their class for September. And so that's how I got started.

And it was very, very hard for the first year, but the second and third years, it got better. And that is how I got started, was because of my father's insistence that I go right then and see if I could get in.

**Donna Silva**

So after you finished law school, where did you started practicing?

### **Judge Dawson**

Well, I went to interview at the firm in Salt Lake, the oldest firm west of the Mississippi, and they told me I had a job and they wanted to interview my wife, Ruth. And after the interview, I knew that I had some opportunities over in Reno, Nevada to clerk for one of the judges over there, so I went over to Reno and interviewed with Judge Guinan, and he told me I was good and we would start in October.

So came October, I hadn't heard from Judge Guinan, and so I was out in the orchards with my father and everyone picking apples in a snowstorm. And my mother called out into the orchard from the house and said, "It's Judge Guinan on the phone." So I ran in, and he said, "Where the hell are you? We have been expecting you and you are not here." I said, "Well, I'm out in the orchard picking apples in a snowstorm." He said, "Picking apples in a snowstorm?" And then I heard a huge gallery of laughter from behind him, because everybody in chambers was listening to this conversation. He said, "How quick can you get over here?" I said, "Well, I can come Saturday."

And that was a very hard thing, leaving my dad with all those thousands of bushels of apples still on the trees. That was a very hard thing to do, but true to his character, he encouraged me to go.

So we moved over to Reno, and then, when I finished my clerkship, I had an offer to come to Las Vegas to interview for assistant city attorney in Henderson, which I did. And I didn't know much about Las Vegas. I was very happy to see that they actually had a Kmart in Las Vegas. But I was hired over eleven local applicants. And Jay Brown, who is a very well-known attorney in this town, was the city attorney, and six months later, he was too busy to continue on with being city attorney because he was involved with his own firm and also with one of the big hotels on the Strip, and so we combined my position with his and I became city attorney for Henderson.

### **Donna Silva**

What were some of the things you accomplished or did while you were city attorney in Henderson?

### **Judge Dawson**

One of the things we did was we got a bill passed through the legislature that allowed us to issue tax-exempt bonds for business and industry and for residential developments for infrastructure, roads, water, sewer, power, all the things that go into making a master-planned community.

### **Donna Silva**

And then, when you left the city attorney's office and went into private practice, can you tell us a little bit about that, some of the cases you handled or what type of law you practiced?

**Judge Dawson**

Well, mine was a general practice but I did have a lot of insurance clients and the Hartford was one. They insured virtually every city in the Valley. And because of my experience as city attorney, I was able to pick up and handle those defense cases and we had some very successful outcomes.

The bonds were still on the table, and I became legal counsel to a bond issuer that was based in Henderson, a governmental entity. So we issued the bonds for Lake Las Vegas, Seven Hills, Green Valley Ranch, MacDonald Ranch; virtually all of the master-planned communities, we issued development bonds for. And I had some probate cases. I represent a lot of the construction companies in Las Vegas and some doctors. It was just a very civil practice.

**Donna Silva**

One of the larger cases was the Major Riddle estate?

**Judge Dawson**

Yes, Major Riddle was probably the last individual owner of hotels on the Strip, and so he had the Dunes, he had the Thunderbird hotel, he had the Silver Nugget in North Las Vegas, he had the Nugget on the Strip, the Holiday Inn and some other hotels. And so when he died, I combined with two attorneys from Arizona who were representing the heirs and I became counsel to the executor of the estate. And so that was one of the larger cases we had.

**Donna Silva**

And then after leaving private practice, how did you become a judge or what made you decide to become a judge?

**Judge Dawson**

I had received calls from one of the municipal judges in Henderson, who was not a lawyer, and he couldn't understand some of the pleadings that were being filed by a pro se litigant and so he had me come out. And it was several days of trial on this case, and the judge had a nice vacation while I handled his calendar. And then he started calling me regularly, and pretty soon it got to the point where I was being called out there all the time. And so I decided, well, maybe the thing to do would be to do it full-time. I enjoyed being a judge.

So I ran for justice of the peace, which was an elected position, and I got elected but I had to run against a bunch of nonlawyers. So one of the things that I did was to get a bill started in the state legislature for judges to be attorneys in the larger cities. And it took us two sessions to get that through. And on the second session, we finally got it passed, over strenuous opposition from a lot of the judges who were not lawyers in the state, and so, now, you know, you have to be a lawyer.

But soon after I got that bill, with the help of Judge Steve Dahl out in North Las Vegas, I got a call from Senator Reid asking me to come over and meet him in the Foley Federal Building, which I did. So that's how we got to the federal level.

**Donna Silva**

Right. And so that was in early 2000 when that all started as far as the appointment and that. Do you want to talk a little bit about your interview and the investigations and everything that you went through to become a federal judge?

**Judge Dawson**

Sure, yeah. Well, the interview with Senator Reid went well. He was very kind and asked me if I would be interested in becoming a district judge. And I told him I was very happy where I was. And I had just been put as an ecclesiastical leader in my church. I had 8,000 people in my stake and so I told him I wasn't interested.

My brother John, who is an estate and tax attorney here in Las Vegas, read the article in the paper and asked me what I had told Senator Reid. And I told John I was -- I told him I wasn't interested. John said, "I wish you would reconsider." I said, "Why?" He said, "Do you have any idea what this would mean to Mom and Dad?" And so I was put in the position of having to call Senator Reid back and tell him that I had changed my mind. So that's how that went.

**Donna Silva**

Well, not only were you doing that, you were also, at the same time, the president of the Henderson Chamber of Commerce. So it was a little bit of craziness in our lives at that point, with three full-time positions.

**Judge Dawson**

Correct. Correct. With over 2,000 members of the chamber, that was a big job. The church was a big job. And later, becoming a federal judge was an even bigger job.

**Donna Silva**

And then the whole process of getting all the paperwork together and the fast notice and when we had to get it all done?

**Judge Dawson**

Yes.

**Donna Silva**

Something I will never forget.

**Judge Dawson**

Yes, you were there. You spent your Christmas vacation with me at my home, trying to put together all of the paperwork that was needed to submit to the president. And so that was in late 1999.

And then we submitted the paperwork and the investigations began, which included the American Bar Association. And I felt very, very fortunate to come out of that with the highest rating they could give, which was well qualified. I was interviewed by the Department of Justice and the FBI. The FBI contacted people in New Zealand through Interpol and had me and my activities in New Zealand gone over. And so it was a very surprisingly thorough investigation, which included talking with all of the judges and attorneys that I had appeared with in court.

**Donna Silva**

So then in early 2000, we moved here. We started the day the building opened, the Judge George federal courthouse. We decided to wait rather than moving across the street, so we moved in in early 2000.

And then early on, some of your mentors or role models here at the court or anybody you would like to mention?

**Judge Dawson**

Yes. I think Howard McKibben was probably among many, but my first case, he had two cases going on a Monday morning and he asked me which one I wanted. And I took the excessive use of force, a Section 1983 case. I had had some experience with that in private practice, so I took that case. That was my first case. But he was very kind and complimentary and things went well.

I should backtrack a little bit about the confirmation process. Just before one of the confirmation hearings, I was called by Senator Reid and he said, "You need to get a Republican to call Senator Hatch and tell him that you are a good guy." And so I said, "Well, I don't know any politically active Republicans, at least that I can think of." And so he said, "You need to find one."

So I thought of Bob Campbell, who was the city manager when I was city attorney. I called him, got him on the phone. He was in Midway, between planes. I told him what I needed. He said, "Well that's good because I'm on my way to Ronald Reagan's birthday party in Washington with Senator Laxalt, who is best friends with President Reagan and best friends with Senator Hatch, and so we will talk to him tomorrow at the birthday party." So that's how I got my recommendation from a Republican.

**Donna Silva**

And then another memorable case, probably early on, was the Schiff case?

**Judge Dawson**

Yes, the Schiff case was a tax evader who was actually internationally known. He had a big following, thousands of followers here in the United States. And the trial, people came from all over the world to testify in defense of Irwin Schiff. He had someone stalk me day and night and put messages to me everywhere, including my church office, threats and other things. And I had over 200 credible death threats during that case, so that necessitated a security detail round the clock, 24 hours a day, going nowhere unless I was in the back of a Crown Victoria and a lead car and a follow car. So that was pretty, pretty tense.

At the same time I was having a little bit of a health and breathing problem. That trial lasted weeks and he just did everything he could to make life miserable, but we got through it. And as a result of that, I got put on the U.S. judicial council core security committee where I was chair of the operations and technology committee, which involved all aspects of court operations and judicial security. And I was on that for six years, and then with two extensions that were very highly unusual, and at the same time I was on the Ninth Circuit court security committee as an ex officio member. So that's how I got into court security.

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Transcribed by Carre Lewis @ Discovery Legal

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**Donna Silva**

And then so now, here we are in 2022. You have taken senior status in 2012, yet you continue to serve as a senior judge. Is there reasons for that, you know, why you stayed on when you don't have to?

**Judge Dawson**

I think it all goes back to Roy, Utah, where I grew up on the farm and when people needed help and you saw they needed help, you didn't just stand by and see how they handled it, you jumped in and helped. And probably that has been a big factor in my decision to stay on, is just that after six years of vacancy with two judges missing, the help was needed.

But also just going back over things, anything I have ever accomplished in my life has been because I was surrounded by really good people. The people that were around me, the parents, the brothers, the people that I work with -- you are at the foremost of that -- the judges, the law clerks, even in the church and in the chamber, I had some of the best people in the world that supported me. And so I have always felt an obligation to just keep doing what I was taught to do by my parents, and that is sacrifice for the betterment of your family and others. And of course, I have to give tribute to my wife and my family for supporting me through long, long days and maybe not too much attention from me.

I wish had I done more for my parents. That's my only regret is I didn't. In spite of all that I did, I wish I had done more to help them.

**Donna Silva**

I know I personally appreciate it and I know everyone in the district does.

Beside the court and your legal career, what are some of your outside interests or things that you enjoy?

**Judge Dawson**

Well, I have never got my head out of the orchard so I do have orchards that I work, some in New York, apples and plum-apricot crosses called plouts. Because of my experiences in New Zealand, I have a tour company and I take people on tours of New Zealand. And I keep a bus down there and know my way around after over 40 trips.

I enjoy doing that and maybe I will enjoy doing a little bit more of farming. I have always looked at farm work and hard work as ennobling and uplifting. It's always made me feel good to be doing that and so I will probably continue doing that and some work here at the court.

**Donna Silva**

I would just say that our district has been very fortunate to have senior judges that have been willing to continue to serve. And for that, we are all thankful and we appreciate all you have done and continue to do.

**Judge Dawson**

Well, I think all of us senior judges are honored to be in this position. And notwithstanding my initial response to Senator Reid, I'm very happy that I did that, not only for Mom and Dad but for my family and for all of the people that I have had the joy of working with.

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**Donna Silva**

And knowing your parents, I know you did make them proud and did do an awful lot for them, and I'm sure they are smiling down very proudly now. So thank you for taking this time.

**Judge Dawson**

One of the things that happened as a result, I was the oldest and so I had three other brothers follow me into the law, and three of us practiced here in Las Vegas. And I have a sister who came along in between the boys just in time to help Mom keep her sanity. And so Marsha is here. And all of them have graduate degrees. The two brothers in Utah, one is a lawyer and the other is a lead pharmacist at a hospital, and so they all benefited from the example that was set by the parents.

**Donna Silva**

So what are some interests that you had in high school?

**Judge Dawson**

Well, I think probably the funniest part of high school was the track and field and cross-country. And as I indicated, I got good enough to get a scholarship. It was important to stay close to home because of the orchards and my ability to work in the orchards, which was a factor in law school as well. I had no interest in trying to get in anywhere away from the orchards. But in high school I did quite well. I led my team to the state cross-country championship in Salt Lake.

So when I got into college, I ran the homecoming cross-country race and I practiced really hard. I practiced sprinting up a hill that was really hard. And during that race, when I got to the bottom of that hill, I took off in a sprint up the hill and I ended up a quarter of a mile in front of the next runner, running into that stadium, with people screaming and carrying on. And that kind of attention was addicting.

So with that, I started getting ready for spring. And I was running intervals which involve running a quarter of a mile, a timed quarter of a mile, then jogging a half of a lap and then walking a half and then doing another quarter. I could do those under 60 seconds each. And I would do eight at night during practice, all under 60 seconds, the idea being that you start putting those together to make a four-minute mile.

And my thought, which was a mistake, was that if I ran eight in the morning and eight at night, I would get better a lot faster, and as a result of that I had stress fractures that put me on crutches. So that kind of discouraged me. And because of that, I changed my mind about whether I would be a missionary.

And my mother used to ask me, "Where do you want to go?" And I would tell her, "I'm not going." And that poor woman, that just crushed her, because to her that would be very important as an example to the rest of the kids, as well as a benefit to me.

But finally, it was my Catholic girlfriend that talked me into going on a mission. And she wrote to me all the time I was there. I got called to New Zealand and it just seemed like a dream to go that far away and see all of the green that is there and all of the beautiful scenes that they have.



But when I came home after two years in New Zealand, I became busy, became a father, dropped the cross-country, the track, got on the debate team at Weber State and I started working full-time as a forklift driver so that my wife and I could both go to school full-time. So I would do the graveyard shift and then we would go to school together, and then I would get some sleep sometime before my shift started. And during that time, we had our first child, Annette. And that's how I ended up in New Zealand.

About 20 or 30 years later, I took Ruth down to New Zealand to show her where I had been. And we saw a lot of the people I knew, a lot of people I stayed with and things like that. And Ruth fell in love with the country, so we went back over and over again. We started taking people with us on these trips. And we could do it for \$1500 for ten days. I think that included airfare at the time. I mean, it was a bargain, and so we had hundreds and hundreds of people that went with us. And we would rent 15- or 12-passenger vans. And then eventually I bought a bus, and today I'm negotiating on a second bus, and we have got a lot of people lined up to go as soon as the country reopens, which is going to happen pretty quick.

**Donna Silva**

Yes, anybody that knows you knows your love for New Zealand and have enjoyed the pictures and learning about the country through you.

**Judge Dawson**

Well, a lot of people have to suffer through it, but I enjoy sharing it.

**Donna Silva**

Thank you.

**Judge Dawson**

Thank you.