

John Winslow Bissell

Born 1940 in Exeter, NH

Education:

Princeton University, A.B., 1962

University of Virginia School of Law, LL.B., 1965

Professional Career:

Law clerk, Hon. A. S. Lane, U.S. District Court, District of New Jersey, 1965-1966

Private practice, Morristown, New Jersey, 1966-1969,

Assistant U.S. attorney, District of New Jersey, 1969-1971; chief, Civil Division, 1971

Private practice, Morristown, New Jersey 1972-1978

Judge, Essex County [New Jersey] District Court, 1978-1981

Judge, Superior Court of New Jersey, 1981-1982

Federal Judicial Service:

Judge, U.S. District Court, District of New Jersey

Nominated by Ronald Reagan on November 23, 1982, to a seat vacated by Vincent P. Biunno.

Confirmed by the Senate on December 10, 1982, and received commission on December 10, 1982.

Served as chief judge, 2001-2005. Service terminated on September 1, 2005, due to retirement.

**OUTLINE FOR ORAL HISTORY WITH JUDGE JOHN (JACK) BISSELL
FEBRUARY 10, 2015
MLK COURTHOUSE, NEWARK, NJ
JUDGE KATHARINE HAYDEN, BETH SHER**

- 1) Background
 - a) Birth – where, when
 - b) Grew up in New Hampshire – what influence did that have on his life
 - c) Family life
 - i) What did his parents do Any relative in the law
 - ii) Siblings
 - iii) Extended family while growing up
 - iv) Fast forward
 - (1) Wife
 - (2) Children
 - (3) Grandchildren
 - d) Education
 - i) K-8
 - ii) High School Public or private
 - iii) College – Princeton (1958-62)
 - (1) Why Princeton
 - (2) Course of study
 - (3) Is that what connected a NH boy to NJ
 - (4) Jobs during college
 - (5) Extracurricular activities (Is this when his singing career began)
 - iv) Law School – UVA – 1965
 - (1) Why UVA
 - (2) Any particular focus during law school
 - (3) What was it like as a “northerner” at a “southern” school in the early sixties
 - (4) Did civil rights movement impact him while in law school
 - (5) Particularly influential professors or mentors
- 2) First association with the DNJ: Clerkship – Judge Lane – DNJ (1965-66) (50 years ago!)
 - a) Why clerk in NJ

- b) Which vicinage was he in
 - c) Tell us about Judge Lane
 - d) Who were the other prominent DNJ judges at the time
 - e) Atmosphere in the courthouse, interaction with clerk's office, other federal agencies
 - f) What was it like being a federal law clerk back then, 50 years ago
 - g) Who were clerks at the same time he was
 - h) Remember any cases in particular
 - i) Did he think then about someday being on the court himself
- 3) Private Practice (1966-69)
- a) How did he decide which firm to join
 - b) Where was his office
 - c) What was it like to be a young associate back then
 - d) Any particular mentors
 - e) Any memorable matters
- 4) U.S. Attorney's Office (1969-1971)
- a) Why join the USAO
 - b) Who were his colleagues (how many ended up on the DNJ)
 - c) What was it like to work for Fred Lacey
 - d) Where was their office at that time
 - e) What was it like in Newark at that time (post-riots, civil unrest)
 - f) Mentors in the office
 - g) Memorable matters he handled
 - h) Why did he leave in 1971
- 5) Return to Private Practice (1972-1978)
- a) Where
 - b) Why there
 - c) Did the practice change in the 3 years he was in public service
 - d) Mentors
 - e) Memorable matters
- 6) Judge, Essex County District Court (1978-1981)
- a) When did you decide you were interested in a judgeship Why did you want to be one
 - b) Which court was that Jurisdiction Location
 - c) How did he come to be a state court judge Who was his sponsor

- d) What was the state court docket like back then How many cases What types
- 7) Judge, Superior Court (1981-82)
 - a) Comparison to district court
 - b) How did the change come about
 - c) Was it a common step to go from district court to superior court
 - d) Types of cases. How big was the docket. Any memorable cases.
- 8) Judge, District of New Jersey (1982-2005 or 23 years)
 - a) How did the move to the federal bench come about Sponsor
 - b) What was nomination process like
 - c) Who was chief judge when he joined the bench
 - d) What did he like most about being a federal judge
 - e) What did he like the least
 - f) What was the hardest part of being a federal judge
 - g) What was the most enjoyable part
 - h) Who were his mentors as a federal judge
 - i) Relationship with magistrate judges
 - j) What was the role of law clerks and how did it compare to when he was one
 - k) What was the role of the chief judge when he joined the court
 - l) He became chief in 2001. Had the role changed in the nearly 20 years since he joined the court
 - m) Practitioners who impressed him
 - n) Changes over time while he was on the court
 - i) Effect of technology – reaction to its use in the courtroom, in submissions
 - ii) Bench / bar relations
 - iii) Courtesy of the bar
 - iv) Diversity of the bench and bar
 - o) Ever sit by designation on the Third Circuit. Any other court.
 - p) Why did he decide to retire in 2005
 - q) What did he miss (and not miss) once he left the bench
- 9) Private Practice – Connell Foley
 - a) Role as mediator, arbitrator
 - b) What were major changes he saw rejoining private practice nearly 40 years after he started

- c) Why did he retire from that in 2014
- d) Does he miss being immersed in the legal world now
- 10) Passion for barbershop music
 - a) When did it start
 - b) How has he pursued his passion
 - c) Has music affected his legal career at all
 - d) Current involvement
- 11) Philosophical questions
 - a) Did he have a “judicial philosophy” when he was on the bench What Was he able to implement it or live by it
 - b) Any regrets about his time on the bench
 - c) What advice would he give to new judge coming onto the DNJ in 2015

FMJA History Committee Oral History Project
Suggested format for interviews

1. Name, city and state of residence, and district of service as a MJ.
2. Age, religion and ethnic background; other languages spoken, how did you acquire this skill?
3. Pre-MJ legal specialty. What was the best part of that? What was hardest to leave for the bench? Easiest? Did you serve on a different court before becoming a MJ? How was your transition to the bench? What helped? How have you helped others make the transition?
4. What was your favorite/worst pre-law job. What did that teach you?
5. Academic background; undergrad, Law, other grad school. Why did you choose these schools? Did you serve as a law clerk? For whom? What did you take away from that experience?
6. What year did you become a MJ? How long have you served as an MJ? Age at appointment; how did that impact your service as a MJ? Have you been considered for a DJ or CtofAp appt?
7. Did your heritage, ethnicity or background influence your decision to become judge, or shape your approach to judging? Who in your family encouraged you to become a lawyer or judge? When did you decide that you wanted a judicial career? What steps did you take to make that happen?
8. Your reaction to your appointment as a MJ: where were you when you got "the call" telling you that you got the job? Do you remember anyone or any experience from "Baby Judge School?" Who were your role models or mentors? How and why? Did you ever thank them?
9. Childhood friends/classmates/family members' reaction to your being appointed a federal judge? If surprised, why? If not, why not?
10. Primary duties as MJ; how have these changed over the years? How do you feel about the administration of justice in this country? The jury system? The decline in the number of jury trials? What would you change about how civil or criminal cases are handled in the federal system if you were able to set policy?
11. Best/ Worst part of being a MJ. How would you change the duties of MJ if you were in charge?
12. Decision/Order of which you are most proud. Why? What was the ultimate outcome of the case –was it appealed? Did you have to enforce any Orders related to the case? What did you learn from this?
13. Most humbling/embarrassing experience as a MJ. (Yes, only one).
14. Most memorable trial or hearing. Why? What happened, and how did you react? What did you learn?
15. Most difficult issue you had to decide as a MJ. Why? Was it the subject matter, the parties, or the law? Did this change how you approached any later cases?
16. Strangest issue brought before you as a MJ. How did you resolve it?
17. Funniest experience as a MJ
18. Any former law clerks gone on to fame and fortune? How did you choose your law clerks? What advice would you have for a new MJ on the best way to find a law clerk? Did you use interns? How did that work out?
19. Retirement plans? What advice do you want to leave for your grandkids/future generations/new lawyers? Do you think there should be a mandatory retirement age for judges? Should MJs be allowed to be on Senior Status without annual renewal process – just serve like Sr. DJs?
20. How would you like to be remembered?