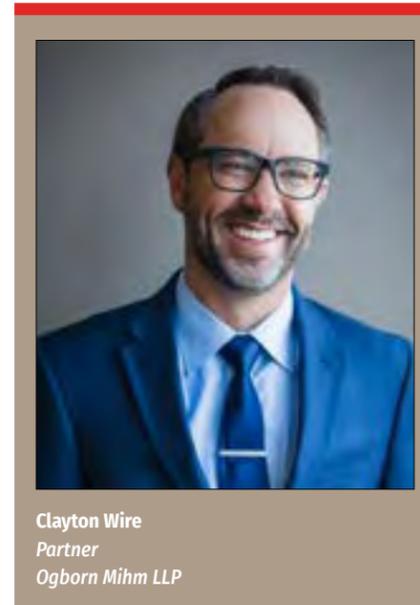


Adversity, 24/7 farm life taught valuable lessons for a native Coloradoan

By Brian Cox



Clayton Wire
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Clayton “Clay” Wire is a Colorado trial lawyer who works with whistleblowers to expose illegal conduct.

Clayton Wire’s life path to a career in law is unlike most.

“I’m an only child. I was homeschooled. My parents were hippies, and I grew up with no electricity, running water, or telephone. I hope I’m not too weird, but you’d expect me to be a lot weirder,” Wire says with a laugh.

As a result of his uncommon childhood, Wire brings a distinctive brand of curiosity and independent thinking to his law practice.

The native Coloradoan attributes his problem-solving skills and unique perspective to growing up on his family’s subsistence farm and then as a teenager to finding himself largely living on his own, holding down a job while also attending high school.

“I didn’t have the benefit of the more socialized or regimented public-school system,” says Wire. “The education I got taught me to think outside the box quite

a bit and to be a self-starter and my own educator in a way.”

He was born in a one-room shack with no running water or electricity. A wood-burning stove served for cooking as well as heating. His parents, who met in San Francisco and gravitated toward the “hippie culture” of the time, purchased a 40-acre homestead in the northwestern mountains of Colorado with the aim of going off-grid. The property was approximately two hours north of Denver, past a small town called Red Feather Lakes, which is just south of the Wyoming border.

For the first year, Wire’s parents lived in a tent and a teepee while his father built a barn and the shack where Wire was born. Over several years, Wire’s father also built a one-room log cabin by hand that the family moved into when Wire was around 5 years old. In place of a refrigerator, his father dug a root cellar. His mother did a lot of spinning and weaving with mohair from the goats they raised and sold her wares at fiber arts festivals. They canned food and slaughtered goats and chickens in the summer to make it through the harsh winters. He recalls several times when the family was snowed-in for as long as two months.

“We were pretty much subsistence,” says Wire. “My childhood was essentially lots of goat shepherding.”

A donkey carried young Wire’s books when he went out to tend to the goats and Wire would do schoolwork while the goats grazed.

Wire says he learned early on the necessity for hard work. There was always a sick goat or one giving birth that needed tending. There were chickens to be fed and eggs to be gathered. Farm chores were a way of life.

“It was a 24-hour work cycle,” says Wire. “I was just there doing it with them. It didn’t really strike me as different until I was exposed to other stuff.”

No school bus could dependably reach the homestead, so the school district paid for Wire to enroll with Calvert School, a leading homeschooling curriculum publisher that has the distinction of once having President Barack Obama, Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, Pulitzer Prize winning novelist Pearl S. Buck, and political commentator William F. Buckley Jr. as students.

The experience developed in Wire a strong sense of autonomy over his own education.

“I think it really spurred in me to be curious of things I didn’t know,” he says. “I was reading books they would never have let you read in public school.”

Wire started attending public school in the sixth grade after the family moved to Red Feather Lakes when he was 11. He says the social transition required him to become adept at connecting with people despite not having many cultural touchstones in common.

“I realized that I needed to be able to relate to people and to understand them on their level because I was not going to have any shared experiences with them.”

His parents separated when Wire was 16 and he ended up living on his own in a small studio apartment in Fort Collins, Colorado. Honed as a self-educator, Wire continued to excel in school, despite working a full-time job and not having parents around to tell him to go to class.

Often, fellow students with troubled home lives would crash on his couch. Many didn’t share Wire’s skills as a self-starter and lacked the motivation and resources to succeed in school.



A log cabin in the Colorado woods served as home for Clayton Wire while growing up.

“They didn’t have the experience of having to teach themselves,” says Wire. “They didn’t have the tools to be able to cope without the support of adults. I had that. I think that’s what separated me from those who didn’t have good outcomes.”

Wire discovered through the challenges of those years a heightened drive to succeed.

“I don’t know if I’d be where I’m at without that kind of adversity,” he reflects. “I think that by having to fend for myself and be much more independent than a lot of my peers, I was set on a trajectory where I really had to figure out how to navigate the world by myself. I think that has led me to being a much more independent thinker.”

Wire went on to study journalism and political science at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, graduating in 2005. His plans to attend law school were

interrupted when just before he was to take the LSAT he fell extremely sick and ended up in the hospital. He was diagnosed with Addison’s Disease, a rare illness that affects the adrenal glands.

“After I got sick, I very much felt that I had to find a purpose and a path forward,” says Wire, who had been an avid snowboarder for years. “I realized I had to focus on becoming an adult and a professional and being more conscious of who I was going to be and what I wanted to do with my life.”

Wire moved to Denver to attend the University of Denver Sturm College of Law, where he graduated in the top 10 percent of his class. He served as editor-in-chief of the globally recognized Denver Journal of International Law and Policy. All while tending bar at night.

The tangible skills he brought to law school were being able to relate to others, being empathetic and having righteous indignation at wrongs he saw being committed. He had no set constructs of what a lawyer did, but he sensed he wanted to do something involving constitutional or international law — before concluding those areas didn’t present a clear career path.

Wire met his wife, Rachael, while he was in law school after she returned from teaching English in Taiwan for a year. They now have two sons: Jackson, 9, and Cole, 6.

After graduating in 2009 and facing a bleak job market, Wire took a clerkship for Judge Nancy J. Lichtenstein of the Colorado Court of Appeals. If not for the clerkship, Wire believes he may have done personal injury work for a small law firm and that his career would have taken a completely

different direction. Instead, the position led to him joining Starrs Mihm, where he has remained throughout his career.

Wire is now a partner at the firm, renamed Ogborn Mihm after a merger in 2012. He primarily works with whistleblowers to expose illegal conduct, collect government rewards, and protect them from retaliation.

“My clients run the spectrum from C-level executives or general counsels at Fortune 500 companies to a woman who was terminated from a nonprofit because they wouldn’t let her bring her emotional support dog to the office,” says Wire, who has represented individuals in whistleblower retaliation and bounty cases, including in unique Qui Tam cases.

He also represents employees in discrimination and harassment cases, as well as contract disputes.

Wire credits supportive partners and co-workers for helping him develop an employment law practice that is primarily

focused on representing whistleblowers. He tells young associates that the firm provides an environment where they can “choose their own adventure.”

“If you feel passionately about something and you’re willing to put in the time and effort to make a practice area out of it, we’ll support you,” he says.

When Wire first became involved in whistleblower cases, it was a niche area in Colorado. Wire was among the few talking and writing about the practice field. One of his first cases was *Genberg v. Porter*, which concerned the anti-retaliation protections of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, a 2002 federal law that established sweeping auditing and financial regulations for public companies. His success with the case helped to elevate his profile.

“We took the case because it was exactly what I wanted to do,” says Wire. “It allowed me to show a proof of concept: That we could attract large, interesting

whistleblower cases and be successful at them.”

Wire is involved with many national and local bar organizations, including the National Employment Lawyers Association, the Colorado Plaintiff’s Employment Lawyers Association, and The Anti-Fraud Coalition.

The attitude toward whistleblowers has changed dramatically over the past decade or more since Wire first ventured into the field.

“There has been a more societal and political recognition of whistleblowers as valuable,” he says. “The idea now is that not only do we want to protect whistleblowers from retaliation, but we also want to encourage them to come forward. They are valuable to our society. They are valuable to our economy. We want to incentivize them to come forward. They’re taking a risk to report to the government. It’s only fair they should share.” 



Clayton Wire and his wife, Rachael, have two boys, Jackson and Cole.