

***** CHIPS OFF THE OLD BENCH *****

**JOHN D. MENAS: Little Flower, Big Heart
(1901-1974)**

The English philosopher, John Locke, sometimes called the philosopher of the American Revolution, had this to say about the importance of reading (for most people a practiced endeavor, but one neither taught nor well learnt today): “Reading furnished the

mind only with material for knowledge; it is thinking that makes what we read ours.” For what can be accomplished by a twelve year old immigrant, who arrived at these shores all alone and who for a lifetime was an avid reader and thinker – becoming a man able to mold his thoughts into inspiring words, meet John Demos Menas.



Menas, only child of Greek parents, was born in Khios on December 26, 1901. Khios, an island in the Aegean Sea, became part of Greece in 1912. On the map of Asia Minor, Khios appears to lie closer to Turkey than Greece. Some historians claim it was the birthplace of Homer. Continuing wars between Greece and Turkey at that time prompted John’s parents to ship him to the United States to avoid his exposure to military service at a tender age. Sadly, he never saw his parents again.

He arrived in New York, birthplace of another hyphenate American, Fiorello LaGuardia. They had some things in common. Each was small of stature, highly emotional, trained in law, and each entered the military service of this country in time of war. The public career of each of them was marked by uncommon devotion to the cause of the common man. While the American-born future mayor of New York City’s given name, Fiorello, gave him the sobriquet of “Little Flower,” John Menas was always adorned with a rosebud in his lapel and clutched in his fingers the ever-present cigar. He had a lovely stand of rosebushes in his yard at 3010 Aquilla St. in old Palma Ceia, his home for thirty years. His wife, Angie, still resides there. He was so fond of cigars, Angie says, that after he had to quit smoking following his first heart attack, he would try to follow in the wake of a smoker on the street in order to absorb the effluvium from the smoke for vicarious pleasure.

Menas first settled in Pensacola where he lived in the home of a cousin for several years. He became interested in law while there when he was befriended by County Judge Harvey Page. He worked in Tallahassee and later in Tampa in the office of J. M. Lee, State Comptroller from 1932 until 1946. After undergraduate study at Stetson University in Deland, he entered law school at Cumberland University in Lebanon, Tenn. and completed the 18 month course in 1933 after somehow scraping up the tuition of \$100 a semester. He was admitted to practice law in Florida in 1938, but those were tough times and, evidently, as many of us can remember, it was important to find a "nut", that is, a secure source of income to keep body and mind intact. So he continued with the Comptroller out of the Tampa office, having landed on his feet here in 1937. It was in that job that he met Angelina (Angie) Cannella, a grand lady of Italian birth and member of an old Tampa family. Her sister married into the family Ferlita. Both families produced a number of prominent, blood-related lawyers, including Norman Cannella, Jr., Angelo Ferlita, and Michael LaBarbera.

Early in WWII, John enlisted in the Army Air Corps, and was trained in gunnery school at Buckingham Air Force Base, Fort Myers. Upon being honorably discharged, he was hired at the Tampa shipyards, and he and Angie were married.

Like LaGuardia, John Menas was a people's lawyer, specializing in criminal defense and immigration law. His office for the greater part of the 1942-52 decade, with Angie providing secretarial services, was in the heart of downtown at Madison Drug Building, 2nd floor on the corner of Madison and Franklin Streets. Close by were the offices of Massari, Patton & Spicola. After a brief stay in First National Bank Building Annex, he was for the rest of his lawyering in Western Union Building on Twiggs. At times he was associated with Raymond Sheldon, also a Cumberland law grad.

Menas did many things in his life but he was never a professional wrestler. Even so, he could have given George Zaharias, who sports writers tabbed, "The Crying Greek from Crippled Creek," a run for his money when it came to lacrimal activity. You remember Zaharias, Babe's hubby; in 1949 they bought Forest Hills Golf Course, and operated until 1954 the course now named for the Babe herself but owned by City of Tampa.

To illustrate the unique Menas touch: Now-retired Circuit Judge Roland Gonzalez tells of an experience he had while associated with Paul Lake, a talented (if overbearing and stentorian-voiced) lawyer, who was the first tenant in Stovall's Professional Building, site of the present County Center. Judge L. L. Parks was presiding over a murder trial with three accused. John Menas represented one, John Parkhill another and the third by a lawyer (unnamed) who also had an office in the Stovall Bldg. Near the end of the trial, Judge Parks called Lake's office and directed him to appear in a short time at Parks' chambers. Roland had taken the call initially. Lake responded, and Parks

directed that Paul Lake immediately take over defense of the man represented by the aforementioned, unnamed lawyer who was making an awful hash of his client's case. As Parks put it, the latter was being systematically strapped into "Old Sparky." After the other two lawyers concluded their final arguments, John Menas stood up, almost rent his garments and grabbed the heartstrings of each juror when he spoke out, with tears streaming down his face, that the other two accused had two of the very finest lawyers in the county, and that his client, poor soul, had only him, a man hardly able to speak English, to speak for him. The verdict spoke to the effectiveness of John's argument – his client was the only one of the defendants who "walked."

Judge Menas first donned the black robes when he was appointed Municipal Judge in 1970 by Mayor Dick Greco in his first term to replace Judge Nick Falsone. In the 1971 election he was opposed by Nick Ficarrotta, Everett Jones and Richard Leon. Judge Menas fared well in the Bar Association poll. The "Tampa Tribune" declined to make a recommendation, noting that the incumbent had previously announced that he would not seek election but changed his mind because he loved the work. Alex Vecchio, his spokesman at one of the rallies, scored some points when he told the gathering that Judge Menas had missed only one day of work on the bench. Menas retained the judgeship by beating Ficarrotta in a run-off.

He served in the Traffic Division in County Court, but heard the panoramic variety of matters served up in Municipal Court. Here's what former judge Charles H. Scruggs, who served with him in the latter forum, had to say about his colleague:

"Judge Menas was the kindest, most gentle man I've ever known. If the offender had no money to pay court costs in a traffic case, the judge would pay the costs out of his own pocket. If the Judge was short of cash, then he would call on defense lawyers sitting in the front to pay. His generosity got so effusive that Chief Judge Bob M. Johnson issued an order requiring Judge Menas to surrender his wallet to the Clerk prior to beginning his docket."

Dr. Frank Massari, Menas' physician and friend, fondly recalls that every year just before Christmas, Judge Menas would make an appointment, and when he came in he would present the doctor with a gift wrapped bottle of Crown Royal Canadian whiskey.

John and Angie Menas have a lovely daughter, Mary Frances (Mrs. Richard) Smith, who has two beautiful, adult daughters. His family was more precious to John Menas than money or position.

Some years back, Ralph McGill published a collection of his essays in a volume called, "The Fleas Come With The Dog." In one of them he ruminates about the exceptional worth of naturalized citizens coming from places like Greece. When some bitter home-grown person speaks scornfully of aliens and says, "Why don't they go back where they came from?", McGill asserts that those so maligned could say: "We will go back but let us take with us the rails we laid, the bricks and stones we made into great buildings, the books, the poems, the music we wrote." John Menas was a man who never lost his enthusiastic pride in his adopted country. He brought his own special gifts that enriched his community and enabled himself and his family to thrive in the process. Thank Heaven, John Menas never went back to where he came from.

Morison Buck

AFTERWORD:

And now that his story is told, what does it mean? How can I tell? What does life mean? If the meaning could be put into a sentence there would be no need of telling the story.

Henry van Dyke