

Oral History of
**CHIEF JUSTICE
DONALD R. WRIGHT**

EDITOR'S NOTE

The oral history of former Chief Justice Donald R. Wright was recorded by Professor Harvey P. Grody of California State University, Fullerton in two interviews held at Justice Wright's home in Pasadena, California on May 12 and June 1, 1982. It is presented here in slightly condensed form, intended to focus on matters directly related to Justice Wright's life and judicial career. It has received minor copyediting for publication. Insertions in square brackets are from the original transcript.

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— SELMA MOIDEL SMITH



DONALD R. WRIGHT
CHIEF JUSTICE OF CALIFORNIA, 1970-1977
Courtesy California Judicial Center Library

FIRST INTERVIEW: MAY 12, 1982

GRODY: Chief Justice Wright, we'd like to start with some general biographical data. You are a third generation Californian?

WRIGHT: That is correct. Yes.

GRODY: And you were born in Orange County?

WRIGHT: That is also correct.

GRODY: Would you like to take us from there?

WRIGHT: Well, I was born in what is now the city of Placentia, but it was county territory at the time of my birth back in 1907, over seventy-five years ago. My folks were orange growers in that area. One of my older uncles was the first man in the area to plant Valencia oranges and, eventually, he and his wife succeeded in getting all the relatives into the business, which was fortunate for everyone involved, frankly. In 1912, my family moved to Pasadena because of the school situation. My two oldest brothers rode horseback into the little school in Placentia, but there were four more younger children coming along and it didn't seem practical to remain out in the country. For that reason, my father, who was brought up in Pasadena back in the eighties and nineties of the last century, decided to return to Pasadena to live. So as I indicated, we moved back up here in 1912 and I have lived here ever since, excepting times when I was away at college and law school and times when I served in the Army Air Corps and times when I was on the Supreme Court sitting in San Francisco.

GRODY: That's concise. Did you go to the public schools in Pasadena?

WRIGHT: Yes. I went to the local grammar schools which were in our area and then to Pasadena High School graduating in 1925. Then I enrolled at Stanford University, entering that fall of 1925, and graduated cum laude, I might mention [chuckle], in 1929. This was at the time when the country was at its most buoyant, and it was almost promised that all you had to do was to graduate from Harvard Law School and you would be assured of a job. So in the fall of 1929, I went to Cambridge to attend the Harvard Law School. Things were not quite as they had been predicted because when I finished the law school in 1932, the situation was such that I was lucky to get a job working for almost nothing. I continued in the practice of the law here in Pasadena and, eventually, I was modestly successful.

GRODY: What kind of influence did you have toward selecting a legal career? Did you decide that before you went to Stanford?

WRIGHT: Not at all. I was not at all directed that way. In fact, in college I had been a major in the political science field and had a professor I thought a great deal of, Professor Tom Barkley, who is now in his ninety-second or ninety-third year. He had a great influence upon me and many other individuals who were at Stanford, not only then but later. At least three or four United States senators entered the political field largely because of Tom Barkley's effect on them. I had determined that I was going to go to Columbia University, which was his alma mater, secure a Ph.D. degree, and then become a professor of political science. A good friend of mine came down on July 28, 1929, and asked me why did I want to go to Columbia, and why did I want to study political science? He said, "Why don't you go to Harvard Law School? Everybody's going to law school back at Harvard," which was slightly an exaggeration [chuckle], but a goodly number were. So I said, "Well, just a minute, I never thought of it." I did give it a few moments thought, and I said, "I'll go ask my father." My father simply hated lawyers. He had several nasty experiences with some, I understand, and so when I told him what I wanted to do, he paused for a while, and he said, "Well, so far, you haven't really done too bad a job. If that's really what you want to do, why, it's all right but, personally, I would prefer that you do something more honest." [laughter] So I sent a telegram to the Harvard Law School saying, "This is my application; transcript will follow." Had I applied three days later, that is on August first or after, I would have been too late to have secured admission.

GRODY: That really was literally a last minute choice on your part.

WRIGHT: It was absolutely a last minute choice. But I might admit that once I got there and got into it, and from then on to this very day, I have never regretted my choice of profession.

GRODY: How about your father? Did he ever say anything more about it?

WRIGHT: Well, unfortunately, he died while I was at law school, after I had finished two years, and so he never had a chance to reflect on it, at least not with me. He might have reflected, but not with me. [laughter]

GRODY: What kind of practice did you have?