



Judicial Profile of William Owen
By Thomas Hoadley
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In 1934 “Fingy” Connors personally achieved one of the 14 most-important U.S. engineering feats of that year. He constructed a paved shell-rock road across the unstable muck, from “20 mile bend” to Clewiston, which previously had been platted and laid out by the Glade’s pioneer O’Briens, and A.C. Clewis, a Tampa banker. Describing this road, the Palm Beach Post declared that: “The barriers of America’s last frontier fell here today.”

In the early 20’s the USDA at Canal Point, had developed a disease resistant sugar cane. A Chicago promoter, Bror Dahlberg, through Southern Sugar, acquired, planted, or controlled 50 miles of sugar cane, from Canal Point to Moorehaven.

Bill Owen, Sr., a civil engineer from Tennessee, after stops in Memphis and Illinois, arrived in Clewiston in 1925 to work for the Clewiston Drainage District, to drain the saw grass swamps. Bill Sr., Viola, and their 2 sons, came to a town of 26 people, a wharf on the Lake, and a boarding house run by early Japanese settlers who had failed in their attempt to found a nearby colony, Bill Sr. would later work for the real estate developer of Clewiston. Then he became the Vice President of the largest sugar producer in America: Southern Sugar, which became the U.S. Sugar Corp. during the Depression. After the giant processing plant was built, Clewiston became a sugar mill town of 2,500.

Bill graduated from Clewiston High in 1939, (a class of 16), and turned down an appointment to Annapolis, to try for West Point. He settled for a full Naval ROTC scholarship at Tulane. After graduation as an Ensign in 1944, he did shore duty, then as a navigator and damage control officer on 2 different destroyers in the Atlantic and Caribbean.

Out of the service in 1946, Bill enrolled at the University of Florida Law School. After graduation, he returned to his hometown, and settled in as a “country lawyer” in Clewiston.

Anne, from Thomasville, Georgia, looking for a job, had taken a position as a Clewiston schoolteacher. Bill, hearing that a new girl had moved in across the street, sold Anne a ticket to the American Legion Bar B Q, fell in love, and they were married in 1949.

Ten years of country lawyering and raising a family went by. In 1958, the legendary Al Cone didn’t want to be “hometowned” and hired Bill to sit with him in a damage suit in Clewiston. Al, a former combat infantry company commander, must have liked this former naval officer, country lawyer. Al formed a partnership with him. The firm was to become Miller, Cone, Owen Wagner & Nugent, after Bob Hewitt left for the Bench in 1960. Bill was the Town Attorney for Clewiston, and did Cone, Owen’s holdover insurance defense work. The rest of the firm followed Al Cone’s early lead to become part of the new wave of plaintiffs’ lawyers.

When Bill was 45, he had practiced law 20 years, saved some money for his 4 children’s college expenses, and felt it to be an honor to become an Appellate Judge. Gov. Claude Kirk agreed. Starting 1967 at the 4th District Court of Appeal, he was the author of over 600 signed opinion, 200 unsigned opinions, and was Chief Judge 1953-1955. Then, after 9 years as an Appellate Judge, there followed two 5-year career changes. He went back to work for his old Cone, Owen firm from 1976 to 1980 (college expenses were greater then he had expected). The he was selected as a 15th Circuit Judge from 1982 to 1987 (there is an unconfirmed rumor that he was drafted for that position). He tried to retire in 1988, but ended up working full time as an appellate Senior Judge, in various Districts.

It seemed as if every time an appellate Judge retired, quit, or was unable to serve, Bill was called upon to fill the vacancy, until a new Judge could assume those duties. He has been, and still serves locally as a Special Master and Mediator. He had mediated over 150 state and federal civil cases.

Bill and Anne are comfortably settled in their new home with high vaulted ceilings, overlooking a small lake just west of the Turnpike, surrounded by Anne's Thomasville family antiques.

Their children are a blessing. Anne (Jr.) is a Curator at the Brooklyn Museum; Claire a bank examiner in Yarmouth, Maine; bill, Jr., a salesman in Naples; and Frank a paralegal with Brackett, Sned.

Bill and Anne, they are certainly one of the most friendly, gracious and caring people you will ever have a chance to meet. I would describe having a conversation with them as giving off a "warm glow". Maybe dramatic, but true.

I am sure that Clewiston is a proud of Bill as we are.