

Judicial Profile on Elza B. Donnell  
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In 1898, the USS Maine went to the bottom of Havana Harbor in a deafening explosion. 226 were dead. War fever gripped the country. Teddy Roosevelt assembled his Rough Riders in San Antonio; then in Tampa for the assault on Cuba. He did not choose regular Army troops, but expert horsemen. Cow-pokes, ranchers, lawmen, Indians, and horsemen from the hills of Tennessee. The Donnell family owned a Revolutionary War grant farm near Lebanon, Tennessee. E. B., age 17, newly recruited horseman of the Fourth Tennessee Volunteers, went to war in Cuba. After returning to Tennessee from the Spanish American War, E.B. enrolled in Peabody Teachers College in Nashville. He wanted to be a teacher. After graduation in 1902, E.B. obtained a post in Cajun Country, Louisiana, teaching Latin, and was the football coach. He was a bright, and well-respected teacher in St. Martinsville (one of his students was Lake Lytal, Sr.'s mother). E.B. was offered the position of Superintendent of Schools at the Capitol, Baton Rouge. He came back to Tennessee to marry his school sweetheart, Rena. They returned to Baton Rouge in 1909.

Then came a career change; law school in Gainesville. After graduation, E.B. and a fellow law student opened their law office in Jacksonville. He practiced for several years in Jacksonville.

But in 1917, E.B. came to West Palm Beach. The governor had appointed him Judge of our newly formed Fifteenth Judicial Circuit. This circuit extended from Fort Lauderdale to Fort Pierce, and out to Okeechobee and Pahokee. He was our Circuit Court Judge from 1917 to 1921. He was so well -respected in that position, the rest of his life he was always referred to as "Judge Donnell." The pay as a Circuit Court Judge was not great. He and Rena had four children, 3 girls and a boy, Ballard. E.B. left the bench to open his own law practice on the corner of Clematis and Dixie.

Judge E.B. was a tall, imposing and engaging fellow. He was the ultimate "joiner." He was the President of everything. This included the Bar, Kiwanis, Elks, Masons, Sailfish Club, Izaak Walton League, and Veterans of the Spanish American War. He taught a Men's Sunday school class at the Methodist Church. He found time to serve two terms as West Palm Beach Mayor in 1935 to 1937; and later as City Commissioner.

E.B. was a powerhouse in State Democratic Politics, and on the State Executive Committee. From newspaper accounts he was on President Truman's side in ending racial discrimination in Florida. He helped to bring in "kicking and screaming", the old time Democrats who did not want their way of life changed.

His love for the outdoors and horseback riding never waned. E.B. and his family went for a swim in the ocean every morning, and a horseback ride in the afternoon. For years, he operated the Donnell Dairy Farm. One hundred fifty cows, and daily milk

delivery. It was said that this was actually a front, so that he and the family would have some place to keep his horses, and ride through the pastures.

Judge Donnell never retired. During the last few months of his life, battling cancer, his secretary would come to his house to work on his cases with him.

Judge Donnell's acorn did not fall far from this mighty oak. Ballard became a lawyer and was in private practice for some time when he contracted TB. He spent four or five years in a TB Sanitarium in San Antonio. He also studied for the Foreign Service exam; always been a dream after a one year bicycle trip through Europe. He was successful. Ballard was our U.S. Vice Counsel in London, Burma, and Naples over a period of years. In Naples, he met and married the daughter of the Brazilian Consul. Homesick in 1951, he returned home, and for the next sixteen years, he founded and became the sole attorney for the Legal Aid Society. He was intellectual and compassionate. His wife, Sonia, states that he did not like to see people suffer. Ballard retired from the Legal Aid Society in 1967. In his retirement, he read a lot in the Palm Springs Library. He had a gradual weakening of his heart, and went downhill. He died on June 28, 1995. He was 81.

His wife Sonia, son, Mark, and daughter, Gisele, put his ashes in the outgoing ocean tide. His widow said that his spirit was so free that he needed to be released.