

## Mr. Odem Served As A Judge In Waterloo For 15 Years

# Waterloo court has small docket

### Judge arrives at work after plane flight

In the mid-1970s, each incorporated Alabama town was given the choice of having its own court or to have cases handled in a district court. Three of the small towns in Lauderdale County — Rogersville, Waterloo and Killen — have their own courts, while Lexington, St. Florian and Anderson use the district court. This is the second of three profiles of the municipal judges for the small towns.

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A municipal judge might be the last person you'd think would fall victim to a "layoff." But Dennis Odem, Waterloo's judge for six years, lost his judgeship for several months when the town had no police officer — thus, no arrests, and no need for a judge.

During that time, Waterloo's law enforcement came from the county and the state. But when the town was able to hire another policeman, Odem was back.

He holds court once a month and arrives there in an unusual fashion.

"I live at Happy Hollow, at the other end of the county from Waterloo," Odem said. "To save time, I fly down in my seaplane and the police chief meets me at the park.

"I may be the only judge around who wears sneakers to court, but I have to climb out on the wing of the plane and, to be safe, I have to wear deck shoes," he said.

Odem said Waterloo has very little crime and "about 95 percent of all violations are traffic, many of them alcohol-related."

"The dry county situation poses a lot of problems with violations," Odem said, "but basically Waterloo is quiet, peaceful and more of a recreation area than anything else."

The small-town atmosphere provides a small court docket in Water-



Waterloo judge Dennis Odem travels to court by seaplane.

JON KILLEN/STPH

loo. "We have about 15 arrests a month," Odem said. "About 12 or 13 will plead guilty and pay their fine, and we might have two or three trials." When a trial is held, attorney Stan Smith acts as prosecutor.

Many people plead guilty to offenses that can be paid ahead and handle it without appearing in court. "Of course, some charges, such as DUI or reckless driving, require a court appearance," Odem said. He recalls "very few" appeals to district court.

"I think municipal court works pretty well for the small towns," Odem

said. "The Legislature gives us pretty much a free hand. We have wide discretion for fines and sentences in the cases that we are allowed to handle."

Is a small town judge more apt to get calls seeking special favors?

"I don't think so," Odem said. "We only handle misdemeanors. If anyone should try to influence me, I think just a reminder that they're attempting to bribe a judge should take care of it. That's committing a felony to get consideration on a misdemeanor. It just wouldn't be worth it to them."

Municipal judges handle only criminal cases, no civil. To many people, though, a judge means just one thing. "People will call and ask me to marry them. I have to tell them I'm not qualified, but if it doesn't work out, I'll handle the divorce," said Odem, also a practicing attorney.

His own wife, Carolyn, is a full-time employee in his law office. She's a secretary and "she even does windows." Their son John, 3, is too young to participate in the family business, but he enjoys the family's lakeside home and seaplane.