

PAST CHAIRMAN PROFILE¹

**Richard Dennis “Dick” Watt
(1947-2020)**

OGERL Section Chairman (2007-2008)

Dick Watt was born on August 22, 1947, and raised in Athens, Texas. That Dick’s life would be tied to the oil and gas industry should not come as a surprise, considering Athens is also the hometown of two of the nation’s most successful oilmen, Clint W. Murchison, Jr., and Sid W. Richardson. Dick was proud to have grown up there, and was quick to remind those unfamiliar with Athens that the town was both the birthplace of the hamburger and the “Black-Eyed Pea Capital of the World.”

Dennis Cavner was a childhood friend of Dick’s in Athens, and remembers the humble origins of Dick’s athletic prowess. “I think Dick’s success in sports was due to a bicycle. In Athens, as kids, we rode our bikes everywhere. Around third grade, Dick’s bike got busted up too badly to ride, and so he started running from place to place that our group would go. Going to baseball practice, we’d ride our bikes – he would run over and run home. And so forth. By the time he got to high school he was a running machine, and he just ran and ran and ran for the Athens Hornets and then the Texas Longhorns,” recalls Cavner.

The extra running eventually paid off, as Dick was a star running back and defensive back for the 1964 district champion Athens Hornets, and set numerous school offensive

and defensive records, including most interceptions in a season, career interceptions, career total touchdowns and career rushing yards. In 2014, Dick was quoted in his hometown *Athens Daily Review* on the imminent occasion of his high school football rushing record being broken after standing for a remarkable fifty years. In revealing fashion, Dick offered: “Fifty years is long enough. I would love to personally congratulate the young man who does it and wish him well.” As it turns out, two fine players surpassed the record that season and Dick was photographed standing between them with his arms over their shoulders sporting his wide smile at the school’s homecoming game. John Beckworth was Dick’s longtime friend, law partner and an Associate Dean at the University of Texas School of Law. Beckworth commented that commending the young players was vintage Dick Watt, and that “those of us who were fortunate to pass his way in life recognized that same generosity of spirit in Dick and our lives were enriched by knowing him.”

Dick’s friends and colleagues remember fondly his love of perusing the weekly high school football scores, and his expert eye when watching a game. He would often share with his fellow spectators how modern coaching does not place nearly enough emphasis on the fair catch!

¹ Contributed by J. Byron “Trace” Burton, III, of Uhl, Fitzsimons, Jewett, Burton, Wolff & Rangel, PLLC, San Antonio, Texas.

Dick's talents on the gridiron continued when Coach Darrell Royal recruited him to play at the University of Texas. Dick played as a defensive back at Texas under legendary defensive coordinator Mike Campbell. His teammates included quarterback James Street, and future Longhorn Men's Athletic Director and Houston attorney Mike Perrin. Upon Perrin's arrival in Austin to move into the Moore-Hill athletic dormitory, the first person he met was fellow freshman Dick Watt. The two remained friends from that summer day in 1965 until Dick's passing. Perrin described Dick as a "fierce competitor" on the gridiron. A favorite memory was when Texas played the USC Trojans during their junior season. A young Trojan running back was holding the pigskin too loosely on a running play, so Perrin stripped the ball and Dick pounced on the fumble. Upon their return to the Texas sideline, both players remarked that while they got the best of O.J. Simpson on that particular play, he was destined for stardom.

During Dick's first two years playing for the Longhorns, the team went 6-4 each season. In Dick's senior season, the 1968 Longhorns team was a Southwest Conference co-champion, defeated Tennessee in the Cotton Bowl, and went 9-1-1. Capitalizing on the momentum from the 1968 season, the Longhorns claimed the national championship the following year during a thirty-game win streak that is still regarded as the golden era of Texas football.

Dick thought that if you lived in Texas, you should know something about the oil and gas industry. So, while they were undergrads at Texas, both Dick and Perrin took introductory courses in petroleum engineering and management. Those courses served as the foundation for what would become Dick's lifelong fascination with and respect for the energy industry.

After graduation, Dick enrolled at the University of Texas School of Law where, in addition to his scholastic pursuits, he was a founding member of the 805 Club. The 805 Club was named for the address of a house near the law school where Dick and several other noted future Texas attorneys lived over the years. Perrin fondly recalls the 805 Club as a gathering place where you could stop by for coffee on the way to class and take a break from the everyday stress of law school. While Dick's professional life eventually centered on oil, gas and energy law, he fondly remembered studying constitutional law under the esteemed law professor Charles Alan Wright during the turbulent late 1960s.

At the time of his death, Dick was of counsel with Houston's Pierce and O'Neill, LLP. Previously, he was a founder of two well-known energy law firms in Houston, first Watt, White, and Craig, and later Watt, Beckworth, Thompson & Henneman. One of Dick's longtime law partners, Joseph G. Thompson, III, remembers Dick first as a friend and mentor, and secondly as an attorney who simply loved oil and gas law. At the Watt, Beckworth law firm, Dick was routinely referred to as "the Professor" and his intellectual curiosity knew no bounds. He took pride in his work product, and was a perfectionist when it came to preparing the written brief. Indeed, Dick once went through *eighty-six* drafts of a document before approving it for filing.

If Dick felt that a court had not arrived at a decision supported by the law, or if he disagreed with the court's reasoning, he was known to draft and file an amicus brief – even when he or his clients were not parties and had no interest in the case. He was always willing to debate the finer points of Texas oil and gas law with colleagues, and he had a special affinity for the law of implied covenants in oil and gas leases, partly due to

his involvement as counsel for the mineral owners in *Sun Exploration & Production Co. v. Jackson*, 715 S.W.2d 199 (1986).

Perrin recalls attending an oral argument at the Supreme Court of Texas during the 1990s, and to his surprise there in the gallery sat his old friend Dick Watt. Again, Dick had no dog in that particular fight, but drove from Houston to Austin just to watch arguments on a case that presented an interesting issue of Texas law.

His competitive drive was evident as he achieved great results for his clients in and out of the courtroom, but even his adversaries remember him as the consummate gentleman. Past OGERL Section Chair Ricardo Morales recalls his longtime friendship with Dick. “I first met Dick as a young lawyer. He was my opposing counsel in a deposition I was taking in Houston. The deposition was not very interesting and people were getting sleepy. When it was his turn to ask questions, he shook the room with his loud voice and sharp questioning. He made an impression on me that I will not forget. Since then, we worked together for years on State Bar projects and as opposing counsel. He was always respectful while vigorously defending his clients.”

In addition to Dick’s service as Past Chairman of the Oil, Gas and Energy Resources Law Section of the State Bar of Texas, he was also a former Co-Chair of the Texas Oil, Gas & Energy Resources Law Section Pattern Jury Charge Project and Pattern Jury Charge Committee. Dick was a proud Recipient of the Ernest E. Smith Lifetime Achievement Award from the *Texas Journal of Oil, Gas and Energy Law*. He was a perennial selection among the *Best Lawyers in America* and the *Texas Super Lawyers*.

According to Beckworth, “Dick was equally at home in his downtown Houston law office, in courtrooms across the state, and in sitting fireside with friends at the family ranch near Monahans. Dick loved getting up early on Saturday mornings, dressing casually, driving into the office, and editing a legal brief over morning coffee.”

Dick was intensely proud of his beloved spouse, Mary, who predeceased him, and their two children, Ashley and Christina. Dick was perhaps happiest when he was with his family at their Antina Ranch in Ward and Crane Counties in far west Texas. Beginning in 1995, the Watt family retreated to the ranch to work cattle, enjoy the sunsets and embrace solitude that Houston did not afford them.

A most fitting tribute comes from Dick’s longtime friend Tom Kirkendall, who recalled that “Dick Watt was the human personification of Gus McRae, the wonderful Texas Ranger from Larry McMurry’s legendary novel, *Lonesome Dove*, that Dick treasured. He exemplified the qualities of a good friend and colleague. My wife and I cherish our memories of Dick and will miss him dearly.”

Dick Watt will be forever missed.