

1-1-1999

William Hunter: Judge of the broken bench (1857-1935)

Morison Buck

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/flstud_pub

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [Community-based Research Commons](#)

Scholar Commons Citation

Buck, Morison, "William Hunter: Judge of the broken bench (1857-1935)" (1999). *Digital Collection - Florida Studies Center Publications*. Paper 2454.

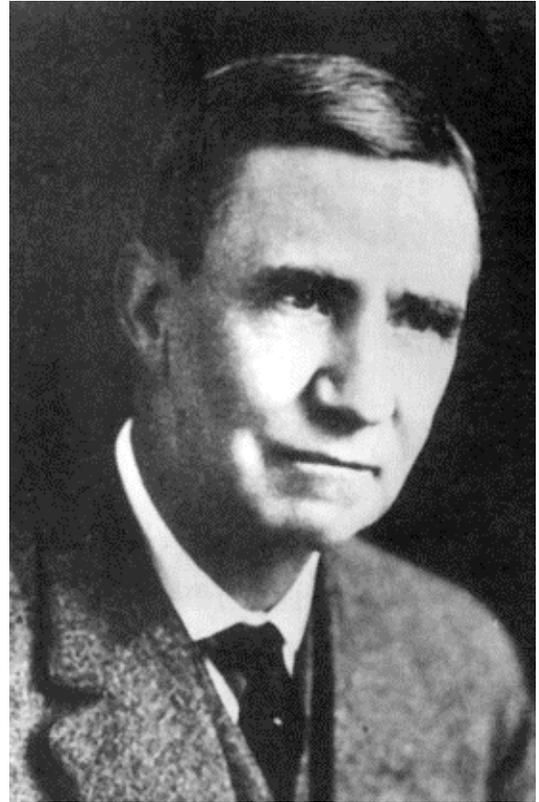
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/flstud_pub/2454

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Digital Collection - Florida Studies Center at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Collection - Florida Studies Center Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

William Hunter

Judge of the Broken Bench

(1857-1935)



Tucked in the extreme southwest corner of Illinois, lies the small community of Mound City. In that place, only four years before the onset of the bloody Civil War, was born William Hunter, son of a lawyer and infantry veteran of the Mexican war, who would later serve in the Union Army. Not many years after newspaper man and political activist, Horace Greeley, appropriated and popularized another's phrase, "Go West, Young Man," Hunter's parents and eight year-old William moved in a different direction - south to Memphis.

In those years, in lieu of attending an accredited law school, lawyer-hopefuls could "read law" in the office of a qualified mentor and then attempt to pass an examination leading to admission to the Bar. Hunter chose that avenue and was admitted to the Bar in 1878, at age 21.

After practicing law in Memphis for four years and surviving epidemics of yellow fever, Hunter became infected with what he later called "orange fever," which took him further south to Dunedin, Florida. He and older brother, Harry, bought 37 acres of gulffront land, planted a citrus grove, and built a house with lumber brought in by schooner, as there was no railroad.

Hunter took time off to marry Dorabelle Tennery in 1882. He and his bride both taught school for a time. A favorite family tale told of Dora's whipping big, "cracker" boys who got out of line in her classroom.

In 1892, William and Dorabelle moved to Tampa to avoid the day-long commute by boat. Hunter's first law office was in Ybor City. After settling in Tampa Heights, however, he moved to the corner of Zack and Franklin Streets in the corner "tower." After establishing himself as a lawyer in Tampa, and completing his family of four children, he expanded his role in public life by becoming City Attorney under Mayor Myron Gillett.

William Hunter never held elective office but, in 1902, he was appointed Judge (then called Referee) of the United States Bankruptcy Court in the Tampa District. He served in that judicial capacity until 1914. (As an historical aside, the temple was the repository for money in earlier civilizations and, generally, the priests were also bankers. Those engaged in money exchanges did business while sitting on a "bench," and that word is the origin of the word, "bank." When an unsuccessful money-changer went broke, he became

"bankrupt," meaning that his bench was "rupt" or broken.)

Early on, Hunter's capacity for leadership with his colleagues at the Bar was manifest. He was what might be called a "legal whale." In 1904, he served as President of the Tampa Bar and was one of the organizers of the state association as well. In later years, he was proud of telling that he hadn't missed an American Bar Association convention in 22 years, including one meeting in London.

Hunter also liked corporate work. About 1915, he drew up the charter for the Florida Marketing Cooperative (Florida Citrus Exchange) and stayed as its counsel until his death in 1935. Part of his success in the corporate arena can be attributed to his quiet manner, ability to listen, sound knowledge of the law, and habit of telling jokes to ease any meeting.

One of his favorite stories was about the Citrus Park grove he jointly owned with prominent lawyer and developer of West Tampa, Howard P. Macfarlane. While Macfarlane was vacationing in Scotland, they were offered a good price, in cash, for the grove. Hunter wired Macfarlane, seeking his approval to sell. Rather than incur the cost of a return cable, Macfarlane opted for the slower but cheaper method of communicating his approval - he wrote a letter. During the delay, the Florida crash occurred, the buyer changed his mind, and the deal fizzled.

Judge Hunter was clearly an organization man who liked to mix with people. He was chairman of the Board of Visitors of the County Detention Board, president of Hillsborough Tuberculosis & Health Association, Mason, Bay Lodge of Knights of Pythias, and an early member of Palma Ceia Golf & Country Club, organized in 1916.

Short of stature but trim and fit, Judge Hunter was also a fine golfer, shooting a creditable 83 on an unfamiliar course in Michigan, while on a Bar trip at age 76. Upon his death, he was called "Dean of the Tampa Bar" by newspaper editorials and honored by the Florida Senate at the instance of his friend, later judge, Henry C. Tillman. The list of pallbearers at his funeral read like a "Who's Who" of the elite of Tampa's legal and business community.

The author is indebted to judge Hunter's grandchildren, particularly the family's unofficial historian, Leah Hunter Hackney, and to the Honorable C. Timothy Corcoran, III, for their contributions to this article.

- Morison Buck

Afterword:

Fresh air, moderate exercise, plain food, regular sleep, and kind thoughts will heal you of your diseases, pluck from memory its rooted sorrows, and put you close to all the good there is.

- Elbert Hubbard



Hunter Family Home. 212 W. Park St., Tampa