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Doug Hoke/The Sunday Oklahoman

ALMA — Justice Served — WILSON

BY TAMIE ROSS

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Simply put, state Supreme Court Justice Alma Wilson was Judge Judy before Judge Judy was cool.

Long before Hollywood turned its spotlight on a woman who mixed a discerning heart with sage, outspoken advice, Wilson was writing that script for herself in Oklahoma. *continued*

IN MEMORIAM

Practically no one knew she was so gravely ill, not even close friends and colleagues. Even as The Sunday Oklahoman featured her in its new series of in-depth profiles of the state's most fascinating citizens, even as Sooner Magazine prepared to reprint that article on this eminent OU alumna. A devout Christian Scientist, Alma Wilson simply did not recognize illness or pain or any other barrier to what she needed to accomplish.

She completed the current state Supreme Court session but did not quite make it home to Pauls Valley as she would have liked. On July 31, 1999, five days after her death at age 82 and two weeks after this article first appeared, Alma Wilson was buried beside her husband, Bill, in the small town where her story began. Former Governor George Nigh remarked that the only place this avid Sooner might have preferred to Pauls Valley as her final resting place would have been the 50-yard line on Owen Field.

Fittingly her memorial service was held on the University of Oklahoma campus, just a short walk from the Oklahoma Memorial Union. There her portrait looks down on the Justice Alma Wilson Room, only one of many ways her alma mater sought to honor her throughout a remarkable life. —CJB

She's refused to grant divorces, telling sparring spouses instead to go home and work things out.

She's locked up trouble-making teens in jail overnight on charges specially written to scare some sense into them.

She's just as comfortable mixing with Washington dignitaries at the Chevy Chase Club as she is waving to beer-drinking construction workers at her favorite barbecue joint in Pauls Valley.

No Hollywood glitz, no cameras in the courtroom, no lights on the litigants. Just a small woman from a small town in Oklahoma who has through the course of her life made a big dent in Oklahoma law circles.

"The older I get, the more interesting it gets, too," Wilson said. "I've even overruled myself once."

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Alma Wilson likes to be first.

It's not a personality flaw, just a fact.

When she hits a tennis ball to her daughter, Lee Anne Wilson, it sizzles over the net. Forget that mother is 82 and daughter is 48—this is blood sport.

Wilson shows no mercy to her hardcourt victims, as pros like Chris Evert and colleagues like Sandra Day O'Connor can attest.

It was always that way, even from birth, her friends say. Those who knew her as Alma Bell just saw it sooner than the rest of Oklahoma, when she became the first woman appointed to the state Supreme Court in 1982.

Alma and her twin sister, Wilma, were born in 1917 at a stucco home on Walnut Street in Pauls Valley. Their father, W.R. Bell, was an abstractor who served for a while as Pauls Valley's mayor. Their mother, Anna, was a talented seamstress who sewed the twins' clothes during the Depression.

Alma still lives on that street, only at the other end, and she splits her time between her five-acre lake home there and her Oklahoma City residence.

"I go to Pauls Valley to re-energize," she said.

Most weekends she wraps things up at her office inside the state capitol on Friday, drives by to pick up Wilma, then heads straight for Bob's Pig for a plate of ribs or brisket. Both lost their husbands within a year, Wilma in 1993 and Alma in 1994, and say their bond as twins has

only been strengthened in later life because they spend so much time together.

On Saturday, the woman who has sworn to never cook again eats catfish with her sister at Punkin's or enchiladas at Tio's. Then she goes to the Homeland downtown—not to buy groceries, really, but to see friends, neighbors and constituents.

"It's always a two-hour trip. And I buy very little. I spend most of the time talking to people. Some remember me from having heard their cases, others want to know what I'm doing now. Some people think they know me, but they just can't place me. It's always interesting."

Little Alma was always ahead of her peers, although she says Wilma was the smarter sister.

At eight, Alma decided she wanted to go to law school. Forget that she was

a girl, and that few women aspired to that. She had her father's support and her own ability and gumption. She was going to be a lawyer.

"I think Dad wanted a lawyer in the family, so that's where the idea probably came from," Wilson said. "But I never changed my mind. Never."

She played the piano for the glee club, and she and Wilma were the tennis team in high school. Alma usually had the lead in school plays.

When Pauls Valley High School's class of 1935 marched in to accept their diplomas, Alma played the piano for the processional. Then she took the stage and delivered her valedictory address. Then she went back to her spot at the piano for the recessional.

High school activities prepared her for leadership roles at college. She graduated ahead of schedule from the University of Oklahoma College of Law in 1941, one of six women in the class of 100, and returned to Pauls Valley as a tax attorney. Her twin sister became Wilma Stufflebean and began a career in accounting. After World War II, a gentleman named Bill Wilson, an attorney turned soldier who became an attorney again, introduced himself to her.

Alma decided Bill would make a good husband, so she "picked him."

"He really didn't have a choice in the matter, but he didn't know that," she said. "Kind of like the decisions I make now, I just made my mind up and that was it."

The two married in 1948, and Lee Anne was born in

1951. The new mother decided to stay home with her daughter for several years. During that time, she got her pilot's license.

She returned to the courtroom in the 1960s and decided to pursue a judicial appointment. Lee Anne must have been watching her parents' every move, because she followed in their footsteps, receiving a law degree from OU and pursuing a career in private practice. The Wilsons' only daughter also has given Alma Wilson four "grandcats," which are spoiled rotten, their human grandmother admitted.

In 1969, Alma Wilson became a special district judge for Garvin and McClain counties. In 1975, Governor David Boren made her district judge for Cleveland County. And in 1982, she accepted Governor George Nigh's appointment to the state Supreme Court, becoming the first woman justice. She went on to become the state's first female chief justice in 1995 and has since been followed by current Chief Justice Yvonne Kauger.

IN THE TRENCHES

Wilson loves being Justice Wilson, but the time she spent at the district court level has been her most treasured experience, she said. Much like that role has guided her life, she said it helped her shape other lives.

In her district courtroom, she grappled daily with tough issues that involved children, directly and indirectly. Which of these feuding parents should have custody of their toddler? How would she deal with the parents of a child burned by cigarettes or those youngsters left to fend for themselves for weeks at a time? Which juvenile offenders should be punished, which should be rehabilitated?

"I saw so much pain, but I steeled myself against it so that I acted in the best interest of all," she said. "But I didn't forget."

Instead, she built her own mental folder, filled with faces of children who couldn't succeed because they were held back by their parents, their peers, their communities.

Last year, Wilson fulfilled a dream she had for those children when she and a few others founded the Seeworth Preparatory Academy, an alternative school in Oklahoma City.

Seeworth's 30 or so students come from backgrounds

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Twin sisters Alma and Wilma Bell, age 8, give one of the family's
goats a turn on an improvised seesaw in the back yard of their
Pauls Valley home, circa 1925.

like the ones Wilson once saw in court. And they're succeeding, she said, because they're getting the attention they need.

Seeworth director Janet Grigg says Wilson is the force behind the school.

"She's absolutely an advocate for the child," Grigg said. "I've never seen someone get the results she gets, both where individual children are concerned and where the school as a whole is involved. Every ounce of her is rooting for these children."

The 6th- through 9th-graders who attend Seeworth need more than an education, Wilson and Grigg agreed. They need help with life issues and peer issues as much as they need instruction.

"I don't think these children could have a better influence or example in their lives than Justice Wilson," Grigg said. "To have experienced what she has and be in the position she's in, yet remain so focused on other people. . . . She's just never lost sight of what's important. In this case, it's these children who attend our school."

Wilson says a good juvenile judge can be the best thing that's ever happened to a troubled child.

"They can either scare the living daylights out of them and get them to shape up quickly, or they can throw the book at them," Wilson said. "A good one knows which way to go with a child, what will work."

At Seeworth, Wilson helps resolve issues that range from children not having running water at home to dysfunctional family situations. If it affects the child's ability to learn, she sees it as the school's responsibility to help.

"I've hugged these kids, talked to these kids," she said. "They don't want to violate the law, they just need a little attention and help so they can stay on track."

"SHE PAVED THE WAY . . ."

Talk to those in Wilson's professional circle, and adjectives like vivacious, alive, caring, able and remarkable pepper the conversations.

To those her age, she is a colleague held in great esteem. Students who followed her, those her daughter's age, know her as both. Those who wear flared jeans to classes and see a portrait of Wilson with "that hair," as she calls it, hanging in the law school, now probably think of her as a pioneer.

continued

“Probably one of the most interesting things about Justice Wilson is that she has such a broad base of interests. She’s very urbane, very sophisticated, but probably the most unpretentious person you’ll ever meet.”

—Tim Kline

“She is a remarkable woman,” said Andy Coats, dean of the College of Law at OU. “She’s very much involved with the law school and is on the cutting edge of women in her profession.”

Coats first met Wilson when she served on the district bench in Cleveland County. She speaks frequently at her alma mater and serves on committees there like the Board of Visitors.

“Because of the success she’s achieved in her life, she’s helped pave the way for so many who have followed her,” Coats said.

Tim Kline knew Wilson’s daughter before he knew her more prominent mother. Kline, now president of the Oklahoma County Bar Association, and Lee Anne Wilson were best friends in law school. But that association just gives him a bigger picture of the real Alma Wilson, Kline said.

“Probably one of the most interesting things about Justice Wilson is that she has such a broad base of interests,” Kline said. “She’s very urbane, very sophisticated, but probably the most unpretentious person you’ll ever meet.”

Her close association with Barry Switzer has always interested and amused fellow lawyers. Switzer introduced Wilson during her induction into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in November 1996. Wilson says the friendship has produced its share of laughs over the years—she granted Switzer’s divorce and remained tennis buddies with his ex-wife, for example.

That’s Wilson’s style, said W. DeVier Pierson, an Oklahoma native now in private practice in Washington, D.C. When they were studying law together, she was the same way.

“It’s just the nature of her personality, she never holds a grudge. And the time aspect of it continually amazes me, as well,” Pierson said. “Here’s someone who’s carrying a full judicial load, yet always has time to be involved in people’s lives on a personal level, as a speaker, in many different ways. She’s a wonderful woman and a fine judge.”

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Wilma, left, and Alma Bell *were* the tennis team at Pauls Valley High School and took their game to Oklahoma City University where they were pictured with their rackets in 1937.

THE STATE BEHIND THE SUPREME COURT

When Wilson accepted the chief justice’s position in 1995, she could have been buried by the paperwork, swamped by the responsibilities ahead.

Instead, she forged yet another new path—one that took her out of the office and into the community. She spoke at civic group luncheons, professional events, church-based gatherings, anywhere people would listen.

Her goal: to make the state Supreme Court a little better understood, a little more accessible to the average Oklahoman.

“My first priority was to do everything I could to get the Supreme Court current,” Wilson said. “Nobody had gone out and spoken to groups, and I felt like that was my duty.”

The biggest issues facing the state as a whole, she decided, were safety and children’s concerns.

“They really went together, though, one with the other,” Wilson said. “If we didn’t do something with child offenders, the safety issue wasn’t going to be resolved.”

Judges told Wilson they didn’t have the tools they needed to deter children from crime. School officials told Wilson they couldn’t keep unruly kids at school, but by sending the children home, they were doing more harm. Child welfare workers told Wilson they didn’t have the funding they needed to break the dysfunctional patterns in homes.

Her experience with daughter Lee Anne’s work in mediation led to Wilson recommending more cases be referred to third parties for help ending disputes. She’s

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The marriage that would unite Bill and Alma Wilson for
46 years began in 1948, the year they were
photographed here on a trip to Chicago.

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The Wilsons' only child, Lee Anne, right, shared a
historic moment with her mother in 1995 when Alma was
sworn in as the first woman chief justice of the state
Supreme Court.

Alma Wilson's close friendship with Barry Switzer, right,
began when he became coach of "her" team, the
Oklahoma Sooners, and continued through his career as
coach of the Dallas Cowboys and return to Norman. He
was the presenter for her induction into the Oklahoma
Hall of Fame in 1996.

still seeing the progress, she admitted, even though her
stint as chief justice is over.

Kline said the effects of her communication during that
time are still being felt, too.

"She seemed to recognize her sense of responsibility in
that area, and it was very beneficial for people and our
profession, too," Kline said. "This was just another example
of what she sees as her responsibility to communicate, and
in this case, it opened a dialogue with lawyers and non-
lawyers. That's a positive thing."

NOT SUCH A SURE THING

Retention bids for judges used to be a matter of formal-
ity. Judges' names were placed on ballots so voters could
decide whether to keep them, according to state law. But no
opposition usually meant no problem.

Until recently, that is.

Last year, Wilson was targeted by a Washington, D.C.,
organization called Citizens for Independent Courts as
being anti-business, based on the organization's interpre-
tation of her rulings on cases over a 12-year period.

John Brock, a Tulsa businessman and an Oklahomans
for Jobs and Economic Growth member, said before the
election that Wilson should be ousted.

"Her performance on the bench in relation to our state's
economy has been terrible, and we urge the voters to reject
her candidacy so that a more qualified justice can be
placed on the Supreme Court," Brock told *The Daily*

Oklahoman last November.

Kline said the analysis was based on stilted, narrow data and was a skewed interpretation by those involved. But he added that if there was a positive in the negative campaign launched against Wilson, it was the support she received.

Wilson, with that support, survived the attack, but the wounds haven't healed completely. She doesn't like to talk about the specifics of what happened, saying simply that she has detractors like any other judge.

"There was a remarkable uprising of support in the legal community, by those who know what type of person Justice Wilson is and what type of work she does," Kline said. "People would be mistaken to think that's the case just because she's a judge. Frankly, most judges don't rank particularly well with lawyers, because they're the best judges of judges—they work with them the most."

Pierson said people have disagreed with Wilson, but she's "stood by the courage of her convictions, I've always felt that about her.

"She had some static in the last election, but she withstood it, and rightly so. She didn't back down a bit."

ALL IN A SESSION'S WORK

Wilson and her fellow justices review as many as 35 cases from lower courts each week. On Mondays and Thursdays, they meet in opinion conferences. The rest of her time is spent writing opinions, researching cases and doing other related work.

She likes to write at home, saying fewer distractions usually make the work go more quickly. Even then, some-

"If you do what you feel is right, you have nothing to be afraid of. You always have the strength of your convictions to buoy you."

—Alma Wilson

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A shared passion for the law and tennis forged a friendship between Alma Wilson, right, and U.S. Associate Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, shown here in 1995 at the Chevy Chase Club in Washington, D.C.

times she'll undo what she's done, "just like real people," she says.

"Sometimes I'll write an opinion and discover it doesn't hold legal water, so I'll go back and completely rewrite it, reverse my opinion entirely. The law is so complicated, you've very nearly got to be an expert in every area of the law. That's difficult to do."

She also spends a great deal of time preparing speeches for professional, civic and community events.

Will she slow down? Can an 82-year-old woman keep up this pace?

No, and yes, she said.

"I love what I do, so I do what I love," she said, smiling. It sounds like a platitude, but it's more of a philosophy for Wilson. So are the other catchy sayings that hang on her office walls and help hold up volumes of law reference books on her shelves.

One in particular she likes: "Do Right and Fear Not."

"If you do what you feel is right, you have nothing to be afraid of," she explained. "You always have the strength of your convictions to buoy you."

She takes a fair amount of teasing from those who know her well, but mingled therein is admiration. Some lawyers joke that the gallery always rises for Alma Wilson just so they can see her petite persona enter a courtroom. Others more seriously state that those who enter the state Supreme Court justice's chambers

may initially stand out of time-honored tradition, but when she leaves, they stand out of respect.

When she enters Bob's Pig, Wilson says no one stands unless they need more beer.

"Keeps you humble to think in those terms, doesn't it?"