

LEO STALNAKER:
(1897-1986) Fearless Fundamentalist, For Whom Life was
“HIGH ADVENTURE.”

Near the close of his productive and colorful career, Leo Stalnakar, at age 82, continued his service to the public and to the Bar when he was appointed General Master in Chancery for Hillsborough County Circuit Court on January 11, 1979. His grandson, Lance K. Stalnakar, was present when the oath of office was administered by Chief Judge Robert W. Rawlins, Jr. His duties were to hear evidence in uncontested divorce cases (and such other matters as might be referred to him), and then report his findings and recommendations to the presiding judge.



Stalnakar’s hearing room was directly across the hall from the Court Reporter and staff, Third Floor, County Courthouse, 419 Pierce Street, Tampa. Testimony at all hearings before a General Master was recorded, so he was a familiar figure at that location. The court reporter’s coterie, largely female and nearly all retired now, remember Leo’s broad smile and relentlessly cheerful demeanor, which virtually lit up the immediate area. His usual greeting to the cluster of often-jaded reporters was: “Ah, just another day of high adventure.” And with that, everyone within earshot would laugh and suddenly feel better. His joviality and bonhomie made it pleasant to be around him wherever he was.

Life began for Leo Stalnakar on August 17, 1897. He was the younger of two sons born to Imboden and Belle Mouse Stalnakar in Harman, West Virginia, a small community a few miles east of Elkins, in the north reaches of Monongahela National

Forest. His parent's marriage took place in Elkins, his mother's birthplace and the site of Davis and Elkins College founded in 1904. Leo's grandfather, Harrison Stalnaker, was a Confederate officer in General Imboden's celebrated cavalry brigade during the Civil War. Leo grew up during a time characterized by the writer's own father (born only five years earlier than Stalnaker) as the golden age in this country's history.

When Harold Ross founded New York Magazine in 1925, he told close friends that he wanted something different from magazines then being published featuring what Ross called: "Horatio Alger stuff." This is not a story out of Horatio Alger; it is rather an effort to take a three-dimensional but objective look at Leo Stalnaker and his times.

In the waning days of the 19th century, the ill health of his wife, Belle, prompted Imboden Stalnaker to uproot his family from the Mountain State, and relocate to the milder climes of Plant City, Florida, and subsequently to Tampa. The latter communities, at or close to sea level, contrast sharply with Elkins, West Virginia, which is about 1,700 feet above sea level; From West Virginia to the West Coast of Florida where the Stalnaker's, father and son and their households, resided for the rest of their lives. In those years no one had any reason to be concerned about the growth of Florida's population. Currently, to borrow one of Yogi Berra's zany expressions, "Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded."

Imboden Stalnaker, described by the Tampa Tribune in his obituary as a "pioneer East Tampa merchant," had been a school teacher, principal (of a school), and owner of a mercantile store, before becoming a resident of Tampa 43 years prior to his death in 1948. His first venture in Tampa was a grain and fencing store on Whiting between

Franklin and Tampa Streets. The business was later moved to Gary, formerly a separate entity, but would become part of the City of Tampa by annexation.

The Stalnaker homestead was a two-story frame structure built in 1842 on the present site of Tampa City Hall. Imboden purchased and moved the dwelling to East Tampa where it still stands at 3210 Eighth Avenue, an historic landmark as the county's oldest house. It was here that Leo spent his early years. Needing more room as his family circle expanded, Leo rebuilt and enlarged a bungalow two blocks from his boyhood home. The distinctive colonial ante-bellum house still stands, out of place, in an area of small depreciating homes and abandoned businesses. Stalnaker had an affinity for history throughout his life. When the old Hillsborough County Courthouse on Franklin Street was demolished, he obtained several large stained glass windows and ornate Moorish style trimming from the main courtroom. These unique items were incorporated into a den at his home. Leo's interest in stained glass was evidently passed down to son, Leo, Jr. After the latter's retirement, he became skilled in the delicate artistry, and nine of his creations are on display in a church on Merritt Island, Florida.

Our subject's pursuit of higher education took him away from Tampa, to Randolph Macon Academy, Bedford, Virginia, and Vanderbilt University. He received his law degree from Cumberland University in Lebanon, Tennessee. His diploma from Cumberland is an oversize 18" by 23 1/2," almost large enough to cover the front door of the fabled Stalnaker house. After admission to practice in Florida in 1922, he opened a law office in Tampa.

Prior to completing his education, however, Stalnaker responded to Uncle Sam's invitation to serve the country during World War I; he enlisted as a Private in the U.S.

Army on October 22, 1918 at age 21. Honorably discharged in December of that year after the armistice was signed, he was appointed Second Lt. Quartermaster, Army of the United States (Reserves) on December 28, 1925.

The following excerpt from the *Tampa Tribune—A Century of Journalism* by Bentley Orrick and Harry L. Crumpacker, University of Tampa Press, 1998 is reprinted with permission:

Stalnaker grew up to be an outspoken fundamentalist and so admired William Jennings Bryan that he made a pilgrimage with his wife to Dayton, Tennessee to visit the room where The Great Commoner had died five days after the Scopes Monkey Trial had ended. It upheld the law against teaching evolution, but exposed Bryan to ridicule as a scientific simpleton.

A more recent devotee of Bryan was the late Albert Gore, former United States Senator from Tennessee and father of Al Gore, Jr. unsuccessful candidate (Democrat) for President in election 2000.

Less than a decade out of law school and still a young lawyer, Stalnaker had already achieved status as an important personality in Hillsborough County. He is one of only five men having served in a judgeship who are given biographical sketches in Ernest L. Robinson's *History of Hillsborough County* published in 1928; the others are: William C. Brooker (County Judge), E.B. Drumright (Police Court Judge, 1910-12), W. Raleigh Petteway (Criminal Court of Record Judge) and T. M. Shackelford (Supreme Court of Florida Judge).

It was in the late 20s and 30s that Stalnaker became a notable figure in politics. During that period Tampa, a Chicago in miniature became notorious as a corrupt city where gangster slayings, illegal gambling and liquor traffic flourished. One writer called Tampa the "damnedest town this side of Hell." Ybor City was the mecca for these

activities. Lookouts stationed outside bars to warn of police raids were commonplace. Crime boss Charlie Wall strolled in and out of a building on south Franklin Street. To visit relatives who ran Lykes Brothers. No one was ever arrested, as mobsters traded murders. This was the stormy environment that existed when the City Commission appointed Stalnaker as Municipal (Police Court) Judge in 1927. In this assignment he demonstrated his strong Southern Methodist beliefs and a passionate commitment to prohibition.

Vigorously bucking the trend by politicians favoring abolition of prohibition, Stalnaker quickly earned a reputation as a “crusading magistrate.” He had already gained national attention during his 1927-28 term as a member of the Florida House of Representatives as an opponent of the teaching of evolution in the public schools. The press referred to his proposed legislation as the “Ape Bill.” The bill passed the House by a comfortable margin but died in the Senate. Some 50 years later, he was quoted as insisting that his bill was a good thing.

Showing neither fear nor favor, on his first day on the bench, Stalnaker quadrupled fines and gambling and liquor law violators got stiff jail sentences. Two vice squad detectives, Ponder and Myers, quietly cooperated with the judge, obtaining search warrants and making hundreds of arrests. Stalnaker learned that a number of those arrested were sending surrogates (substitutes) to court to face trial and paying them to serve jail time if necessary.

Tampa’s political establishment was jolted. Mayor Perry Wall was unable to get sufficient support for his demand that the crusading judge to be recalled. The judge reported a number of death threats, and son, Leo, Jr. recalls that it was a tense time for the

family. Shotguns were placed at strategic places inside their home. Activity in the court was so tumultuous that one local paper ran a story with the headline: “Stalnaker Tries 104 cases in 90 Minutes.”

Stalnaker accompanied law enforcement on several raids, one such foray being on the Key Club, a speakeasy and favorite hangout for city officials across the street from City Hall. He carried a movie camera to record the identity of those taken into custody. Stalnaker produced a documentary film he called “The Wages of Sin,” and demands for his removal from the bench intensified.

When Stalnaker, who could not be bribed or corrupted, sought election for a full term as city judge, his foes mounted a strong offensive against him at the polls. One-sided balloting at Ybor City precincts and the power of his political adversaries combined to bring about his defeat. For a year after his ouster, Stalnaker published a newspaper, *Tampa Life*, which attacked City Hall and carried stories of reported graft and corruption in the city. It was a full-sized newspaper featuring editorial cartoons and popular comic strips, such as the *Katzenjammer Kids* and the *Nemo the Sandman*, in color. Dwindling advertising revenues led to the newspaper’s demise.

Boswell wrote five volumes about Dr. Johnson before he could bring himself to state that the great man had not always been virtuous or totally free from questionable activity. And so it was with Leo Stalnaker, who in early 1930 was faced with disciplinary action when it was alleged that he could not account for several thousand dollars belonging to a guardianship under his management. Judge W.T. Harrison heard the complaint against Stalnaker. While finding that disbarment was unwarranted, the judge did on December 12, 1930 suspend him for twelve months and thereafter until he

was satisfied the obligation owed. Suspension was affirmed by the Supreme Court, 102 Fla. 638, 136 So. 318. All of the news stories, which have been examined in the preparation of his narrative, including the aforementioned history of the *Tampa Tribune*, erroneously state that Leo was disbarred. No doubt due to economic hardship so prevalent during the 1930s, it was not until 1941 that Stalnaker was able to make a financial settlement of the debt. Circuit Judge Harry N. Sandler of Tampa granted Leo's petition for reinstatement to practice his profession, after considering the circumstances and hearing testimony from Judge Harrison and a number of character witnesses appearing in behalf of the petitioner. The Supreme Court of Florida approved Judge Sandler's lengthy opinion as reported in 9 So. 2d 100. Except for the above-described hiatus, Stalnaker's practice of law spanned 64 years, and he was joined professionally with his grandson, Lance K. Stalnaker, for two years.

During the 1930s Stalnaker traveled extensively as National Lecturer for the fraternal organization, Junior Order of United American Mechanics. He was a popular and dynamic public speaker at churches, patriotic rallies and other public meetings, and it was his invariable practice to present the organization, which had invited him with a Bible and small American flag.

Leo Buscaglia, popular California author and television personality, who died in 1998, was known as the "hug therapist." He said something to the effect that the person who is the happiest and most well adjusted is the man or woman who is most curious about things, and who had the greater number of interests. Leo Stalnaker's interests were many and diverse: he wrote about 70 detective stories for the dime pulps so popular during the thirties, potboilers like *The Corpse Came Back and Killer Legs*. He was a

serious student and expert on Bible lore, and the Civil War; a musician (played the trombone, French horn and trumpet); a painter, coin collector and camera enthusiast. Leo wrote several books, two of which are still in Tampa's Central Library downtown in the reference section. The earliest is *History of Eighth Avenue Methodist Church* written in 1944, at which time he was Chairman of Board of Stewards there and former Tampa District Lay Leader of all Methodist Churches (1939-41). All of his family was involved in the work of that neighborhood church, and both his sons are listed on the World War II honor roll plaque there. In 1957 he compiled the history entitled *Methodist Beginnings in Tampa*. A Methodist church, he declares was the first church building of any dominion to be erected in Tampa, the Hillsborough County Courthouse being the only structure (at that time), which was older. Moreover, he suggests that in the spring of 1849 Robert E. Lee, then a Lt. Colonel in the Army Engineers, was temporarily stationed at Ft. Brooke military reservation, and could have attended such Methodist church then pastured by Rev. L.G. Lesley. Dorrance & Co. of Philadelphia published in 1952 his work entitled *Mystic Symbolism in Bible Numerals*, which had a forward by Homer Rodeheaver.

Like most public figures, Leo was a "joiner," affiliating with many social, fraternal and veterans organizations. But his most enduring and lifelong attachment was to the Methodist church. It was during his active participation in the Methodist Epworth League, a group within the church catering to young adults of the faith, that he met and married Judson Lorene Vest. They had three children: Zeno, a lifetime educator now living in Lakeland; Leo, Jr. of Tampa, former City Editor of the *Tampa Daily Times*, Asst. Mgr. Editor of the *Tampa Tribune*, and Associate Professor, School of Journalism, and Dir. Of Student Publications, University of South Florida; and Belle Russo, of

Tampa, formerly a Supervisor in the AFDC program, Florida Dept. of Health & Rehabilitative Services. Leo had five grandchildren. Following the death of his wife, Leo married her sister, Kathleen. Stalnaker's mission on earth ended June 22, 1986.

One of art's purest challenges, it has been said, is to translate a human being into words. That is the objective of this piece about Leo Stalnaker. The reader must decide whether or not it had succeeded.

Morrison Buck

AFTERWORD:

Life while you live, Life calls for all your powers;
This instant day your utmost strength demands.
He wastes himself who stops to watch the sands,
And, miser-like, hoards up the golden hours.[William Henry Hudson].