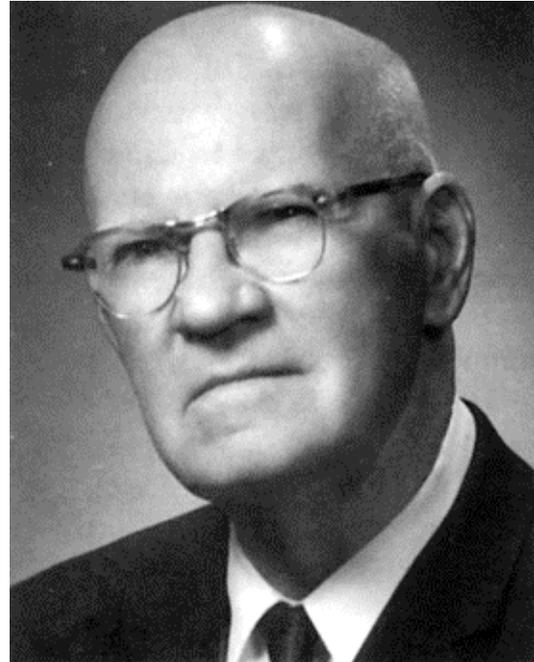


# Judge O. K. Reaves West Central Florida Leviathan



The year was 1877. It had been a scant twelve years since the last shots were fired in the nation's long nightmare - the calamitous Civil War. In the spring of that year, Rutherford B. Hayes was elected President and in late April the last federal troops withdrew from the South by leaving New Orleans. Meanwhile in Florida, George F. Drew, a Democrat, was sworn in as Governor, ending the era of so-called "carpetbag" government.

It was also the year in which two later closely-connected lawyers were born. One was Giddings E. Mabry, a Mississippian, who ventured into Florida and ultimately settled in Tampa where he formed an association with Doyle Carlton for the practice of law in 1912. The other, centerpiece of this article, was O.K. Reaves, native Floridian. Biographical references and his own notes reflect his birth in Sarasota. At least one record, however, reflects he was born in Fruitville, which is more likely correct in that the founding of Sarasota reportedly did not take place until about 1884.

That O.K. Reaves lived, practiced law, became a judge, then resumed the practice, and was a pillar of his church and community leader are facts. That his professional reputation and stature made him a man apart from most of his contemporaries is the stuff that gives birth to legends. He was of the common clay no doubt but clay of a unique mold. Famed film director, John Ford, is the origin of a remark attributed to a character in one of his classic Westerns, "If a legend becomes fact, then print the legend."

Judge Reaves, as he was forever known following his judicial service, was appointed Judge of the Sixth Judicial Circuit in 1915 and held that office until 1921. That Circuit is presently comprised of Pasco and Pinellas Counties; during Reaves' tenure it encompassed Manatee, also. When the 6th Circuit was restructured in 1915 by Ch. 6975, Laws of Florida the 13th Circuit was created exclusively for Hillsborough County.

Preparing for his long career which lay ahead, Reaves attended Stetson University Law School graduating in the Class of 1903, just three years after that institution was founded. A half century later, Reaves was honored with other 50-year graduates by Stetson. Judge Reaves' law partner, former Governor Doyle Carlton was principal speaker for the occasion.

Reaves launched his law practice in Bradenton in 1903 and established himself in what must have been a highly competent fashion for the next 12 years. Attesting to that conclusion is the fact that he became judge after that relatively brief time in the profession.

In 1921 the salary of Circuit Judges was \$5000 a year. A Tampa Tribune story in the 40's featured Judge Reaves calling him one of the "Builders of Tampa" and quoted him as saying that he left the bench with a ten year old son, was prompted to resign his judgeship and resume private law practice. Perhaps it was the lure of big city life that brought him to Tampa, at that time a metropolis of 51,628 souls. However, it came about, he came and was made a partner in the firm known as Mabry, Reaves and Carlton. Governor Carlton took third position in the firm name perhaps out of deference to Reaves who was older and a former judge.

Some years ago, Reece Smith, who joined the firm early in his career in 1953, composed a splendid, in-depth profile of firm members and associates. The firm name has undergone a number of changes of the years, ultimately dropping the familiar Mabry, Reaves signature, and is presently titled Carlton, Fields, Ward, Emmanuel, Smith and Cutler.

As further evidence of his stature, Reaves was once offered but declined a seat on the Florida Supreme Court, which at one time is said to have referred to him as, "One of the two best lawyers in Florida." He served a term in the State Legislature, and later was a charter member and President of the Florida Bar Association, forerunner of The Florida Bar, in 1920.

In addition to his career in the law, Reaves had extensive business and financial interests, reportedly being a shareholder in Bradenton Bank and Trust, National Bank of Commerce, Commercial State Bank, Merchant's Mechanics Bank, Guaranty Mortgage Co., Seminole Furniture Co., Beach Park Company and others.

In 1949, O.K. Reaves attracted public attention when he took a strong stand against strikes by organized labor, calling for federal legislation outlawing strikes or requiring all labor disputes to be resolved by a three-judge panel in federal courts.

Described by Reece Smith as a "lawyer's lawyer" who never ceased to be a model of legal excellence for his firm's junior members and associates and indeed, for all who dealt with him, Judge Reaves was, perhaps surprisingly, a man with self-deprecating humor. Reece tells the story, "When he was over 90 years, judge told Broaddus (Livingston) of the firm that he was worried about the hereafter. Broaddus said he couldn't see why since Judge had been a devout Christian all his life. Judge replied, "Yes, but I voted for Franklin Roosevelt in 1932."

While Reaves was not a man of the cloth, he was an individual made of rock-ribbed, moral fabric. A stalwart Baptist, he was chosen while still in Manatee County to lead the Florida Baptist Convention. In 1962, he was recognized as a "Christian layman of unusual achievements" by Tribune Church Editor Adiel J. Moncrief in his column.

The writer met O.K. Reaves only once. In 1953, a committee to prepare a resolution honoring Judge L.L. Parks on the 30th anniversary to his 13th Circuit Judgeship was appointed by Bar Association President, William H. Gillen. It consisted of Judge Reaves, T.M. Shackelford, Jr., Esq. and a thirty-year-old fledgling lawyer out of his league. My recollection of Judge Reaves from that distant and brief association is that he was a man of commanding presence and sincerity, and possessed of a wondrous speaking voice. Lawyer/writer Louis Auchincloss once remarked of his boarding school headmaster, Endicott Peabody, "Hearing him talk was a little like listening to God." That was a feeling experienced by me after meeting and hearing Judge Reaves 45 years ago.

His long and productive life came to an end in 1970 at age 93. Survivors included his

son, the late Charles K. Reaves, and three granddaughters, one of whom, Betty Lou Turner, still lives in Tampa. Son, Charles, was trained as a lawyer, associated for a time with the Mabry, Reaves firm, then served with the F.B.I. Later, he engaged in business in Tampa. Mrs. Charles K. Reaves still lives actively in Tampa.

To paraphrase Sydney Smith's praise of a particular food, doubtless God could have made a better man than O.K. Reaves, but doubtless He never did.

- *Morison Buck*