

WOMAN OF THE YEAR: MARY LOU ROBINSON

Trailblazer known for fairness

For 7 decades, federal judge made her mark on legal field

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Globe-News women of the year

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Judge Mary Lou Robinson, who served as a U.S. district judge for nearly 40 years, can trace her interest in law back to elementary school. She has paved a path for women in a male-dominated field and garnered the respect of her peers and all who have appeared in her courtroom.

Perhaps like any good attorney, Tom Riney anticipated the question long before it was asked.

"I don't think it's fair to her to characterize her only as a role model for females," Riney said.

"I view her as role model for everyone in the legal system. That's not to say she didn't have struggles a male her age didn't have, but to have her as just a role model for women sells her short."

Mary Lou Robinson was a legal pioneer, paving the way for women in what was once a male-dominated profession. But she was more than that. Robinson cast an imposing shadow on the federal bench, serving as a U.S. District judge with distinction for nearly 40 years.

For her seven decades of service — from her beginning as an attorney in a two-person firm with her husband to presiding over the high-profile Oprah Winfrey beef trial — Robinson, 90, is the 2016 Amarillo Globe-News Woman of the Year.

"I'll just say this, Mary Lou is a superior judge," longtime Amarillo attorney Tom Morris said.

"They don't come any better than Mary Lou. She has all the qualifications of an excellent judge — she's a student of the law, follows the law meticulously, applies the law with solid analysis and conducts a truly professional courtroom."

Robinson assumed senior status in 2016, meaning she stepped off the bench into mostly retirement while taking on a lighter caseload.

She leaves behind a noteworthy career as a judge on three different levels, a reputation as a no-nonsense legal scholar, and a parade of lawyers with knots in their stomachs as they tried cases in her court.

"I guess the best way to describe her is she has standards that she expects to be met," attorney Kelly Utsinger said, "and if they are not, she will tell you in no uncertain terms."

Woman in a man's world

It was in grade school, not long after Mary Lou Strueber moved to Amarillo from Garden City, Kan., that she became interested in law. A young girl, about her age, could not attend school because she declined to recite the Pledge of Allegiance for religious reasons. It did not sit well with Mary Lou.

"It seemed to me that when things were really wrong in the world," she said, "that law was what changed it and that lawyers were the ones that motivated that change."

Robinson graduated from Amarillo High in 1944. Encouraged by her mother, Frances Aynn Strueber, to be the first in the family to earn a college degree, she went to Amarillo College. After that, Robinson earned an economics degree at the University of Texas in 1948.

From there, she stepped into the largely male world of law school at the University of Texas. Morris, 97, was a new associate professor at UT Law School. He taught a torts class that Mary Lou and husband A.J. Robinson attended.

"In the late '40s, there were virtually no women in law," Morris said. "I had a huge class, around 150 in it, and Mary Lou was one of five or six women. It's hard to remember what kind of student she was back then, but she always maintained an appearance and demeanor that was unique. She was a beautiful lady."

After graduation in 1950, the Robinsons — Mary Lou and A.J. — moved to Amarillo to open a private practice. She was one of only two female attorneys in Amarillo.

Mary Lou's reputation as a sharp legal mind quickly spread. In 1955, Robinson became the first woman in Amarillo history to serve as a judge higher than a justice of the peace when she was named judge of the newly created Potter County Court at Law. This was at a time when women could not serve on juries.

"She paved the way for women practicing law in the Texas Panhandle and beyond," said Nancy J. Stone, an Amarillo attorney. "She has set an example and been an inspiration to many of us."

To reach that mark, Robinson was keenly aware, even as a Potter County judge, of who she was and what she represented.

"If I really fouled up, it wasn't Mary Lou that fouled up," Robinson said. "It was women who couldn't do the job."

Suffice to say, she didn't foul up. Robinson juggled a career and her family, giving birth to Rebecca in 1954 and Diana in 1957. In 1960, she was elected judge of the 108th District Court, the same year son Matthew was born.

In 1973, Robinson was appointed justice of the Seventh Court of Appeals in Amarillo, making her the first female appellate judge in Texas. Four years later, she was appointed to chief justice of the same court.

As prestigious as that appointment was, it only set the stage for what was to come.

Tight ship in her courtroom

It was the second major celebrity trial in the U.S. in 2 ½ years. Not long after the sensationalized and circus atmosphere of the O.J. Simpson murder trial in 1995, talk show host Oprah Winfrey was on trial — of all places — Amarillo in 1998.

Texas cattlemen filed a defamation lawsuit against Winfrey and others for comments made on her show in 1996 about the beef industry and mad cow disease. The suit alleged violation of "veggie

libel" laws.

The suit found its way into the U.S. District Court, the Northern District of Texas and Judge Mary Lou Robinson. Those who thought this would be a glitzy legal show had no idea who was in charge.

"It was anything but a circus," Riney said. "She took complete control of that courtroom from the outset and made sure decorum was preserved and made sure the proceedings were consistent with obtaining justice.

"This is not an overstatement, but that helped turn around a nationwide view of the public after the O.J. trial of the ability of the legal system to handle a celebrity case."

For U.S. Magistrate Clint Averitte, who was an attorney in Robinson's court on several occasions and later worked as a colleague, the Winfrey trial, in which the celebrity was found not guilty, was business as usual.

"She ran the Oprah trial the way she would run a two-day civil case that was of no importance to anyone but the litigants," Averitte said. "Other than the courtroom being full and some minor accommodations, she ran it in the same professional manner she always has."

Nineteen years earlier, in 1979, President Jimmy Carter appointed Robinson to a federal judgeship. She was only the second woman to serve as a U.S. district judge in Texas.

The first, Sarah Hughes, became famous for swearing in Lyndon Johnson as president a few hours after John Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas in 1963. Robinson would make her mark over nearly 40 years as a judge's judge — fair, prepared and with the highest of standards demanded in her courtroom.

"Attorneys want two things from a judge — to give everyone a fair shake and a judge who will prepare and dig into the issues of the case, and Judge Robinson has always been both," Riney said. "I have had clients remark to me after trial how well she knew the case.

"And lawyers may disagree on a lot of things, but almost all agree that she treats everyone equally and fairly."

In a 2007 Amarillo Area Bar Association judicial evaluation poll, 247 members ranked 13 judges in five categories, including integrity, applying the law, work habits, demeanor and communication. Robinson, then 81, scored second-highest among all judges, and received a superior rating of 37.3 percent.

But woe to an unprepared attorney who tried a case in her court.

"She has formidable intelligence," said John Boyd, retired chief justice of the Seventh Court of Appeals. "If she asked a lawyer a question, they better have the answer. She didn't take malfunctions lightly."

Indeed, it was better to have flunked out of law school than for an attorney to enter Robinson's court showboating to the jury or not having done their homework — because she had done hers.



Mary Lou Robinson takes an oath given by Judge Bill Adams in the Potter County Court of Law to become its new judge in April 1955. (Amarillo Globe-News file)

"Because she does have a reputation of running an orderly and efficient courtroom, those who appear before her know well ahead of time they need to be prepared," Utsinger said. "Consequently, most who appear in front of her do their darnedest."

Said Riney: "I have had more than one person say that the way she runs her court makes you a better lawyer."

A.J. Robinson, a Japanese prisoner of war in World War II, was a 47th District attorney. He died in 1992.

For nearly 25 years after that, Mary Lou Robinson continued forth, ruling from a prestigious bench — a pioneer, a scholar, and above all, a judge of fairness and integrity.