Retired Montana Judge Blair dies

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The following story was taken from the April 8 edition of The Montana Standard.

Mass of the Resurrection will be Thursday at 10:30 in St. Mary Catholic Church in Virginia City for retired Judge Frank E. Blair, 95, who died Sunday in his Virginia City home. Burial will be in the Hillside Cemetery in Virginia City. The parish vigil service will be Wednesday at 7:30 in the K & L Mortuary in Sheridan.

Memorials are preferred to the Ruby Valley Hospital or charity.

Judge Blair earned his first college degree in 1980 when he was 90. But by then he had been a pharmacist, lawyer and judge.

Three judges who worked with Judge Blair praised him.

"He came on the bench late, but he was a good judge," Judge W.W. Lessley of Bozeman said.

Judge Arnold Olsen of Butte said Judge Blair sometimes was unpopular because of his leniency with people who had drug or alcohol abuse problems. He would be lenient, Olsen said, as long as the person went for treatment.

He said the judge would talk about his views privately with his colleagues. "He spoke from his heart and he acted that way from the bench.

"We all, all of us, admired him for that," Olsen said.

Judge Frank Davis of Dillon, who ran against Judge Blair several times and replaced him when he retired, said he had a remarkable record. The Fifth District, which includes Madison, Jefferson and Beaverhead counties, is the largest district, Davis said, and he couldn't remember that Judge Blair ever missed court.

"I mean he fought the blizzards and the hurricanes and he made it."

Judge Lessley said often he couldn't get the younger judges to help fill in if the roads were bad but could always depend on Judge Blair. "If he promised to come, he came."

Judge Blair was born August 24, 1890, in Groton, S.D., to Thomas Mitchell and Angie Robinson Blair. He grew up on the family farm and when in high school was an apprentice for the local drug store. By the time he graduated in 1910, he was able to pass the South Dakota pharmacy examination and be licensed as a pharmacist.

In 1920, he moved to Butte and worked at the Paxson and Rockefeller Drug Store. He had studied law independently and on December 13, 1921, he passed the state bar examination and became a lawyer.

He married Eda Corgiat in Butte October 16, 1926.

In 1928, they moved to Virginia City and bought the Callaway home, where he and his wife have lived since.

He was elected for three terms as Madison County attorney and had a growing civil practice. He also supervised the Madison Abstract and Title Co.

In 1970 - his 50th year as a judge he filed against Judge Davis for the Fifth Judicial District seat. Davis had been appointed when Judge Philip Duncan died in office.

Judge Davis said he didn't take his oppenent too seriously. "Blair closed his office and ran his campaign and just beat the pants off me." He said he believes Judge Blair went to every home in the district.

The two contended against each other several more times in heated campaigns before Judge Blair decided to retire.

Judge Davis said that Judge Blair wanted to make sure the court news was well covered so he wrote weekly reports on what had happened and sent it to newspapers. "He did it religiously. And he wrote it out in his beautiful longhand. He wrote an elaborate account."

In 1980, after more independent study, he graduated cum laude from the Upper Iowa University with a degree in public administration.

In his private life, he was active in politics before becoming a judge, fraternal organizations and the Catholic church.

He was chairman of the Madison County Republican Party for 15 years and was a Virginia City school board member for 10. He organized the first lay Order of St. Francis of Assisi in Montana, which now has seven chapters.

He was a charter member and first president of the Vigilance Club of Virginia City and was state president of the Eagles 1948-49. In 1981, he recejved the Reverence for Law Award at the state convention. He also belonged to the Virginia City Elks Lodge No. 390.

On May 26, 1968, he received the seventh Borromeo Award from Carroll College.

Survivors include his wife; daughter, Josephine Mathews of Folkston, Ga.; son, Leonard E. Blair of Portland; sister, Jennie Boggs of Corpus Christi, Tex.; 12 grandchildren; and 11 great-grandchildren.

His daughter, Maxine Williams, died in 1961 and his son, Steven Robert, in 1972.