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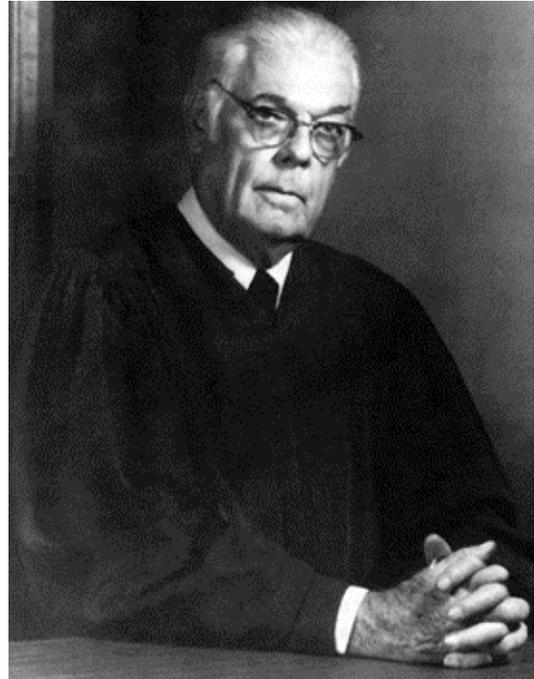
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James Dewitt Bruton, Jr. Squire from Plant City (1908-1995)



1908 was a banner year for America and, indeed, for the rest of the civilized world. Henry Ford produced and marketed the first Model T Ford (it sold for \$750), the Boy Scout movement was founded, and General Motors Corporation was born. There was another birth that year in a small town in the Ozarks, without which Hillsborough County would have been deprived of one of its most colorful personalities. Jas. D. Bruton, Jr. (he always used the abbreviated version of his given name) was not only a hugely successful lawyer, prosecutor, legislator, and shrewd investor, he achieved judgeships at three different levels in Hillsborough County; Plant City Municipal Court, County Court, and Circuit Court.

Bruton ultimately became a typically enthusiastic Gator, but he could just as easily have grown into a Razorback fan. He began life in Magazine, Arkansas just down the road from Fort Smith, and at the foot of Magazine Mountain, highest elevation in the state (2753 feet). The 1998 demographic record lists Magazine as home to 825 souls. It is best known currently as the residence of a man whose name is familiar to golfers -Jack Fleck, who trounced Ben Hogan in a playoff from the 1955 U.S. Open title.

Especially during the 1700s and 1800s in this country, the term *Squire* was a courtesy title extended to local judges in rural communities to signify their elevated social standing. In Britain, where the term originated, a squire was a high-toned country gentleman, the chief personage and usually the largest land owner in the village. That designation seems to fit Jas. D. Bruton, Jr. as comfortably as his Homburg.

Always nattily and distinctively vested during his active career, his taste ran to double-breasted suit with vest. Any color was fine as long as it was black. Outdoors he was never seen without the Homburg with tufts of his grey hair peeking out from under his expensive hat. And to complete the picture there would be the inevitable cigar clutched in his right hand, which was missing half of the index finger due to a condition his niece described to me as a felon.

Bruton's family consisting of the parents and nine children settled in Plant City about the time World War I was winding down. He lived there the rest of his life. He and his wife, Quintilla (until her death in 1989) maintained a comfortable but modest life style with no display of the trappings of wealth. The couple never had children, but perhaps to compensate for that circumstance and, as his lawyer, Robert Trinkle, Esq. quoted him, "We wanted to make a difference in the lives of needy, deserving youngsters," so he paid

the costs of college for a large number of the children of others in the Plant City area.

Bruton took his undergraduate and law degrees at the University in Gainesville, opened shop in Plant City and practiced law energetically and continuously after 1931 for the next thirty years. He sampled just about every opportunity that came his way as a small town, ambitious lawyer. A look at the Martindale-Hubbel directory over the years starting in 1933 provides a pretty good indicator of his progressively enhanced rise, both professionally and financially. In 1933 he was given a simple "v" rating with an estimated worth of less than \$1000. By 1937 he was listed as attorney for Seaboard Railroad and Tampa Electric Co. with net worth of from \$10M to 20M. In 1943, he was shown as Municipal Judge with no increase in his net worth, but in 1950 he was designated with the "av" rating, a net worth of over \$100,000, and representative clients included the two mentioned above plus Federal Land Bank of Columbia and Breyer Ice Cream Co.

He succeeded in winning a seat in the Florida House of Representative in 1935, but evidently had no further ambitions along those lines. The previous year he served as Assistant County Solicitor in the Criminal Court of Record. His objectives appear to have been to build his law practice which he decidedly enjoyed. He was active in the American Bar Association, and was a key member of a group of influential lawyers which formulated plans which later led to creation of The Florida Bar. Chesterfield Smith, former ABA President, called his work, "A monumental contribution to the legal profession."

The history of Bruton's professional life and his accomplishments as a lawyer and judge, and also his generosity with his money to institutions he believed in, are well chronicled in stories over the last 10-12 years of his life. In the fall of 1991 issue of the University of Florida Lawyer magazine, there is a comprehensive oral history of Judge Bruton put together by Denise Stobbie. The largess of Judge and Mrs. Bruton to the University of Florida led to the dedication of Bruton-Geer Hall in 1984, and in 1988 the University presented him with its Distinguished Alumnus Award. Both Brutons had a keen appreciation of the value of books and libraries. Mrs. Bruton, formerly Quintilla Geer, served faithfully and well on the Hillsborough County Library Board. After the death of his wife in 1989, Bruton gave over a period of time several hundred thousand dollars to what became known as Bruton Memorial Library in Plant City. Not far from his home base, he established Bruton's Audubon Acres Bird Sanctuary and Nature Preserve on 45 acres of land. Periodically he would tour all over the preserved area in his 1952 Willys Jeep - that and his air boat, he called his toys.

The Judge's niece, Grace Bruton Kelly, a lifelong resident of the area, relates that her uncle was essentially a loner; not a reclusive man, but one who wanted to be different. For example she suggests that his "Abe Lincoln" haircut and long sideburns are evidence of his idiosyncrasy. One gets the impression that Jas. D. Bruton, Jr. set out early in his career to create an image which would clearly distinguish him from his contemporaries. Said Nettle Draughon, then City Manager of Plant City, upon learning of his death reportedly said, "There has never been anyone quite like Judge Bruton, and I guess there never will be again. " Ralph Waldo Emerson must have had someone like Bruton in mind when he said, "Whosoever would be a man must be a nonconformist."

He liked to drive a luxury automobile, proudly declaring on one occasion that he had owned 23 Cadillacs and paid cash for all of them. After he went on the bench, being first

appointed to the County Court in 1961 by Gov. Farris Bryant, then elevated to Circuit Court in 1964, he had the political astuteness to make calls on law offices and on other public officials during the pre-Christmas holidays when it was opportune to take a few hours or days off.

According to several judicial assistants who knew him, all save one requesting anonymity, Bruton had a twinkling eye for the ladies. Lois Walsh, a savvy, spirited Philadelphian whose wit and personality are reminiscent of Rosalind Russell in her prime, was assistant to Judge Vernon W Evans, Jr., and before him, the late Judge Roger D. Flynn. She laughingly recalls that during Plant City's Strawberry Festival Judge Bruton made sure that many of the judicial staffers in the Tampa courthouse got a sticky-back, embroidered strawberry emblem. He wanted assurance, no doubt, that it would be worn so he would gently but firmly affix the simulated strawberry on the recipient's chest. One of her colleagues told Lois one day, "Well, Bruton got me again." Further affiant sayeth not.

Judge Bruton was an entertaining speaker. About three years after he was appointed to County Court, the writer invited him to speak at a luncheon sponsored by Florida Council of Bar Association Presidents. The subject of his talk was "Stuff and Things Like That There." One memorable snippet of "stuff" was his remark that the female elephant is the only four-legged mammal with mammary glands between the forelegs rather than at the hind quarters ... evidently nature's way of enabling mama elephant to better control her nursing calf.

From this scribe's own experience with Judge Bruton in a first degree murder trial held in Courtroom One, he had a penchant of taking over the examination of witnesses. He was a believer in equal opportunity so both sides had that usually distracting experience. Don Buchanan, who is in charge of the Clerk of Circuit Court's Evidence Department, has some stories concerning his experience while serving as his jury trial clerk. "I remember being the Deputy Clerk assigned to Judge Bruton's court on a Wednesday in the early 70s. His Honor enjoyed corned beef and cabbage, and the old Tribune Grill offered this dish as their special on Wednesdays. He invited me to join him for lunch this particular day, and confided to me that his judge's salary, which was a bit over \$38,000 a year at that time, did not even cover his income tax. Since the Clerk of the Court was paying me less than \$125 a week, he received very little sympathy".

He had a Midas touch when it came to making money from prudent investments in stocks and land. At death the estimated value of his estate was \$4 Million dollars. The inventory was placed under seal and is not open to inspection without Court order. Suffice it to say that the major beneficiaries who shared equally in the bulk of the estate were: Florida United Children's Home in Deltona, First United Methodist Church of Plant City, and Children's Home, Inc. in Tampa.

That old curmudgeon, H. L. Mencken, said, " I go on working for the same reason that a hen goes on laying eggs." Better worth remembering is the philosophy of J. D. Burton, a truly unforgettable character, who cited the following quote on his plaque in Bruton-Geer Hall in Gainesville that "hard work and honesty pays." His father preached that to his children, said Bruton, teaching that if you spend less than you earn, you'll never have financial trouble.

-Morison Buck

Afterword:

What a place to be in is an old library! It seems as if all the souls of all the writers that bequeathed their labors to these Bodleians were reposing here as in some dormitory, or middle state. I do not want to handle, to profane the leaves, their winding-sheets. I could as soon dislodge a shade. I seem to inhale learning, walking amid their foliage: And the odor of their old moth-scented coverings is fragrant as the first bloom of these scintial apples which grew amid the happy orchard.

-Charles Lamb