

# IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF NEVADA

IN THE MATTER OF A MEMORIAL TO THE  
HONORABLE GORDON R. THOMPSON.

## ORDER

As an expression of the esteem and respect held by the Bench and Bar of the State of Nevada for the late Honorable Gordon R. Thompson, who passed away in Reno on February 4, 1995,

IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that the following memorial be printed in the next published volume of the Nevada Reports.

Dated this 23rd day of May, 2003.

## BY THE COURT

DEBORAH A. AGOSTI, *Chief Justice*

MIRIAM SHEARING  
*Associate Justice*

ROBERT E. ROSE  
*Associate Justice*

MYRON E. LEAVITT  
*Associate Justice*

NANCY A. BECKER  
*Associate Justice*

A. WILLIAM MAUPIN  
*Associate Justice*

MARK GIBBONS  
*Associate Justice*

## MEMORIAL

Gordon R. Thompson was a true son of Nevada. He was born in Reno on March 2, 1918, to Reuben C. and Mabel McLaren Thompson. His parents were pioneer stock, who had come west to settle in Nebraska, Oregon, and then Nevada, where they settled in a home on the banks of the Truckee River. His father was a Professor of Philosophy and Head of the Philosophy Department at the University of Nevada-Reno; he would eventually become the Dean of Students. Justice Thompson was said to have inherited his deep philosophical bent from his father.

Justice Thompson received his early education in public schools in Reno. He graduated from McKinley Park Grammar School, Northside Junior High School, and Reno High School. During his time at Reno High School, he was involved in student government and played on the basketball team. He graduated from the University of Nevada-Reno in 1940. While at the University, he continued to play basketball and was a member of the team that won the Far-Western Conference Championship in 1938. In addition to his athletic skills, he had a fine voice and enjoyed singing,

participating in two choral groups—the Reno Men’s Chorus and the Silver State Barbershop Quartet.

After graduating from the University, he attended Stanford University where he received his law degree in 1943. He soon returned to Nevada. On November 29, 1943, he was admitted to the State Bar of Nevada. He started his law practice in Reno that year in a law partnership with Thomas O. Craven and Douglas A. Busey.

In 1944, Justice Thompson successfully ran for a seat in the state assembly. He served a single term during the 1945 legislative session. As an assemblyman, he chaired the Judiciary Committee and the Rules Committee. He also served on several other committees, including the Education Committee. He was fond of recounting his experience in introducing a bill that required applicants for marriage licenses to undergo a blood test. The impetus for the bill lay in the government’s need to track and deal with hereditary diseases; however, as Justice Thompson put it, he was practically stoned out of the Legislature for suggesting something that would have a deleterious effect on the state’s marriage business. That one session in the Legislature proved to be enough, although he would continue his involvement in civic activities, serving seven years as a School Trustee in the Reno School District and one year as a School Trustee in the Washoe County School District.

In 1946, Justice Thompson joined the Washoe County District Attorney’s Office as one of only three assistant district attorneys, along with Grant L. Bowen and John C. Bartlett. In 1948, he left the district attorney’s office and joined the law firm of Woodburn, Forman, and Woodburn. He became a partner in that firm, which became Woodburn, Forman, Wedge, Blakey and Thompson, in 1956. During his time in private practice, he focused on trial work and developed a strong reputation for his easy manner before a jury.

In addition to his legal practice, Justice Thompson actively participated in bar organizations. He served as president of the Washoe County Bar Association and as a member of the Board of Governors of the State Bar of Nevada. His life outside of the legal profession was focused on his wife Betty Ricker Thompson and their two daughters, Mada and Robin Marie.

When Justice Miles Pike announced his resignation from the Nevada Supreme Court in 1961, Justice Thompson expressed his interest in the position to Governor Grant Sawyer. Many prominent members of the Nevada Bar wrote Governor Sawyer in support of Justice Thompson’s appointment to the court. Procter Hug, Jr., wrote that Justice Thompson possessed the qualities that he believed should be had by a supreme court justice—“a keenness of mind to search out the law, comprehend it and apply it to the circumstances at hand, together with the conviction and

courage necessary to establish new doctrines of law as they become warranted.” That year, Governor Sawyer appointed Justice Thompson to the Nevada Supreme Court. At the time, Justice Thompson, then forty-three years old, was the youngest judge ever appointed to a state supreme court in the United States.

Justice Thompson served on the court until 1980. He was chief justice for several terms and won re-election three times. During his tenure, he saw the court through many changes including its expansion from three to five justices in 1967. He also authored hundreds of opinions, one of which was praised by United States Supreme Court Justice William Brennan. He was known for drafting clear and concise opinions. Upon his appointment to the court, Robert Taylor Adams noted Justice Thompson’s ability to focus on that which is relevant to the matter at hand:

One very interesting thing to lawyers about Gordon is the quality which he has of relevant thinking. All of us, I am afraid, depart from that kind of thinking from time to time, and the one time it should not be departed from is in the practice of law and, above all, when sitting as a Judge. We know Gordon has a good mind. We know how likable he is. We know he has experience. But those of you who have not known him as a lawyer will perhaps not realize the really keen sense of relevance which he has. It is said that lawyers should be experts in relevance; Gordon is such an expert.

In addition to his keen sense of the relevant, Justice Thompson was known for his concern for and interest in civil rights and liberties. He once observed, “Our nation need not worry about a court that zealously protects individual liberty. When it ceases to do so, then we shall have deep concern.” He enjoyed welcoming new law clerks to the court by inviting them into his office for a spirited round-table discussion of any appropriately inflammatory socio-legal issues of the day, such as legalized abortion or capital punishment. After almost nineteen years of service on the court, Justice Thompson retired in 1980.

When Justice Thompson retired, he had been widowed and later married Kathleen Wall. Soon after his retirement from the court, he helped form the faculty for and taught at Old College School of Law in Reno. Although he spent only two years at the school, he immensely enjoyed his contact with his students. He spent the rest of his retirement in various endeavors at Ophir Mill, the old Bundy Guest Ranch in Washoe Valley. He loved animals and spent much of his time caring for his and Kathleen’s horse, dogs, and cats. He also developed an interest in home construction work, first building rocked-in planter walls and pathway borders, which escalated into a full, rock-walled, shake-roofed barn for the horse. Justice Thompson passed away in Reno on February 4, 1995.