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George Hopson Cornelius: Extraordinary Ordinary (1880-1946)



The word ordinary has been given different shades of meaning in the language over the years. Commonly used today as synonymous with typical, usual or average, in Colonial America it referred to the local tavern or pub. At common law an Ordinary was one having jurisdiction in ecclesiastical causes. In some states like Alabama or Georgia, it is the title given to a judicial officer with statutory authority in matters pertaining to wills, probate and guardianship.

George H. Cornelius was an immigrant from Georgia. The guru of grammarians, Yogi Berra, said: "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." Cornelius did, and, well, George took it. Before leaving his homeplace in Clinch County, Georgia, however, he served a stint as Ordinary in the Goober State. After practicing law in Tampa for several years, he began service as County Judge. Hillsborough County now has 13 County Court Divisions, but he had undivided responsibility for that office for twenty years. After his death in office, he was succeeded by Honorable William C. Brooker.

At the gateway to Florida on U.S. 41, lying midway between Valdosta and Waycross and hard by the Okefenokee Swamp country, lies the sleepy town of Homerville. The Cornelius family was well represented in Clinch County, with a rich tradition of public service. God must have loved them because he made so many of them.

According to one of the judge's collateral kin, his forbears came from County Cork, Ireland before the Revolutionary War. On his mother's side, the judge was a descendant of Light Horse Harry's son, who was married to a half Cherokee Indian. One of their offspring was Mary Ann Lee, wife of the judge's grandfather. George's great-grandfather, Benjamin, served as justice of the Peace in both Lowndes and Clinch counties, and later was elected tax collector in the latter jurisdiction for terms totaling 24 years. George's grandfather, also named George, was elected J.P. in Clinch (formerly Ware County). After Civil War service in the infantry, he sought the job as Ordinary but was defeated by one vote. On his second try he was elected, serving from 1888 until 1900. Our subject's older brother, Ben, was also a lawyer, and his sister, Kate Pafford, had the job of Ordinary in Clinch County, one more family member who was attracted to public service.

After receiving a teacher's degree from Georgia Normal College, he graduated in law from Mercer Univ. in Macon, was admitted to the bar in 1903, then practiced in Homerville where he served as Mayor for one year. The year after becoming a lawyer, Colonel Cornelius (as he is referred to in a history of Clinch County) was appointed to fill a vacancy on the County Court. After serving less than two years, Cornelius moved to St.

Petersburg, then to Tampa where he commenced law practice.

In 1921, Cornelius was appointed judge of the Municipal Court in Tampa. That duty was short-lived when he was displaced by Edmund Worth due to some changes in the structure of city government. After a brief hiatus, he was reappointed Municipal (Police Court) Judge by the City Commission. Then in 1926 he was picked by Governor John Martin to fill the unexpired term of County Judge Julian Hazzard who resigned to become judge of the newly created Civil Court of Record. Hazzard, who first went on County Court in January, 1921, was a dashing, handsome individual who had an Errol Flynn-like life and who, with another Tampa lawyer, developed the pari-mutuel system for dog racing betting.

Thus did George Cornelius embark on his long career as County Judge, being reelected continuously for twenty years until death overtook him in 1946. News accounts tell that his only serious challenge at the polls came from City Judge Robert J. Potter in the 1944 primary. Ordinarily a mild mannered, gentlemanly fellow, Potter went on the offensive. He made the Judge's health an issue asserting that he was in such bad health he could not perform the duties of the office. Although he had been using a cane for several years before the 1944 election, Cornelius responded that his absence for several months in 1941 was his first time off in 18 years. Potter also charged the incumbent with nepotism, contending that administration of the County judge's office was a "family affair." Although the Judge's daughter, Georgia (who later became the wife of J. Clifford McDonald, founder of McDonald Training Center for handicapped young people, still active in this city) had worked in the office at one time, Judge Cornelius parried the thrust by pointing out that his son, Ivan, his Chief Clerk, was the only relative employed in his office. After the results were in, the final tally in the May, 1944 primary which was decisive was Cornelius 16,028 votes to 9,455 votes for Potter. That was the last time the name of George H. Cornelius appeared on a ballot.

Cornelius and his wife, Annie, were married in 1901 after he secured his law degree. They lived in Tampa Heights (then an upper class neighborhood) with their four children, James Oswald (an attorney); Ivan, Georgia, and Una (later Mrs. Hugh Dawson). Only the latter was living at this writing in Monticello, Florida but too enfeebled to be helpful. The Polk directory reflects that in 1928 the family moved to New Suburb Beautiful on Sunset Drive where the judge resided the remainder of his life. Well-known lawyer, J. Rex Farrow, lived in the same block.

Little is known about his life as a lawyer after he moved to Tampa. His office was in the long-gone Gould Building at 604 1/2 Franklin Street directly north of the old courthouse. His brother, Augustus E (Frank) had an office at the same location. Readers will understand that in the virtually unregulated bar in those years, County Judges could still engage in general law practice. City directories listed Cornelius as both County Judge and Attorney-at-Law.

Getting a fair picture of the personality and judicial record of George Cornelius is not an easy task because he finished life's course so long ago. None of his family or personal friends are available. Also gone are almost all of the legal community who knew him or practiced before him.

The writer wishes to thank the following for their perspective, and for their stories known or heard, which they have shared about Judge Cornelius: Bayard Angle, Maynard Ramsey, and T Paine Kelly, Jr.

The description given Winston Churchill by James Reston of the *New York Times* when he had lunch with the famous man in 1949, could also apply to Judge Cornelius "well-rounded, fore and aft." He was, in truth, a portly man, clean shaven, with heavy brows and shadows underneath the eyes. One could speculate that there was something about his photographs that reminds of his Cherokee ancestry.

One of his office staff for many years was the late Forrest O. Hobbs, a family name familiar in Tampa's legal circles. Hobbs worked as the judge's clerk, studied law and passed the Bar examination without acquiring a legal education.

My close friend, nona generian Bayard Angle, has a couple of stories regarding Cornelius. One he attributes to his contemporary, the judge's brother, Frank. In a flashback to turn-of-the-century Homerville, we know that George wanted to get a college education but couldn't afford it. One of his neighbors took him out to Okefenokee Swamp, fished out a container buried in a remote area, opened it and counted out some currency and loaned it to young George for college. According to Frank, the loan was repaid. Another story widely known at the time concerned a heated argument in chambers involving contending lawyers, John Sutton and J. Tom Watson. Things were waxing warm in the course of the hearing before Judge Cornelius when Watson, known for his fiery and combative temperament, took a swing at Sutton across the table. He missed his target and mashed in the judge's hat which was on his desk close by. Bayard also has the wondrous recall to remember judge Cornelius telling about a light-hearted incident. It seems that Sheriff Will Spencer, whose office was next door to the judge's, had a constituent drop off a large load of watermelons outside the office. Some "Cracker" came around and asked the Sheriff if he could have one of the melons which looked so good. Spencer said it would be fine with him but that the melons belonged to Judge Cornelius. About that time the Judge came out, overhead the conversation, and with a smile told the melon seeker to "help himself."

Maynard Ramsey, well-known Tampa attorney, now retired, who for years has lived immediately next door to the Cornelius family home on Sunset Drive, relates that the first time he appeared before Judge Cornelius, the latter inquired if the Order he was presenting to the court was correct and in proper form. He hoped so, he told Ramsey, because it was the attorney's responsibility, not the Judge's.

T Paine Kelly, Jr., still in active practice, recalls that as result of his success in a will contest before Judge Cornelius, vying against a client of Oliver Maxwell (later a Circuit judge), he, Kelly, acquired the prevailing party as a client for decades afterward.

Judge Cornelius had a fine record of being sustained on appeal to the Supreme Court of Florida, there being no intermediate appeals court in that era. A survey of some of those reported cases reveals one which is particularly interesting. It was a will contest, *Thompson v. Freeman*, 111 Fla., 149 So. 740, decided by the Supreme Court on July 17, 1933.

This article includes a rare photograph taken in the office of Judge Parks on the 2nd floor of the old County Courthouse in 1939 or 1940. The four judges comprising the entire judiciary of Hillsborough County are pictured. From left to right, they are: Criminal Court of Record Judge John R. Himes; Circuit Judge L. L. Parks; County Judge Cornelius, and Circuit Judge Harry N. Sandler. Standing behind is the same Bayard Angle mentioned earlier, who was serving at that time as President of Hillsborough County Young Democrats. Notice that each person in the photograph is holding a paper.

Angle's memory, still keen, is that he had given an honorary membership in that organization to each judge.

George H. Cornelius was a popular and evidently able judge who enjoyed a great success during his long tenure as County Judge in Tampa - a place described by one writer as the "damnedest town this side of hell," referring to the decade of the 1920s. Were it not so, he would likely not have been reelected every four years beginning in 1926.

- *Morison Buck*

Afterword:

Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence.

Talent will not. Nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent.

Genius will not. Unrewarded genius is almost a proverb.

Education alone will not. The world is full of educated derelicts.

Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.

... *Calvin Coolidge*