



James Hardy Payne

March 5, 1941 - December 2, 2025

Judge James Hardy Payne (March 5, 1941 - December 2, 2025)

James Hardy Payne, 84, of Tulsa, Oklahoma, after a prolonged battle with multiple health issues, entered into the presence of his Lord and Savior on December 2, 2025. A longtime member of the Eastern Oklahoma legal community, Jim practiced law in Muskogee before serving as a United States District Judge in both Muskogee and Tulsa for nearly twenty years.

Jim was born on March 5, 1941, in Lubbock, Texas to Hollis Lee and Leona (Hecht) Payne. He later moved with his parents and younger sister (Carol Ann) to Stamford, Texas where he graduated from high school in 1959. Jim (known then as “Jimmy”) was a member of two Texas high school state championship football teams (1956 and 1958) and was named to the Texas Sports Writers AA All State football team (1st team) in 1958.

In 1959, he received a football scholarship from the University of Oklahoma where he played for legendary coach Bud Wilkinson. Jim lost his father while in high school and Wilkinson became a mentor to him. He made lifelong friends as a student-athlete at OU and was an avid Sooner football fan.

In 1963, Jim graduated from OU with a Bachelor of Science degree.

On September 7, 1963, he married Judith (“Judy”) Mills. She was a year behind him in school in Stamford and also attended college at OU. Though they grew up together in Stamford, Jim and Judy did not start dating until they were both at OU.

Coach Wilkinson encouraged Jim to consider law school, and in 1963 he enrolled at OU’s College of Law. He graduated with a JD from OU in 1966. During his law school years, he helped coach OU’s football team as a graduate assistant under Coach Wilkinson.

Between 1966 and 1970, he served as a JAG officer in the United States Air Force with the Strategic Air Command at Columbus AFB in Columbus, Mississippi. He served a temporary duty assignment at Andersen AFB in Guam and was discharged from active duty in 1970. During his time in Columbus, Jim and Judy had two children - their son, Jon, and daughter, Julie.

In 1970, he moved with his family to Oklahoma where Jim served as an Assistant US Attorney for the Eastern District of Oklahoma in Muskogee. In 1973, he entered private practice with Forney Sandlin, and together they formed the firm of Sandlin and Payne in

Muskogee. He served as a part-time United States Magistrate Judge for the Eastern District during his years of private practice.

In 1975, Jim resumed his Air Force service as a reserve JAG officer, serving first at Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas and later at Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma. He retired from the Air Force in 1992 as a Lieutenant Colonel.

In 1988, he was appointed to a full-time United States Magistrate Judge position in the Eastern District of Oklahoma. As a Magistrate Judge, he

worked with others including Judge Frank Seay on a case that became a subject of John Grisham's well-known book, *The Innocent Man*. Grisham described Judge Payne in the book as a “hero.”

On September 4, 2001, President George W. Bush nominated him to a United States District Judge position. The United States Senate confirmed his nomination on October 23, 2001, by unanimous vote (100 to 0) and he received his commission on October 24, 2001. He kept chambers and received cases in both the Eastern and Northern Districts and served as the Chief Judge of the Eastern District between 2002 and 2017. He transitioned to inactive senior status in 2020. Judge Payne thoroughly enjoyed his judicial duties and would likely have continued in his position had his health allowed him to do so.

He had great friends at the courthouse including his longtime assistant and many excellent law clerks with whom he greatly enjoyed working during his tenure. A beautiful oil painting portrait of Judge Payne hangs in the ceremonial courtroom in the Eastern District of Oklahoma in Muskogee.

After living in Muskogee for more than 50 years, Judge Payne moved with Judy to Tulsa to be closer to their children and grandchildren. During the last chapter of his earthly life, he lived at Montereau in Tulsa where family members and Montereau staff lovingly cared for him. He drew the admiration of his caregivers and was affectionately known at Montereau as “Judge.”

Judge Payne was a member of St. Paul United Methodist Church in Muskogee for more than 50 years; a member of the Oklahoma Bar Association, the Varsity O Club, a fellow of the American Bar Association; a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, a past president of the Muskogee Rotary Club; and a member of the Sigma Chi Fraternity while

attending OU.

Judge Payne was a devoted Christian who invested heavily in his family and community. At St. Paul, he served as a youth leader along with Judy, coached a church

basketball team, and taught Sunday school classes. He helped found an FCA chapter in Muskogee and frequently spoke to high school athletes. He loved spending time with Judy, his children and their families, and lovingly attended grandchildren's activities including sporting events as well as dance and other performances. As a big Sooner fan, he attended many OU football games over the years with his family.

Judge Payne is survived by his wife of 62 years, Judith Mills Payne of Tulsa; a son, Jon Payne and his wife Karri of Tulsa; daughter Julie Payne Woolslayer and her husband John of Tulsa; six grandchildren: Matthew James Woolslayer and his wife Brooklynne of Tulsa; Jackson Robert Woolslayer and his wife Landes of Lake Mary, FL; John Philip Woolslayer of Savannah, GA; U.S. Army 2nd Lt. James ("Ben") Payne and his wife Celie of Clarksville, TN; Jillian Beatrice Payne of Tulsa, and Sarah Katherine Woolslayer of Tulsa; two great-grandchildren: Michael Hardy Woolslayer of Tulsa, and Davis Payne Woolslayer of Lake Mary, FL; a sister, Carol Ann Armstrong and her husband Terry of Garden Ridge, TX; a brother-in-law Jack Mills and his wife Cirrelda of Boulder CO; two nieces: Deborah Mills Stamets and her husband Chris of Scottsdale AZ; Mary Mills Schrock and her husband Brad of Steamboat Springs, CO; and nephew Tom Mills and his wife Sue of Lafayette, CO.

A celebration of life service will be held at St. Paul United Methodist Church in Muskogee beginning at 2 pm on December 20, 2025. The family requests that any remembrances in the form of donations be made to St. Paul United Methodist Church in Muskogee (2130 West Okmulgee, Muskogee, OK 74401)

or the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (PO Box 2236, Broken Arrow, OK 74103).

Previous Events

Family to greet friends

DEC **6**. 2:00 PM - 4:00 PM (CT)

CORNERSTONE FUNERAL HOME
1830 N York St
MUSKOGEE, OK 74403

Celebration of Life

DEC **20**. 2:00 PM (CT)

St. Paul United Methodist Church
2130 W Okmulgee
Muskogee, OK 74401

Tribute Wall

BC

“ Betsy and Chris purchased the Simply Elegant S pathiphyllum for the family of James Hardy Payne.



Betsy and Chris - December 20, 2025 at 10:43 AM

CM

“ Cirrelda Mills purchased the Peaceful White Lilies Basket for the family of James Hardy Payne.



Cirrelda Mills - December 19, 2025 at 04:21 PM

CM

“ Cirrelda Mills planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of James Hardy Payne.

Cirrelda Mills - December 19, 2025 at 04:21 PM

CW

“ It is with great sadness that we express our deepest sympathies to Judy and all her family and friends who loved and now grieve the loss of this incredible husband, father, grandfather, friend and gentleman.

Even though we did not have the good fortune of knowing Judge Payne well, we recall the times in his company, as memorable. The power of his presence was undeniable, as he made you feel deeply valued with his kindness, generosity, curiosity and humility. We would often see him jogging, waving and smiling...and alongside Judy, both so effortlessly and happily greeted others with the same genuine warmth and abundant kindness, wherever they might be! Learning more of Judge Paynes history, it is not a surprise he led such a respected and honorable life that spoke so well of his sterling character It is difficult to imagine the countless lives he influenced, changed, assisted and encouraged throughout his long and successful career filled with such vast experiences and deep wisdom. A legacy that will be long, fondly remembered and forever fostering a positive impact within this Muskogee community.
With loving condolences, Carolyn and Bob Watts

Carolyn Watts - December 18, 2025 at 10:44 AM



“ Tender Tribute was purchased for the family of James Hardy Payne.



December 17, 2025 at 12:47 PM

JC

“ My name is Jill Crawford, though I was Jill Harris when I started as a young legal assistant at Sandlin & Payne in 1979–80. Judge Payne—Magistrate Payne at the time—was one of the first people in my career to show me genuine kindness. When I filled in as an impromptu stenographer during a hearing, he treated me with patience and encouragement I’ve never forgotten.

I later married, moved to Tulsa in 1982, and would occasionally see him downtown. Every time, he greeted me with that same graciousness.

Rest in peace, Judge Payne. My heartfelt prayers go out to his family.

JILL CRAWFORD - December 10, 2025 at 02:16 PM

RP

We remember Jim Payne and Judy as our Sunday school teachers and a great example of a man of God ,who brought true Joy to me and my wife at St. paul church in Muskogee, and Christmas. Class party made each person feel special and welcome in their home. Judy was a true example of a Godly woman who made the best wife Jim needed and loved her deeply, our friends for life, Rick&Pat Perkins

Rick&pat Perkins - December 11, 2025 at 11:05 PM



“ Beautiful in Blue was purchased for the family of James Hardy Payne.



December 05, 2025 at 08:12 PM

RJ

“ Robin Droze & Jordan planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of James Hardy Payne.

Robin Droze & Jordan - December 05, 2025 at 08:12 PM