

ROBERT EARL NELSON

RCBA President 1931

Like many young men in 1917, Robert Earl Nelson departed for Europe (France) to fight what became known as The Great War, or as British author H. G. Wells dubbed it, the “war to end all wars”.

Unfortunately, there isn’t much information about Nelson’s involvement during the war which, ultimately, did not end all wars. What is known, however, is that he survived the war and returned to Riverside to eventually become a president of the Riverside County Bar Association in 1931.

It is also known that Nelson was born on March 11, 1891 in Brookston, Indiana to Robert and Rebecca Nelson. His family subsequently relocated to Riverside when he was nine months old.

He was apparently developed into an athletic young man because, by April 14, 1909, an article from the *Riverside Enterprise* noted that he was the captain of the track team at Riverside Poly High School. The article further mentions that Nelson, along with 16 other members of the team, was presented with his orange and green “R” (varsity letter) during a school ceremony.

After eventually graduating from high school, Nelson enrolled in college at the University of California at Berkeley. He completed college in three years and then enrolled in law school at the University of Southern California (USC). According to state bar records, he was admitted to the California bar in June of 1915 and was later assigned bar number 6087 (as an aside, the California bar did not start assigning numbers until after it was formed in 1927).

Nelson initially worked with Schweitzer & Hutton in Los Angeles. He then joined with his friend Albert Hunt Ford, who had also graduated in 1915 from USC, to form the Law Office of Ford & Nelson in Riverside. Ford, who was later assigned California bar number 2236, was the son of Riverside’s mayor Oscar Ford. He had been working for Jones & Bennett in Los Angeles. The two friends opened their office in the now historic Loring Building.

Nelson’s “first trial” made the local news. In an article dated July 28, 1915 from the *Riverside Daily Press*, it was reported that he was defending an “eccentric man who wore silver ‘Ron Ton Tongs’ for pant guards” during his trial. Nelson’s client Antonio Navarez had been arrested on July 8, 1915 for burglary (note how quickly the criminal trial took place after the arrest!). Navarez contended during the trial that he won the allegedly stolen money while gambling. When the prosecuting attorney asked him to describe the other gambler, Navarez pointed to his own attorney Nelson and said “He looked something like that fellow there.” This caused an outburst of guffaws from the spectators and even the judge. Unfortunately for Nelson, his first trial ended in failure when it took the jury just three minutes to convict his client of the burglary charge.

Later in the year, another of Nelson’s cases made the local news. He was representing a client who had been accused of stealing a watch and other items. The *Riverside Daily Press* reported on December 30, 1915 that Albert Richings had been accused of stealing the items from the Perris residence of Ernest Talbot. By the date of this article, Richings was involved in a second trial because a jury had determined that there was insufficient evidence to convict him of a grand larceny charge. It was reported that Deputy District Attorney Loyal Kelley was the prosecuting attorney. Kelley, it should be noted, was also a former president of the Riverside County Bar Association.

Nelson made the local press again when, on October 26, 1916, it was reported in the *Riverside Enterprise* that his client Dewey Goldshevry had been charged with raising the amount of a check from \$5 to \$50 and trying to cash it at the First National Bank. Nelson argued that his client could not obtain a fair and impartial trial in Riverside. He was able to convince the court to transfer the case to Corona.

The next time Nelson made the local press was on September 27, 1917 when it was noted in the *Riverside Enterprise* that he had joined the US Army and had left for San Francisco. In a subsequent article dated February 22, 1918 in the *Riverside Daily Press*, further clarification was provided about Nelson's military service. It was reported that he had enlisted in the Quartermaster's Corps of the US Army. He had been stationed at Madison Barracks in New York. These barracks had been established a few years after the War of 1812 at Sackets Harbor, NY and had been named after President James Madison. The article further mentions that Nelson had recently arrived safely in France about one week earlier.

Although nothing further is mentioned in the local press about Nelson's military career, he had obviously returned to the Riverside area by January of 1920. It was reported on January 21, 1920 in the *Riverside Enterprise* that Nelson was representing Charles McDonald who was a Coachella merchant who had been arraigned by Judge Hugh Craig on a charge of insanity. His client had been committed to Patton State Mental Hospital. Nelson asked for a jury trial for his client and Judge Craig scheduled one of January 29, 1920. No further mention was made in the press about this matter. In an earlier article dated October 5, 1919 in the *Riverside Enterprise*, however, it had been noted that the name of Nelson's law firm had been changed to Ellis, Ford & Nelson.

In a battle of future RCBA presidents, the *Riverside Daily Press* reported on April 8, 1920 that Nelson was defending Tom Crawford on a murder charge and that his old adversary Loyal Kelley was the prosecuting attorney.

Nelson made the Society Pages of the *Riverside Enterprise* on June 26, 1920 when it was reported that he was scheduled to marry Alvina Williams on the following Wednesday. It was further reported that the "Groom Elect" was being given a shower at the home of Cassie Capper. Several years later, the couple had a son (Robert Marshall Nelson; 5/21/1922-5/27/1987).

Another of Nelson's cases made the press on March 18, 1921, when it was reported the he was defending Mrs. D. Decker who had been arrested with Roy F. Smith in a downtown rooming house in violation of Ordinance 286 (7). This somewhat unusual local ordinance made it illegal for two members of the opposite sex—except husband and wife, or parent and minor child—to occupy jointly and privately any room in any house, dwelling, hotel or lodging house within the City of Riverside. Nelson's law firm contended that the ordinance was overly broad. They pointed out that it could apply to situations such as an attorney and his/her stenographer in a law office. Although there was no subsequent press coverage of the matter, it is presumed that, somewhere through the years, this ordinance was abolished.

As noted above, the name of Nelson's law firm had been changed to Ellis, Ford & Nelson in 1919. In an article dated October 21, 1921 in the *Riverside Enterprise*, it was reported that William H. Ellis of the law

firm had been appointed yesterday by Governor William D. Stephens to replace Hugh H. Craig as a Superior Court judge. Ellis' name was then removed from the firm's name.

After the early 1920's, Nelson's name essentially disappeared from local press coverage. His later life became as invisible in the media as his aforementioned military career. It is known that he became the RCBA president in 1931 but there are essentially no bar association records elaborating upon his term of office.

Nelson died on October 21, 1961 and his wife Alvina followed him in death on December 21, 1984. They are both buried in Olivewood Cemetery in Riverside. Nelson's grave marker reads "CPL US Army World War I".

Written by Bruce E. Todd.