



John Fred Stroud Jr.

As a boy John Stroud, Jr., often sat next to his grandfather, Percy Steel, an Arkansas circuit court judge, and watched in fascination as lawyers argued cases. He decided then and there to make the law his career, continuing a tradition in a family that counts many attorneys, prosecutors and judges.

John would go on to exceed his boyhood ambitions, eventually serving on the Arkansas Supreme Court and the state's Court of Appeals. Along the way, he built a loving family, appeared in movies and once flew a jet faster than the speed of sound.

Having been born at the outset of the Great Depression in the small town of Hope, Ark., John's future was anything but certain. His father, Fred, was out of work for long stretches, often requiring John and his mother, Ella Clarine, known later in life as Mamaw, to stay with relatives for several months at a time.

John's parents had no shortage of love and support for their only child, including nursing him through a mild bout of polio. Fortunately, the illness did not keep John from playing team sports in high school or from becoming an Eagle Scout in 1947.

He began his secondary education at the University of Arkansas, where he pledged Kappa Sigma fraternity--where he was dubbed "The King of Hearts" for his love and skill of playing the card game, before finishing his bachelors at Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas.

After graduating college, John fulfilled a boyhood dream and enlisted in the U.S. Air Force. His three-year stint with the military was a literal whirlwind, from learning Russian at Syracuse University to flying fighter jets in Florida and Texas. On one training mission, John took his jet up to 35,000 feet, activated the afterburner, and sent the plane into a controlled dive that broke the sound barrier, earning him admission into the Air Force's "Mach-Busters Club."

He would remain in the Air Force Reserve for another 20 years. But having fulfilled his active duty commitment, he was ready to pursue a legal career.

He returned home to Arkansas to get a law degree at the University of Arkansas. Long days of studying were made easier by sharing a house with his lifelong friend and future law partner, Hayes McClerkin, who himself would go on to a distinguished career in state politics.

Somehow John also found time to do some courting of his own. In this case, with Marietta Kimball, a physician's daughter who was studying elementary education at the University. They met on Lake Greeson in Daisy, Ark., where both their families had summer cabins.

At "Hillside House," which he shared with Hayes in Fayetteville, they frequently played badminton, which Marietta usually won. The couple dated for several years and married before John's final year in law school.

In 1960, John and Hayes set up their practice in the State National Bank building in Texarkana. With little money to furnish their office, John and Hayes filled the shelves with law books that had belonged to John's grandfather. The books were mostly out of date, John recalls now, but he laughs: "They looked good on the shelves." To help draw attention—and revenue—to their practice, John and Hayes became active in civic affairs. John agreed to serve on the board of the Visiting Nursing Association, though at first he knew little about that field or its issues.

In 1961, John was elected City Attorney of Texarkana, a part-time role that provided a welcome regular salary, as Marietta was pregnant with their first child. John had hardly begun to prepare for his new job, however, when U.S. Senator John McClellan invited him to come to Washington, DC, as a legislative assistant. It was a rare opportunity for a young lawyer, and after discussing it with Marietta and Hayes,

John was on his way to the Nation's Capital. There, he tracked legislation and debates, and enjoyed privileged access to the Senate floor and cloakroom lounges where informal discussions among Senators often help shape laws and forge compromises.

John's job led to invitations for him and Marietta to attend many high-profile events and parties, among them a 1962 fundraiser gala for President John F. Kennedy that was made famous by Marilyn Monroe's sultry rendition of "Happy Birthday." John could have easily built a career on Capitol Hill.

But with a young son, John III, and his mother now widowed and living alone, the family returned to Texarkana in 1963. An exciting opportunity also awaited John in the form of a partnership with the Smith and Sanderson law firm, one of the city's best.

His practice grew steadily over the next several years, with John becoming a recognized expert in estates and water issues, often advising communities and local commissions on securing funding for critical drainage and infrastructure projects. His family grew as well, with the arrival of daughters, Kimball and Tracy.

Back home, he also had a chance to indulge his love of acting and the theater, sparked from the time he saw his first movie in a vacant lot that had been improvised into an outdoor theater. He was recruited by movie director and family friend Charles B. Pierce for small roles in *The Town That Dreaded Sundown* (based on the true story of a serial killer in Texarkana), and *The Winds of Autumn*.

John also had a knack for writing poetry and was famous for crafting limericks to be read at birthday parties and other special occasions. In 1980, John received the Distinguished Eagle Scout Award, presented to him at a ceremony by Texarkana-native H. Ross Perot. That same year, John's dream of being a judge like his grandfather was realized, when then-Governor and future U.S. President Bill Clinton appointed him to fill a one-year vacancy on the Arkansas State Supreme Court. On the day he was sworn in, John received a note from a fellow justice counseling him that once he got over the shock of being on the Court, "You're going to love it."

That note proved prophetic. He joined the other justices in hearing cases that spanned the full spectrum of state law, as well as a handful involving the death penalty. John knew there was no easy way to tackle these difficult cases, which he called the "most troubling" of his career on the bench. Though it was only one year, the experience marked him for life and his ambition to serve as a judge never slacked even as he returned to his law practice. Years later, John was appointed to the Arkansas Court of Appeals, where he would serve for nine years, including four as Chief Judge.

Upon leaving the court in 2004, John worked as a mediator with an alternative dispute resolution firm. He enjoyed applying his legal skills in a new way, while also spending more time with friends and family at the family's cherished cabin on Lake Greeson, and venturing back to Fayetteville whenever possible to watch his beloved Arkansas Razorbacks play football.

The year 2016 would prove bittersweet for John. Long active in the Arkansas Bar Association, he received the group's Golden Gavel Award at a ceremony that spotlighted his long and distinguished career. He also experienced the depths of sadness with the loss of his firstborn and only son John III to cancer. In his final days, John III learned that his son, John Luke Stroud, would soon become an Eagle Scout and it meant the world to him to know that his son was following in his father's footsteps.

John continues to find joy with his family and friends—playing Spades and Dominoes at the cabin, his daily dose of cinnamon rolls, indulging in Marietta's infamous holiday caramels, driving his golf cart to the country club for dinner, big bang music that sparks cherished memories, and his nightly bowl of ice cream, which he shares with his beagle Molly. And of course, there's the law, which John loves and respects as much as the days when he sat at his grandfather's side.