

L. Clayton Nance

Judge Leads Hunt For History And Heritage

The recent untimely death of Circuit Court Judge L. Clayton Nance stunned his family and friends. Late in the afternoon on June 20, 1979, a heart attack ended his life. This issue of **Broward Legacy** is dedicated to the memory of Luther Clayton Nance, the catalyst in the preservation of Broward County's history.

Though Clayton Nance is dead, his spirit will continue to inspire those who knew him.

"Now he belongs to the ages," it was written of Abraham Lincoln at his death. That saying applies as well to Clayton Nance. A man bigger than life, he was every bit as fundamental as a character straight from a Shakespearean play. Clayton Nance was original. He could never have been invented, not even by the bard of Avon. His stature in Broward County will no doubt increase with each passing generation, for his life and character are the materials from which legends are woven and grow.

As a jurist, Nance's colleagues held him in the highest esteem. But it is the work he accomplished as a non-jurist which sets him clearly apart from his contemporaries.

Nance possessed an overpowering propensity for knowledge of the past. Few could lay claim to being more confirmed antiquarians. Contrary to much wisdom current in today's academic circles, he loved the events of the past per se. They had a meaning in and of themselves, irrespective of any application to the present in the way of lesson, example or symbol.

Sam Jones (Arpieka), the famous Indian warrior chief of the 1830's and 1840's who frequented the area now known as Broward County, for example, was interesting to Nance for a variety of reasons, none having to do with any example he might have provided regarding cunning, bravery or inspiration. Nance simply was awed that this beleaguered chieftan could hold at bay the powerful United States Army until it abandoned efforts to capture him after seven years.

Nance not only loved the past, but went far beyond giving lip service to the need for discovering local history and heritage. For ten years, from 1969-1979, the needs of the Broward County Historical Commission held a high priority in his life. From 1969-1972 he laid the groundwork for the

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1924-1979

In Memoriam

creation of the Commission and from 1972 to 1979, he served as the official advisor to the Commission. But tagging him "advisor" is akin to merely revealing the tip of the iceberg of his activities for the Commission.

For five years, it is fair to say, he was the Commission. He drew up the budgets, hired personnel, enlisted a host of volunteers for Commission projects, personally researched vast areas of county and state history, and represented the Commission in a variety of forums. In short, he oversaw every facet of Commission activity, from Pioneer Days to the stocking of the County's historical library. Often, less than a forty-hour week in his historical domain was the exception. Nance served on the statewide level as a member of the State Historic Preservation Advisory Council, a position which demanded that he frequently travel to Tallahassee where the Council met.

Few could see the unique quality of historical events as Nance could. So thoroughly had he mastered the historical method for local events, at a glance he could pick out the whimsical, the grotesque, the commonplace, the refined, the unusual and relate it to the broader strands and facets of history. A gregarious man himself, he always held humans never do anything in isolation, as if the deed were a thing in itself. In pursuance of this thesis, he never spared any pains in joining together events of a class so as to produce a vignette with flesh and bones, designed to entertain and edi-

fy his hearers. No doubt, in following this philosophy and the method it entailed, he often dredged up the seamy and unbecoming, if not evil, side of human nature. Because of his empathy for the weak and unfortunate, he eschewed the exploitation of anything which might reflect adversely on their characters and intentions. He always sought a positive interpretation.

Enthusiasm for his subject and the ability to transmit it to others will always be seen as one of Nance's finest characteristics. One time when he described the tremendous benefits which the decaying Lock Number One on North New River Canal had brought to Broward County, his listener volunteered immediately to work weekends, helping restore the lock to its primal condition. On yet another occasion, he so mesmerized a state legislator regarding the vital need to preserve and exhibit the history of Broward County, a state agency was created to nurture and fulfill this need.

With so many concerned citizens anxious to learn and preserve Broward's past, it is obvious Nance could not inspire each of the four hundred volunteers who in any single year have merged their efforts with the concerns of the Historical Commission. There are few, however, whose enthusiasm for volunteer historical preservation has not been touched by the zeal of the man known so affectionately as "Judge Nance."

We need not apotheosize nor canonize Nance, but simply honor him for his vast contributions to the knowledge and preservation of Broward County history. Like everyone, Nance, too, had shortcomings, but strove constantly to overcome them. His most apparent oversight was that he failed to make a lasting contribution in the arena of written history, though he encouraged many others to write their hearts out. One result of his encouragement has been **Broward Legacy**. But over the years he diligently collected maps and recorded the details of many historical events in Broward County. If what he termed "Nance's Notes" are ever published this slight blemish might not only be erased, but supplanted by a truly remarkable achievement in the written history domain.