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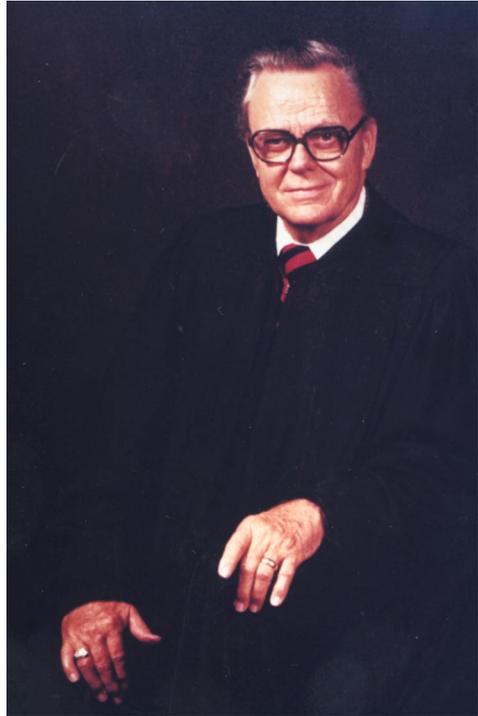
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Henry Ozidel Wilson: A Chef's White Toque and a Judge's Black Robe
(1910-1995)

The year 1910 saw the end of life of an American icon, Mark Twain, when he began the unending journey into eternity. It was also the year that ushered in the birth in Screven County, Georgia, of Henry O. Wilson who in his own way lived an extraordinary and exciting life. Mention of Georgia brings to mind a not-intentionally irreverent story currently going around which Henry Wilson would have enjoyed.



Seems there were two Baptist churches in a small town in the Peachtree state. The older one believed strictly in the Biblical account of the Pharaoh's daughter's finding the baby Moses in the bulrushes; the other church believed that was just *her* story.

Wilson's life has the flavor of a Horatio Alger story. One of his sons, Tim Wilson, a Baptist minister who lives in East Hillsborough County and who is founding a new church to serve the Riverview area, graciously provided a detailed narrative of his father's early years. He

has bittersweet memories of the father who departed the family household when Tim was five or six years old. Tim recalls:

Dad moved with his sharecropper father to Dade City at a very early age. His father was a fruit picker for various groves. They then moved to Plant City and that is where he grew up; barefoot and in overalls. They were very poor. I remember him telling me about his boyhood friends and especially the fight as a young boy with the notorious Charlie Wall. Dad's family moved in the Garrison Channel area where the Ice Palace is located today. As a boy he would watch the big sailboats come into a Tampa and vowed that one day he would own a large sailboat. He owned many.

While the family was living in the Jackson Heights neighborhood in Tampa my father saw an ad in the *Tribune* seeking a cook's helper and dishwasher in Sebring. Dad applied for the job and was hired. He was twelve years old! Dad said that one day a large Cadillac pulled up in front of the house; a man got out, came to the door and asked for Henry Wilson. My dad's mother, when told why the man was there, said, "you can't possibly mean Henry because he is only twelve." My grandfather said, "Oh, let him go Lizzy." My father gathered his belongings, put them in a paper sack, and drove away with the visitor, never to return home again.

After working in Sebring for several years, he hitchhiked to Chicago where he was hired as a cook's helper. Dad told the purportedly true story that while he was living in Chicago, one day he saw a large number of police cars and ambulances across the street. Soon he learned that a mob hit had occurred that became known as the Valentine's Day Massacre: February 14, 1929.

For years I struggled with a great deal of anger because of my father. As the years pass and grow older, we realize that there were reasons that the man carried his own issues. My father came from a background of poverty, a father who battled alcoholism and early illiteracy. These were issues that scar for life. I later learned in life that none are perfect and we all do the best we can. I can still hear him saying to me, "Timmy, it's a wonderful life."

Lowell Thomas, a towering figure in the history of American journalism, travel and communication, astounded the dean of the small Indiana state college where he enrolled by completing the freshman and

sophomore courses within one year. By age 19, Thomas had earned his Master's degree, later also obtaining a law degree. He may have been outdone by Henry Wilson, who was working as a cook's helper in Chicago, and who toiled ten hours a day, then studied so that in one year he completed the equivalent of four years work. Then he passed a University of Illinois high school graduation exam, and received his diploma.

Years later, during an interview by a *Tampa Times* reporter, Wilson said that he moved from Chicago to New York, where managed a country club; then to Washington, D.C. to manage a cafeteria. California was his next stop. In Modesto, he met and married Irene Wilson, mother of his sons, Tim, Richard, and Michael. While working as a chef's steward in a local hotel, he entered Modesto Junior College, graduating in 1940. After the start of World War Two, he went with the Army Engineer as a steward while the Alcan Highway was being constructed. He graduated from the University of San Francisco Law School in 1946, all the while still working to sustain his wife and two children, plus all his school expenses. The latter year saw his return to Tampa.

"There's a new lawyer in town, and he's really got a head on his shoulders." That was said to this reporter sometime, as I recall, in the year 1949 in the lobby of the Stovall Professional Building at 305 Morgan (now part of the site of One Mack Center which houses Hillsborough County Offices) by Jane Brannon (McMaster). She was a lawyer who was

admitted to practice in Florida in 1931, and who was honored posthumously by the Florida Bar in May, 2000, as one of the first 150 lawyers of her gender to be admitted to practice law in this state. She had served as a civilian in the U.S. Army during World War Two, participated in the Nuremberg trials, and was also part of the post-war military government in Trieste, Italy. The right-headed lawyer she was alluding to in my conversation with her in the lobby of the Stovall where all three of us had an office was Henry O. Wilson.

After admission to practice in Florida in 1947, Henry shared space with various lawyers, including Charles Bryan, Robert Fishkind, Hugh McArthur, Bill Fussell and Albert D'Arpa. For a time, he also operated a restaurant, Henry's Steak House, in Palm River.

His restaurant menus have not survived, but it is more than likely that Henry, a native Southern *chef de cuisine* would be familiar with what famous Louisiana personage, Huey Long, a gourmand, called the noblest dish conceived by man: potlikker. Long favored the following recipe. Cut up some turnip greens and some turnips, add a chunk of side meat (salt fat pork). Cook until just tender, then eat while dipping cornpone (hot water, salt and corn meal) in the liquid goodness. Long recognized no method of absorption but dunking, but FDR, who also fancied the Southern delicacy, admitted he was a "crumbler," not a "dunker."

While getting better known and established in Hillsborough County, Wilson boldly ventured into politics. In 1956, he competed against Charles Corces, Sr., Gregory Gout and Sam Gibbons for the State House, District Three. The latter won, launching a long career which took him to the United States Congress for many years. Not discouraged, Wilson entered the race for Municipal Judge, Group Two, three years later. Competing against Walter Burnside, Jr., Mike Buscemi, and James P. Calhoun, he was again unsuccessful. Burnside and Calhoun ultimately became judges of Circuit Court.

It was Calvin Coolidge who is given credit for saying that nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Proving that truth, Henry sought and received appointment as judge of the newly created Civil Court of Record in 1965. He stood for election in the primary the following year and defeated popular lawyer Willie Garcia, garnering 58.22% of the vote. Wilson was never challenged after his success in 1966, serving until required by law to retire (due to age) in 1982.

During his colorful tenure on the bench, first as judge of Civil Court of Record, then as County Judge starting in 1973 when his jurisdiction was enlarged (by revision of Article V of the Florida Constitution), Judge Wilson occasionally had to deal with matter which drew the attention of the press. For example: a) a six-hour hearing in a dispute involving custody of Koko, a three year-old chimpanzee; b) an attempt by attorney Steve Hanlon, then a lawyer with Law, Inc. (a

federally funded agency to provide legal services to indigents) to have Wilson disqualified for allegedly having shown prejudice towards his client, a woman of color. Wilson was quoted by the reporter writing the story, "I'll never recuse myself because I'm a white man."

Judge Wilson was generally well-liked by lawyers (one-half of litigants are usually unhappy with any judge's decision in their case) because he had a folksy way of dispensing justice. Tom Meyers, veteran Tampa lawyer, recalls that instead of hearing evidence during a scheduled hearing the judge would offer to hear opening statements of the attorneys, accept as true what the lawyers indicated would be proffered by each party without the judge actually hearing it, then he would announce his ruling. Most often, says Meyers, his decision would achieve a fair and just result.

Now retired Deputy Sheriff and court bailiff Henry Germain was assigned to Judge Wilson for some period of time. On one occasion, at the commencement of a trial, everybody stood, the judge entered and sat down in his overstuffed judge's chair. Somehow, the chair's spring-like apparatus broke, causing the judge's feet to fly up into the air and he was thrown to the floor in a heap. Fortunately, he was unhurt, only his dignity being temporarily disturbed. Germain also confirmed that Judge Wilson always kept a loaded revolver close by when hearing county criminal matters.

After his retirement at age 72, he showed no signs of taking on a sedentary life. He earned a B.A. degree in Political Science from the University of South Florida. He resumed the practice of law, civil and criminal, in association with several lawyers including his son, Richard H. Wilson, prominent in civil defense litigation for defendants. He shared offices with prominent and experienced Ronald W. Young for about two years after his retirement. Says Young, "To say Henry was a unique character would be a vast understatement. He was often quite contentious and irascible, and these traits would often not serve him well. However, he could just as easily be the most gracious and giving person you ever ask for."

His friends kiddingly referred to him as Henry the Eighth due to his multiple adventures in matrimony. The song *Vagabond Lover* comes to mind. It was made popular by Rudy Vallee in a movie of the same name released in 1929, featuring the wonderful Marie Dressler. Wilson was a trim, clean-cut, handsome fellow in good health who was attractive to women, and vice versa. He told friends, like the late Judge Hanlon and his wife, Lesley, that he stayed healthy by a daily elixir of Tupelo honey and cider vinegar.

Judge Wilson was busy all his life, and was briskly practicing law at 85 not knowing that, in the words of the old Negro spiritual, he had just a little while to stay here. His heart beat its last on March 5, 1995.

Henry Wilson savored the taste of life and he was served up a large helping. He told a newspaper reporter in 1965 that for him cooking was an art, not a trade. His whole life had an artistic and colorful flair probably unmatched in the judicial history of Hillsborough County.

The writer wishes to thank Donna Wilson, Henry's daughter, for loaning a treasured photograph of her father appearing on the frontispiece.

Morison Buck

Last Word: Every son of man travels an unbeaten path, a road beset with dangers and temptations that no other wanderer met. His footsteps can be judged only in the full knowledge of the strength and light he had, the burden he carried, the obstacles he met and a thorough knowledge of every open and secret motive that impelled him. —Clarence Darrow.