Stanley Soderland: judge, dad, angler

By Judith Blake
Seattle Times staff reporter

Stanley Soderland may have been best known as a King County Superior Court judge, but to his friend and fellow lawyer Leo Peden, he had another claim to fame: “He could cook a whole damn dinner in one frying pan” — a feat Judge Soderland would pull off when the two went fishing in the San Juan Islands.

When Judge Soderland died Wednesday (Nov. 28) at age 84 of complications from Parkinson’s disease, friends and family remembered a man whose love of the law mingled with more down-to-earth pleasures: fishing, gardening, beach-combing for useable driftwood and building an island cabin.

He was attracted to law early, declaring his intention to become a lawyer while still in elementary school, said his son Stephen Soderland, of Bainbridge Island.

Eventually, he would serve as a law clerk under U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas; as a personal-injury lawyer in Seattle; and as a Superior Court judge who won plaudits for fairness.

More than once, lawyers in King County voted him best judge. The Washington State Trial Lawyers Association voted him Judge of the Year in 1976.

He also made a lasting mark by helping rewrite the instructions judges give to juries, making them easier to understand, a former colleague said.

Born March 15, 1917, in Vancouver, B.C., Judge Soderland grew up on a farm near Snohomish, where his parents, Carl and Irene Soderland, raised strawberries, chickens and other animals and crops.

He retained his love of the soil and growing things, keeping a garden most of his life, said Diana Crittenden, Judge Soderland’s daughter by his first marriage.

A bright student, Judge Soderland skipped two grades in elementary school, said Douglas Soderland of Seattle. Like Stephen, Douglas is one of four sons from Judge Soderland’s second marriage, to Mary Elizabeth “Bunny” Sutherland.

At the time of his death, the couple had been married 55 years.

Judge Soderland attended the University of Washington, earning Phi Beta Kappa honors, and graduated first in his class from the UW Law School in 1939. He served as Justice Douglas’ law clerk for about a year and also earned a master’s degree from the University of Michigan before returning to Seattle to practice law.

Specializing in personal-injury cases, though not exclusively, he practiced law from 1943 to 1964.

“He was a trial lawyer par excellence,” said former law firm colleague Ron Groshong. He said Judge Soderland was innovative in employing special exhibits, working models and expert witnesses, using techniques of evidence and testimony that would later become common in courtrooms.

He was appointed a judge in King County Superior Court in 1964 and served until his retirement in 1979.

Though he spent much time with his legal papers at home, Stephen Soderland also recalls a lighter side.

“The thing I most remember about him when growing up was he enjoyed telling corny jokes to his kids” and taking them fishing, Stephen Soderland said.

He spent many of his retirement years at his home on Shaw Island in the San Juans, traveling, boating and gardening. At the time of his death, he lived at Bayview Manor on Queen Anne in Seattle.
Besides his wife, sons Stephen and Douglas and his daughter, survivors include sons David Soderland of Bellevue and Carl Soderland of Kirkland, 14 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

At his request, there will be no services. The family suggests memorials to the UW Law School.

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