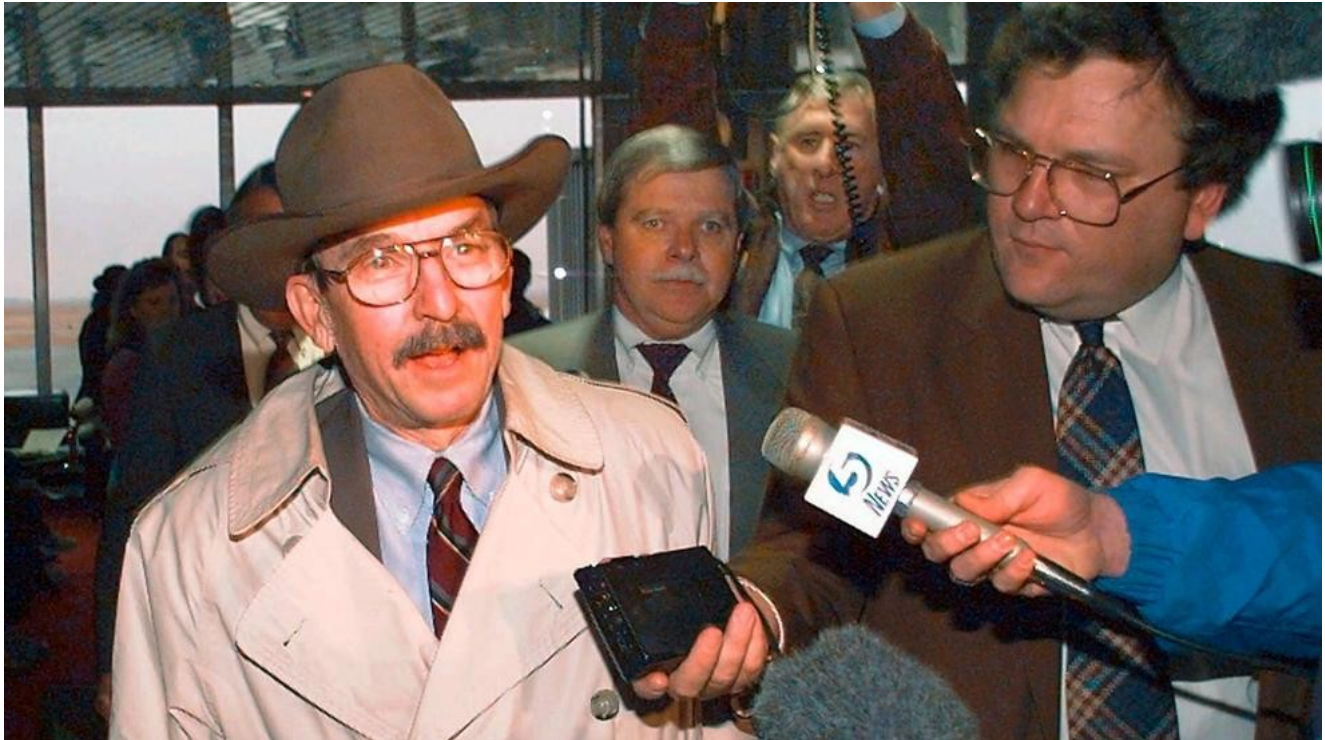


Oklahoma City bombing trial judge Richard Matsch dies at 88

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by STEVEN K. PAULSON, Associated Press Tuesday, May 28th 2019



DENVER (AP) — U.S. District Judge Richard Matsch, who ruled his courtroom with a firm gavel and a short temper and gained national respect in the 1990s for his handling of the Oklahoma City bombing trials, died Sunday. He was 88.

The clerk of the U.S. District Court of Colorado, Jeffrey P. Colwell, announced Matsch's death.

Matsch had received a liver transplant in 2001 after being diagnosed with a disorder that causes a buildup of fluid that can lead to infections.

He took senior-judge status in 2003, allowing him to reduce his caseload. He was appointed to the bench by President Richard Nixon in 1974.

Known for his conservative suits, big boots and cowboy hat, Matsch saw it as his personal duty to restore order, decorum and respect to the courtroom after the judiciary got a black eye during the often-chaotic O.J. Simpson trial.

As chief judge of the federal court in Denver, Matsch was assigned to oversee the trials of Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols in 1996 after a judge ruled they could not receive a fair trial in Oklahoma City.

Almost immediately, Matsch imposed a gag order to prevent attorneys from trying their cases to the media on the courthouse steps. He ruled decisively on matters of evidence and tolerated no courtroom antics.

McVeigh was convicted of murder and other charges and was executed for the April 19, 1995, bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. The blast, the worst act of terrorism on U.S. soil before the Sept. 11 attacks, killed 168 and injured hundreds of others. Nichols was convicted of involuntary manslaughter and conspiracy and sentenced to life in prison.

Matsch consistently refused to discuss the trials. Only after Nichols' federal trial was over did he comment about McVeigh, calling him the "instrument of destruction" in the bombing and saying he deserved to die.

"Judge Matsch will be remembered for the way he handled the Oklahoma City bombing cases, reaffirming the public's faith in our judicial system through his firmness, fairness and dignity during a particularly wrenching episode in our nation's history," the chief judge of Colorado's federal court, Philip A. Brimmer, said in a statement.

Matsch was also assigned to preside over a civil lawsuit against basketball star Kobe Bryant, filed by a Colorado hotel employee who accused him of sexual assault in 2003. The case was settled without trial in March 2005, a month after Matsch chastised both sides for attacking each other and disclosing too many details about the high-profile case in court filings.

In the 1980s, Matsch presided over the trial of several members of the Order, a militant anti-Semitic organization responsible for the 1984 assassination of Denver radio talk show host Alan Berg.

In more than 40 years on the bench, Matsch also presided over a protracted school busing case and the sentencing of a forestry worker who admitted starting what was then Colorado's worst wildfire.

Terry Barton, a U.S. Forest Service fire spotter, pleaded guilty to two charges: setting fire to federal forest land on June 8, 2002, and lying to investigators. In 2003, Matsch, in a rare show of sympathy, sentenced Barton to six years in prison on the federal charges, but he refused to impose the \$14 million restitution asked for by prosecutors, saying he would not sentence Barton to a "life of poverty."

Born in Burlington, Iowa, Matsch graduated from the University of Michigan Law School, served as a federal prosecutor and became a bankruptcy judge. His role model was the fictional lawyer Atticus Finch, hero of Harper Lee's 1960 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel "To Kill A Mockingbird" who saw it as his duty to do the right thing even though it might be unpopular.

In a 1991 speech before the Denver Bar Association, Matsch described Atticus Finch as "the opponent of oppression, the paradigm of propriety, the dean of decent citizens and the core of his community."

Matsch was widely criticized when he ordered a nativity scene removed from the holiday display at Denver's City and County Building. He also ruled the Ku Klux Klan had a right to march on Martin Luther King Day despite the risk of violent confrontation, and that adult bookstores do not need city permits to stay in business.

Matsch had little patience for those who had not done their legal homework. Lawyers who veered from their arguments and failed to notice the judge's mustache starting to twitch, the first sign of his anger, often paid for it dearly.

He set up a barricade pen for journalists to interview people outside the courthouse, and locked his courtroom's doors precisely at 9 a.m., leaving anyone who arrived late stranded outside.

A story profiling Matsch in the 1995 Almanac of the Federal Judiciary quoted trial attorneys who cautioned, "If you make a stupid argument in front of him, he will take your head off."