

# Judge of Character

Even in the days of Dobson Ranch, Mesa was never confused with Bedford Falls. Still, there's at least one man in town—Judge Hamblen—who's a character straight out of a Frank Capra movie. Homespun, no-nonsense, unorthodox ... that's how you'd describe this throwback to the old school.



ONE MORNING IN SEPTEMBER, A MAN named Robert arrived early at the West Mesa Justice Court to pay a traffic ticket. As he waited for the court to open, another man pulled up to the building, got out of his truck and started banging on the door, asking where everybody was. The man looked disheveled, and the back of his truck was full of used tires. Although the weather promised to be hot, he wore a pair of brown corduroy pants that looked too big and were folded up at the bottom.

Robert thought the judge was going to have his hands full with this guy, so he was more than a little surprised to find the man in brown corduroy sitting behind the bench in the courtroom. A nameplate identified him as Judge Clayton R. Hamblen, who had “immediately transformed into this very kind-hearted guy.”

Robert was charmed.

“He’s compassionate, but he’s firm,” Robert says. “In five minutes, with a smile on his face, he was able to coerce the most hard-looking guy I ever saw in

my life to admit that the story he was telling the judge was baloney. He did it by looking him in the eye and kind of chiding him.”

It was like a Capra movie. Robert felt like he was watching the whole thing in black and white. He half expected the courtroom to erupt into song.

“I went to pay a traffic ticket,” Robert says. “When I left, I felt like I’d been treated to something wonderful.”

Only one thing bothered him. Robert overheard that Judge Hamblen’s court is scheduled to be absorbed into a Maricopa County regional complex in 2010. He worried that the move would drain Hamblen’s courtroom of its character and, in the process, destroy what might be the last of a dying breed.

JUDGE HAMBLEN’S COURTROOM IS INFORMAL, and he runs it himself with the help of a computer, a copier and a scanner that

works only intermittently. He speaks quickly but in plain language. He’s made rules for himself: No words with more than seven letters or more than two vowels touching each other.

“All-righty then,” he might begin, “what’s this about?”

The people who parade before Hamblen’s bench wear T-shirts and work shirts, ball caps and do-rags. Some sport piercings and tattoos. They argue traffic tickets and certain misdemeanors, and plead to DUIs. They face evictions or pursue small claims. Hamblen treats them all with respect. He jokes with them. He lectures like a concerned father.

On a recent Tuesday afternoon, a college student named Stephanie stands before the bench with her father. She has a smooth complexion and large blue eyes. She’s 21, but looks about 16.

Stephanie is pleading guilty to driving under the influence. Her blood-alcohol content tested at .20, well above the .15 required to classify the DUI as extreme.

“Did I give you a hard time the other day?” Hamblen asks.

**ECCLECTIC COLLECTION** Judge Clayton R. “Bud” Hamblen’s office (left) reflects his varied interests as an avid collector of military memorabilia and all things Americana. From his bench, Judge Hamblen (above, right) maintains a just, yet compassionate courtroom.



**PARNELLI HAMBLEN**  
An auto enthusiast since his earliest driving days, Bud Hamblen cleans his helmet in preparation for a figure-8 race at the Arizona State Fair.

“No,” she says with a shy smile.  
“Darn, I meant to. You do this again and I’ll come hunt you down, OK?”  
After sentencing, as Stephanie turns to leave, Hamblen calls after her, “I hope I never see you again.”

“BUD” HAMBLEN LOOKS A LITTLE LIKE William H. Macy. He’s got the same broad forehead, thin lips and fine, ginger-colored hair. He admits to having mostly Scottish and Welsh ancestry, but he’s also part German, Cherokee, Cheyenne and North Kaibab Paiute. He’ll tell you none of it means anything to him. He doesn’t believe in race. That comes partly from the way his parents raised him, and partly from growing up in rural South Phoenix. “I grew up in the melting pot,” he says. “It’s hard for me to be a bigot. I never had the room.”

But if he’s not a bigot, he is a great patriot. His courtroom is hung with a collection of American flags, black-and-white photos of soldiers, and World War I- and World War II-era military service flags. He wanted to be a fighter pilot — his father served in the Third Army Air Corps — but Bud’s eyes went bad. At age 19, he got a permanent deferment after a train hit his car while he was driving to a Veteran’s Day parade. The accident blew out his knee. So now he collects military artifacts.

“I can do this because I never served,” he says, referring to his collections, which include every issue of Life magazine published during WW II, military uniforms, and patriotic postcards of children clutching flags and flowers. But he admits he’ll collect almost anything: old currency, clocks, cars. He still has the first car he ever owned — a ’32 Ford Cabriolet — and the cars that belonged to his parents. “I never sell anything,” he says. “It’s been a lifelong problem.”

HAMBLEN PLEADED HIS FIRST CASE AT age 16. It was his own. He had gotten a

ticket for having more than three people in the front seat of his car. To prepare his defense, he looked up the statute, which was written in 1919. Then he found a 1920 Ford Model A touring car and measured the front seat, calculating how many inches per person the statute allowed. In court, he argued that those allowances, when applied to his own car, left plenty of room for four.

He lost. But he appealed the decision and won by default when no one showed up on behalf of the state.

“I guess I do have a strong feeling about what’s right and what’s wrong,” he says. “That was wrong. Shoot-fire, there was plenty of room in that seat.”

Now, as a judge, he’s heard a million traffic stories.

“A woman gets a ticket coming down from Payson,” he begins his favorite story. “She can’t figure out how she’s going 92 mph. And when she got home after getting a ticket, and got undressed and took off her boots, she realized that all day she’d been wearing her steel-toed boots, and coming home they’d been dragging her foot down on the pedal.”

Hamblen pauses and smiles. “Now that’s good, huh? That’s good. I like that.”

“My worst one is a guy who told me his Ferrari wouldn’t go 97 mph. A 200 mph car. I was thinking about putting him in jail for failing to maintain a prime car. Abuse of a vehicle.”

Hamblen’s early experience in court gave him a taste for the law, but he still hadn’t decided, at age 62 and after 19 years on the bench, to make it a career. He narrowed his choices down to doctor, orthodontist and lawyer, but he didn’t like blood, and once he got braces, he found them painful.

“So, I became a lawyer by default,” he says.

Hamblen attended college and law school at Arizona State University, becoming the first in his extended family

to graduate from college. He was admitted to the State Bar of Arizona in 1972, and worked as a criminal defense attorney. But it wasn’t long before he realized that that career wasn’t right for him.

“I wanted to change the world,” Hamblen says. “By the fifth year, I realized I wasn’t going to.”

He felt guilty about defending people he’d just as soon stuff in a closet. He couldn’t sleep through the night.

“The truth is, I slept with Pepto-Bismol,” Hamblen says. “I drank it before I went to sleep. It was my kick in the morning.”

So, in 1988, he quit.

About that time he convinced his boyhood friend, Michael Orcutt, to run for justice of the peace in Phoenix. Orcutt won, and suggested Hamblen give the bench a try. “He thought I’d like it, and he was right.”

Hamblen worked pro tem for two years, filling in for judges on leave. He ran for JP as a Republican in 1990, and hasn’t looked back since.

A MAN WEARING A BROWN T-SHIRT WITH sand-colored hair and a salt-and-pepper beard hobbles into Hamblen’s courtroom. He bends over a cane, wincing with each step. The man tells the judge his name is William. He’s pleading to an extreme DUI.

“Have a seat anywhere,” Hamblen hails him from the bench. “You own the place.”

“I don’t own it,” William says, “the taxpayers do.”

“It’s a fractional ownership,” Hamblen says.

“Do you mind if I stand?” William asks.

“Stand, sit, whatever you need to do.”

“I can do anything, just not very long.”

“You’re ahead of me,” Hamblen says. “I can’t do anything, but I can do it for a long time.”

Laws govern the minimum and maximum penalties for DUIs, but Hamblen exercises discretion where he can. If defendants work or attend college, he authorizes work release. If their incomes are puny, he waives the incarceration fee. In this case, the judge wonders if William is up to the physical demands of jail, and sets in motion a process that might allow him to serve his time at home.

“The key thing about being a judge is we drive people into such deep holes that they can never crawl out, and they give

up,” he says. “You get a guy who comes in on a hundred thousand a year and he gets fined \$455. Big whoop. You get a guy comes in and he’s making 12 grand a year and you’ve probably just ruined his chances of making the mortgage payment for the next three months — if he’s able to afford a house. Everyone is unique and different. You have to take it case by case.”

Hamblen is proud of the fact that he’s never held anyone in contempt of court, but he has little patience with people who are rude or self-important.

To one plaintiff who complained that a business owner didn’t remember his name, Hamblen said: “Are you really that important that he needs to remember your name? Sheesh!”

“I slept with Pepto-Bismol,  
I drank it before I went to sleep.  
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As William turns to leave, Hamblen asks if he goes by William or Bill.

“I usually go by Bradford,” William says. “Bradford?” Hamblen repeats, sounding surprised. “Well, good luck, Bradford. Do whatever you need to do to feel well.”

IF HAMBLEN FEELS COMPASSION FOR THE people who come before him, it might be because he’s led what he calls “a gloriously imperfect life.”

“I’ve screwed up as much as anyone I know,” he says. And some of those struggles have played out publicly. In 1995, the state bar censured him for violating the rules of professional conduct for his work as an attorney on a personal injury suit in the 1980s. The court found that he failed to file timely discovery responses, resulting in the client’s action being dismissed. The client was able to get the case reinstated with new counsel.

“I screwed up,” Hamblen admits. “I always said that. It was my fault and I deserved it. Did I learn from that? Oh yeah. But I will say it makes me a better judge. I’m very slow to do anything that will screw someone up.”

Judge Michael Orcutt has known Hamblen since they were Cub Scouts. And while he’s never seen him in action, he believes Hamblen is an excellent judge.

“I know he cares about people, and I wouldn’t say he has a soft side, but he does have compassion appropriately,” Orcutt says. “There are times to be tough and there are times to have a little compassion. The art of judging is knowing when people need to have a firm hand and when a softer hand is more effective.”

Orcutt calls his friend competitive and funny, but says Hamblen’s defining characteristic is a big heart.

“He tends to want to show a little bit of gruff side, but I think he does that to hide the big heart part of it,” Orcutt says. “He’s helped a lot of people, but he’s usu-

ally pretty quiet about it. Back when he was an attorney, he would do a lot of pro bono work and most people wouldn’t find out about it.”

Orcutt notes the work Hamblen has done with kids, coaching volleyball, soccer and baseball teams. But the best evidence, he says, is the number of kids he’s adopted.

“He has a lot of patience dealing with each of them,” Orcutt says. “It’s very challenging, and I’m sure very rewarding when they turn out well.”

IF ROBERT HAD COME TO COURT ON another day, he might have seen a beat-up-looking yellow ’75 Camaro with a blue No. 4 painted on the side hitched to the back of Hamblen’s truck. If he had, he might have understood the tires in the back of the truck. Hamblen races on weekends, but sometimes drags his car to court when he plans a weeknight practice. He’s been hooked on racing since 1951, when he was in first grade. That was when he watched his cousin race at Manzanita Speedway on opening day.

The first race Hamblen entered was

a demolition derby. He was 17 and had gotten a Texaco sponsorship.

“In the main event, there were two cars left and the other guy was crippled, and I was headed over there to destroy him,” Hamblen says. “I ran out of gas.”

He chuckles. “I got second because I ran out of gas.”

Hamblen’s term expires in 2010, shortly after his 65th birthday. He hasn’t yet decided whether he’ll run again, but not because the court is scheduled to move into a regional complex. He’s not worried about being forced to change.

“I’d quit before I let that happen,” he says. “You can follow the law, you just don’t have to be mean. I believe in my heart that I handle my court the way court should be handled.”

Instead, he thinks of all the things he’d like to do. He’d like to establish a charitable organization that would help impoverished kids improve their appearance by providing things like braces and eye care. He’d like to have a political talk show and run a political campaign. He has an idea for a line of salsa and a fast-food restaurant that would serve a healthful version of fish and chips — his favorite food. He’d like to travel the world, but he’d like to see the United States first. Above all, he’d like to spend more time with his children. Including those he’s adopted, he counts 14. On the other hand, there’s the law, which he loves as much as his job.

“I love coming to work,” he says. “You don’t get luckier than that.” ■

*Kathy Montgomery is a Mesa-based journalist who teaches magazine writing at Arizona State University. This is her first story for Arizona Highways.*

*If they ever do have to appear in court, photographers Don and Ryan Stevenson hope it’s in front of Judge Hamblen. They were impressed by the judge’s blending of humor, compassion and respect for the law*