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• [Metro](#)

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Latest news and sports

Henry Wade, dean of Texas prosecutors, dies at age 86

03/01/2001

By Joe Simnacher / The Dallas Morning News

Henry M. Wade, who reigned over justice in Dallas as its district attorney for 35 years, died early today of complications from Parkinson's disease.



Wade

A legend who never lost a case he personally prosecuted, Mr. Wade set a benchmark for criminal prosecution. He built on the success of his predecessor, Will Wilson, and turned the District Attorney's Office into a highly successful prosecution team that rarely lost a case. Wins against the office became a bragging right among defense attorneys, who formed the Seven Percent Club to honor their sparse victories.

Funeral services are pending for the 86-year-old Mr. Wade, often referred to as The Chief at the Dallas County Courthouse. In 1995, Dallas County commissioners named the juvenile justice center for Mr. Wade.

"He's the person against whom all district attorneys will be measured for as long as anybody who's practiced while he was DA is still around," said Dallas attorney Peter Lesser, who ran against Mr. Wade in the 1982 Democratic primary and lost.

His political clout extended well beyond the county line. His law school friends included three-time Texas governor John Connally, the former powerhouse congressman from Austin, Jake Pickle and former president Lyndon B. Johnson.

"Lyndon always called me Hank," Mr. Wade once said.

The longtime district attorney also found a place in U.S. history, with his name attached to the landmark Roe vs. Wade abortion case

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Henry Wade dies at 86

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and the successful prosecution of Jack Ruby for the murder of John F. Kennedy's accused assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald.

But his success wasn't without controversy. Some say his high conviction rate was just as misleading as his appearance. At least three people were wrongly convicted and imprisoned by his office.

Packing a razor-sharp legal mind, Mr. Wade lurked behind the facade of a cigar-chomping country boy fresh off the farm in Rockwall County. His thick East Texas drawl only added to this image. More than one defense attorney learned the hard way that Mr. Wade was no bumpkin.

The late Tom Unis, who had known Mr. Wade since their days in the U.S. Navy during World War II, recalls how the Rockwall native outmaneuvered celebrated defense attorney Melvin Belli during Mr. Ruby's 1964 trial. Mr. Belli died in July 1996.

The jury took one hour and 50 minutes to reach a verdict and sentence Mr. Ruby to death.

Early in the trial, Mr. Wade repeatedly pronounced Mr. Belli's name as bell-ee.

The San Francisco-based attorney finally objected.

"Your honor, will you tell Mr. Wade that my name is not Bell-ee, it's Bell-eye," he complained.

"You're correct, counsel. Mr. Wade, you will refer to your opposing counsel as Mr. Belli," the judge responded.

"He said, 'Well, your honor, I accept the reprimand, and just to show I am in good faith, I'll be glad to invite Mr. Bell-eye to go to lunch to eat some spaghetti-eye.'"

He floored the courtroom and went on to win the case, said Mr. Unis, who went on to serve as a partner with Strasburger & Price in Dallas.

"Belli thought he was a hotshot coming from California, and he was just going to bowl everybody over and take care of this country bumpkin from Rockwall," Mr. Unis said. "He didn't know that Henry Wade was Phi Beta Kappa and Order of the Coif. There wasn't anything country bumpkin about him. He was smart as hell. And he beat him."

Beating Mr. Belli, known as "the king of torts," was a high point of Mr. Wade's more than three decades as Dallas County district attorney. Although Mr. Wade thought he had an open and shut case for murder against Mr. Ruby — "140 million people saw it on TV" — he later said that he was concerned there would be sympathy for the man who shot the accused presidential assassin.

Mr. Wade, the ninth of 11 children, was the son of an attorney. Five

Mr. Wade, the ninth of 11 children, was the son of an attorney. Five of his brothers also became attorneys. "Frankly, I don't think it ever dawned on me that I wanted to be a lawyer," he said in 1985. "I thought that it was the only profession."

In high school, Mr. Wade spent hours at the Rockwall courthouse.

"I never dreamed of being anything but a lawyer because I liked watching those trials," he said in a 1993 interview.

He recalled watching one of his older brothers, as a rookie Rockwall County district attorney, prosecute cases against his father, a seasoned Rockwall defense lawyer.

"I guess the reason I got into law enforcement for the prosecution was because I was always for my brother in those cases," he said. "I felt sorry for him."

Valedictorian of his senior class at Rockwall High School in 1933, Mr. Wade went to the University of Texas on a football scholarship. But he found better work than that of a 175-pound quarterback on a team that seldom passed. He opted to take a better paying job moving books from the main library to the new stacks in the university's Tower.

The switch gave him \$30 a month more spending money than his \$50 a month scholarship as well as more time to devote to his studies. "Blocking 250-pound linemen gets kind of old for a little guy," he recalled.

Mr. Wade wasn't a little guy in the classroom.

In 1938, he graduated with highest honors from the UT Law School, where he was president of the law school his senior year, chairman of the Honor Council, Order of the Coif and one of the editors of the Texas Law Review.

Mr. Wade also learned a lot about politics from classmates.

The Delta Theta Phi legal fraternity, which had cut its teeth volunteering for Lyndon Johnson's 1937 congressional campaign, turned its attention to winning campus elections. J.J. "Jake" Pickle, who went on to become a U.S. Congressman, was the first to upset the existing social fraternity hold on elections. John Connally, who went on to be a three-time governor of Texas from 1963 to 1969, was the second.

Mr. Wade's father died a month before Henry Wade graduated from UT Law School. He finished second in the Class of 1938. He turned down a lucrative offer from a Houston law firm to take over his father's practice.

After clearing his father's remaining cases, Mr. Wade ran for Rockwall County district attorney. He won but grew restless after about a year.

During a visit to Dallas, he stopped by the local FBI office and filled out an application. Two weeks later he was hired.

As an FBI agent, Mr. Wade investigated sabotage and spy cases in New York, Boston and Baltimore. He also worked undercover as a radio-network journalist in Ecuador. After four years with the FBI, Mr. Wade resigned to join the Navy during World War II.

After the war, Mr. Wade ran third in a field of six candidates running for Dallas County district attorney. "We had a great campaign," Mr. Unis said. "We had four or five people and one car."

Will R. Wilson, who got into a runoff with Andrew Priest, asked Mr. Wade and his supporters to back him, Mr. Unis said. When Mr. Wilson won the job, he hired Mr. Wade as an assistant prosecutor.

Mr. Wade said the Wilson campaign was the end of the good-ol'-boy system in Dallas. Before Mr. Wilson, Dallas County DAs "hired assistants not on ability but on who could help them get elected," Mr. Wade said. "You had a prosecuting office that was trying to get re-elected."

While working as Mr. Wilson's chief felony prosecutor, Mr. Wade prepared for the next election. He collected 5,000 names, addresses and telephone numbers of people he met.

In 1950, he was elected district attorney. He took office Jan. 1, 1951, and held it for the next 35 years. Prior to his election, the longest term for a Dallas County district attorney was six years.

The conviction rate for the district attorney's office wasn't very high when Mr. Wade took office. Two very good defense attorneys, Ted Monroe and Maury Hughes, "never lost a case," Mr. Wade said. "They seldom lost a case because you had inexperienced prosecutors."

Mr. Wade set out to build a powerful staff.

He also built a reputation by personally prosecuting some high-profile cases. In 1952, he helped convict Rebecca Doswell for the murder of her husband, oilman Thomas W. Doswell.

"She killed her husband out here at the Melrose Hotel," Mr. Wade recalled. "She hired Hughes & Monroe, and everybody thought she was going to be turned loose."

While Mr. Wade became a legend as a prosecutor, critics noted that at least three people were wrongly convicted by his office under Mr. Wade: Joyce Ann Brown, Randall Dale Adams and Lenell Geter. All were later set free.

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