



Morris Atlas

December 25, 1926 - October 4, 2015

Morris Atlas passed away peacefully in his sleep after a lengthy illness on October 4, 2015, at his home in McAllen, Texas, surrounded by his loving family. In addition to his many professional accomplishments, Morris will be remembered by all who knew him for his love of family, devotion to friends, rock-solid integrity, dedication to his community, unfailing generosity, passion for all things Texas Longhorn, and his insatiable sweet tooth.

Morris was born in Houston on December 25, 1926, to Sam and Bluma Atlas. As a child, he excelled in athletics, particularly basketball and tennis. He graduated from San Jacinto High School in Houston, attended Texas A&M for one year, and then spent two years in the Navy in the Pacific at the end of World War II. After his return to Texas, he graduated from The University of Texas in 1949 and from The University of Texas School of Law in 1950. While at The University, Morris met the love of his life, Rita Willner. They married in 1947 and celebrated their 68th wedding anniversary last August.

After law school graduation in 1950, Morris and Rita moved to Houston. Within weeks, Rita had decided that Houston was too big for her taste, so with the encouragement of their close friends, Myles and Sylvia Aaronson, they moved to McAllen in South Texas' Rio Grande Valley. Morris began practicing law as a solo practitioner. In 1951, he joined the law firm of Ewers, Cox, Port, Bentsen & Toothaker. In 1954, he joined two other lawyers to form their own firm. Morris served as the firm's managing partner for decades. Today, the firm Atlas, Hall & Rodriguez is the largest law firm in South Texas, with 35 lawyers and 3 offices. Over the years, Morris' reputation as an exemplary attorney became well known. He

served as

President of the Hidalgo County Bar Association in 1960. He handled numerous cases and

counseled on many matters of local importance. For instance, in the mid-1950's, he won lawsuits that facilitated transportation of natural gas from the McAllen gas field to market, which

has helped the McAllen economy for generations. About that time, Morris developed a strong

professional relationship with the Lloyd Bentsen family. That relationship resulted in the firm –

and Morris personally – handling most of Lloyd Bentsen, Sr.'s legal work and becoming a trusted counselor to the Bentsen family. In the early 1960's, representing the cities of McAllen

and Brownsville, he successfully thwarted efforts by the City of Harlingen, Texas, to turn Harlingen's airport into the Valley's sole regional airline facility, thus defeating a plan that would have ended passenger air service to McAllen and Brownsville. During the same period,

working with the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico and the Mexican Secretary of Foreign Relations

(equivalent to the Secretary of State) and negotiating for months in English and Spanish, he

persuaded the Government of Mexico, after a year's delay, to complete construction of the southern half of an international bridge over the Rio Grande to Reynosa, Mexico, that replaced

the original narrow, dangerous, and decrepit two-lane bridge. In the 1970's Morris, representing

former Texas Governor Dolph Briscoe, successfully challenged and forced changes to a flawed

state cattle disease testing program that was forcing ranchers statewide to kill healthy cattle.

As Morris developed a reputation as an outstanding trial lawyer, he began attracting clients from

around the globe. He tried – and won – many complex lawsuits during his career and was elected to the prestigious American College of Trial Lawyers, the highest honor a litigator can

receive. Increasingly, he was hired to not only represent clients in trial, but to advise them on

business matters. He was often referred to as a "lawyer's lawyer."

Morris served as a trusted advisor and member of the Board of Directors of Texas

Regional

Bancshares and Texas State Bank. He played a key role in the \$2.16 billion merger of that bank into BBVA Compass.

Morris also played a major role in addressing intricate state law issues. Morris, representing the defense perspective, was praised by negotiators on both sides as constructive, fair, creative, and thoughtful. For example, in 1987, at the request of Lt. Governor Bill Hobby, Morris served as Special Counsel to the Texas Senate in negotiations on early tort reform legislation. In 1989 he served in the same role on workers' compensation and deceptive trade practice legislative reform, virtually living in Austin for the entire 20-week legislative session. The Senate passed resolutions honoring his efforts.

Beginning in 1987, Morris served for many years on the committee formed by the U.S. Senators from Texas to review and recommend candidates for the federal bench. He declined invitations to accept lifetime appointments on the federal trial and appellate courts, and also declined appointments as U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Texas and a U.S. ambassadorship.

Morris was pleased to accept an appointment by three different Texas Governors to three successive six-year terms on the Pan American College Board of Regents beginning in 1965, the year the school changed from a county-supported junior college to a state-supported college.

During his tenure, Morris chaired the school's Architectural Committee, which arranged for the design and construction of the campus that the school has today. While Board Chair in 1972-1973 and for the next 15 years, Morris lobbied and recruited Valley leaders and many others to persuade the University of Texas and Pan American Boards of Regents and the legislature to accept Pan American into the UT System. With U.S. District Judge Ricardo Hinojosa, he cochaired the committee in the Valley that, in 1989, ultimately consummated the merger, allowing

Pan American access to millions of dollars in previously unavailable legislative funding and paving the way to its merger with UT-Brownsville and the creation of a medical school for the Rio Grande Valley.

In addition, Morris was appointed by three different Governors of Texas to three successive four-year terms on the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission from 1977 to 1990, where he gained the respect of all interests for reasoned and fair administration of the alcoholic beverage laws.

In the political realm, for more than 25 years, Morris was the go-to person when statewide and national Democrats needed to raise money in South Texas. He was elected to six successive

terms as Chairman of the Hidalgo County Democratic Executive Committee, serving from 1968

to 1980. He chaired the Valley effort for all four of Lloyd Bentsen, Jr.'s successful campaigns

for the U.S. Senate and served as a close confidante to Senator Bentsen in those campaigns and during his service in the Senate.

A great civic love of Morris' was The University of Texas, to which he owed so much for his

success. In 1978, he was elected a Trustee of The University of Texas Law School Foundation,

served as its President from 1993 to 1997, and became a Life Member in 1990. The Foundation

has raised several hundred million dollars for student scholarships and faculty salary supplements. At the Law School, Morris and Rita endowed several scholarships and helped fund

a faculty Chair. In 2001, Morris chaired the Chancellor's Council of the UT System, which consists of hundreds of UT major donors statewide.

Morris was active in many other civic matters. For instance, he served as president of the McAllen Country Club and McAllen's Temple Emanuel. He also loved his service on the Scott

& White Memorial Hospital Board of Visitors.

He received too many honors to list them all. One he particularly relished was the Distinguished

Alumnus Award, given by the University of Texas Ex-Students Association in 1993. Accompanied by his entire family, he was introduced on the field at halftime of a Longhorn football game. After seeing his name projected on the scoreboard while the crowd cheered, his grandchildren crowed that this meant their Granddaddy (and the award) must be important!

Morris was named one of the State's 102 "Legal Legends" by Texas Lawyer in 2000, the Texas

Bar Foundation's Outstanding 50-Year Lawyer in 2001, and Hidalgo County Chamber of Commerce's 1991 Border Texan of the Year. Morris also received awards from The University

of Texas School of Law School's Faculty and Alumni Association, the Anti-Defamation League,

the Valley Boy Scouts, the Valley Easter Seals, the McAllen International Museum of Art and

Science, and many other organizations.

Morris' legacy is more than as a leader in his professional and civic endeavors. He was a person

who truly cared about his family, friends, and many, many others in need, even those he did not

know personally. Morris helped, he acted, he made a difference. He helped on the little things,

such as always paying for group dinners. He helped on big things like paying for one of his children's friends' ticket home to visit an ailing parent and a law firm worker's family member's

healthcare needs. He donated to innumerable charities, those supporting causes about which he

was passionate, and others just because his friends asked. He inevitably gave -- sometimes anonymously and always generously.

Even more, Morris taught by example within his family and in institutions he led. In meetings,

he urged others to voice their views and interests. He ensured that others were heard, absorbed

the various positions, and then suggested wise and responsive solutions.

To Morris, family came first – but he defined "family" extremely broadly. His family, his friends, and his community are better for having known Morris. He will be missed greatly.

Morris is predeceased by his parents Sam and Bluma Atlas and his siblings Jake Atlas, Fannie

Wilk, Rose Bergman Weiss, and Joe Atlas. He is survived by his beloved wife of 68 years,

Rita

Willner Atlas, and four children: his son Scott, his wife Nancy, and their sons Ryan and David;

his daughter Debra Atlas; his daughter Lauren Silverblatt, her husband Alan, and their son Nathaniel; and his daughter Lisa Genecov, her husband Jeff, and their children Adam and Rebecca; and numerous nieces, nephews, and cousins.

The family would like to extend sincere thanks to Drs. Marvin Tavaréz, Michael Jelinek, and

Adolfo Kaplan. The family would also like to extend heartfelt gratitude to Morris' loyal caregivers during the last 5½ years, Fidel Lara, Jimmy Martinez, and George Garcia, who have

become close friends of Morris, Rita and the rest of the family and were instrumental in Morris'

comfort and happiness during the last few years.

A funeral service will be conducted at two o'clock in the afternoon on Tuesday, the 6th of October, in the sanctuary of Temple Emanuel, 4300 North Chai (C) Street, in McAllen with burial to follow at Temple Emanuel Cemetery on South Ware Rd, McAllen.

Pallbearers will be Gary Gurwitz, Alter Holand, Ryan Atlas, David Atlas, Adam Genecov, and

Nathaniel Silverblatt. The lawyers and staff of Atlas, Hall & Rodriguez will serve as honorary

pallbearers.

In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions may be sent to the University of Texas Law School

Foundation for the "Morris Atlas EFE Scholarship"; attn.: Linda Lewis; Development Office; University of Texas School of Law; 727 E. Dean Keeton St.; Austin, TX 78705, or the Vannie E.

Cook Jr. Cancer Foundation; 101 W. Expressway 83; McAllen, TX 78503.

Cemetery

Events

Temple Emanuel Cemetery

south Ware Rd

McAllen, TX, 78503

OCT

6

Service

02:00PM - 03:00PM

Temple Emanuel

4300 N. Chai "C" Street, McAllen, TX, US, 78504

Comments



“ Morris was and is my friend from age 10 or younger, thru high school, A&M, and even UT and later. Morris, Joe, and others played all ball games, ping pong, tennis; and some cards together. We never forgot each other and the infrequent visits after college continued the warm friendship. Only he and I remain from the gang of kids including brothers and friends. Rita, we both lost a very good friend.
Melvin Maltz

Melvin Maltz - October 06, 2015 at 11:30 AM