

Retired Judge Joe Pigott died Nov. 3, 2015

November 5, 2015

Retired Circuit Judge Joe N. Pigott of McComb died Nov. 3, 2015, at Ochsner-Baptist Medical Center in New Orleans. He was 90.

A memorial service will be held at 11 a.m. Saturday, Nov. 7, at First Baptist Church of McComb. Visitation will begin Saturday at 9 a.m. at the church. Hartman Funeral Home of McComb is handling arrangements.



Pigott had been visiting New Orleans with family after going on a cruise. He had enjoyed football games over the weekend. “He got to see Ole Miss on Saturday and the Saints win on Sunday, and had a good meal at a restaurant in New Orleans with us Sunday evening after a five-day cruise on the Gulf the previous week,” said his son, former U.S. Attorney Brad Pigott of Jackson. “He had just had a wonderful time. It was very joyful and very wonderful.”

Brad Pigott described his father as a quiet and thoughtful man. “He loved being a lawyer and a judge.” The younger Pigott followed in his father’s footsteps to become a prosecutor. Joe Pigott was a district attorney during his son’s adolescence. “I was privileged to grow up around it,” Brad Pigott said.

Supreme Court Justice Jim Kitchens of Crystal Springs knew Pigott for 48 years. “I think that I learned more from him than anybody else that I was exposed to as a lawyer. I did not always agree with his rulings, but he was the best judge that I ever practiced before....His demeanor and his countenance and his personality demanded respect,” Justice Kitchens said. Kitchens defended cases against the former district attorney, and practiced before him when Pigott took the bench. Kitchens followed Pigott as district attorney.

Judge Pigott tempered his sentences. “He was not harsh. He sentenced within the parameters prescribed by the law, but he didn’t throw the key away. He was a strong believer in the second chance,” Justice Kitchens said.

In a March 2007 interview that aired on National Public Radio, Judge Pigott recounted the frequent appearances in his court by the late Willie Earl “Pip” Dow. “You didn’t have to try him. He always pled guilty, and he was a likable person. He would write me letters and he wrote me one time and he said, ‘Judge, I feel like I’ve been up here long enough this time and I would appreciate it if you would write to the Parole Board and see if they’ll let me out.’ Well I did, and they did.” Dow’s freedom was short-lived. Judge Pigott recalled telling Dow at his next court appearance how disappointed he was after giving him another chance. And Dow said, “Well, Judge, I’m disappointed in you....When I was here four years ago, you were sitting in that same chair, wearing that same robe, making that same speech. I figured a man of your caliber ought to at least be on the Supreme Court by now.” Judge Pigott sentenced him to three years instead of the five he had intended. Dow attended the portrait hanging ceremony for Pigott after the judge retired. Dow told the judge that he had retired too. He had no more convictions afterwards.

“Sometimes, you make friends in strange ways,” Judge Pigott said in the interview, which can be heard on NPR’s StoryCorps archive at <https://storycorps.org/listen/joe-and-lorraine-pigott/#>.

NPR in 2009 also aired Judge Pigott’s account of his family’s reaction to Orson Welles’ 1938 radio drama of “War of the Worlds.” The family, like much of the radio audience, thought there was a Martian invasion. Judge Pigott described how his step-grandfather, a country doctor, went to be with other family members “so that they could all be together when the end comes....They began confessing to each other and repenting of their sins.” In later years, the doctor would always leave the room when the story was told and retold. “He had no sense of humor whatsoever, especially when it involved himself,” Judge Pigott recounted in an interview that is archived at <https://beta.prx.org/stories/43217?play=true>.

Judge Pigott’s career of public service spanned nearly four decades. He served as Pike County prosecuting

attorney 1955-1962. Gov. Ross Barnett appointed him as district attorney in 1963 in the 14th Circuit District, which at the time included Copiah, Lincoln, Pike and Walthall counties. He served as district attorney for nine years, returning to full-time private law practice in 1972. He was elected Circuit judge in 1974 and served until his retirement in June 1992. After he left the Circuit bench, Pigott served as a senior status judge, hearing cases assigned by the Supreme Court through 2001.

The World War II veteran saw combat as a teenager. He volunteered for the U.S. Army and served as an intelligence officer in Europe. He parachuted behind enemy lines, gathering intelligence. He was captured by the Nazis twice, and escaped twice. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge, and suffered severe frostbite to his feet during the Siege of Bastogne. He walked away from a medic tent after he learned that the treatment would be amputation.

“He walked on those same feet and ankles for another 70 years,” Brad Pigott said.

His family knew little about his war experiences until about five years ago. He didn't talk about it easily. When grandson Chris Pigott insisted on videotaping an interview, he discovered that his grandfather had been an eyewitness to history.

Judge Pigott recounted that as a 19-year-old Army sergeant, he and two other soldiers were among the first American soldiers to arrive in Milan, Italy, on April 29, 1945, after the bodies of executed former dictator Benito Mussolini, his mistress and followers were hung by their feet from a beam at a gas station. A mob had trampled and reviled the bodies. Judge Pigott said that he ordered the mob to disperse, and for the bodies to be taken down.

Brad Pigott said, “They in their jeep came into what we would call a town square, a piazza. Over in the corner there was a lot of yelling going on....They felt like they were beginning to serve the function of police, so they ordered the crowd to cut the bodies down.”

Justice Kitchens several years ago arranged for Judge Pigott to do an oral history interview at the National WW II Museum in New Orleans, and drove him to the interview. Kitchens said that upon learning that Judge Pigott had not recounted the Milan encounter, he asked staff to re-interview Pigott.

Brad Pigott said, “They had to turn him around at least once and send him back in to the oral history interviewer in order to prompt him to tell some of his, literally, war stories. He was a little reticent about that, as most of those guys are.”

Joe Pigott was discharged from the Army in 1946 at the rank of Captain. He had attended Southwest Mississippi Junior College before entering the Army. He resumed his education on the GI Bill at the University of Mississippi, earning a Bachelor of Business Administration in 1947 and a law degree in 1949. He was admitted to the practice of law that same year.

Joe Ned Pigott was born Oct. 13, 1925, in Walthall County. He was the son of John Douglas Pigott, who managed multiple enterprises for a McComb businessman, and Patty Lou Williams Pigott, a music teacher. The family moved to McComb, where Pigott graduated from McComb High School.

Judge Pigott married Lorraine Holleman in 1953. They were married for 61 years. Lorraine Pigott died June 13, 2015.

Survivors include daughter Dr. Linda Pigott Robinson of Raleigh, N.C.; three sons, Brad Pigott of Jackson, and James Pigott and John Pigott, both of Atlanta; brother Arthur Pigott of Columbia; and four grandsons, David Pigott, Chris Pigott, Christopher Robinson, and Carter Robinson. He was preceded in death by daughter Carol Jean Pigott, a sister and three brothers.

In lieu of flowers, the family asks that contributions be made to the Pike-Amite County Library, the Pike County Arts Council and the Mississippi's Toughest Kids Foundation.