

Judge Donald Pitts heard colorful cases in his Yosemite courtroom

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Carmen George



Yosemite Federal Magistrate Donald Pitts is seen in his office at the small courthouse in Yosemite National Park in 1993.

JAY MATHER

Thinking of a federal judge, this image probably doesn't come to mind: A bearded, long-haired, former smoke jumper firefighter with an affinity for bolo ties, colorful vests and a 160-pound Rottweiler named "Bailiff" who accompanied him to court.

But that was Donald Pitts, retired federal magistrate judge for Yosemite National Park.

Mr. Pitts died July 31 of a heart attack at the age of 86. A Yosemite resident for 36 years, Mr. Pitts returned in 2011 to Fresno, where he formerly worked as an attorney.

As a Yosemite judge for 18 years, he ruled on federal misdemeanors in the park, Stanislaus National Forest and nearby Bureau of Land Management territory.

His colorful life drew the attention of The New York Times, which featured him when he retired in 1993, chronicling many interesting cases that made their way to his small, Yosemite Valley courthouse: daredevil parachutists, an arsonist who burned buildings in protest of civilization, and tourists who lured bears with raw steaks.

On Wednesday, his wife of 33 years, Kay Tolladay Pitts, recalled many amusing defendants, such as the daring mountaineers caught trying to grab marijuana from a plane that crashed in Yosemite in 1976. Officials had to guard the crash site after word got out that pot was floating in a high country lake.

Mr. Pitts was "tremendously ethical" and utilized his superb memory as a judge, as a prosecutor in the Fresno County District Attorney's Office and as a private-practice attorney, said Kenneth Andreen, retired Fresno municipal and Superior Court judge and Court of Appeal justice. "He knew what the rules of evidence were and he followed them. ... He always did more than his share of the work and he had a sense of humor and he enjoyed himself. It was easy to be around him because he was so friendly."

As a judge, he was also known to "go anywhere" in Yosemite to administer weddings. On his free time, Mr. Pitts often sported his "Ski or Die" T-shirt while gliding over the Sierra on powdery white. He established the cross-country division of the Yosemite Winter Club.

In his early years, he was a pre-med major at the University of California, Los Angeles and a U.S. Army paratrooper. He earned his law degree at the University of California, Berkeley. In retirement, he and his wife built and ran the Yosemite Peregrine, a bed and breakfast in Yosemite West.

"He loved to dance, he loved to sing, he was just very warm," Kay Tolladay Pitts said. "He taught me to be a much warmer, nicer person. He taught me to be far more loving than I ever thought I would be.

"He was just very open to life ... open to experiences. Things just didn't bother him, he didn't have moods. ... He dealt very successfully with life, and interestingly, we didn't seem to have any bad times."

The outlook of this "marvelous person," his wife said, "came from his being totally open to every experience and accepting people as they are."

Donald William Pitts

Age: 86

Residence: Fresno

Birth: April 15, 1928

Death: July 31, 2014

Occupation: Retired federal magistrate judge for Yosemite National Park

Survivors: Wife Kay Tolladay Pitts of Fresno; children Donald Pitts of Petaluma, Linda Tolladay of Clovis, Michaela Pitts of Ukiah, Laura Tolladay of Roseville, Ann Acuna of San Francisco, Eric Tolladay and Valley Village, Robert Pitts of Ahwahnee; 12 grandchildren; five great-grandchildren; brother Dale Pitts of Yucaipa; and sister MaryAnn Block of Evansville, Ind.

Celebration of life: 4 p.m. Friday at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Fresno, 2672 E. Alluvial Ave.

The reporter can be reached at (559) 441-6386, cgeorge@fresnobee.com or @CarmenGeorge on Twitter.