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Morison Buck

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**\*\*\*\*\* CHIPS OFF THE OLD BENCH \*\*\*\*\***

**HARRY GORDON McDONALD: (1910- 1993)  
IN POLITICS, IN LAW AND IN LIFE-----A HAPPY WARRIOR**

A lot of noteworthy things took place around the world in 1910: Beginning of the Mexican revolution, death of Leo Tolstoy, discovery by a famed bacteriologist of a substance called 606 which proved to be a positive cure for a dreaded social disease, an event made better known in 1940 by an acclaimed Warner Bros. Production entitled, "Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet" starring Edward G. Robinson and Ruth Gordon. None of those events, however, had as much impact upon Hillsborough County as the birth that year of Harry Gordon McDonald in an orange grove in the little community of Hopewell. Harry's life, while not memorialized in celluloid, was of no little importance in the political and judicial history of this county.

If you are unfamiliar with east Hillsborough County and want to find Hopewell, just follow State Road 39 not much more than a league south of Plant City. Or you could venture out Highway 60 east of Brandon, turn right on SR 39, and there you are. Hopewell is a tiny citrus and farming community (pop. 1433 as of the most recent census) that got its name from McDonald's great-grandfather who settled there in the 1860s. His descendants continue to live in the area. It is no coincidence that there is a McDonald Road in the vicinity, and also a road with the name Holloway (Judge McDonald's mother's maiden name).

How Harry got his middle name is an interesting story told by the judge himself to his son-in-law, Joe Mount. Joe is a highly respected lawyer, now living in Manchester, Vermont with wife Jan, daughter of Harry and Montine McDonald. For a time, Joe served as attorney for Hillsborough County. In late 1869, J.B. Gordon, former Confederate general officer and comrade of Robert E. Lee, was president of Southern Life Insurance Co. in Atlanta, Georgia. Gordon wrote Lee offering to give up his position in favor of Lee, who was at that time president of Washington College in Lexington, Virginia. Lee demurred, preferring, he said, to use his energies in training of young men for their life's work. Gordon was a Georgia native of whom it was said by Civil War historian Bruce Catton: "Gordon got into about as much truly desperate fighting as any other man on either side." Lee's old friend later served two terms as United States Senator from Georgia, then became Governor. It seems probable that Harry's parents were aware of General Gordon's stature and appropriated his name for their son.

McDonald took an interest in local politics at an early age, largely because of his father's activities in every political season. Law and politics tend to be bed-fellows, so after graduating from Plant City High School, he headed for the University of Florida. Not to be overlooked are his achievements in high school, especially in athletics. He lettered in football for four years as quarterback, made the All-State team in 1928. Harry was reportedly unusually fleet of foot. His

cousin, Glenn McDonald, attributes this to the practice Harry got racing from the family car into the house at Hopewell so he could avoid being left alone in the dark at night. Just youthful apprehension, says Glenn.

McDonald was obliged to retire in 1974 on account of constitutionally based age limitations. Three years later the *Tampa Tribune* ran a feature story about Judge McDonald. The headline read: "Former Circuit Judge's Roots are in East Hillsborough." It told of his pioneer family heritage of which he was so proud. He remembered all the strawberries he had picked over his growing-up days, hunting and fishing, and families gathering to pick and grind sugar cane, then drink the squeezings. It was, he reminisced, a great time for youngsters, like himself.

After earning his law degree, McDonald moved west to the "Big City" (Tampa), and maintained his office at his home on the corner of Suwanee and Hillsborough Avenues. His first taste of public office was his election to the Florida House of Representatives in 1940 and he served effectively in the 1941, 1943 and 1945 sessions in Tallahassee. A fellow lawyer and contemporary of Harry McDonald, Bayard Angle of Seminole recalls Harry telling a true story that happened while he was serving in the House. A bill providing an increase in salary for circuit judges was coming up for a vote. Judge Harry Sandler, one of the two circuit judges in Hillsborough County, told Harry, "If you don't support that salary increase, you'd better not come further south than the Suwanee River."

McDonald's successes which led to his legislative service for three terms must have whetted his political appetite. He became a candidate for County Judge in 1946. The incumbent, who had just been appointed to replace Judge G.H. Cornelius, was popular and was never defeated. That was Judge William C. Brooker. It was a real "horse race", although Brooker edged his 36-year-old challenger by a vote of 11,976 to 11,049. Ironically, nearly 20 years later, Judges Brooker and McDonald would share office space on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the County Courthouse sharing duties in the Probate, Guardianship and Trust Division.

Undaunted by his first loss as a candidate for office, Harry McDonald announced for Congress in January 1950. The crowded field included J. Tom Watson, a Tampa attorney and former Florida Attorney General for two terms, E.R. Bentley, Lakeland lawyer, Jerry Collins, state representative who had an interest in Sarasota Dog Track, Hortense Wells of Tampa and the ultimate winner, Chester B. McMullen, Pinellas County State Attorney. Harry was a vigorous campaigner, adept at speaking on his feet – a talent which was early demonstrated when he won an oratorical contest at Plant City High School. Moreover, he was the top vote-getter in Hillsborough County. The final run-off saw McMullen winning over Watson.

McDonald stayed busy in the ensuing decade with a variety of responsibilities as an Assistant County Attorney under W.C. McLean, who had been legal advisor to the County, Board of Public Instruction, and all elected county judicial and executive officers. McDonald's duties involved primarily the School Board and the Election Board.

Harry McDonald was a lifelong Democrat. So must have been Finley Peter Dunn, creator of the "Mr. Dooley" stories of a bygone day. After Dunn's death, the New York Times printed this "Dooleyism":

"Histhry always vindicates the Dimmycrats, but never in their lifetime. They see th' thruth first, but th' trouble is that nowthin' is iver officially thru till a Raypublican says it."

Many men (and women) have at some time in life enjoyed tobacco in one form or another. In his autobiography, "Once Around the Bloch," horror story writer, Robert Bloch, recalled as a young man sampling obscure brands of cigarettes like Wings, Picayune and Twenty Grand; the latter named for a famous racehorse pictured on the package. Bloch said that anyone who ever smoked that brand would know why it was named for a horse. Judge Harry was a longtime devotee of cigars, and his colleague, asst. county attorney, John F. Germany (later a judge), said Harry could always be seen chewing on an unlighted stogie. Crosby Few, who succeeded McDonald as counsel for the School Board in 1965 can remember that at one contentious meeting of the County Election Board when votes were being tallied and County Judge McDonald was presiding, every ash tray in the room had a still-lit cigar actively burning, and all of them were the property of the Judge.

Harry McDonald was a man whose background and personality made it almost predestined for him to be a major player in the public life of the county where he lived for his entire life. He had a sincere love for people and loved nothing more than talking with his co-workers and constituents. He was of a special breed which most likely will not be seen ever again.

A popular Alfred Hitchcock production released in 1955 was called, "The Trouble with Harry." What of this Harry of Hopewell, who rose to become Honorable Harry Gordon McDonald, Circuit Judge? He never was trouble for anybody.

Morison Buck

AFTERWORD:

When Winston Churchill came to America to lecture in 1900, he offered a cogent statement of his philosophy: "I have always found it easy to make

up my mind on questions about which I know very little, but the more facts one learns, the more difficult it is to come to a decision."