



Judicial Profile of James R. Knott, Circuit Court Judge
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This is the first installment on our most senior circuit judge, retired Judge James R. Knott. It is pretty hard to encapsulate this man's accomplishments in one issue. His life, to some extent, is an extension of his father, who was truly an authentic landmark in Florida.

William V. Knott, father of Judge Knott, died at the age of 101. In 1900, W.V. Knott owned a phosphate business in Tampa. Governor Mitchell asked him to audit the books in several counties, including Hillsborough. W.V. was an expert accountant and was passed on to the next Governor to audit the books of various government units. W.V. became Treasurer of the State. In this position, he met and was on speaking terms with practically everyone in business and government in the State of Florida over a period of 38 years.

In 1917, W.V. Knott won the Democratic nomination for governor. A one-eyed Baptist minister by the name of Sydney J. Catts ran on the prohibition ticket against Knott on an anti-foreigner, Catholic, Jew, and minority group platform. Catts was declared the winner in 1917 and went to his inauguration armed with a revolver. He likened his victory to the triumph of Cromwell over the English Royalists. It is interesting to note that when Governor Catts moved into the mansion in January 1917, he tethered a milk cow in the front yard, put his pigs in the back yard, and turned the tool shed into a hen house. W.V. Knott never ran for Governor again.

Judge Knott was six years old and living in Tallahassee at the time of this most famous election. He graduated from Tallahassee High School in 1928. He spent a year at the University of North Carolina, and then came back to the University of Florida, where he graduated with a law degree in 1934. He had been a member of Blue Key, a Phi Delta, and was Editor of the Seminole Annual Year Book.

Judge Knott has always known a lot of people in a lot of Florida cities. During his six years in college, he traveled to various Florida cities on weekends where he had extensive contacts. He said this was because the men/women ratio was very poor at the University of Florida. He developed quite a network of friends in Jacksonville; and after his graduation, he went there to practice law from 1934 to 1942. He states he went to Jacksonville because he knew most everyone in town.

With the start of World War II, he joined the Navy as a Lieutenant, was stationed in Key West, and then went to navigation school in Boston. He spent the next three years teaching navigation and seamanship to young officers. He ended up at the Philadelphia Navy Yard working on an Admiral's Flag Ship for the invasion of Japan.

He met his wife Evelyn, in the late 30's through cousins in Watertown, Florida, east of Lake City. This was a mill-town and her family owned the mill. They were married in 1942; and Evelyn was able to visit him three or four times from 1942 to 1945.

After the war, he returned to Jacksonville. Then he had an interesting job offer from Charles F. Coe. Coe was a well-known writer of short stories for the Saturday Evening Post and other national magazines. Coe had finished his career as a writer, and was 50 years old when he came to Palm Beach. He passed the Bar examination, although he had not gone to law school. Coe was a wonderful speaker and maintained an office at 256 Worth Avenue. Shortly after opening his practice in Palm Beach, he ran for the United States Senate against Judge Andrews and ex-Governor Carlton. He might have won this race, but he announced his candidacy from Paris and this turned the voters off. Coe heard that Judge Knott wanted to move to South Florida and invited him to become a partner. He worked for Coe about one year, and during that year Coe hired another attorney back from the War, Gus Broberg. It was fascinating working for Coe because he was a prolific writer. At one time, he was publishing 12 stories in 12 different magazines.

Coe became the Editor of the Palm Beach Post and the Palm Beach Times. John Perry, Sr., who also owned daily newspapers in Pensacola and Jacksonville, and about 30 weekly newspapers, owned these newspapers. Coe was not only the editorial writer, but also the Editor-in-Chief. During these years, E.F. Hutton would make daily visits to their office, writing a local financial column.

For the next ten years, Judge Knott was in private practice, he represented the Perry newspapers and other companies. Judge Chillingworth was murdered on June 15, 1955, and this left a vacancy in the Circuit Court. Joseph White was the other Circuit Court Judge. Three names were submitted to Governor Leroy Collins: Charles Fulton, Russell Morrow, and Judge Knott. Charles Fulton was a former President of the Florida Bar and later District Court Judge. The other nominee, Russell Morrow was a member of the State Senate and got the Legislature to authorize another judgeship to which he was appointed. Governor Collins selected Judge Knott to fill the vacancy created by the death of Judge Chillingworth and he went on the bench in June 1956.

When asked how it felt to fill the judicial vacancy created by the death of Judge Chillingworth, he said this was the most horrible crime he had ever encountered. He said that the most everyone in town had felt so bad about his disappearance that the Court system almost shut down for a while.

A final interesting footnote in this article is that Judge Knott's sister, 13 years older, received her medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania. She was the first woman born in Florida to get a medical degree. She practiced medicine in West Palm Beach from 1924 to 1929, moved to Philadelphia and died at the age of 90.

When you contemplate Judge Knott's life, it is not hard to understand why he has been very interested in Florida history. But more about this next month.

Our first installment of the life of James R. Knott described his early life in Tallahassee, the son of William V. Knott, the State Treasurer in 1903 who retired as State Treasurer in 1941. His college career at the University of Florida, his work career in Jacksonville, the U.S. Navy, and in West Palm Beach. Then finally, his appointment to the Circuit Court Bench in 1956, to replace the murdered Judge Chillingworth.

Judge Knott had stamina. He was a judge for twenty-three years, having to run for that office three times, retiring at the age of 67. He was our Senior Judge for seven or eight years, after the retirement of Judge Morrow. In those days, the Senior Judge acted as Chief Administrative Judge, and chaired the Circuit Judges' meetings every month.

Never at a loss for words, he was reticent to comment on his fellow Judges. But he did say Judge White was a great "wit". He particularly liked Judges Hewitt and Downey. He didn't like Judge Morrow's judicial philosophy, but I didn't get into what that was. When asked to describe his most memorable

cases, he mentioned two. First, the judicial dismantling of the Hilton Hotel extending across the beach on Singer Island, and second, the Firestone divorce trial. That divorce trial made the Pulitzer trial look like a grade school play. In that nationally infamous trial, there was deposition and court testimony that Russell and Mary Alice were very interesting persons. What the parties didn't know was that investigators and detectives were recording every movement made by each party. His written decision will always be considered judicial literature.

The chinning bar? Judge Knott started chinning himself on a tree limb in his backyard at 336 Valley Forge Road in 1964. He soon moved a bar into his chambers. I would hate to count the number of "chins" I did over the years while waiting for jury verdicts in his Division. He did twenty twice a day, and has even done twenty-five at one time. He says the champion chinner among lawyers was Ray Royce, who struggled out twelve.

The second ritual in his chambers while waiting on a jury verdict was as follows: he would ask a young lawyer where his home was. Then followed a twenty minutes discussion about every important person in that town. He seemed to know everyone in the States.

His hobbies? He played tennis twice a week, but said he was never a "champion". He wasn't the type to do yard work or go fishing. He liked to read, a lot of history and biographies. He mostly drifted into his main hobby: history because at one time or another, he and his father had known about everything that had happened to everyone in the State.

He was President of the Palm Beach County Historical Society for eleven years from 1957 to 1968. He says one of the main reasons he retired, as Circuit Judge was to "write" history. He will always be remembered as the author of weekly Palm Beach County vignettes in the "Brown Wrapper" Sunday addition of the Post, and for seven years, he was paid \$400.00 a week to write these articles; this was an invaluable addition to our local history. Selected articles were published in book form: *Palm Beach Revisited*, which can be found at various libraries.

His home life? When asked the secret of success for his fifty-year marriage to Evelyn, he says, "She puts up with me."

Not to outdone by their parents, his children have led interesting lives. Lisa, forty-five, divorced lives in France and the Judge thinks she is studying religion. Douglas, forty-three, went the way of all "preppies": Yale undergraduate, then Harvard Law School. He practices some solo law in Los Angeles, but is better known as a playwright, a published poet, and the author of the screenplay for *Dances With Wolves*.

As for his present condition Judge Knott is 83-years-old. Since his father lived to an age of 101, we expect to see our Judge for a long time. The bookshelves in his fourth floor office in the Harvey Building are now looking a little bare. He is giving his extensive historical library and papers to the Palm Beach County Historical Society. His eyesight is not as good as it was, but his mind is always razor sharp, as is his transcending wit.

In conclusion, when asked how he wanted us to remember him, he replied: First as a good judge and second as a writer of state and local history. We will do that. But I, for one will always remember his good-natured, wry comments at 8:45 hearings that would bring the lawyers to tears (of laughter).

He had and has no peer at that, as with other things in his life.