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Library lecture examines civil rights-era judge's career, influence

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Library lecture examines civil rights-era judge's career, influence

FaTvLiErCoSMPrSt



Claude Clayton Jr. recently discussed his father's legacy.

Archives & Special Collections at the University of Mississippi hosted a program on April 17 to commemorate Judge Claude F. Clayton and mark the opening of his case files and other papers to researchers.

Clayton, a graduate of the UM School of Law, served as a judge on the U.S. District Court of Northern Mississippi from 1958 to 1967, and on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit from 1967 until his death in 1969. The collection includes case files from Clayton's tenure, such

as chamber papers, case notes, draft memoranda, and opinions and research. Of particular interest to researchers will be the many rulings Clayton issued on civil rights cases.

During this program, former law clerk Will Lewis of Oxford discussed Clayton and the 1962 integration of the University of Mississippi. Third-year law students Sierra Brown and Seth Johnson reviewed several civil rights files they uncovered while working on the collection. Judge Grady Jolly of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit also shared memories about practicing law in Judge Clayton's court as an assistant U.S. attorney.

Claude Clayton Jr., attorney at Clayton O'Donnell law firm in Tupelo, remembered his father as courageous, meticulous and committed to the rule of law.

"Because of the reputation of Mississippi, especially during the 1960s, I think it's important that people know there were judges who were following the law and were willing to take actions that were very unpopular," he said.

Clayton noted that it was not unusual for his father to receive threatening letters or phone calls during those times.

"He never discussed any details of his cases unless there was something in the newspaper about it, but we all witnessed the stress he was under," Clayton said. "He might comment that he had to make a very difficult decision, but it was what the law required him to do, and he was going to do it."

"Judge Clayton's papers are an invaluable resource for examining the history of the U.S. District Court of Northern Mississippi and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, providing researchers with insight into the internal workings of the judiciary during his years on the bench," said Leigh McWhite, UM associate professor and political papers archivist.

Clayton and several other family members traveled to Oxford to attend the program.

"We are grateful that the university has made the herculean effort to review the papers and index them so they will be available to scholars who have an interest in studying Mississippi courts during a turbulent time in the state's history," Clayton said.

For more information about Judge Clayton and his papers, use the collection finding aid online at <http://purl.oclc.org/umarchives/MUM00738/>.

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