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Robert Trask Mann: Judge & writer with intelligence, wisdom, and whimsicality
(1924-2002)

The year was 1924. Life and death went on about as usual. In Florida politics, John W. Martin, a Democrat, was elected governor and took office the following year. Women became eligible for the first time to vote in America only four years earlier, and would in time become significantly more conscientious voters than their male counterparts. Notables who died in 1924 included: Woodrow Wilson, writer Joseph Conrad, and Lenin.

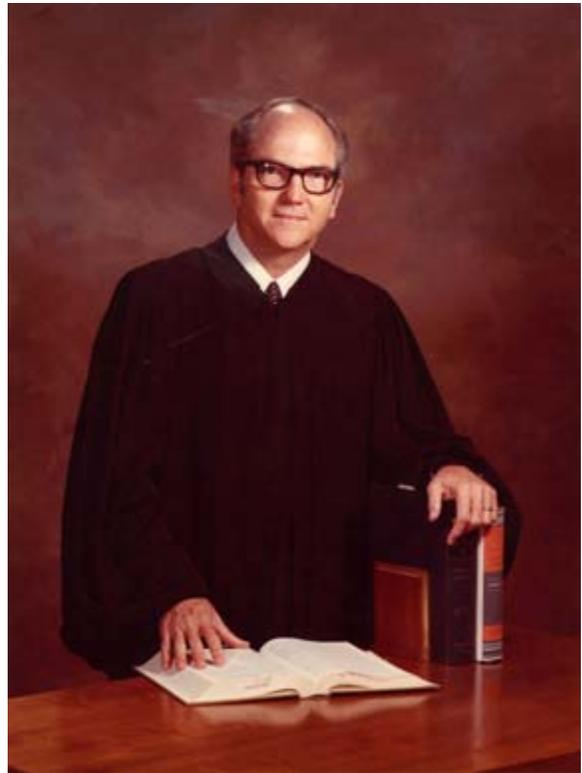
Tarpon Springs, founded in 1876, was a small village on the Gulf coast of Florida with a population in the 1920 census of 2105. Although sponge fishing began almost a quarter-century earlier, it was not until John Cocoris, a Greek immigrant, introduced the harvesting of sponges by deep-water diving that the industry began to flourish. A steady number of hardy Greeks settled in the area and their influence became the dominant force in the life and culture of the community.

In mid-year the stork landed safely in Tarpon Springs bringing a second child, another boy, to William Edgar and Eunice Trask Mann. The newborn arrived June 5, 1924, and they named him Robert Trask Mann. An older son, Bill, now deceased, became a Navy pilot in World War II. About two years after Robert's birth, came a daughter, Barbara, now Mrs. Gene Vinson; she still lives in Tarpon Springs and has a son, William L. Vinson, who practices law there. Other children are: Arthur, Melissa, Tim, Orion, and Dan.

When asked about her brother's early life, Barbara relates:

"We were both born and grew up just a city block from Spring Bayou, a wonderful environment. We had such freedom and lack of fear, riding bikes all over town and even out to the beach area. Bob was very bright. When he entered first grade, the teachers found that he could read anything put before him, but he hadn't yet learned to write. So he was placed in the "2B" grade so he could learn writing.

Our home had always been full of books and our parent both read a great deal. Bob was a "sickly" child and the doctor said he needed goat's milk if he was going to be strong. In those days goat's milk wasn't available unless you owned a goat, so a goat was purchased- a fine Saanen, solid white, which provided the family with plenty of milk.



In high school, Bob was a very good student and a strong debater. He played the trumpet both in high school and during his undergrad at the University of Florida. Mike Kavouklis, former County Court Judge, also played trumpet in the same band, Tarpon Spring Spongers.”

Father, William Edgar Mann, largely self-educated, was a linotype operator and occasionally columnist with Tarpon Springs Leader, a small, local newspaper. The senior Mann was an avid reader, and Bob credited his dad with indoctrinating him to the joys of reading, at an early age. Harry S. Truman, a man without formal education after high school, reminded us that not all readers can be leaders, but that all leaders must be readers. Bob’s father also taught his son to enjoy the intricacies of chess (Bob, in turn, introduced his own son to the intellectual game). Bob’s father died in 1964, not living long enough to enjoy his son’s professional attainments beyond his legislative service. His mother lived to see Bob’s investiture as judge, to her great pride.

Bob Mann was not known to wear hats as part of his attire. Because he had endured baldness from youth, he could not be faulted for covering up had he chosen to do so. Some wise man (or possibly some wise acre) said that nothing better has ever been developed for baldness than a hat. Humor writer, P.J. O’Rourke has written a piece about contemporary manners. Decrying the need for anyone to wear a hat, O’Rourke observed that the only people who could be excused for hat-wearing was someone playing golf or going duck hunting in the rain. (Bob was, incidentally, a pretty good tennis player). At any rate, he grew into a man who, figuratively speaking, wore many hats. He was husband, father, church leader, student, musician, lawyer, politician, legislator, photographer (while in Tallahassee, he was seen around the hallowed halls with at least one, sometimes two, cameras encased around his neck), chairman of a state agency, court of appeals judge and law professor. He was, it may be said, a portable one-man monument of public service.

Mann’s good friend for more than 40 years, R.R. (Bob) Simmons of Temple Terrace describes Bob Mann as a “total intellectual”.

Bob’s mental acuity may have been manifest as early as the first grade, as noted above, but as his body grew so did his intellect. His higher education began at the University of Florida in his undergraduate years. His date with destiny was delayed, however, when in February 1943, at age 18, he was drafted into the United States Army for duty in what Archie Bunker called *The Big One*.

Until his discharge in late 1945, he was assigned to the 666 to Antiaircraft Artillery Machine Gun Battery, Airborne, promoted in the course of events to the rank of Tech. Sgt. and found himself stationed in the China-Burma-India theater of war (commonly referred to as CBI). His knowledge of office procedures and especially his proficiency with a typewriter stood him in good stead and fatefully kept him from exposure to combat duty. His wife, Elizabeth, advises that he was placed in a unit of OSS (forerunner of the CIA) and was scheduled to be dropped into Thailand and he was being taught to speak the language. Fortunately, plans changed and he was returned to

the states after 1, 1945; that was the date when President Truman disbanded the OSS, writing Director William (Wild Bill) Donovan to thank him for his leadership in an “activity which will not be needed in time peace.” History tells us that Donovan, a buddy of FDR, was not a favorite of Truman even though they had served together in the AEF in Europe during the First World War.

While in uniform based in India, Bob corresponded regularly with his sister, Barbara. He was not yet married. She still has a packet of letters, all neatly typed, from her brother starting in September 1944 and extending into October 1945. Some were written in Assam (northeast India) and others from places like Kanchrapara in that far distant part of the world (the writer’s World Book of Encyclopedia does not provide a precise location of either of the last-named villages or towns).

Mann’s service records reveal that effective February 10, 1948 he was appointed Second Lieutenant, Military Intelligence, U.S. Army Reserves. He later joined the Florida National Guard, and trained once a week at Starke, near Gainesville, for an extended period.

Upon his release from active WWII service, he returned home and resumed pursuit of his drive for more education. He was really a young man in a hurry. In 1946 he received a BS degree in Business Administration from the University of Florida. His longtime interest in writing and finding the right word and knowing how to use it was manifested when in his final year at the College of Law (still at Bryan Hall, I believe) he became Editor-in-Chief of the Law Review. Exactitude was the hallmark of Mann’s work. As everybody’s favorite, Mark Twain, wrote: “the difference between the nearly right word and the right word is the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.”

Evidently not yet fully focused on his ultimate career goal, Mann chose to then go to the George Washington University where in 1948 he was conferred an MA in Government. His L.L.M. was awarded in 1953. A similar degree came from Yale in 1968. In the interim, University of Florida awarded him a J.D. degree in 1951, the same year he was admitted to the Florida Bar. Not to be outdone by its state rival, Stetson University in 1979 awarded him an honorary L.L.D. degree.

Having a sackful of graduate degrees, he was almost but not quite ready to embark on the drudgery associated with the practice of law. For a two-year period beginning in 1951, he served as an Asst. Professor of Law at Northeastern University at Boston. Over the years he taught at other schools including University of Maryland, Stetson, and University of South Florida. Sometime ago, a Tampa lawyer told this scribe that he considered Bob Mann a natural-born academician. His record in the classroom surely bears him out.

For the next ensuing 15 years, Mann practiced the noble profession of law in Tampa—never with a large group, but in a small cohesive firm. His first associate was with the Hill, Hill & Dickenson combine in First National Bank Building. The only

survivors of that respected old firm at this writing are Lewis Hill, III, and John Mankin. His other connections during that time period were Graham, Dixon & Flynn in the Wallace S. Building. All of the latter gentlemen are gone. From 1961 until about 1964, he teamed up with two excellent lawyers, Charles C. Whitaker, II, and Larry Stagg and the firm of Whitaker, Mann & Stagg was born. "Sonny" Whitaker is now retired, and Larry Stagg is a partner in Akerman Senterfitt. Larry tells me about one of Mann's practical talents:

"When he ran for Congress against Sam Gibbons I had to meet him following a taping of a television commercial. I recall that the people in the station and the advertising consultant were astounded by Bob's uncanny sense of timing. He would simply "wing it" in a TV commercial, say what he wanted to say, and be finished at almost exactly the expiration of whatever time was allotted for the commercial."

In what was probably his last association as a practicing lawyer, he became the junior partner in Campbell & Mann located in (you guessed it) the Wallace S. Building. When Bob was sworn in as judge of the appeals court on May 3, 1968, Charles I. Campbell held the Bible upon which the new judge's hand rested. Campbell died in 1969 after many years lawyering in Tampa.

Mann severed his law firm ties when, enticed by that might be called the "forbidden fruit" of politics. It is though that Bob was a restive individual who sought out new challenges in life. Consequently, he decided in 1956 to seek election to the Florida House of Representatives. He won in a runoff and served until 1968. Bob Simmons tells me that Bob took some pride in announcing that he had spent only \$26.00 in his first political campaign. Mann quickly acquired a reputation as a "white hat", an independent thinker and a man of high ethical standards. He was unsuccessfully challenged by Finley O. Ricard when he sought reelection in 1958. Another hopeful, the late Yale Whidden, fell by the wayside in 1960. Buoyed by his success at the state level, Mann raised his political sights for higher and announced that he was running for Congress in Dist. 10. Sam Gibbons, popular state senator from Hillsborough County and prime mover in the creation of University of South Florida in Tampa, who had previously indicated he would not run, apparently changed his mind when encouraged to enter the race by some of the best-connected, wealthy movers and shakers in Tampa. There were five Democrats on the ballot: Ken Ayers, Dick Bacon, Sam Gibbons, Sumter L. Lowry and Robert T. Mann. For the Republican nomination, running unopposed, was Victor Rule. These numbers are of no importance now, but after the votes were tallied Gibbons and Lowry finished 1-2. Bob Mann, who followed his usual practice of not raising serious money, finished a strong third. Gibbons went on to trounce Rule in the general election. It was the first of Sam's seventeen successive terms in the Congress. Bob, undeterred, moved on to achieve great success in the state judiciary.

An interesting sidelight during Mann's years as a lawyer and legislator found him in the business of operating a small newspaper (a weekly) in Tampa. Somewhere inside, he always had an affinity for journalism, likely due to his father's job with a newspaper.

He acquired Ralard Publishers, Inc., 202 E. Henderson Avenue whose principal business was printing, and who published a weekly newspaper, the Tampa Independent. The predecessor owner, Al Chiaramonte, member of the County School Board, now deceased, was honored by having an elementary school in Interbay named for him. Ralard had been around since 1950, and one of the original organizers was Roger D. Flynn, a lawyer who later was associated with Bob Mann, and who also later served as Circuit Judge succeeding the late L.L. Parks whose court service commenced in 1923. By the Tampa Independent Publishers, Inc., Bob Mann was designated to President and the corporate office relocated to his office at 725 E. Kennedy Blvd. On May 22, 1970, the Tampa Independent was dissolved by operation of law.

Bob had a remarkably successful record as a legislator. Former Governor Reubin Askew said, upon learning of Mann's death, "He was one of the finest legislators I served with, one of my all-time favorites." Florida State University president, Talbot "Sandy" D'Almberte commented: "Bob was really one of the more brilliant people I've ever known, one of the handful of people who was really important during an era of tremendous change in Florida." In 1969, after he left legislative office, Judge Mann was awarded the St. Petersburg Times Most Valuable Legislator award. Years before, Tampa Jaycees named him Outstanding Young Man of the Year.

An influential newspaperman who ultimately became Publisher of the Tampa Tribune was a close friend of Bob Mann. H. Doyle Harvill is now retired and living the good life in Tampa.

Here's a summary of Harvill's recent comments regarding his late friend:

"I first met Bob while I was connected with the Plant City Courier and he was a freshly-installed member of the Florida House. He was an intellectual individual, smart as hell, with a reputation of being an enemy of the Crockett Farnell political establishment. Mann was a fine writer with the ability to speak on his feet to great effect. I remember covering for the Courier a major rally at Bob's lakefront home in Seffner. As Mann could not be controlled, he was unpopular with the "good old boy" network in Tampa. In the legislature, he was often referred to as the "bill killer", no doubt because of his fierce independence."

The extent of Harvill's friendship with Bob Mann became clear when I was advised that on May 26, 1986, Judge Mann performed the marriage ceremony when Harvill's daughter, Kimberly, wed Ben Scott.

Charles H. Scruggs, III., former Tampa Circuit Judge, stretches his memory to reflect on his initial encounter with Bob Mann:

"I had the privilege of serving as a legislative aide to Plant City's Jim Redman during the 1967 session. Bob Mann was the defacto leader of the Hillsborough delegation whose members included future judges,

Guy Spicola, Elvin Martinez, future Senate president, Louis DelaParte, and future Speaker of the House T. Terrell Sessums. Rep. Mann was one of the most knowledgeable lawmakers in Tallahassee as well as one of the most affable and outgoing persons I had the privilege to know. Bob wore a 35mm camera (suspended by a leather strap around his neck) everywhere he went including committee meetings, also the floor of the House and he must have taken hundreds of photographs of everybody in and around the state government. I'm sure his photo collection would be a treasure of historical depictions. One evening several of the Hillsborough delegation's aides went to a dinner at the invitation of the manufactured housing lobby. Later, we all went to a pub on the fringe of the FSU campus. It was filled with students and was noisy and loud and fun. Everybody was feeling good, and the group began to playfully challenge Bob Mann to demonstrate his ballroom skills. Not one to back down, Bob proceeded to boogie to "Light My Fire" with none other than the future legislator, Helen Gordon Davis. It was a hoot. Not only was Bob an outstanding legislator, but a super nice guy and a lot of fun to be around. I will always treasure that two month period of my life spent in and around the halls of state government."

Robert W. (Bob) Turner, a Richmond, Virginia native, experienced "in the trenches" journalist, popular with colleagues and readers alike, became a stellar reporter with the old Tampa Daily Times in 1953. The Tampa Tribune acquired the evening paper in 1958, renamed it the Tampa Times (evening & Sunday) until it ceased publication in 1982. Bob Turner covered every session of the legislature for years beginning in 1957. During those years he became highly familiar with Bob Mann- a man he calls: "bright, articulate and witty." The following stories (Turner calls them vignettes, which proves the value of a liberal education) are first-hand recollections by an older but still keen-witted Bob Turner:

"I remember very well an incident which almost certainly took place in the 1961 legislative session involving a congressional redistricting plan giving Hillsborough County its own congressional seat. The delegation consisted of Bob Mann, Tom Whitaker and Woodie Liles (Sam Gibbons was in the Florida Senate). When the final version of the aforesaid plan came to a vote, Whitaker and Liles voted "Yea" and Mann voted "Nay". I was standing against a sidewall of the House chamber near the Hillsborough desks. The instant the tote board lighted up, Whitaker and Liles bolted to their feet "going ballistic" over Mann's negative vote. The threesome left the room. When they returned, Mann looked sort of ashen and shaken. The story which I heard later was that the 3-member Hillsborough delegation had some agreement that should Hillsborough County get its own Congressional seat that the trio would support any measure containing that provision. I can only conjecture that by voting against the redistricting plan Mann was only trying to insulate himself from any subsequent campaign criticism that he had supported a

measure which might benefit him personally should he choose to run for the new seat. In the 1967 session, it was Mann who came up with the memorable remark that while it was agreed that nobody could “buy” a legislator, he wanted to make sure that nobody could “rent” one for the session.”

After six terms as a Democratic legislator, Mann took a giant leap from debating in the State House (against able orators like Fred Karl, who was quoted later as admitting “He beat the hell out of me”), to listening to lawyers debate in an appeals courthouse. Mann obviously felt some obligation to the Republican governor (Claude Kirk) who gave him an interim appointment on April 20, 1968 as judge of the Second District Court of Appeals. The day of his appointment coincided with his change in party affiliation to Republican- a small concession indeed for the chance to use his fertile mind in the judiciary. Later he switched back to being a Democrat.

Judge Mann’s service on the court was uninterrupted due to another appointment from the same governor to fulfill the balance of resigning judge William Allen’s term on Dec. 10, 1968. Retired Supreme Court Justice Stephen Grimes, who had served on the Dist. Court with Mann, called the latter a “straight arrow who would not tolerate anyone attempting to get special treatment in that tribunal.”

William Haddad, now retired Clerk of the Second District Court, is another admirer of Bob Mann, telling me:

“What impressed me when I was just out of law school and, I believe, his first law clerk, he seemed to know everyone and who their relatives were. We could be in a courtroom or at a restaurant, it didn’t seem to matter. He just had a remarkable memory for names and people. He had a scholarly interest in many subjects besides the law, and I have many pleasant memories of our discussions.”

Recently at Mac Dill Air Force Base Exchange the writer chatted with a cashier. She and her parents were from the Philippines. During the conversation, she unexpectedly quoted a simple yet profound philosophy taught by her mother: “Life is like water because if you spill or waste it, it can never be recovered.” Bob Mann accomplished so much in his 77 years that one can be sure that he did not spill any of his time on earth.

Mann had a serious accident in 1971 when both legs were crushed between two automobiles. Despite his severe injuries, he wrote opinions from his hospital bed in cases not requiring oral argument. Writing was probably his “long suit”. His nephew, William L. Vinson of Tarpon Springs (whose father, now deceased, owned the well-known Vinson Funeral Home there) retrieved about five pages from his trusty computer, which contained opening sentences and other portions of a larger number of Judge Mann’s opinions. He labels the collections as: “The Wit and Wisdom of Judge Robert T. Mann.” Mr. Vinson, a practicing lawyer in Tarpon Springs whom this scribe has not met, told me

of a piece which his uncle sent to the Gainesville Sun in the year 2000. It's entitled: *A Few Good Words for the Confederate States of America.*

Both William Haddad and prominent Tampa attorney, Thomas C. MacDonald are intrigued with Judge Mann's adroit way with language in *Cobb v. State*, 214 So.2d372 (1968). With Judge Mann authoring the brief opinion, the 2nd District Court affirmed a conviction in a Pinellas County criminal case before Judge Allen C. Anderson. It seems that defendant Cobb doused another man with about a nickel's worth of high-test gasoline, and then ignited the hapless douse in a torch-like exhibition. Fortunately, the victim survived. Judge Mann made the following pithy observation:

“Whatever fires may in the next world consume those who spend Saturdays in sloth, the rights of Louis Banks (victim) and other free men protect them against premature ignition.”

Judge Mann put his black robe in mothballs in 1974 after six years on the appeals court, serving as Chief Judge in his final year. He was then offered and accepted a full professorship of law at the University of Florida's College of Law at Gainesville. He taught a variety of legal subjects from 1974 until 1986, being named Professor Emeritus when he left, including Appellate Practice, Florida Constitutional Law, Jurisprudence and more. He was enormously popular with his students who usually referred to his class as the “Hour of Charm.” Authority for the latter characterization is Ron Fraley, long one of Tampa's most preeminent trial lawyers. Professor Mann took on another assignment when Gov. Reubin Askew named him to the Florida Public Service Commission in 1978, (Chairman 1979-1981). But he was not done with teaching. In 1987 and 1988 he was Herff Visiting Professor of Law at Memphis State U. (now University of Memphis).

Bob Mann made a lot of decisions in his lifetime, whether or not he was functioning as a lawyer, leader in state government or judge, but if he were here he would doubtless take pride in saying that the best one he ever made was when he married the lovely Elizabeth Brown of Tampa on December 27, 1947. She is the daughter of Dr. & Mrs. Coleman T. Brown. He was a doctor of dental surgery in Tampa for many years, and was past president of West Court District Dental Association, 1941-42. Elizabeth Mann holds multiple degrees and has a large dossier of accomplishments in state and local professional societies in which she is still active. She holds a doctorate in Library and Information Studies at Florida State Univ. where she taught and represented her school in the University's Faculty Senate, serving also on its steering committee. The Mann's have two children: Robert T. Mann, Jr. and Margaret Elizabeth Mann.

During his lifetime Bob Mann was a loyal and devout member, officer and leader in the Methodist Church. Suffice it to say that he held almost every position available to a layman with the exception of being in charge of the bishopric. And he took great pride in that commitment.

Until his final illness, Judge Mann was (as someone has described the creator of the wonderful Rumpole of the Bailey, John Mortimer) motoring along in life in his late

seventies, embracing it with enthusiasm and compassion, still with a vigorous way with words. But, as it does with every mortal, time ran out for him on February 26, 2002 at age 77. At the funeral service on March 1, 2002, his son Robert presented a moving tribute to his father; the last two paragraphs of which are as follows:

You charted the course of your life based on the principles of the New Testament and the U.S. Constitution. You believed in the power of reason, in the rule of the law, in the love of God. More than anyone I have ever known, you lived what you believed. Father, I salute your noble soul and though I grieve your passing I rejoice in knowing that you are free of pain. That you have gone greatly into that sweet light from whence you came.

Morison Buck

Afterword:

Great men, like the teeth of a hippopotamus, are few and far between.
Damon Runyon