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PINELLAS COUNTY 'S FIRST COURT HOUSE

This photograph, taken about 1916, shows then County officials proudly posing in front of the first Pinellas County Court House in Clearwater, the wooden structure that costs $3,750, and was built overnight by torchlight to avoid St. Petersburg interests from stealing the county seat.

BY TORCHLIGHT, CLEARWATER
BUILT COURTHOUSE OVERNIGHT

By HAMPTON DUNN
(Reprinted from Florida Trend, June 1970)

Sunshiny St. Petersburg and Sparkling Clearwater are right neighborly neighbors these days and get along fine, pulling together for a greater Pinellas County.

But it hasn’t always been thus.
One of the most memorable intra-county feuds that ever took place in Florida was there in the West Coast peninsula back in 1912.

Civic leaders and politicians of Clearwater and St. Petersburg had worked shoulder to shoulder just prior to this as they banded together against the east side politicians over at Tampa. Pinellas had been part of Hillsborough County for years prior to a separation battle that resulted in creation of Pinellas County by the 1911 Legislature and a subsequent referendum. The new count became effective New Year's Day of 1912. The west side of the old consolidated area had complained for years that the east siders were getting all the gravy and the west side citizens were not getting anything for their taxes. Biggest bone of contention was lack of roads for what is now Pinellas. The lid blew off on the morning of Sept. 12, 1911, when a Negro driving a team of mules across the Seminole Bridge was dumped into the bayou as the rickety old span collapsed. "Enough!" cried the west ciders and kicked off the successful campaign to unjoin Hillsborough.

‘LONG AND DISGRACEFUL’

No sooner had that issue been settled when a newer and hotter spat developed. St. Petersburg politicians wanted their city to be the county seat; Clearwater politicians wanted their city to be the county seat.

The St. Petersburg Times, whose revered editor, V. L. Straub, had led the divisionist scrap, in a review years later described the "imaginary" county seat fight as "long and disgraceful."

The legislative act had made Clearwater the county seat, and The Times reported the arrangement had the approval of 90 percent of the people of St. Petersburg.

"But there were some here (St. Petersburg) we called 'Sooners," who did not agree and were all the time determined on a courthouse raid at the first chance," The Times' obituary on Mr. Straub recited in April, 1939. ‘And Clearwater’s political populace being of that kind which trust nobody, after January 1, trouble came promptly and plenteously.

CLEARWATER STARTED IT

"It all started when clever Clearwater politicians, aided and abetted by some politically foolish citizens of St. Petersburg put over a politically crooked deal in the first county election and captured for Clearwater, or the 'upcounty,' a three-to-two control of the Board of County Commissioner, and gerrymandered the newly formed districts to perpetuate the control - and so well done it was that it stands today as invincible as ever."

Fearing that the "Sooners" and other south county folk would try and steal the county site away from them, the Clearwater people set about to build a courthouse as quickly as possible to seal their coup.

"So the Big Three (County Commissioners) got a bunch of the boys together and built a courthouse one Sunday instead of going to church," The St. Petersburg Times' version went.

Ralph Reed, executive director of the Pinellas County Historical Commission, has accumulated considerable documentation of the early wrangles of the baby county, including the courthouse dispute.
FORGOT THE TOILETS

He reports that the first building was constructed almost overnight by torchlight to prevent St. Petersburg residents from voting a change in the county seat. The wooden government building cost $3,700. Eugene L. Pearce, who served as Clearwater's Mayor in 1910, years later told how the lumber used to build the courthouse was sawed in Tampa and each piece numbered before being hauled to the site by mule team. This was done so the unskilled volunteer laborers could erect it. The old-timers worked furiously putting it together. Neighbor women did their part by cooking food and bringing it to the amateur carpenters.

One report is that the courthouse was built so quickly they forgot about the toilets!

At night armed citizens patrolled all sides of the building during the construction because rumors had been spread that St. Petersburg citizens would try to burn it down, so deep was the feeling over the county seat.

The two lots on which the first courthouse was built was given to the county by Clearwater citizens who took up a collection to buy the property.

THE BATTLE CONTINUES

There were no dull moments even after the new government was safely ensconced in the building. The controlling clique on the County Commission undertook to levy a direct five-mill, five-year direct county tax for, according to the St. Petersburg Times, «a real courthouse."

The situation got so heated that even the peace-making referee, Editor Straub, got singed. He editorialized on the ensuing court fight and commented that "it was either a bum decision or a bum law." The up-county politicians needled Circuit Judge F. M. Robles into hailing Mr. Straub into court to show cause why he shouldn't be cited for contempt.

Judge Robles noted the alternative in the comment that the outcome could have resulted from a bum decision "or" a bum law and he did not take offense. The judge remarked that he and the editor would still be friends long after the courthouse case was forgotten - and they shook hands on it.

Soon other arguments, such as roads and other public services for citizens of the county, captured the limelight, and the county seat feud cooled.

Today, Clearwater has a fine courthouse building, including a handsome modern addition of recent date. And St. Petersburg has a county building "annex" of its own to serve south county residents.

And everybody is living happily ever after.