

'Judge Charles Franich: 'A prince in the courtroom'

By **DONNA JONES**
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WATSONVILLE — As a Superior Court judge, Charles S. "Chick" Franich presided over two of the most notorious murder trials in county history.

But among those who knew and worked with him, Franich will be remembered more for the decency, integrity and fairness he showed in his courtroom, day in and day out for 20 years.

Franich died Saturday at his home in Watsonville. He was 90.

"He had all the qualities a good judge could have," said Chris Cottle, a retired Superior Court and Appeals Court judge who was Santa Cruz County district attorney during part of Franich's tenure.

"He was very smart, very compassionate, very fair, and had a great sense of



FRANICH

served at the Watsonville annex for five years before he was elevated to the Superior Court in 1963.

Santa Cruz County was a smaller place then. Franich was one of two Superior Court judges, and so interacted frequently with lawyers.

During part of his tenure, he heard cas-

humor. His courtroom was always interesting. He was just an extremely decent person who really cared about people."

Franich, a onetime FBI agent in Washington, D.C., who returned to his hometown Watsonville to practice law, was named to Municipal Court in 1957. He

in the Veteran's Memorial Building, City Hall and the Chinese Room of the Palomar Hotel.

He was known for his booming voice, and a gregariousness nature.

"We said, 'He couldn't walk from his chambers to the john without finding two people to talk to,'" said Harry Brauer, a retired judge and justice who succeeded Franich in Municipal Court and eventually joined him in Superior Court.

Brauer called Franich his mentor.

"He was the one guy if I felt I had a problem that really stumped me I could go into his chambers, put my feet on his desk and say 'Chick, let me chew on you,' and I'd always get help," said Brauer, who retired to Arizona.

Franich sentenced people to death, and

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presided over the trials of two of Santa Cruz County's most infamous murderers: John Lindley Frazier, who killed an eye surgeon, his wife, two children and secretary at their home in the Soquel hills in 1970, and Herbert Mullin, who murdered 13 men, women and children during a four-month spree in 1972-73.

Lawyer Jim Jackson was involved in both cases as public defender. The Frazier murders stunned the community, he recalled.

"(Franich) was a member of the community and he felt for the community," Jackson said. "(But) Franich was nothing but fair."

Bob Bosso, who at various times represented both plaintiffs and defendants in civil cases in Franich's courtroom, said even cases that didn't make the headlines received the judge's full attention. At the time, Superior Court judges heard appeals for Small Claims Court cases, he said.

"The \$5,000 laundry cases, he'd pay as much attention to those as any others," Bosso said. "He felt a lot of people only got in a courtroom once and he wanted to make sure they felt they were fairly treated. ... He was absolutely a prince in the courtroom."

Sentinel editor Tom Honig covered Franich's courtroom as a young reporter. He remembered a man who would interrupt the proceedings to ask questions, sometimes exploring important social issues tangential to the case at hand.

Charles Stephen Franich

BORN: May 16, 1915.

DIED: Jan. 6, 2006.

FAMILY: Croatian immigrants and Pajaro Valley apple farmers.

OCCUPATION: FBI agent, lawyer, judge.

EDUCATION: Graduated Watsonville High School, 1933; Stanford, 1937; Stanford Law, 1940.

SURVIVORS: Son Charles Franich Jr. of Milton, Mass.; daughters Mary Bignell of Santa Cruz and Ann McInnis of San Jose; seven grandchildren. Wife Bridie Murphy Franich died in 1996; son Michael died in 1959 at age 10 of leukemia.

SERVICES: Vigil, 7:30 p.m. Thursday at St. Patrick's Catholic Church, 656 Main St., Watsonville; Mass, 11 a.m. Friday at St. Patrick's. Burial, Valley Catholic Cemetery. Mehl's Colonial Chapel in Watsonville in charge of arrangements.

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Franich was plainspoken, and wanted to make the law accessible, Honig said.

"What I found to be the most inspiring thing about him, his presiding over court on a daily basis, was that he was kind to

people, he was fair to people, and he really took seriously the idea of being a judge," he said.

Franich's daughter, Mary Bignell of Santa Cruz, recalled her father coming home at the end of the day, eating dinner, taking a nap and then going back to work until 1 a.m.

Like many fathers of the 1950s and '60s, he considered the home front more his wife's realm than his own, she said, though he was probably more involved with his children than many fathers of the time. He was particularly supportive of their education. She remembered him helping with algebra homework.

"He was very big on math homework," Bignell said.

He was also deeply religious, she said, a Catholic who attended Mass every day until his health no longer permitted him to drive.

But he loved the law, Bignell said.

Even though he judged terrible crimes, Franich tried to see the humanity in people.

In 1977, when he retired, Franich recalled the case of a Catholic priest convicted of sexual abuse with a minor. Franich wrote to the man after he served his sentence.

"I told him any of us, anytime, is capable of almost anything under the wrong circumstances and pressures," Franich said. "It's easy to judge another human being. ... It's hard to back up and see the problems he has behind him."

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