

Judicial Profile on Judge Carl Harper
By Thomas A. Hoadley
March 1996

Carl Harper came from a law enforcement family in Pensacola. His grandfather was a police officer, his father Assistant Chief of Police. Counting uncles and cousins, it was said to be 200 years of family police service. Carl had three sisters. After graduating from high school, Carl joined the Navy on the last day of World War II. He followed his father who enlisted in the Navy out of high school. His father had urged him to learn shorthand and to type. This served Carl well in the Navy. For 3 years he was a secretary and aide to an Admiral. He would take shorthand notes, and transcribe the minutes from scores of meetings with Navy brass in the Portland, Oregon area.

After 3 years in the Navy, he was first in his family to go to college. Since he had grown up in the depression, he could only afford to attend nearby Florida State on the G.I. Bill (\$75 a month). 1948 was the year the college became co-ed. He also worked his way through college delivering dry cleaning, and operating a Jitney service to Pensacola every weekend. Toward the end of each month, he would throw sticks at pecan trees. He told Patsy that he had eaten a lot of pecans going through college because they were free.

Carl had wanted to become a policeman, but his father discouraged him. Working as a high school runner-messenger for a law firm, he decided to become a lawyer. After graduating from college in 1952, he wanted to save enough money to go to law school. He took a job as an insurance claims adjuster. A year or two later, he opened an insurance adjustment office in Orangeburg, South Carolina. The office secretary was Patsy. I asked Patsy if it was love at first sight. Patsy said "no"...when he wore a hat he was like a tower. Anyway, she had a crush on a neighbor. Though to Carl, it was love at first sight. One year later (January, 1956) they were married. By now, Carl had saved enough money to go back to law school. Carl went year round at Stetson (in Gulfport). Patsy worked as a secretary PHT (putting husband through). After graduating from law school he went back to Pensacola and got a job in the Askew law firm. A year or two later, he was appointed Assistant, then County Solicitor in Escambia County.

In 1972, this position was merged into the State Attorney's office, and the position disappeared. Losing a tight 4 county election race with the incumbent State Attorney, Carl was at a crossroads as to whether he would work as an Assistant State Attorney or go into private practice. Marvin Mounts had been a visiting Judge in Pensacola when Carl prosecuted the Sheriff. He recommended that David Blutworth hire Carl as a Chief Assistant. This was done on the telephone. Carl was with our State Attorney's office from 1973 until 1976. Governor Reubin Askew appointed Carl Circuit Judge in 1977. It was the natural selection because they had gone to school together, and had practiced law in the same firm.

Judge Harper worked primarily in our Criminal Courts. Except for a brief civil experience with the Pulitzer divorce. Carl had told Patsy: "I'm not used to this high-life

at the Petite Marmite and Taboo; I'm just a cracker from Northwest Florida." The Palm Beach Post had this to say about Judge Harper on November 1, 1995: "For more than a decade, Carl Harper sat as one of the most colorful, quotable-and intimidating-Judges in Palm Beach County history. His curmudgeonly drawl earned peoples respect; his work ethic and wit earned their admiration."

He was not known for activities out of the home. Patsy said he had come from a family of modest means. He preferred to keep a low profile. He loved to watch ball games in his pajamas. Carl retired in 1987. Patsy retired in 1989. She had worked for State Unemployment Compensation for over 31 years. They returned to Pensacola where Carl hunted, and fished the rivers' and lakes. He became a Senior Judge, and sat frequently here, and in Fort Pierce and Vero.

Carl always had a regular 6 months medical check up. His doctor after an examination called him and said that a spot had been found on his left lung. Carl and Patsy were in the process of buying a vacation lake cottage. The cancer was surgically removed in March 1995. Then chemotherapy and 30 radiation treatments. On October 19, 1995, Carl developed a breathing problem. He was admitted to the hospital, and into intensive care. There was no evidence that the cancer had spread. He died of lung congestion from a non-infectious respiratory problem.

Patsy stated to me that: "I would like your readers to know that I was so proud of him, not only as a person, but of his career. He worked hard all of his life. We would have celebrated our 40th wedding anniversary on January 28, 1996. He was a wonderful husband and my best friend. I loved him so much and miss him more than words can say. He enjoyed working with all the attorneys, judges, and court staff."

After Carl's death in late October, 1995, former Governor Askew called Patsy and said: "I've never been prouder of an appointment than this one."