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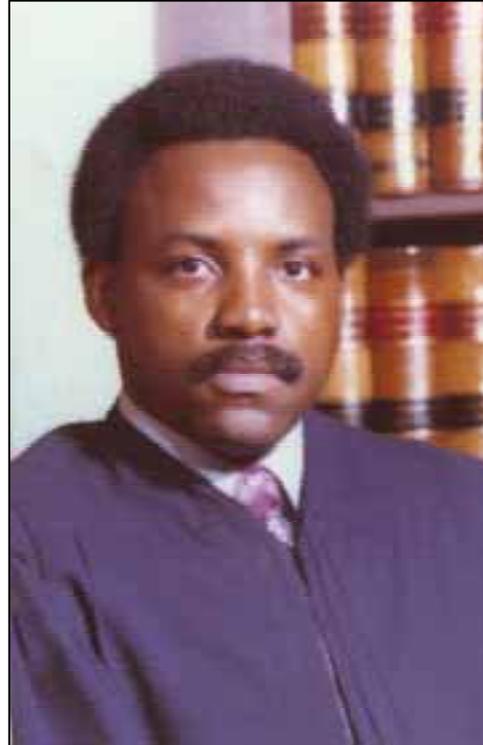
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## CHIPS OFF THE OLD BENCH

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### GEORGE E. EDGECOMB: JUDICIAL PATHFINDER (1942-1976)

George E. Edgecomb was a Tampa native, he and his siblings having been raised by their mother on Spruce Street in the federally sponsored housing project-North Boulevard Homes, a 354 unit complex completed in late 1940. His father was an absentee parent during much of Edgecomb's early years. While their home was neat and comfortable, and the four children had duties and responsibilities, the family probably had a luxury-free, hard-scrabble existence.



The writer was born in the first quarter of the last century and grew up in the south, or more correctly perhaps, the mid-south, as Memphis, Tennessee liked to call itself in 1923. Maybe it still does. Schools and neighborhoods were entirely segregated in those years and for decades afterward. The only real contact any young whites had with persons of color were so-called domestic workers (female) or handymen (male). On the surface, at least, neither of the races had any problem with the long-standing social order. Giving the racial divide little thought, white householders for the most part felt kindly, even affectionately, toward those with black skin who lived in another part of town, but worked in white neighborhoods.

No one is born with prejudices. Like allergies, they are acquired. Thus it is, that a southern white man is simply not capable of understanding how it was to be a young black man growing up in post-World War II in Tampa. But we know that until the long past due changes brought about over time by the desegregation of schools, and subsequent civil rights legislation in the areas of voting, housing and public accommodations, the attitude of most in the southern United States was unchanged from that described in an article written in 1908 by Will Irvin, a prominent newsman, that appeared in *Colliers* weekly magazine. He wrote: "The southern white still regards the negroes as his subject people; dear if

they keep their place; to be chastised if they do not.” Historically, equality of opportunity for black persons was vastly better in the northern, eastern and midwestern United States. Someone put it this way many years back: “The north loves The negro and the South loves A negro.” Patrick Henry, a Virginian, American folk hero and patriot who professed to favor death over his loss of freedom was the owner of 65 slaves. In the story of his “Good Life” Ben Bradlee, former editor of the Washington Post, tells us that the Post had a rule to never make references to a person’s race unless it was necessary to make a story understandable. Washington, D.C., which now has a predominantly African-American population was, according to Bradlee, segregated halfway into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Norman Rockwell, renowned magazine illustrator, was instructed not to use black persons on the magazine covers for which he became famous.

As this is being written, a major oil company is airing a television commercial depicting a number of young, underprivileged children of color. Each of them was expressing the same hope: “All I want is a chance.” Other figures representing the same minority group in the ad say: “I want to be somebody.” George Edgecomb had the determination to be someone of worth, and he surely succeeded. It took a special person to persist because more than a half century after Irvin's social dictum, quality education and full citizenship privileges for young black men and women were scarce when George Edgecomb and others like him came along. The first African-American to graduate in law from the University of Florida was George Allen, who got his degree in 1962 and still practices law in Ft. Lauderdale according to the Florida Bar Journal. It was 1971 before University of Miami and Florida State University law schools had a non-white graduate.

From his youth, Edgecomb followed Lincoln’s apothegm that each individual should do what he chooses in all matters which concern nobody else. He overcame the economic and social obstacles which his life’s circumstances placed in his path. An honor graduate of Middleton High School, he was also president of the student body. He was a natural athlete, playing tennis later on but in high school he was as infielder with the school’s baseball team. One of his teammates, Alton White, a well-known personality in Tampa for many years, relates that George’s nickname was “Candy Boy” – a term of endearment which originated with his father.

Life became a series of firsts for Edgecomb. He was the first black Assistant County Solicitor, then the first black Assistant State Attorney under the irrepressible E.J. Salcines (now a judge of the Second District Court of Appeals). Finally, 1973 saw him become the first of his race to be appointed County Judge for Hillsborough County by Governor Reubin O’D. Askew. “So Rare” is the 1937 musical composition made famous some years later by Jimmy Dorsey & Orchestra. So also was the brief but luminous career of George Edgecomb as a judge. By the way, the first black judge in Florida was Lawson Thomas who was

appointed to preside over Police Court in the black community section of Miami in 1950.

But I'm getting ahead of the story. Before his foray into public service, George had to complete his education. Next stop after high school was Clark College in Atlanta. Even then he cultivated a mustache. As a freshman he formed a close, almost brotherly, association with the Honorable Clarence Cooper who has served as a United States District Judge for the Northern District of Georgia since 1994. The two men were remarkably similar in several respects, both having served as prosecutors, then as judges at about the same time. They resembled one another and were approximately the same height and weight. George was a candidate for class president as was another friend of Cooper, and the latter switched his allegiance to Edgecomb helping to insure his election. George also received the Young Man of the Year award while attending Clark.

Judge Cooper characterizes his late friend as a natural-born leader who could bring about consensus on issues, and whose attributes of fairness and honesty would serve him well throughout his career – one that burned brightly but flamed out much too soon. Both friends attended Howard University law school where George took his degree in 1968. Cooper transferred to Emory in Atlanta, but they remained close until Edgecomb's death. Howard, one of the largest predominantly black universities, named for the man who headed the post Civil War Freedmen's Bureau, was opened in 1867.

Reverend A. Leon Lowry, whose leadership in the cause of asserting and capturing the rights of black Americans reached well beyond the Tampa Bay area, brought him to state presidency of the NAACP. After serving nearly 40 years as pastor of Beulah Baptist Church, he was in the forefront of those who in the early 1960s engaged in non-violent, sit-in demonstrations at downtown lunch counters and other establishments long barred to black patrons. He knew George Edgecomb who was a participant in those significant expressions of resistance to racial discrimination. George didn't worship at Beulah Baptist but Lowry admired his spirit, his out-going personality and clean humor. Edgecomb never became swell-headed after he ascended the bench, always, Lowry remembers, retaining the common touch. Reverend Lowry continues to serve his fellow man as Chaplain at the Hillsborough County jail facility on Falkenburg Road.

While a student at Howard, Edgecomb worked for a law firm in the nation's capitol. Then after becoming a member of the Florida Bar he became associated, first as a clerk then a partner, for about two years with Delano Stewart, Esq. An established and well-respected lawyer in Tampa. Mr. Stewart advises that Herbert Reed, George's professor in constitutional law, recommended him highly to Stewart. They maintained one office in West Tampa and another on North 29<sup>th</sup> Street.

After serving part-time as Asst. County Solicitor, E.J. Salcines showed his confidence in George by making him Chief of the Felony Division as Asst. State Attorney with supervisory authority over a substantial number of attorneys. One of those lawyers was Hon. Richard Lazzara, now a United States District Judge in Tampa. In 1971, there was a discussion in the office about how to handle the recently issued desegregation orders. Lazzara recalls when George told the assemblage, without rancor or bitterness, "I never heard any white folks objecting when I was being bussed to school into another neighborhood."

His solid record as a lawyer and prosecutor led to his appointment as County Judge and he was installed on August 15, 1973. In an especially poignant moment in the ceremony, he had this to say about his mother and his wife and daughter:

"To my mother who is here, I thank her for encouraging me from the day I was really able to understand what honesty and integrity and dedication could do and would bring a reward regardless of the obstacles. I think that even more for the summer of 1960 when I graduated from high school not even knowing that I would go on to college. She encouraged me, gave me the strength and wisdom to go on, to go on and to go on.

To my wife and daughter, who are both here this morning, I say I truly appreciate the love, the patience, the encouragement and the inspiration that they have given me to go on and be here today."

During the short span of years allotted him, George Edgecomb remembered many organizations by his faithful service, e.g. Mt. Sinai A.M.E. Church, president, Tampa Urban League and many others. After his death he was remembered by having the building on Twiggs directly opposite the Courthouse Annex, which housed his court, named George Edgecomb Public Service Center. The proposed structure to replace the existing building with a six story Family Court facility will also bear his name. That was the decision of the Board of County Commissioners on April 1-2, 1998.

He and wife, Doretha, married on Jan. 31, 1964 after a story-book romance which began when they began dating during their senior year in high school. He was a first year law student at Howard and she was teaching English at a local junior high. She was later principal at Robles Elementary. She also taught at USF in the College of Education after earning her Masters degree. That union proudly produced a daughter, Allison, who teaches math at Sligh Middle School in the tradition of her parents' commitment to excellence in scholarship.

William Howard Taft, a lawyer who went on to become the 27<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, was quoted once as saying: "I love judges and I love courts. They are my ideals that typify on-earth what we shall meet hereafter in heaven

under a just God.” History tells us that Taft’s real ambition all along was to serve on the Supreme Court, and he is the only former chief executive to later serve as Chief Justice of the nation’s highest court.

Taft would have been proud of Judge George Edgecomb, especially when one is reminded of what was said by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. just before his premature death: "The quality, not the longevity of one’s life, is what is important."

Morison Buck

AFTERWORD:

We can agree now, most of us, that slavery was an unmitigated evil, but we cannot therefrom conclude that those who inherited it, were caught in it and by it, who supported it and fought for it, were evil men. What we can say is that but for the grace of God, or the accident of history, we might ourselves have been caught up in slavery, and bound by it, and habituated to accepting, just as our forbears were. What we can say is that if earlier generations – in the North and the South alike – bore the burden and the guilt of slavery, we have borne the burden, and the guilt, of racial discrimination.

Henry Steele Commager