



Judicial Profile-Nelson E. Bailey

By: Thomas Hoadley

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Nelson was born in a small German community near Columbus, Ohio. His father was a bee-keeper. His family decided to move to Tavares, Florida, where the bees could produce honey all year round. In Central Florida, the beehives could be moved to citrus trees, or to flowering plants along the St. John's River Valley. Nelson went to elementary, middle and high school in Tavares. He enrolled at Florida State in 1962, graduating in 1966. He was in the first law school class at FSU, and graduated in 1969.

In college in 1966, he went to a Congregational Church Retreat near Ocala and met Carol. She was from St. Pete. They fell in love, and she followed him to FSU. When Nelson was a freshman in law school, they married. Carol completed college with a degree in social work. After law school graduation, Nelson worked in Tallahassee as the first "consumer complaints lawyer" ever employed by the State of Florida. Then to the Attorney General's Office drafting criminal appeals briefs. In that position, he argued cases in all the State and Federal Courts, and the U.S. Supreme Court.

Nelson was offered a position to head up the Attorney General's local office in West Palm Beach. He conceived the idea, and headed the first and only strike force for enforcement of environmental protection laws. This was a strike force that included federal, state and local law enforcement officials. There was a lot of criminal appellate work. He argued criminal appellate cases in every court. Then, he decided it was time to leave. He said he didn't want to become a bureaucrat.

Going in to private practice in 1973 for awhile with Andy Frederick, he then formed a partnership with Rendell Brown that lasted three years. Rendell had written appeals for the Public Defender; Nelson had written appeals for the State. They had opposed one another many times, and they had become fast friends. It was the first black-white partnership in Florida. They practiced law on the first floor of the Pan Am Building across from the Courthouse, and became one of the areas' premiere criminal defense firms. Nelson had a reputation among criminal defense lawyers as not being a "plea bargain specialist." He took a large percentage of his cases to trial. This partnership worked great, but Rendell was in two automobile accidents that put him out of circulation for some time. Nelson left for the Commerce Building, where he went into practice with Joe Jordan, a former Post reporter Nelson had talked into going to law school. He continued his criminal defense work practicing by himself, with associates from time to time. His long time secretary, Barbara, followed him to his Courthouse office. His wife, Carol, was his office and business manager the second half of his law career, but has now retired.

He applied for appointment to a to a Judgeship on various occasions, and was picked this last time out of 40 applicants. Judge Bailey started work in October in the Criminal Division, taking over Judge Stephen Cohen's position who moved to Delray. This position involves misdemeanors, the bulk of which are DUI, domestic battery, and a few other different crimes. He also takes his turn at first appearances on weekend duty at Gun Club Road. Nelson and Carol adopted a multi-racial child at birth. he must have
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gotten the best of three races, because Travis (a baseball star at Wellington High School) was drafted by the Milwaukee Brewers.

Once a year, for six days, about 100 horsemen ride and a wagon train follows, from Fort Pierce to Bradenton, across the State of Florida. This is to commemorate the cattle drives to deep water ports in olden days. Nelson has done this seven times.

A fourth generation cowman, Judge Platt, rode with Nelson on his first horseback trip across Florida Cracker Ride. Nelson became entranced with Judge Platt's history of the early cattle drives from Fort Pierce to Bradenton. This led into a hobby he enjoys a whole lot, storytelling. Most every weekend, at county fairs, rodeos, horse shows, school groups, you will see Nelson in a gray wide-brim hat on his horse, Domino. His long beard is gray; jeans, bandanna, and suspenders, and a Colt 44. The crowd gets the feel of a cowman from the Old South. For the next hour, Bailey enralls the fair-goers with facts about Florida's rich history. About Ponce de leon in 1513. Spanish cattle and cattle drives. He makes an excellent statement that "a lot of people move to Florida, but they never become Floridians." Nelson is doing his best to remind us of our history.