TRANSFER OF THE
OKLAHOMA
COURTS

A photographic document by

NEIL CHAPMAN
Transfer of the Oklahoma Courts
2009 - 2012

A Photographic Document
by
Neil Chapman
On Flag Day, June 14, 2011, the Oklahoma Supreme Court and related offices began the move into their long-anticipated new home, a move 30 years in the making. Historians would find it more than fateful that two Chief Justices, separated by eight decades, played key roles in shaping the building at 2100 North Lincoln Boulevard.

In 1907, Robert L. Williams was elected to the newly-created Oklahoma Supreme Court, and selected as the first Chief Justice. Williams served on the Court until resigning in 1914 to make a successful run for governor. In an effort to balance the state budget, he made the infamous decision to eliminate the dome from the Capitol building, which was under construction at the time. When his term as governor ended, Williams returned to the judiciary, serving first as a federal judge for the Eastern District of Oklahoma and later as a judge for the United States Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals. He was also an active member of the Oklahoma Historical Society and served as the organization’s president. In the spring of 1929, he successfully lobbied the legislature for $500,000 to construct a building to house Oklahoma’s growing history collection. Up until that time, the Historical Society office and collections had been kept in the basement of the State Capitol.

In the 1980s, Justice Yvonne Kauger and other visionaries, including Willie Paul and Oklahoma Bar Association Director Marvin Emerson, imagined a new home for the Historical Society. Once that was accomplished, the Wiley Post Building would be available as a new home for the state judiciary. Chief Justice Kauger asked the state legislature for the building in 1997, but it would take nearly 10 years for the Historical Society to complete their new building, opening the Oklahoma History Center in 2005.

Subsequently, the Wiley Post Building's 69,000 square foot granite and limestone neo-classical structure was modernized and more than doubled in size with the addition of a similarly-designed adjacent building. Today, the Supreme Court of Oklahoma, Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals, Clerk of the Appellate Courts and the Administrative Offices of the Courts all occupy the nearly 150,000 square feet that feature ample office spaces, well-designed meeting areas and absolute elegance.

The nine justices and five judges each have functional chambers with adequate space for staff members, technological efficiency and a conveniently accessible Hearing Room. The Court retained the original Supreme Court Courtroom in the State Capitol and uses the historic space for all formal activities, including oral arguments and ceremonial events.

The Oklahoma Judicial Center also features meeting spaces capable of accommodating large groups. The first-floor auditorium seats 196 and includes original art deco details preserved from the original 1929 construction. The third floor “Great Room” can seat 160 for dinner or educational functions and is often booked for continuing legal education events and other gatherings by all branches of government, as well as private parties.

The Oklahoma Judicial Center Art Committee was charged with selecting art for the renovated building, using Art in Public Places funding. In a unique cooperative agreement, the Oklahoma Historical Society loaned art pieces from its collection to adorn the walls. The OJC Art Committee, chaired by Justice Kauger, also commissioned new pieces from Oklahoma artists.

Two significant art conservation projects were also undertaken: one-third of the art funding was allocated to repairing and
enhancing the outdoor Veterans’ Memorial which honors Oklahomans who served in all military conflicts since statehood.

Special care was also taken during the building renovation process to protect eight life-size Native American figures painted directly on the walls of the third floor. Nan Sheets commissioned the murals in 1934 with Civilian Works Administration funding. Oklahoma artists Monroe Tsatoke and Spencer Asah, members of the internationally known Kiowa Six, painstakingly created the figures as a reminder of those who have gone before. When the building renovation was completed, protective plywood barriers were removed and professional conservators were brought in to return the art treasures to their original glory. The Judicial Center Art Committee received the 2011 George Nigh Public Service in the Arts Award in recognition of their efforts.

“Oklahomans can be particularly proud of this effort to represent the judiciary and the history of Oklahoma through the Oklahoma Judicial Center,” said Justice Kauger. “I, along with my fellow justices, am pleased to have been a part of the Supreme Court’s second affiliation with the Wiley Post Historical Building.”

Mike Mayberry, JD
Deputy Court Administrator 2006-2014
Transfer of the Courts

The photo project, “Transfer of the Oklahoma Courts” began in December 2009, when I was encouraged by Mike Mayberry, then deputy director of the Administrative Office of the Courts, to photograph the renovation of an 80-year-old building into the new home of Oklahoma’s judicial branch of government. To my surprise, no one was documenting this historical move.

Oklahoma Supreme Court Justice Yvonne Kauger was leading the building project, so I reached out to her. I learned that the building was not only historic, but had formerly housed the Oklahoma Historical Society. When completed, its new occupants would be the Supreme Court, the Court of Criminal Appeals, the Administrative Office of the Courts, and the Appellate Clerk and staff.

I suggested the photography project include not only the interior and exterior of the building under construction, but also the Court’s current offices in the State Capitol. I also suggested photographing those most affected by the move, which implied portraits. Justice Kauger graciously agreed.

My goal was simple: to document the ongoing renovation progress; photograph formal and informal portraits of the nine Supreme Court justices and the five Court of Criminal Appeals judges, and finally photograph the home they were about to leave behind.

While at first the building seemed to be the main subject, I soon realized it was the people who were truly the important entity; they were the heart of the move. I got to know the justices and judges and the staff members who work with them. I saw firsthand how they are dedicated to the state of Oklahoma.

The move involved four groups within the courts; the Supreme Court, the Court of Criminal Appeals, the Administrative Office of the Courts, and the Appellate Clerk and staff. My concentration on formal portraits began in the Capitol building and upon completion of the renovation I then took portraits of the same individuals in the Judicial Center building. I focused on the Supreme Court justices and the Court of Criminal Appeals judges. The project evolved as time passed. While more than 500 people were affected by the move, I chose to focus on the main court leadership, comprised of fourteen individuals.

Early on, one of the justices said, “people outside of the courts think we all sit around in robes and decree laws. I hope you show those we serve who we really are.” I spent enough time with the subjects that I became the so-called “fly on the wall.” People let down their guard and gave me the opportunity to take authentic, natural photographs.

I also engaged in some of the most fascinating conversations and learned many unexpected and interesting things. I have never been particularly engaged with government and was largely ignorant of state court functions. I am still not an expert, but I am sure of this — I am honored to know there are such incredible people serving Oklahoma’s judicial system.

Another unexpected surprise was the beautiful Oklahoma art selected for the building. I had the privilege of documenting the entire collection by photographing the artwork and designing the book, Art of the Oklahoma Judicial Center, published in 2014. I am certain the average person doesn’t realize they can visit the Judicial Center just to look at the extraordinary Oklahoma art pieces. I have accompanied many family members and friends on art tours of the building and they’ve all been pleasantly surprised by the collection.

Back in 2009, when I started photographing the renovation...
project, I was living in southern California. I could only be in Oklahoma City for one to three weeks at a time, every four months. But over the course of the three-year project I was able to document the old and new locations of a branch of government, and memorialize the Oklahoma courts in transition.

You might wonder about my connection with Oklahoma. Though I was born in California and lived there most of my life, I spent three wonderful years in Hobart, Oklahoma. Those years in the late 1950s gave me a lifelong fondness for the state and its people. I learned about dust storms, tornado horn warnings, frog gigging, fishing, hunting, having a best friend, and unlocked doors with neighbors who would holler and just walk in. Next door to our house at 629 South Main, was a Kiowa family. At age 10, that was my first encounter with the local Native Americans. Throughout the years I always felt a need to pay back Oklahoma for the wonderful experience it gave to me in those early years.

The three years spent photographing the Transfer of the Oklahoma Courts convinced my wife Dawna and I to make our own transition. We now call Oklahoma home.

Neil Chapman Ed.D
FROM THE CAPITOL

The documentation of the transfer of the courts and renovation of their new location took place in two primary locations.

The Supreme Court and the Court of Criminal Appeals, in both the west and north wings of the Oklahoma State Capitol building, and then . . .
ACROSS THE STREET

... the newly renovated and expanded Oklahoma Historical Society building became the new home now known as the Oklahoma Judicial Center.
Supreme Court in the State Capitol
Supreme Court Hearing Room in the Judicial Center
Court of Criminal Appeals in the State Capitol
Court of Criminal Appeals in the Judicial Center
Judicial Center Demolition

The interior renovation proved to be some of the most painstaking of operations. The primary concept was to fuse the old with the new by utilizing existing treatments, flooring, skylights and wall design along with current designs that were to bring a contemporary look to the overall ambiance.
Original roof

East exterior wall

Wall insulation

South exterior wall
Judicial Center Building

The renovation process of this building took over two years and not only involved the interior but the exterior of the building as well.

The preservation of the marble, columns, bricks and treatments was paramount. Thus, a high-quality green agent was used in the cleaning of the stonework.
Mural Conservation

Steps were taken during construction to protect the Kiowa murals painted in the 1930s. When the renovation was complete, conservators Anne Rosenthal and Helen Houp were commissioned to preserve these historic art treasures for future generations.
Entry stairwell
Soon after 1917, the Oklahoma Supreme Court was housed in the Capitol building.
Supreme Court at the State Capitol

The Court retained the courtroom in the State Capitol for formal hearings and judicial ceremonies. It is located on the second floor, west wing.
Justice Rudolph Hargrave

1925 - 2014
retired 2010
Justices of the Oklahoma Supreme Court
Supreme Court Justice

Yvonne Kauger

Appointed 1984
Supreme Court Justice

Joseph M. Watt

Appointed 1994
Supreme Court Justice

James R. Winchester

Appointed 2000
Supreme Court
Chief Justice (2010)

James E. Edmonson

Appointed 2003
Supreme Court
Vice-Chief Justice (2010)

Steven W. Taylor

Appointed 2004
Supreme Court Justice

Tom Colbert

Appointed 2004
Supreme Court Justice

John F. Reif

Appointed 2007
Supreme Court Justice

Douglas L. Combs

Appointed 2010
Supreme Court Justice

Noma Gurich

Appointed 2011
The nine Justices of the Oklahoma Supreme Court
Administrative Office of the Courts Library and offices on the first floor of the Judicial Center
Court of Criminal Appeals Conference in the Oklahoma State Capitol
Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals
Court of Criminal Appeals courtroom re-enactment presentation in the Capitol courtroom
Judges of the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals
Presiding Judge

Charles A. Johnson

Appointed 1989

Retired 2014
Judge

Gary L. Lumpkin

Appointed 1989
Vice-Presiding Judge

Arlene Johnson

Appointed 2005
Judge

David Lewis

Appointed 2005
Judge

Clancy Smith

Appointed 2010
When I joined the Supreme Court staff in April 2000, I was very excited to be working in the State Capitol. To be in the building where state history had taken place — and was still being made — appealed to my curious nature.

I remember hearing “don’t get too comfortable — we’ll be moving across the street in two years.” Two years became four, then eight and many staff members were extremely skeptical that the move would ever actually happen “before we retire.”

At some point, 2008 perhaps, I remember touring what would become the Judicial Center with Justice Winchester. The Justices selected their office spaces based on seniority and he wanted to know if he’d be able to see the Capitol from the northwest corner spot he’d picked out.

It had been some time since the Oklahoma Historical Society had moved into its new home and the building had been sitting vacant. Whether through a broken window, or just an open construction area, a pigeon had taken up residence in the space. Though we didn’t see the actual bird, evidence of its presence was ample.

Still, the lure of an actual office suite with space for both staff attorneys and a reception area for me was very appealing. And yes, Justice Winchester had a superb view of the Capitol.

To put things in perspective, when Justice Winchester was appointed to the Court in 2000, his chambers in the Capitol included an adjoining space shared by the administrative assistant and a staff attorney. The second staff attorney officed in a space of the second floor rotunda, in an area that was literally a converted storage closet. The desk filled nearly all the available space in the cramped “office” that had a window air conditioner stuck in the wall since there are no air vents in storage closets. Office space was a problem for every justice because the chambers had been designed for a smaller staff, so creative use of space became the norm. Over the years, we watched construction start and stop on what would become the Judicial Center, but when we started picking out furniture for the offices, it all became real.

During the year immediately preceding the move, I made multiple visits to the building as it was being renovated. By then, I was part of the Judicial Center Art Committee and I accompanied artists Patrick Riley and Mike Larsen when they showed the spaces where their commissioned pieces would go.

As the time drew closer, I was called upon to pack up our office: eleven years worth of memos, legal research and case files all had to go into labeled boxes that I hoped would end up in that northwest corner suite facing the Capitol. Staff members from the Administrative Office of the Courts facilitated the move, that as far as I know, went without a hitch. Although it’s not really that surprising, the Administrative Office of the Courts provides support for the District Courts in each of Oklahoma’s 77 counties every day; staggered moves of the justices and judges across the street during the summer seems simple in comparison.

The Judicial Center is a very different atmosphere from the State Capitol. The sense of history is still just as present, but instead of a beehive of activity, it offers the space for quiet contemplation — something very fitting for the judicial branch of government.

Gayleen Rabakukk
Administrative Assistant for Justice Winchester
2000-2015
Court Staff, Clerk of the Appellate Courts and Administrative Office of the Courts
To you all . . .

It should be noted that those represented here not only serve the courts within the Judicial Center but they also serve judges, lawyers and local courts throughout the state of Oklahoma. They are a very busy group of professionals.

When you enter the Judicial Center, you are greeted with a smile and a noticeable attitude of service. Not only were the Justices and Judges of great help in photographing the project, but all these individuals helped in my process of documenting the transfer.

They were all kind, trusting, thoughtful and patient when I was around. These are many of the first Oklahomans that I met and interacted with before making the decision to move to Oklahoma.

To all of you I say thank you for your wonderful greeting of an outsider.

Neil Chapman
The Crew
Acknowledgements

First and foremost a special thank you to my wife Dawna. She is my greatest supporter, encourager, confidant and the person I rely on for all my creative endeavors. I always pitch my projects to her first. She provides wisdom and the most important considerations before embarking on my adventures.

It is always appropriate to thank those who have made any project a success. I feel a special need to point to “all” that I came in contact with at the Judicial Center over the three year process. I want to give you a heartfelt “it would not have happened without your help and cooperation.”

It all began with a name given to me by Linda Guess, my sister-in-law. I was living in California, and she said, “We have to get you to come to Oklahoma.” I replied, “the only way that will happen is if I am working on a photo project.” Half joking I threw out, “maybe I could do a project on your highway patrol.” She worked for Troop R, Highway Patrol in Oklahoma City. I followed with, “or maybe your court system.” I was not sure what I was thinking when I suggested that subject. She replied, “let me see what I can do.”

A few days later Linda gave me Mike Mayberry’s name, who was the Deputy Director at the Administrative Office of the Courts. I called him to pitch the project to photograph judges. We were not far into the conversation when Mike said “it’s fortuitous that you are calling because the courts are about to make a historical move and no one is documenting it; you should do a book.” We discussed some ideas and he said, “think about it and call me back.”

When I called him back he gave me the name and phone number of one of the Supreme Court Justices, Yvonne Kauger. Mike indicated that she was spearheading the transfer of the courts to a newly renovated building. He further explained that she would be the “go-to” person to whom I should pitch the photo project. He told me that if she liked me and my pitch she would ask me to call her Yvonne. I called her and we discussed documenting the move. During our conversation when I respectfully addressed her as Justice Kauger, she told me to call her Yvonne. I gave a sigh of relief. I would say that was the beginning of a most interesting friendship.

There is no question that this project would not have happened if not for Linda and my brother, Dale Guess. They re-introduced me to Oklahoma and gave valuable support. Also, Mike Mayberry provided invaluable guidance and wise counsel. Our friendship that was forged during the project continues today.

Yvonne Kauger — when you hitch your wagon to Yvonne you better be ready for an adventurous ride. Thank you for the adventure. During our first encounter Yvonne took me to Justice Taylor’s office to see what he thought. He asked questions; I answered as best I could. The important question was “how much would this cost?” My reply, “Nothing — I am not asking for any money.” I think that answer surprised us both. I appreciated his candor and support.

Next, Yvonne introduced me to Justice Winchester, who was also enthusiastic but added one more element. He wanted me to show all the court members as they are, not just people in robes. That element became the guiding concept in my photographs.

I am indebted to each justice, judge, staff member and renovation worker for their cooperation and trust by allowing me to point my camera in their direction and sometimes in their face. To Erica Rice who worked as my assistant, carried equipment and documented me while I was working, thank you so much.

A special thanks to Linda, Dale, Debra, Shawn, Bryson, Mike, Leisa, Jackson, Kenzie, Kyle, Vanessa, Julie, and to Gayleen, my good friend and book partner.
Oklahoma Transfer of the Courts
Officially ended 2011

Upon completion of the renovation process a beautiful book of the art pieces on the walls of the Judicial Center was published.