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Longtime St. Clair County Sheriff Mearl Justus dies



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Longtime St. Clair County Sheriff Mearl Justus resigns

The board chairman said health woes were a factor in 81-year-old Mearl Justus' decision to resign.
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Mearl Justus, who served as sheriff of St. Clair County for three decades before resigning from the position last week, died Tuesday afternoon at Memorial Hospital in Belleville.

He was 81. He started as a street cop in Cahokia and was police chief there for 20 years before serving as county sheriff.

He had just resigned from the position on Tuesday, citing health issues.

Mr. Justus rarely carried a gun, although it was said that he always had one within reach. He taught criminal justice classes and told his college students they would solve more crimes with a pen than a gun.

During a career as one of the longest-serving sheriffs he helped lead his profession into the next era.

“Mearl Justus is the reason I’m a police chief today. There’s no hesitation,” St. Louis County Police Chief Tim Fitch said this evening. Fitch was a 16-year-old police explorer scout in Cahokia when he first met Justus, who was the department’s chief.

He said Mr. Justus was progressive and an “absolute giant in law enforcement,” who eventually hired him and then encouraged him to go to a bigger department so he’d have more opportunities.

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"He taught me a lot of cuss words," said Fitch. "So, that's Mearl Justus. He would laugh if he read that in an obituary."

Mr. Justus was a law-and-order sheriff, but outspoken about changing traditional police practices.

He once sent out notices telling 1,000 fugitives they had won a free pair of sneakers. When they showed up, he locked them up.

Mr. Justus featured photos of the "drug house of the month" to spotlight criminals. He turned jailhouse cells into fund-raising parties for charities. He pushed programs to educate kids about drugs and got convicted felons to make scary speeches to impressionable youngsters.

He sold advertising space on his patrol cars and put public service announcements on the fenders.

He gave jail inmates a garden to grow vegetables. The prisoners ate their own produce and Mr. Justus gave what was left to nursing homes.

He collected 500 guns his department had confiscated and swapped them for bulletproof vests for his deputies.

One perk of being sheriff was free housing: a three-bedroom apartment atop the overcrowded county jail in Belleville.

All the apartment doors and windows were locked and you couldn't leave without carrying a set of keys. On a floor below the apartment was the jail's kitchen, where the cook counted his knives hourly for fear of his inmate assistants walking off with them.

Mr. Justus and his wife raised their granddaughter in the jail when she was in elementary and high school.

Mr. Justus was among the last of the sheriffs who lived in their jails, and the county was planning to turn his living quarters into badly-needed jail space.

Nearly thirty years after his first election as sheriff in 1982, he said he had no plans to retire.

"They'll probably carry me out of here," he told the Post-Dispatch in September 2011.

Current Sheriff Rick Watson said Justus hired him in Cahokia in 1979, where Watson eventually became chief, and they had been good friends since. He said Mr. Justus had always had him in mind to succeed him. "It's an eerie feeling that I was confirmed last night, and almost 24 hours later he passed," Watson said. "So he got his wish." Watson said he visited him in the hospital just an hour or so before he passed away.

Funeral information was incomplete, but Watson said he would help his family plan "a big sendoff."

"He needs to get everything he deserves and more. He deserves it. There's a lot of people out in law enforcement who owe their careers to him."

St. Clair County State's Attorney Brendan Kelly said Mr. Justus had a wonderful sense of humor, but took the job of protecting the public very seriously. "He was always a very strong partner with every prosecutor that encountered him," Kelly said. "He was very serious about making sure things were done the right way. He wanted to make sure that cases were investigated properly, and that police officers always did the right thing."



St. Clair County Board Chairman Mark Kern said Mr. Justus was always a professional, even when he disagreed with you. "He understood the art of working with people," Kern said. "He did that within his department, he did it at budget time."

He said Mr. Justus' "razor-sharp" wit proved popular with citizens. "Anyone who had a dinner or an occasion, if you had Mearl Justus as your master of ceremonies, that meant you would double your attendance."

United States Congressman Jerry Costello, D-Belleville, said in a statement: "Sheriff Mearl Justus was known throughout the area, state and country in law enforcement circles as a consummate professional and a cop's cop. In addition to doing an outstanding job for the people of our area, Mearl was a personal friend. His contributions, leadership and legacy will be remembered for many years to come."

Mr. Justus was 19 months old when his father died. He was raised by his grandparents, poor farmers in Cahokia.

In 1953, as a high school dropout, the mayor told him he was big enough to make a good police officer. Mr. Justus strapped on a gun and badge, all he needed then to become a part-time officer.

In those days, his patrol car had no radio. If you needed a cop, he said, you walked around until you found one.

As Cahokia grew from a small, rural town, so did crime. Burglaries turned into armed robberies and in 1972 he investigated his first murder.

The body of Robbie Watson, 14, was found eight weeks after he turned up missing. Chief Justus led the investigation, but there were few leads.

Thirty years after the murder, Mr. Justus got a letter from a prison inmate who confessed to murdering the boy. The prisoner was already serving time in another, unrelated murder in another state.

Although the inmate was never charged in Robbie's murder, Mr. Justus said he had no doubt that he was the killer.

In his Cahokia days, he said, he never would have sought help from the St. Louis Area Major Case Squad.

"I thought people would think we were not smart enough to do it ourselves," he recalled in 2011.

Some police chiefs still act like that, he added.

After he became sheriff, Mr. Justus was elected chairman of the board of the Major Case Squad. The squad calls upon some of the best investigators on both sides of the Mississippi to solve major crimes, usually murders.

Mr. Justus left standing orders for his department to call Major Case any time there was no immediate suspect for a murder in his jurisdiction.

"Don't hesitate — and the hell with who solves it," he said.

In another case, Mr. Justus helped arrest Charles Walker, later convicted of the 1983 murder of a young engaged couple in a robbery that netted \$40.

Walker was executed by lethal injection in 1990 — Illinois' first execution since the state stopped using the electric chair in 1977. Sheriff Justus was a witness at the execution.

"I hope I can die that easily," he said at the time. "It was a very peaceful death."

Of his many accomplishments, he said, he was most proud of the memorial to fallen officers built in front of his jail.

The memorial wasn't for the dead, he added. "The memorial is for us, so that we never forget those people who give up their life."

While still in Cahokia as a high-school dropout, Mr. Justus realized that if he wanted to remain a cop, he needed an education.

He earned his GED, got an associates degree at Southwestern Illinois College in Belleville, and then got a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from correspondence courses. In 1981, he took more correspondence courses for a "master's degree" from what is commonly considered a diploma mill in London, England.

Mr. Justus said he wrote essays, took monitored tests and earned credit for his law enforcement experience. "It was harder than sitting in a classroom," he said.

He taught law enforcement at Southwestern Illinois College and started a scholarship program to help students with GEDs continue their education.

Mr. Justus and his wife, Audrey, owned a house boat at Kentucky Lake, Kentucky, not far from her hometown. It was the only home he owned as sheriff.

To relax, he enjoyed public speaking and fishing.

Funeral arrangements were pending. In addition to his wife, Audrey Justus, of Belleville, Mr. Justus is survived by two daughters, Kay McGrew of O'Fallon, Ill. and Debra McNeely of Fenton; four grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Valerie Schremp Hahn of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.

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