

Miller plans to 'disappear into the mist' after retirement

Philip Jankowski | Herald staff writer | Posted: Thursday, December 27, 2012 4:30 am

Standing guard at the Bell County Attorney's Office are life-size figures of the Lone Ranger and Tonto. The fictional Old West icons line the halls of the office, where Rick Miller has overseen operations for two decades.

Miller, 72, is one of four county elected officials retiring at the end of the year who have accumulated more than 100 years in total experience as either elected officials or employees of the county.

Miller said he was raised on spaghetti westerns. The films led him toward his "passion," writing about legendary Texas outlaws and lawmen.

A self-described bibliophile, Miller has compiled meticulous records of every criminal ever to pass through Bell County's justice system, the marriage records of all its residents and a list of every person ever elected to office.

He also has written several books and essays about outlaws and peace officers.

A lawman himself, Miller worked as a police officer for the Dallas Police Department for 12 years, as chief of police for the Killeen Police Department for three years in the late 1970s and briefly as the police chief in Denton.

During his time in Killeen, Miller earned the reputation of a chief who cracked down on crime. Downtown Killeen had been overrun with prostitutes, who at the time lined Fourth and Gray streets with little regard for the law. "It was frustrating," Miller said.

Miller shared his frustrations with then-state Rep. Stan Schlueter, and played a part in the passage of legislation that increased the penalty for prostitution. Armed with more severe penalties, "we went to town," Miller said. "We literally filled the county jail with prostitutes."

He became known as a tough-on-crime chief, and the city of Denton hired him away from Killeen. But facing a resistant department, he was "run out of town" after only nine months, he said.

And then, at age 40, Miller decided to take a different path. He went to law school.

Even with a difficult course load at Baylor University, Miller found time to marry his wife, Paula Miller, who is the city secretary for the city of Killeen.

He then opened a private practice in Killeen. But his work defending criminals began to wear on the former lawman. He said he began to worry that his attitude toward his work would grow "half-hearted."

With that, Miller decided to run for county attorney in 1992. He faced a Democratic incumbent in a county where a Republican had not won elected office in a contested election since Reconstruction. He narrowly won.

Since then, Miller has become an institution at the courthouse.

Among his most important accomplishments, Miller said he streamlined office procedures as the office moved into a digital age.

He cultivated good relationships with local law enforcement, leading a charge to improve domestic violence investigations.

Miller will be succeeded by Jim Nichols, who has worked as Miller's first assistant for 18 years. During that time, the county's population has grown immensely.

"When I first got here, we were more of a rural county than a metropolitan kind of county," Nichols said. "He certainly ushered us through that change."

Miller's fifth term ends in less than a week. Once out of office, he plans to continue researching his latest project, a book on outlaw Belle Starr.

"My whole point is to disappear into the mist," he said.