

Phillip L. Knowles

A Public Life of Service

in Loco Parentis (1924-1999)



From the Heart of Dixie to the Heart of Florida's Panhandle in less than one hour. That's how long it takes to get from Dothan, Alabama, where Phillip Knowles was born, June 1, 1924, to Bonifay, Florida. Few Floridians grow up within 45 miles of their birthplace in another state. His parents decided to move down the road a piece while Phillip was still in knee pants. It was a place where he was destined to live until going off to college in what one imagines was a Mayberry-like setting. Life was less complicated then, and everybody knew not only their neighbors, but everyone else within hollerin' distance. "There couldn't be a better place in the world to grow up," Judge Knowles reflected when he was interviewed about a month before his retirement in 1990, by Sue Riddle Cronkite of the *Holmes County Advertiser*.

Bonifay may not be on anyone's list of most-want-to-visit places. It has the distinction, however, of being the seat of Holmes County, one of the smallest and least populated counties in Florida.

While going to school, Phillip worked in a variety of those not-so-odd jobs available in the 1930's to an energetic young man in a town having a population of less than 2500: delivering newspapers (*Mobile Register*), selling patent medicines, dispensing cherry Cokes, banana splits and sundaes at Padgett's Drug Store (those of us who were then called soda jerks would, in this era of political correctness, be referred to as *fountainneers*). Just down the street was Knowles retail clothing store operated by Phil's father, Davis.

Giving a foretaste of Phillip's pleasure in engaging others in casual conversation are the stories told during the above mentioned interview. For example, he said: "Mrs. McKinnon's Dairy was the last customer on my (newspaper) route and I would usually sit on a porch rocker and visit with her mother. She had a little short-haired white dog, don't know what kind he was. He'd sit on my lap. He didn't want me to leave. One day when I got on my bike he bit me, just stripped my pants leg, knocked my dollar watch out of my pocket and it broke."

The year 1942 saw him graduating from high school, and, soon, he was at the beck and call of the Army Air Corps (before it became the U.S. Air Force) from March, 1943, until December, 1945. Trained as a cryptographer in the 132nd Army Airways Communications system, he served all over Europe. One of wife Mary Jane's favorite

snapshots sent home showed Phillip wearing a genuine Scottish tartan kilt. Upon his discharge, he received the European-African-Middle Eastern Service ribbon with two bronze stars, World War II Victory medal and Good Conduct medal. During active duty, he rose to the rank of Tech Sgt. and became a Major in the Air Force reserves. He entertained his friends in the weekly luncheon group of retired judges with tales of his overseas military experiences and his sometimes cramped and uncomfortable means of travel in combat aircraft.

Earning needed undergraduate hours at Stetson University in Deland, he entered its College of Law and, in 1950, received his degree. Phillip was editor of the school paper, *The Stetson Reporter*, and was prominent in other law school activities. Elected to Mystic Krewé leadership society, he was also a member of Delta Sigma Phi fraternity.

Clutching his law diploma in one hand and the hand of his future bride, Mary Jane Lewis, of Tampa, in the other, Phil came to the hub of the west coast to begin the practice of law, and to marry Mary Jane the following year (1951).

For the first decade of his legal career, Knowles associated with lawyers, later judges, O.D. Howell, Jr., and after Howell was elected judge of Juvenile Court in 1954, Neil C. McMullen. Governor Leroy Collins appointed him Deputy Commissioner of Industrial Claims (later called Workers Compensation Judges) in 1955; that assignment served as an apprenticeship for greater judicial responsibility. In a letter to Mary Jane and Family after Phillip's death on January 31, 1999, A. Dallas Albritton, Esq. wrote: "He was a wonderful judge, always poised, kind, and extremely careful. The thing that struck me most was that he was a person of true compassion and somehow he understood the hardships of being poor and being black and being hurt and out of work. **** Terrell Sessums and I were talking at lunch today about the many fine workmen's compensation judges we had encountered. None, we concluded, was better than Phil Knowles."

In 1961 when his star was in the ascendancy, he was chosen by Gov. Farris Bryant for a newly created Hillsborough County juvenile judgeship, where he served for more than 20 years continuously, without opposition, after winning election in the primary following his appointment. He received endorsement of local newspapers and overcame two challengers with a clear majority. Except for a six-month temporary assignment in General Civil, he remained in his beloved Juvenile Division until the early 1980's, when he was assigned to the new Family Law Division, where he remained for the remainder of his judicial service. His record as one of the County's finest ever juvenile arbiters is impressive.

Judge Knowles was challenged by lawyer, Joseph Episcopo, in his final bid for reelection in 1986 - the only opposition he ever faced since he first stood for election in 1962. Phillip carried the day by 45,475 votes (58.97%) to Episcopo's 31,641 (41.03%). Judge Knowles added a bit of levity on the occasion of a pre-election interview by two journalists making up the editorial board of the Tampa Tribune. At one point, so the story goes, he broke into a chorus of the spiritual, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen." He received the paper's endorsement, nevertheless.

Dora LeFleur was his assistant in the last two years of his term as Deputy Commissioner and the first ten years of his Juvenile Court judgeship. She can vouch that serving in Juvenile Division can be dangerous to the somewhat defenseless judge seated at a desk, not upon an elevated bench as in the conventional courtroom. Hearing a loud

noise coming from the hearing room in the Annex, Dora entered and saw Judge Knowles standing at the window with a heavy, Bank of England-type chair out of place on his side of the desk. She learned that a strapping juvenile, upon hearing Judge Knowles say he was going back to the Juvenile Detention facility, picked up the chair and threw it at the Judge. Fortunately, Judge Knowles was nimble and dodged to avoid being hit.

After 1971 until retirement, Beverly Golden (now Judicial Asst. to Judge Chet Tharpe) was Knowles' "Girl Monday through Friday," and, like her predecessor, has warm memories of her association with him. Beverly says that he was initially chagrined when shifted into Family Law by the Chief Judge Arden Merckle. Mrs. Golden and others, like Cynthia Coen, now family law mediator and formerly child custody investigator, remember his penchant for spontaneously reciting poems, songs and homilies, all done with sincere good humor.

State social workers who dealt with him are invariably outspoken in praising Judge Knowles for his kindness and respect for them, as well as his fairness in protecting the children's interests. One of those, Margie Graham, knew him as well as a strong family man and church leader. Her first matter before him in 1964 was a memorably difficult case. A young mother of two small children living in Tampa Heights had a mental breakdown. Knowles approved placement of the children in foster care, giving great weight to their recommendations. Another high-level social worker, Jo Anne Harvey, speaks of a case she can't forget. The natural mother of a 3-year-old left the child with a 70-year-old woman, a non-relative who called herself the child's "godmother." The mother had been missing for months, and there were no other relatives. The Court found that the child had been abandoned, and he was able to induce the 70-year-old to agree that the child be voluntarily placed in foster care.

Phillip Knowles was a proud husband to Mary Jane, and a dutiful father to son, David, and daughter, Diana (Mrs. Jack) Tagliarino, and often boasted about his grandchildren, Tara and Taylor Tagliarino.

Probably Phil's most enduring quality was his soft-spoken, country-boy manner. He was a folklorist who loved to dig into his bag of stories about Bonifay and life in general. His next door neighbor and friend since college, retired contractor, Felton P. Davis, Jr. who liked to call Phillip "Colonel," says: "I think the things I most remember about Phillip were his pointless jokes. He would spend 5 minutes telling an unfunny joke in great detail. As he finished, he'd burst into a big laugh, and you'd struggle to make a chuckle, of course. Phillip was a most unusual man from an age many of us would like to see return. A time when life was simpler, when friends were sincere, when your word was bond, when friendship was worth more than money."

LaRochefoucauld, the 17th century French aphorist, said, "Only strong natures can really be sweet ones; those that seem sweet are in general only weak and may easily turn sour." By that measure, Phillip Knowles truly had a strong nature. Phil, says his friend and former colleague in the juvenile Division, Hon. James P Calhoun, never had an unkind word to say about anybody ... ever. What a sweet guy.

- *Morison Buck*

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Afterword:

This is what youth must figure out;

Girls, love, and living.
The having, the not having,
The spending and giving,
And the melancholy time of not knowing.
This is what age must learn about;
The ABC of dying,
The going, yet not going,
The loving and leaving,
And the unbearable knowing and knowing.

- *E.B. White*