

## Chapter 1 – Introduction

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**Announcer:** In 1948, at the age of 21, Gene Stipe was elected to the Oklahoma State House of Representatives representing Pittsburgh County, making him the youngest person elected to the state legislature. Stipe won a senate seat in 1956 and served for forty-eight years, making him the longest-serving Oklahoma State Senator.

Gene had a reputation as an excellent trial lawyer and took the lead in some important Oklahoma court cases.

On January 1st, 2000, Gene published the book *A Gathering of Heroes*, featuring stories of many Oklahomans.

Some of the heroes he talked about included former U.S. Senator Robert Kerr, Judge Luther Bohanon, and Lloyd Rader.

The book is still available on Amazon.

Gene Stipe was 85 when he died on July 21st, 2012.

When John Erling was with KRMG radio, he interviewed Gene about the book in 2000, and you can hear the interview now on the podcast and oral history website [VoicesOfOklahoma.com](http://VoicesOfOklahoma.com).

## Chapter 2 – 5:40

### Senator Robert Kerr

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**John Erling (JE):** When this man was elected to the Oklahoma legislature, it was back there when Harry S. Truman used to be the president in 1948. He was 22 years old and, now, 50 years later, he's the longest-serving legislature in the state: Senator Gene Stipe from McAlester. Good morning, Senator!

**Gene Stipe (GS):** Morning, John!

**JE:** You have this new book, "Gathering of Heroes," which, as I understand, you actually told to Ralph Marsh who has been a scribe and has been in the capitol for many, many years. Is that the way you did it?

**GS:** That's the way we did it.

**JE:** Alright. And in this book -- see, I don't know how many different stories there are -- 30-some, is that true?

**GS:** That's right.

**JE:** Alright. I know I talked to you yesterday about certain stories that we wanted to talk about. But I was really interested in the story about Robert S. Kerr -- how he shut down legislation of John. F. Kennedy over the appointment of Judge Luther Bohanon. And, of course, for Robert S. Kerr -- his namesake, the first two letters, "K.R." M.G -- it's "Kerr McGee" here.

**GS:** I remember when they had the station.

**JE:** You do?

**GS:** Yes, sir. That was a big deal.

**JE:** When they named the station? When they --

**GS:** Yes, sir. KRMG: Kerr McGee.

**JE:** Alright, so tell us. This was in 1961. Luther Bohanon was an attorney from Oklahoma City and Robert Kerr wanted him to be named the district judge from this area.

**GS:** United States district judge.

**JE:** Alright. Tell us how that came about.

**GS:** Well, Bobby Kennedy was attorney general and he had made a pledge to the American Bar Association that he would not appoint any judges that they didn't approve. For some crazy reason -- and I think they really wanted somebody else -- they did not approve Judge Bohanon for appointment. Bob Kerr was a very determined person and, among other things, he had all of the lawyers circulate a petition and 90% of the lawyers in Oklahoma endorsed the appointment of Judge Bohanon. It still didn't convince the president and the attorney general.

So, Bob Kerr was the Chairman of the Finance Committee. They had all of the appropriation bills of the White House, and the Justice Department, and so forth. Bobby Kennedy came over to see when these bills were going to get out of committee.

The chairman said he hadn't had time to look at them yet, and probably wouldn't for awhile, until they named Luther Bohanon judge.

**JE:** (Laughing)

**GS:** So, that impasse was resolved by Judge Bohanon's appointment.

**JE:** And as you have the quote here in the book from Robert Kennedy, it says: "Kerr doesn't get his judge, and you don't get any tax legislation." And that's Robert talking to his brother, the President.

**GS:** Yes, sir.

**JE:** Now that is power. I think you referred to Robert Kerr as definitely being of the most powerful in the United States at that time. Is that true?

**GS:** There wasn't any question about it. Lloyd Rader and Bob Kerr wrote the Medicaid bill that's still the best healthcare plan in America today. And Lloyd Rader wrote it with Bob Kerr's staff.

**JE:** That's another story, too. You detailed the stories of many, many people in this book -- "A Gathering of Heroes". About Robert Kerr: When Robert Kerr died -- that story all came to light at a football game?

**GS:** Yes, sir. At the Orange Bowl in Miami, Florida.

**JE:** And that year would have been?

**GS:** '71, I believe.

**JE:** Okay. So this football game is with Alabama and Oklahoma University.

**GS:** Yes, sir.

**JE:** Tell us what happened there.

**GS:** Well, Senator Kerr died during the football game. And when it was over, the word was spread. And Howard Edmonson was down there. He got on his plane and come back to Oklahoma right away. The Kerr family wanted Robert S. Kerr, Jr. to be a United States Senator. Howard was governor and the only way that that could be is that he'd have to appoint him.

**JE:** And at that time, the Lieutenant Governor was George Nigh.

**GS:** That's right. And so, he had George talked it over and I believe they agreed that he would resign as Governor and George would appoint him as United States Senator. At least that's what was to happen right away.

**JE:** Right.

**GS:** That ended the speculation on that. And then, one thing I remember real well about that, is it was the only time I'd ever stayed all night in the Governor's mansion. George was only Governor for 9 days. We were trying to build Arrowhead and Fountainhead Lodge. We had gone to Washington and Carl Albert, by then, was leading the house and Bob Kerr was running the Senate. So we met with the economic development administration about funding those lodges. And the director was there and he allowed that that expenditure did not fall within the terms and mission of his agency. Senator Kerr said, "You need to study your mission a little better. We'll meet back here at 9:00AM and I think you'll find that this fits exactly within your mission."

We met back there the next morning, and sure enough, it did fit within the mission of his agency.

**JE:** (Laughing)

**GS:** So we had the money. And so then we had to have a contract with the State of Oklahoma and the Mining and Resources Board, which administers your parks and your lodges, and used 'em to sign the contract. So they all served at the pleasure of the Governor and guess who the Governor was? It was George Nigh. So he sent 'em all a wire and terminated their services. And we had to spend most of the night -- I believe that was a 9-member board -- we had to get 9 members up to the capitol to swear 'em in, which we did at about daylight in the blue room. And they signed the agreement that the lodges were built.

### **Chapter 3 – 6:18**

#### **Judge Luther Bohanon**

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**John Erling (JE):** Senator, from your book, “A Gathering of Heroes,” I was taken with the story of how you went to Vietnam to defend a boy in your district in Calvin, Oklahoma. His name was Randy Herrod. He was charged with murder in Vietnam. Tell us the nature of that charge.

**Gene Stipe (GS):** Well, it was a squad and there was 6 of them on patrol. It was nighttime and they wiped out a Vietnamese village, and they charged them with murder. 5 of the 6 had been convicted and Randy was the patrol leader; and they saved him 'till last. We tried the case in Vietnam. Randy had been awarded a Silver Star for saving Oliver North's life.

**JE:** And how was that?

**GS:** Well, he had thrown his body across Oliver North and protected him -- a heroic act. But they refused to give him the Silver Star, even after he was acquitted. So I filed a lawsuit that he'd been discharged from the Marine Corps; and I filed a lawsuit in the civil court here in the United States District Court Eastern District. The judge ordered them to award the Silver

Star, and they come down.

At that time, we'd had a Marine contingent at the U.S. naval ammunition depot out here in McAlester. They brought the comandante of the Marine Corps and the Marine Corps band down, and presented the Silver Star to him with a great deal of flair.

**JE:** Had to make you feel awfully good.

**GS:** Oh, it felt good. But anyhow, that was an exciting deal.

**JE:** Yes. Also, in your book here, "A Gathering of Heroes," I'm interested in this story here: The Reverend Wade Watts. And the title of it is: "That Stuff Jesus Said Do." Who was the Reverend Wade Watts?

**GS:** Reverend Wade Watts was a black preacher here in McAlester. He was State President of the NAACP for many years and led them. He was in the Selma march with Martin Luther King. And the Ku Klux Klan kinda targeted him, and they came to McAlester for a big rally and for the stated purpose of killing Reverend Watts. So we saw that that didn't happen.

Reverend Watts believed in non-violent persuasion; and he began to work on the leader of the Ku Klux Klan. Sometimes they called him "The Cyclops," sometimes they called him other terms, like "Grand Dragon."

Anyhow, Wade ended up converting that guy to Christianity, but before that happened, they had a big debate at the Mabee Center there in Tulsa. And it may have been the biggest crowd they'd ever had in the Mabee Center.

**JE:** A debate?!

**GS:** A debate.

**JE:** Between?

**GS:** Reverend Wade Watts and Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan. What eventually happened was the Reverend converted him to Christianity and then they went on tour across the country.

**JE:** How about that.

**GS:** That's one of the great victories of all time.

**JE:** Yeah. Is that Watts of J.C. Watts' family?

**GS:** J.C.'s uncle.

**JE:** Okay.

**GS:** J.C.'s uncle.

**JE:** Alright. "That Stuff Jesus Said Do." Many of the stories that we have in this book -- it's really fun, easy reading. Lloyd Rader -- that's a name that, by now, everybody kind of takes for granted and we had the Lloyd Rader detention center here. But he was the head, really, of welfare and set it up in the state of Oklahoma. Is that true?

**GS:** We eventually put about half of all government agencies under Lloyd Rader. He had a knack of making them work better.

**JE:** The story is: "A Sick Kitten for Mr. Rader." What does that mean?

**GS:** Mr. Rader was a very powerful man, and the sick kitten was the school for the deaf and the school for the blind. They just never did get funded really well and we transferred them to Lloyd Rader. So, Vera, his secretary, said, "Well, we've got these sick kittens..."

And the next thing we gave him was the university hospital in Oklahoma, and his secretary said, "Well, we've got these sick kittens. Now we've got the sick momma cat."

**JE:** Then, finally, if I were to say, "Pick a story that you really enjoy telling," and I don't know if you've told it already, but just pick one out of the book here -- which one would you tell?

**GS:** Why, I loved all of them: Judge Bohanon integrated Oklahoma City schools. He was maligned; they had crosses burnt on his yard; and they threw rocks at him and everything. When George Nigh got to be Governor, the first thing he did was had a meeting with Judge Bohanon -- Carl Albert was there; he was a classmate of Judge Bohanon in law school at Oklahoma University. We presented the judge with some facts, and bragged on him, and he was in tears. He actually cried, because he said, "It has been a long time since anyone has said nice things about me."

**JE:** Huh. Wow.

**GS:** Those are my favorite stories. When you look around for heroes, there's so many. What I tried to do is tell the world about some people that never had the recognition they need.

E.T. Dunlap, Chancellor of Higher Education, I think that that story's a great story. He had to ride a horse to high school in the sleet and snow down in the mountains in eastern Oklahoma, and then he went on to head up all of the universities of the state and make policy on higher education. All of those stories are real stories about real people.

Hayden Donahue was a great healer. He and Judge Bohanon... Well, most of my heroes are dead. I don't know. Maybe that's telling you something about me. I'm getting old! (Laughing)

**JE:** Well, no you're a hero to a lot of people, yourself. So you'll be included in somebody's book, I'm sure.

**GS:** I doubt that, but I enjoyed doing that book.

**JE:** "A Gathering of Heroes." Pick it up at your local bookstore and thank you for sharing this with us this morning. We appreciate it, Senator.

**GS:** Go down to Steve's Sundry. That's where it is.



**JE:** That's where it is; you got that right. This is detailed. It's wonderful reading. It's called "A Gathering of Heroes." I got my book at Steve's Sundry at 26th and Harvard. I guess it's going to go to other bookstores as well.

But anyway, for those of you who are interested in Oklahoma history, you'll find this interesting from our longest-serving now-legislator in our legislature -- that would be Gene Stipe. Thanks for talking to us this morning, Senator! And we'll be doing more stories with you.

**GS:** Thank you.

**JE:** Absolutely. Good-bye!

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