

New Texas Judge's Journey From Blue Collar To Black Robe

By Lynn LaRowe

Law360 (August 8, 2022, 2:34 PM EDT) -- James Boone Baxter went from carpet installer to oil field engineer and to law school before recently landing in Texarkana as the newest federal magistrate judge in the Eastern District of Texas.

Judge Baxter, who is called Boone by his friends, was tapped for his new role in December, but spent the next several months winding up his caseload at Heim Payne & Chorush LLP in Houston before packing up his family and moving to Texarkana where he was sworn in on June 29 and took the bench the following day.

He is now serving alongside Judge Robert Schroeder III, one of the two district judges he clerked for in the Eastern District of Texas after earning his law degree from Emory University School of Law. Aside from Judge Schroeder in the court's Texarkana division, Baxter also clerked for the now-retired Judge Leonard Davis in the Tyler division.

"I wanted the opportunity to be a public servant," Judge Baxter, 43, told Law360 Pulse in a recent interview. "Seeing the work ethic of Judge Davis and Judge Schroeder inspired me. They had a commitment to getting the right answer and there was always respect for all parties, from a criminal defendant to a corporate leader."

Judge Schroeder said Judge Baxter was a welcome addition to the Eastern District's team.

"We are very fortunate to have Judge Baxter," Judge Schroeder told Law360 Pulse in an email. "In a way, he is coming home, having clerked both in Tyler and Texarkana as a young lawyer, and his years of experience in private practice will be a huge benefit to litigants and the bar. Boone has a brilliant mind, an even temperament and a willingness to work hard — and he's an all-around nice person to boot. The court, the bar and the public will be well served by him for many years."

As a practicing lawyer, Judge Baxter said that he handled mainly civil litigation involving patent and other intellectual property matters, and that he was "about 50/50 in plaintiff and defense" work.

"My clients varied greatly from individuals to companies on the stock exchange," Judge Baxter said. "That part was really interesting — seeing the differences in how they handled cases."



James Boone Baxter

Judge Baxter's path to the federal bench began in Florida where he grew up working weekends and vacations with his dad laying tile and carpet. While grateful for the hard-working, blue-collar example his father set for him, Judge Baxter said that, in the end, it motivated him to seek higher education.

After obtaining an engineering degree from the University of Florida, he began working as an engineer for oil field services company Schlumberger Ltd.

"That was a young person's job," Judge Baxter said. "It was meant for young people without families who could work 24 hours a day in remote locations. You can only do that for so many years. Then Deepwater Horizon happened, and they shut us down for six months."

The slowdown at work resulting from the catastrophic 2010 explosion and oil spill gave Judge Baxter time to take stock, and Schlumberger was there with a battery of aptitude and personality tests to help him decide what his next position in the company might be after the relentless oil field engineering work.

"All of the tests told me to be a lawyer," Judge Baxter said, smiling as he reflected. "Schlumberger offered me a post in a teaching-training position in Siberia. Yes, Russia. I decided to go to law school."

Judge Baxter said that his oil field work often routed him through the Lone Star State, and that his love of East Texas deepened further with his clerkships.

"Judge Davis and Judge Schroeder, they embodied public servants," Judge Baxter said of his judicial mentors. "They are people who work harder than they have to. They were incredibly humble and very service-oriented. You knew they wanted to get it right. I had growing admiration for them and I looked up to them. After a while, you want to do that yourself."

Judge Baxter told Law360 Pulse that he and his wife's children were born during his clerkships, one in Tyler and one in Texarkana, which only strengthened their bond with East Texas. His wife, who has worked as a kindergarten teacher and a sheriff's deputy, is currently a full-time parent, Judge Baxter said.

So when Judge Caroline Craven decided she would retire at the end of her third, eight-year term in May, Judge Baxter applied. He expressed a deep respect for the work of his predecessor and the other professionals who keep the office running.

"Judge Craven's staff is still here and working with me," he said. "Everyone here is committed to delivering a high-quality product. There really isn't a backlog from the pandemic because they handled things so efficiently."

There are actually two Texarkanas: Texarkana, Texas, and Texarkana, Arkansas. The sister cities are divided by a road, aptly called State Line Avenue, which ends at the federal courthouse downtown — the only one in the U.S. that serves two states and straddles a state line. On the Texas-side of the unique bi-state building is the Texarkana Division of the Eastern District of Texas. Across the hall is the Texarkana Division of the Western District of Arkansas with a courtroom that is a mirror image of the one in Texas.

Like Judge Craven before him in Texas and like fellow U.S. Magistrate Judge Barry Bryant on the other side of the building in Arkansas, Judge Baxter is cross-designated to hear matters in either state. The

magistrate judges in Texarkana may step in when one is out unexpectedly or when a criminal defendant needs a first appearance and a judge in that state is unavailable. The arrangement keeps cases moving in both jurisdictions.

Using two courtrooms during jury selections, embracing virtual meeting technologies and employing other innovative techniques to keep people safe while moving cases forward helped the court avoid a pile-up, Judge Baxter said.

When asked how his engineering experience has shaped him as a lawyer and a jurist, Judge Baxter said there was no denying the impact.

"I'm still new as a judge, but my engineering background did influence me as a lawyer," he said. "The big thing that is ingrained into me as an engineer is efficiency and looking at results and how to improve with the next step. As a lawyer it certainly helped in cases related to technology, but I've seen a lot of judges without engineering backgrounds do fabulous work."

The new magistrate judge said he aspires to be like the judges he admires.

"I want to get the right answer and get the right answer as quickly as possible," Baxter said. "That always helped as a lawyer when you could have answers efficiently and had faith that the court would apply the law and existing precedent in a consistent manner. That is really the focus I think."

Baxter said that during his first few weeks in Texarkana he has seen a varied docket.

"The cases here seem to run the gamut," he said. "General business litigation, criminal cases, patent, civil rights, products liability, everything really. And with being on the state line we do see a fair share of diversity cases."

--Editing by Ellen Johnson.