

# DOC HALLIDAY

## Seeking Warmth on Whim, He Found the Law

by Elizabeth Davies



PEORIA—Years before he ever dreamed of becoming a criminal defense attorney, Ronald Halliday's classmates gave him a nickname that was a throwback to one of the most famous gunmen of the Wild West.

Doc Halliday, they called him. His last name was so similar to famed O.K. Corral gunfighter and Wyatt Earp compatriot Doc Holliday that they couldn't resist. It's a nickname that's been with him so long, Halliday can't entirely remember when it started.

"All the way back to high school, maybe even grade school," he says.

Even with a successful law practice in Peoria, Halliday is still known by clients, peers, and judges as "Doc." He now practices alone, his firm name simply, **Doc Halliday, Attorney at Law**.

Years after starting his career in his hometown, Halliday, 63, no longer does much criminal defense work, concentrating primarily on workers' compensation and personal injury claims. But it's a career this Peoria native has embraced and enjoyed, even though it wasn't the path he'd planned.

"I wanted to be a math teacher and basketball and baseball coach," said Halliday, who attended Illinois State University on a baseball scholarship and had a tryout with the Pittsburgh Pirates after college.

But during his senior year, his best friend said, "Hey, let's go to law school."

"So he talked me into it," says Halliday. "We wanted someplace warm with good sports. So

we ended up at the University of Tennessee."

With that, his teaching plans were left behind and Halliday embarked on a career in law. The son of a nurse and a telephone installer, Halliday finished law school and returned to Peoria. He knocked on doors until he found a position at an existing practice. He didn't have plans to specialize.

"I was just going to go and see what happened."

In Peoria, it's not unusual for start-up attorneys to pick up part-time work as public defenders. That's precisely how Halliday got his feet wet. For the first six years, he was able to grow his practice, but still pay the bills, thanks to the work he got as a defender.

"I loved it," he says. "Peoria has one of the best public defense systems in the state, in part, because it is part-time. Lawyers will do that and develop their own practice. Because of that, a lot of really good attorneys stick with it for years."

The time he spent acting as a public defender influenced his career in a multitude of ways. He went on to meet his longtime legal partner when they were both doing public defense work. The pair worked together until Halliday went out on his own earlier this year.

It also taught him to trust the criminal justice system, and to appreciate his role in it.

"People would go, 'How do you defend people you know are guilty?'" he says. "You had to give it your best shot. Even if 80 or 90 percent really were guilty, you can't know

which ones, as most defendants maintain their innocence. So you have to let the system work."

Halliday is quick to recall one case. A hardened criminal was accused of beating a man and there were witnesses. It seemed open and shut.

But the defendant told Halliday that if he checked jail records he would find the accused was behind bars at the time of the beating. He couldn't possibly have done it. In the end, it seemed some enemies had convinced witnesses to lie about the case.

"It really taught me that you are innocent until proven guilty," he says. Perhaps his most notable case from those days was also the one with the highest stakes—a death penalty case. Halliday remembered the advice he got in law school: Go to the scene of the crime and talk to people.

So Halliday drove to the projects, to the place where the murder happened. He looked at the spot, began talking to neighbors. One woman told him that she saw the shooting—and that his client didn't do it.

"I put this lady on the stand and...I got a not guilty," he recalls. "It was a matter of doing your homework. If you go to the scene, you pick up things you wouldn't see in photographs."

Working public defense cases taught him a few key lessons about the law, namely, that a job wasn't done unless it was well done.

"It was pressure-packed," he says. "With all the cases you handle, especially the felonies, you are giving it your best. You want to know that no one is doing time because you didn't give it 100 percent."

### Offering a Wing to Injured

Halliday now limits his criminal defense work, instead taking on mostly workers' compensation and personal injury cases. It's a specialty he loves because of the rewarding feeling of helping others.

"I'll have employees who are there 20 or 25 years and they have a serious injury," he says. "The company treats them like they committed a crime. When a person comes here, they don't know who to trust or what to do. So we take them under our wing and help them."

It's challenging and highly emotional work, however. His clients are often under great financial strain. They are off work due to an injury, they might have lost their benefits and medical bills are piling up.

Halliday has one case that he's been working on since his client was injured in 1997. The case has been through the appellate system more than once and is still ongoing.

"I didn't think about the fact that I haven't made a dime off this case," Halliday says. "What's right is right and what's wrong is wrong."

U.S. District Court Judge Mike McCuskey has had Halliday appear before him many times throughout his career. He says Halliday has a strong success rate and has been impressive in court.

"Doc is very personable and well-liked by his fellow lawyers and judge," McCuskey says. "He is well-prepared and very professional in his approach in court and with fellow lawyers. Those traits enhance his professional success.

"Moreover, he has the street smarts to converse with clients and gain their confidence, and immediately turn to speak to a judge or a jury in a split second. Many lawyers only have a single personality. Doc is a man for all seasons."

Halliday says his personality as an upbeat extrovert has helped him succeed in his job over the years. "I'm a positive person and I'm a straight shooter," he said.

He also credits the strong legal community in Peoria for making his career so satisfying. "Peoria is a great place to practice," he said. "Most of the attorneys here, you can trust. It makes it very enjoyable to practice here."

## **An Aggressive Reputation**

Retired Chief Judge Robert Manning has known Halliday for more than two decades, from the days when Halliday was just "getting his stripes as a lawyer."

Manning worked much of his career as a criminal court judge before retiring in 1997, and Halliday appeared before him often.

"He represented his clients well," he said. "He was aggressive. He was honest about it. If he gave the other attorney his word, you could bank on it."

Joseph Winne is a Peoria attorney who has known Halliday for 35 years. He's gone up against Halliday on injury claims and also described him as aggressive.

"He'll take on any case," he says. "He's not afraid to take on a very difficult case and run with it."

Winne also said that Halliday is well liked and respected throughout the community.

"Doc is kind of a legend. Everyone knows him," Winne says. "He's one of those guys you meet one day and you never forget him. He

knows everybody in town and everybody knows him."

Winne said Halliday is very attractive to clients because of his attentiveness.

"He's very client-driven," he says. "He has his clients' best interests at heart above everything else. He is a people-practice guy and does a very good job."

Halliday has deep roots in Peoria, even beyond the legal community. He remembers growing up during the glory days of Bradley University basketball, so although he didn't attend the school, he is a booster you can count on seeing at games. He also serves on the board of directors for the fundraising arm of Bradley athletics.

He has a love of sports, enjoying both golf and competitive poker. Last summer, he played in the Senior World Series of Poker in Las Vegas, coming in 37th out of 4,182 players.

Halliday and his wife, Mari, also have long been involved with the Children's Miracle Network, having lost their four-day-old daughter, Hillary, after a risky surgery 21 years ago. He continues to be involved with the District 150 Foundation, which assists his local school district.

He's raised three children, one of whom, his 34-year-old son, is now a lawyer in Chicago. At 63, he's enjoying the next stage of life, one without children at home and in a new, solo legal practice. He has every intention of working for years to come, heading to the office every day to tackle a new challenge, a different case, a career he loves.

"I can't believe I have been doing this since 1976," he says. "I love it. I think it's a great career. I've enjoyed my life as I've gone along." ■