

Dillard's portrait presented to Hinds Chancery Court

Oct. 4, 2005

Retired Hinds County Chancery Judge W. O. "Chet" Dillard recounted death threats and intrigue from his early days as a prosecutor as some of Mississippi's highest ranking current and former judicial officials gathered to pay tribute to his 45-year legal career.

Dillard, 75, of Clinton, was honored Tuesday, Oct. 4, by having his portrait displayed with those of 13 of his predecessors in the Hinds County Chancery courtroom where he presided for six years.

Dillard reflected upon his public service as a district attorney, commissioner of public safety, assistant attorney general and chancery judge.

"I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to serve," Dillard said. "I thank the good Lord for giving me the ability to serve."

Mississippi Supreme Court Chief Justice James W. Smith Jr., former Chief Justice Edwin L. Pittman, former 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Charles Pickering and former Gov. Bill Waller Sr. were among those who took turns at the microphone to illuminate Dillard's adventures and accomplishments.

Chief Justice Smith said, "I just admire the man so much for his continued loyal service to the people of Mississippi."

Chief Justice Smith said, "He's a self-made man, and I admire that in anyone."

Dillard described an impoverished childhood in the Great Depression. He was born in 1930 in Mantee in Webster County, the youngest of 10 children. His first encounter with the court system came when, at age 3, he and two of his siblings were committed to the Baptist Orphan's Home in Jackson because the family was destitute and unable to care for the children. Older siblings were sent to Columbia Training School. The family would later be reunited in Pachuta in Clarke County, where his father worked as a sharecropper.

Dillard served in the U.S. Navy as a pilot after he graduated from the University of Southern Mississippi. The G.I. Bill helped him pay for law school at the University of Mississippi.

Dillard opened a law practice in Laurel. His first public service job was as Laurel city prosecutor in the early 1960s. He served as Jones County District Attorney from 1964 to 1968.

Dillard recounted death threats from the Ku Klux Klan in a time when violence was carried out against African Americans and unionized workers. After a private security officer had been killed at a Laurel factory, a witness came forward and wanted to meet with the district attorney on a shopping center parking lot late at night to provide information. Dillard said the previous threats made him fearful that he was being set up. Dillard said Pickering, who was county prosecuting attorney at that time, borrowed a gun and watched the meeting at a distance from the upstairs window of a funeral home. They had a prearranged signal if trouble started. It didn't.

During that same time period, Dillard prosecuted local officials on corruption charges. Pickering said, "The two challenges Chet and I faced when we were prosecuting in the 1960s was corruption in government and the Ku Klux Klan."

Referring to the KKK threats, Pickering said to Dillard, "They wanted to kill you. They just

wanted to whip me.”

Dillard and Pickering noted that they were voted out of office at the next election.

Dillard said the juries were all white and all male when he started practicing law.

“That was a real turning point in the civil rights struggle when black people were put on juries,” Dillard said.

Pickering said, “Really what made the difference in the civil rights struggle was when African Americans started voting.”

Former Gov. Bill Waller Sr. appointed Dillard as Commissioner of Public Safety in 1972. Waller said Dillard in his four years as commissioner brought professionalism and high visibility to the agency. Traffic fatalities decreased each year he served as commissioner. The Department of Public Safety headquarters was built and the State Crime Lab was created during his term.

Pittman, who served as state attorney general from 1984 through 1988, hired Dillard first as a special assistant attorney general, then as an assistant attorney general.

Referring to the threats and intimidation that Dillard faced as district attorney, Pittman said, “Very few of us are ever called upon to assume personal danger to carry out the law of the state of Mississippi....It cost Chet Dillard his job...but Judge Dillard enforced the law as district attorney. I admire Chet Dillard for his courage and his willingness to uphold the laws of this state.”

Jackson attorney Weaver Gore, who at 79 is one of the longest practicing attorneys of the Hinds County Bar, formally petitioned the Hinds County Chancery Court to hang Dillard’s portrait in the courtroom where he once presided. Gore presented the petition to Chancery Judge Denise Owens on behalf of the W.E. Gore Coffee Club, which claims among its membership an assortment of veteran members of the bench and bar.

Gore said of Dillard, “He’s an honorable man. He sticks by his convictions.”

When Gore presented the petition to Judge Owens for her signature, Dillard quipped, “Make sure he doesn’t include an attorney’s fee.”

####

Media Contact: Beverly Pettigrew Kraft, Administrative Office of Courts, 601-354-7452