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## Sidebar with honorable Susan C. Bucklew, United States district judge middle district of Florida

Morison Buck

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**Sidebar with  
Honorable  
Susan C. Bucklew  
United States  
District Judge  
Middle District of  
Florida**



*Editor's Note: The following interview of Judge Susan C. Bucklew was recorded on October 30, 1997 by retired Judge Morison Buck. Due to space limitations a portion of the interview was not reprinted here. A transcript of the full interview is available from the Bar office.*

*Morison: Judge Bucklew, there are about 3200 members of the Hillsborough County Bar Association. Most don't know U.S. District Judge Susan Cawthon Bucklew. It is even likely that most Tampa lawyers will not be called upon to practice in your court. Would you please let them in on something of your life and career BDC (that's before District Court)?*

**J. Bucklew:** Sure. I was born here in Tampa, went to Seminole Elementary, Sligh Jr. High, and graduated from Hillsborough High School in 1960. There were in excess of 600 people in my graduating class. Those were all good schools, and my teachers made a huge impact on my life. I attended Florida State University, graduating after 4 years there. My brother told me that girls don't go to Univ. of Florida, although he was, of course, only joking. I had a very good experience at Florida State although our football team at the time wasn't wonderful. Upon graduating with a major in English and a minor in education, I taught English at Plant High for a year. I married during that time, then moved to Pinellas County where at the time teacher pay was somewhat better. I taught two years at Seminole High School, then decided to go back to graduate school. At that time, there was, I recall, a state-wide teacher's strike going on. I obtained a Master's degree at USF, after which I was invited to teach at Chamberlain High School in Tampa. Subsequent to taking that assignment, I became pregnant and gave birth to twins, a boy and girl. It was a full time job taking care of two babies. That was in 1969. About 1972 I moved to West Palm Beach for two years, then returned to Tampa to attend law school at Stetson, finishing there in 1977. After graduation, I went to work for Jim Walter Corporation in their legal dept. I was fortunate to have worked with some fine people there. My client was Jim Walter Homes. They'd never had a female attorney before so it was a unique experience for both of us. In 1981, I was nominated for one of 3 County

Court judgeships. In 1983, I was appointed by then Governor Graham, and became the first female judge in Hillsborough County. Bob Bonanno and Don Evans were named to the other vacancies. I kidded them because the news story headlined First Female Judge Appointed, then down in the body of the story it mentioned the other two appointees.

**Morison:** *So, they were upstaged by you?*

**J. Bucklew:** They were a little bit. My first assignment was in Traffic Court in the Police Station, together with Ed Ward and Don Evans. Don't think I'd ever been in Traffic Court before. I started in the first day with hearing everything from running a red light (now an infraction heard by a Hearing Officer) to DUI. While it was a unique experience, it's like night and day between what I did then and what I do now. In 1983, I went to Plant City and presided over all manner of cases.

**Morison:** *What did you do after that?*

**J. Bucklew:** Cliff Cheatwood was Chief Judge at that time. As my children were going into high school, I asked judge Cheatwood for a transfer back to Tampa where I'd be closer to my children. He assigned me to the Misdemeanor Division. Bob Bonanno and I shared a courtroom in the Annex - he had use of the court 2½ days a week and I was allocated 2½ days a week. Most cases were non-jury. Jury trials in Misdemeanor were rare. I spent one to one and a half years doing that. Meanwhile, Judge Spicola became Chief Judge. The Annex Tower had recently been erected and Judge Bonanno and I set up there as Acting Circuit Judges hearing felony cases. In 1986, I was appointed Circuit Judge by Governor Graham. In early 1993, I applied for one of the two vacancies in Tampa on the federal bench. After investigation processes were concluded, nominees, Henry Adams and I went to Washington to appear before the Senate Judiciary Committee. We were promptly confirmed thereafter. That was late 1993.

**Morison:** *What hobbies or special interests do you have?*

**J. Bucklew:** You know, Morison, I have a three year old granddaughter who is absolutely the greatest thing in the world. Every weekend, usually Saturday, I spend a good portion of the day with Sylvia. She's named after my mother who died in 1993. She (Sylvia) is a great joy. Do you have any grandchildren?

**Morison:** *I've two grown grandchildren. Do you have any aspirations to go on to a high level in the federal court system?*

**J. Bucklew:** None. I like being in the courtroom as District Judge. I'm there constantly, and I would miss that. I have no aspirations except to be here and ultimately become a Senior Judge coming back to hear cases at 66 and 67, and so on until I'm told that I shouldn't.

**Morison:** *You spoke earlier about the federal judicial selection process. Tell us more about that, If you would.*

**J. Bucklew:** The system is designed to have checks and balances. Federal nominees are subject to an extensive FBI background check. You have to fill out a lengthy form. You list every place you have lived since age 18, and the identity of someone who can confirm that information. They talk to neighbors, friends, and others who perhaps are not your friends, ex-spouses, etc. The Senate Judiciary Committee also does its own investigation. For example, at one time I belonged to Palma Ceia Golf and Country Club and they had done a Westlaw or Lexis check which revealed some old news stories about that club's policy with regard to blacks and women. At my confirmation I was asked some questions about that. I had resigned earlier but that was an issue. Also, the

American Bar Association rates candidates for appointment after making extensive inquiries. I had to get a physical exam and have my sight and hearing tested as well.

**Morison:** *What are your views on the efficacy of methods now in place for judicial appointments, both state and federal?*

**J. Bucklew:** I think they're good at the federal level. The process, by its nature after it gets past the nominating committee, is going to be somewhat political. I think Senators Graham and Mack are both very concerned about appointing good judges. In the state system there are fewer checks and balances, but I think the nominating process and gubernatorial appointment is better than the electoral method where voters sometimes like the sound of a name on the ballot. People just don't know enough about judges. I'm a great advocate for the nominating process as opposed to the election of judges.

**Morison:** *Have you taken note or read perhaps of the efforts of some national political figures to impose some sort of political correctness test on judges, thinking they've exceeded their judicial authority and are legislating? Do you have any thoughts on that?*

**J. Bucklew:** I've a lot of thoughts on that. I realize that's been a source of contention with the federal judiciary. A judge, federal or state, has to be free to make a decision without believing that he or she is going to be second-guessed by a politician, whether a senator or congressman or congresswoman in Washington or a legislator in Tallahassee. Judicial activism is a tag placed by some politicians on some federal judges. I don't see judicial activism as an issue. Certainly we should never get to the stage where a judge is unable to decide a case and stick by the decision without being influenced by an elected official who claims the decision is wrong. We've gone to a bad place in our judicial system if we allow that to happen. I hope that lawyers and the public would not want that to happen.

**Morison:** *Now, I want to ask you a few questions about today's lawyers in general from your vantage point. Do you have any impressions about the level of professionalism within the rank and file of attorneys appearing in your court?*

**J. Bucklew:** You know, that's an awfully common question. For the most part the attorneys appearing in front of me are very professional. Generally, they are prepared and act in a very professional manner. There are exceptions, of course. There are big differences in federal and state court. In federal court there is a lot less confusion. Usually, there are not ten lawyers waiting to be heard. In criminal cases there aren't 10 defendants sitting in the jury box, with an equivalent number of defense attorneys, witnesses, etc. standing around to be heard.

**Morison:** *You mean cases are more isolated?*

**J. Bucklew:** That's right, but it's more than that. There's more of a formal atmosphere and that tends to create more professionalism. Also, because in the federal system more emphasis is placed on the written product from counsel, the expectations are much higher. In my opinion the quality of the written product in the district court is higher than in the state trial court. Perhaps the need for written product is not as great at the state level because of more hearings.

**Morison:** *My late father was a guest speaker at Tampa's Downtown Sertoma Club when it was meeting weekly at Hillsboro Hotel about 35 years ago. After being introduced by me, he opened his remarks by jesting that he understood lawyers were modern-day bounty hunters. In 1997, with huckstering and self-promoting solicitations*

*by lawyers in television and print, there appears to be diminished respect for the legal profession. Would you venture any comments?*

**J. Bucklew:** I would agree that respect has been diminished. Just two weeks ago, I had a prospective female juror state in open court that she couldn't serve because she couldn't trust anything said by lawyers in general. In another case, a pro-se defendant who was struggling with paper work which he was required to do, commented to the Court that it was no wonder that lawyers make so much money on account of having to generate so much paper. People tend to like and respect their own attorney although there seems to be a widely held distrust of attorneys generally.

**Morison:** *After several years of service in the U.S. Courthouse as District Judge, what part of your work gives you the most satisfaction?*

**J. Bucklew:** What makes me feel good is when you have a trial, whether jury or non-jury, where the attorneys are prepared, courteous toward each other, witnesses, and court personnel, and the trial proceeds smoothly due to the professionalism of counsel.

**Morison:** *Conversely, what duties do you have that you find onerous or less palatable?*

**J. Bucklew:** Sentencing defendants in criminal cases is an unpleasant responsibility, especially because federal guidelines in drug cases are severe and harsh.

**Morison:** *Upon being honored at retirement, the late William J. Barker, in appearance and demeanor the embodiment of a respected judge, said, in effect, that serving as a judge was close to a call to church ministry. Do you have any inner feelings along those lines?*

**J. Bucklew:** No, I don't feel that way. There have been times when I have expressed a private prayer asking for divine guidance in dealing with a difficult decision. People tend to expect a higher standard of moral conduct and behavior from ministers and perhaps judges as well.

**Morison:** *There has been increased debate over cameras in the courtroom since the recent British au pair trial. What is your opinion on that important issue?*

**J. Bucklew:** My thinking as to that issue has taken a 180 degree turnaround in recent years. Cameras were allowed in the state court while I was serving there and I became accustomed to it. After the nationally publicized William Kennedy Smith and O.J. Simpson trials, I am now persuaded that it's much better for accused defendants, victims, jurors and even the attorneys if cameras are excluded. I believe that without the distraction of cameras a trial is more honest and there is more focus on the real issues to be decided.

**Morison:** *Do you think that the controversial issue of abortion is one to be resolved in the federal courts?*

**J. Bucklew:** The road always ends in federal court, it seems. It's just not possible to predict what legal issues in that area will come up. In many instances, women will be confronted with the morality of a decision on abortion. In some cases both women and their spouses, or perhaps biological fathers, will be making decisions. There will no doubt be cases involving the legal issues. What I will do will be controlled by what the law is at that time.

**Afterword:**

By Retired Judge Morrison Buck. Ladies whose names begin with Susan seem to have a magical affinity for judgeships in Florida. In addition to Judge Bucklew, here is a partial list of other judicial notables of that name: Susan Black, 11th Circuit Court of Appeals; Susan Sexton of Tampa; Susan Schaeffer of the 6th Circuit (at this writing a finalist for appointment to the Supreme Court of Florida); Susan Roberts of Polk County; Susan Lebow of Broward County; and Susan Lubitz of Palm Beach County.