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Morison Buck

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# Judge Harry N. Sandler Small Wonder (1889-1965)



The first skyscraper in America (Chicago) and the Eiffel Tower in Paris were completed in 1889. That same year saw the birth in Maryland of Harry Nathan Sandler (he always preferred only the middle initial) who would ultimately launch a career in law, politics, community service and the judiciary which would last 53 years and leave an indelible mark on the history of Tampa and the State of Florida.

It's been said that every life has a story. This article attempts to capture the essence of the life and times of Judge Sandler.

There's no getting around it. Harry Sandler was a small man, five feet two inches in height "vertically challenged" some might say in contemporary vernacular. That small frame, however, housed an imposing intellect, make no mistake about that.

A native of Baltimore, Sandler earned his LL.B. degree from the University of Maryland in 1910. Although his family is uncertain of the reason, he came to Tampa the following year. Most likely, it was because his father, a tailor, had earlier relocated in Ybor City. A further attraction was Tampa's reputation as cigar capital; Harry was an inveterate cigar smoker.

The 1912 City Director lists Sandler as a lawyer with an office at 9 Knight Bldg. By 1930 he had formed the firm of Sandler & Duff (R.J. Duff who years later became well known as instructor of a refresher course for graduates preparing for the bar exam). Their office was in the Citrus Exchange Building, 205 Zack Street, site of the Maas Bros. Dept. Store. Ernest Robinson's History of Hillsborough County published in 1928 says of the Sandler & Duff firm: "This has been one of the prominent law firms of the city." The 1930 directory identified Sandler as a lawyer and also as Vice-President of Columbia Bank.

Some years ago, *Newsweek* magazine proclaimed, "In a nation of joiners the convention has become an American social institution." There's no record of his interest in conventions but it's safe to say that Harry Sandler, at least during the years of his professional practice, was a joiner. He also took a leadership role in many of the groups with which he affiliated. There were the state and national Bar associations, of course. For 10 years he functioned as Treasurer of the Hillsborough County Association. He was the first judge from the 13th Circuit to be chosen to head the Florida Circuit Judges Conference (1960-62). Later, Judges Moody and Lenfestey followed suit. He was Master of John Darling Lodge of Masons in 1918, and achieved a 33rd degree in the Masonic

Order, member Palma Ceia Golf Club, President of the Young Men's Hebrew Assn. of Tampa, served on the Board and for a term as President, Temple Schaarai Zedek. During World War II he served on the Draft Board and as a temporary member of the Coast Guard Reserve. Also, he was a Seaman First Class for over two years in the Volunteer Port Security Force, earning a Victory Medal for his service.

After more than 20 years of practicing law, with Columbia Bank as a major client, Sandler somehow became actively involved in local politics. Elected to the state legislature in 1933, he served through the 1935 session (at that time it met every two years), and became speaker *pro tem* for the latter term. Edward I. Cutler, Esq. has practiced law continuously in Tampa since 1947. He knew Judge Sandler well and often appeared before him. Both of them were active in the same Temple (Congregation) for many years. Cutler suggests that Sandler found favor with State Senator Pat Whitaker, a potent force in Hillsborough County politics during that era, and that such link or connection led to his appointment as Circuit Judge by Governor Dave Sholtz in 1935.

Speaking from my own experience, I can say that to many lawyers, especially less experienced ones, Judge Sandler brought to mind the phrase used by golf fans in Scotland to describe the great American player, Ben Hogan: "a wee ice mon." Those same lawyers would probably concur with Ralph Dell, Esq. who observed, "He was well versed in the law and while under 5 feet in height was always in complete control of his courtroom. He was soft-spoken and quick to the point."

Levity was out of place in Sandler's courtroom. No-nonsense formality was the natural order of things there and even in Chambers. Now retired Court Clerk, Jerry Stoner, says that it took him nearly two years working with Judge Sandler before he called him by his first name rather than Mr. Clerk. Stoner always had his instructions to the jury timed so as to try and limit them to ten minutes, if possible, and the judge always stood and faced the jury during instructions. That practice, one may assume, was out of deference to his small stature. When the present courthouse was erected in 1952, Judge Sandler had an elevated platform built for his chair which suggests that he had some degree of self-consciousness about his size. Judge James Moody, Jr. now occupies that office but the platform was removed prior to his occupancy.

There were occasions when Sandler's lighter side was revealed. Judge Ralph Steinberg tells of the occasion when he was just starting practice around 1960. He took an order to the Judge which was clipped to the court file. With a straight face, Judge Sandler told Steinberg that something was not right. It seems that the clipped order was upside down on the file folder. Judge Sandler finally laughed to the relief of the young lawyer, and signed the order.

Bayard Angle, who practiced law in Tampa commencing in the early 30's, vows that this story is true. He met with Harry G. McDonald (later a judge) who had been elected to the state legislature in 1941. McDonald said that before he left for a session that year, Judge Sandler told him that a bill would be filed to raise the salaries of judges and that if he didn't vote for it, he better not come back south of the Suwannee River. Harry said he didn't know if the Judge meant it or not, but it is assumed that the bill passed. Angle also says that then Circuit Judge T. Frank Hobson was seriously considering leaving that job before he learned that lawyers practicing in Pinellas County at that time were making less than he. He remained on the court and was later on the Supreme Court.

He was a solid family man, with wife and three children, all of whom (Mrs. Hannah

Sandler died in 1989) have memories of his wry humor even though his usual demeanor was quiet and unassuming, always mindful of his public image. He was reluctant to, for example, attend jai-alai games with friend and family because he thought it inappropriate for a judge to be seen at a gaming establishment.

Upon his retirement in 1964 at age 75, a newspaper encomium at the time described him well as "mild in manner, rugged in principle."

In 1961 the writer lived only a couple of blocks from Judge and Mrs. Sandler. One morning while waiting on a bus to town, I was offered a ride by Judge Sandler in his brand-new Ambassador sedan, a beautiful car. He drove us downtown at a perilous rate of speed, sometimes reaching 15 mph on the straight-away. Not, I'm certain, to becalm his passenger but from his innate conservative nature coupled with his pride in his new automobile. He was not only an upright judge but a good neighbor as well.

His diminutiveness notwithstanding, Harry N. Sandler stands tall in the pantheon of Hillsborough County's trial judges.

*- Morison Buck*