

WALTER S. CLAYSON And HIS HISTORIC LAW FIRM

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One writer referred to him as a “crusty old soul . . . with a sense of humor under his hard shell”. His daughter described him as a “country lawyer who helped people in need”. Whatever the description, Walter S. Clayson has undoubtedly earned the distinction of being one of the earliest pioneers of the legal profession in Riverside County.

Born on January 25, 1887 in Redwood Falls, MI, Clayson moved with his parents to Corona in 1900 where his father opened a furniture store. Clayson’s older brother Marshall was already residing in Corona.

He attended high school at Corona High and was graduated in 1905. By his own admission, he was not the most studious student at the school.

“I graduated from the high school probably more on account of the fact that the institution was overcrowded and needed the room rather than because of because of my intellectual achievements,” Clayson once told newspaper columnist Fred L. Eldridge, who was also the one who described him as a “crusty old soul” in an earlier article.

Whether he really had any academic limitations or not, Clayson continued on to law school where he graduated from USC in 1908. He then started practicing law under George Freeman who was Corona’s first attorney and who became Corona’s first City Attorney and Riverside County’s first judge of the Superior Court. Their office was located in what was then the First National Bank at the northwest corner of 6th and Main.

In one of his articles about him, Eldridge noted that Clayson, besides his legal skills, had a vivid memory and could quote verbatim long passages from plays. He described him as being a proficient cornet player in his high school band.

In those days (1910), Corona, which had been incorporated in 1896, was described as a “quiet, sleepy city” in part because of the absence of street cars which only traveled as far as Arlington. There were three hotels—Alden House, Del Rey and The Commercial—which provided hospitality for people passing through the city. It was in this “sleepy” environ that the Riverside Daily Press noted on June 9, 1914 that Clayson had married Nell Ratliff.

Eventually, Clayson became Corona’s second City Attorney for what has been described as “the magnificent salary of \$50 per month”. He also became a Justice of the Peace. Some of his exploits as a JOP were described in the local press.

In article dated October 13, 1921 from the Riverside Daily Press, it was noted that there had been a preliminary hearing for Armando “Miracle Man” Dominguez of Chino who had been charged with practicing medicine without a license. He was released after posting bail set by Clayson in the sum of \$200.

Another article from the Riverside Daily Press dated February 18, 1922 described seven (!!!) arrests for speeding during the past week in the Santa Ana Canyon. Clayson levied fines against these speedsters in the total sum of \$125.

David R. Saunders, a lawyer at the Clayson law firm since 1983, recalls a story which has been passed down through the ages about Clayson's tenure as Justice of the Peace.

"He was called to officiate a wedding in Elsinore which was a long way from Corona back then. After the wedding, the bride's father asked Walter if it was customary to pay him for his fee for officiating over the wedding. He responded in the affirmative. The bride's father then handed him a cigar as his payment"

Besides his work as the City Attorney and a Justice of the Peace, Clayson was also involved in other community activities. He served as President of the Corona Chamber of Commerce. He also was an organizer, charter member and eventual president of the Corona Rotary.

During his lengthy career as an attorney, Clayson was involved in numerous interesting situations. One is described by the aforementioned Fred Eldridge who provided tidbits about Clayson in several of his columns.

In his March 2, 1972 column for the Corona Daily Independent, Eldridge wrote that "Clayson always escaped scandal. He had one near miss, however. As the attorney for the Temescal Water Co., he would buy up pieces of land for the company and transfer them into the company's name. He bought a piece of land up in Temescal Canyon during the bootleg days and forgot to transfer the title to the water company. One day he remembered it and had it recorded."

"Two days later," continues Eldridge, "the newspapers reported that the sheriff had raided the largest still ever found in Riverside County and noted that it was on land owned by the Temescal Water Co. Clayson was not mentioned (in the article)".

In the same column, Eldridge also states the "Things were pretty rough in Corona's early days." Stuart, Clayson's only son, told Eldridge that he remembered that his father had to twice disarm men in his office. Stuart witnessed one of these incidents and said that his father didn't use force—"He just talked them out of their guns".

Clayson developed an expertise in the area of water law in the early days of Riverside County. Said fellow partner E. Spurgeon Rothrock, "He was an expert in the fields of water and municipal law. He represented the Temescal Water Co. for many years and was instrumental in the building of the Railroad Canyon Dam".

Such was the respect that Clayson developed in the area of water law that Saunders adds, "Rather than filing litigation, citrus growers would just go see Walter to resolve their disputes in those days. They respected his opinion."

Clayson's daughter Barbara previously described to writer Iris Hayward that her father also had a kind heart. In a column dated March 3, 1972 for the Daily Enterprise, Hayward quoted Barbara as saying "I worked in his office for one year and found that many times he helped people who were in need and, if they didn't have any money, he many times didn't charge them. Like the country doctor, he was a country lawyer."

The historic law firm which was started by Clayson in 1910 still exists today at the corner of 6th and Main in Corona. In earlier days, the firm was known as Clayson, Stark, Rothrock & Mann. Donald Stark had joined the firm in 1949, Rothrock in 1952 and Roy Mann in 1955. Later the firm morphed into Clayson,

Mann, Arend & Yaeger with Erling Arend and Derrill Yaeger having joined the firm. Today, Roland C. Bainer teams with Saunders and the firm is called Clayson, Bainer & Saunders.

During its history, the law firm has employed several other notable attorneys including former Superior Court judges J. William Mortland and George Grover.

Bainer and Saunders have smartly kept the prestige of Clayson's name in the firm even though he is long deceased. Local legend Walter S. Clayson died back on March 1, 1972. His wife Nell preceded him in death on June 10, 1969. He was survived by his son Stuart and daughter Barbara at the time of his passing.

Written by Bruce E. Todd