

FIFTY YEARS ON - II

ANNALS OF JUSTICE

By Steve LaCheen

Among the many things I never gave much thought to when I started practicing law as a solo general practitioner was the nature of the clients I would be representing. I had a general idea about the kind of cases I expected to handle in the early years of practice, and thought I would be “a people’s lawyer,” but I had not a clue as to the nature of the “who” that category of humanity would encompass. A few examples should suffice to illustrate the infinite variety of eclectic weirdness that found its way into my file cabinet and onto my calendar during the first dozen years of my practice; time that today seems so long ago and faraway as to be referenced “B.C.E.”

Osra Duffy Hall, a woman in her sixties, whom I represented in connection with her application for Social Security Disability benefits, believed that she was the illegitimate daughter of the Hollywood character actor Victor Moore, and that her family had once owned Deal Island, Maryland, out of which they had been swindled by unscrupulous Native Americans. We were successful in obtaining the sought-after disability award, and recovered a fairly large lump sum payment for back benefits; and then I was surprised to learn that the one-third contingent fee upon which we had agreed was not going to be paid since the Social Security regulations limited counsel fees to \$10.

Herbert Cook came to me by way of a referral from another client. With him came his partner in their proposed commercial venture, Randy “Record-Mixin” Dixon, a popular local disc jockey. The impetus for the consultation was their desire to formalize their partnership agreement and register the name of the company they were forming: Cook’s Negro Beer.

That venture apparently never got off the ground; but several years later, I found out, quite by accident, that I apparently had a storefront office, with my name on the front window of Mr. Cook’s building on Columbia Avenue. Mr. Cook did not understand my insistence that my name be removed, because, as he said, he just thought he was doing me a favor with free advertising.

I was consulted by a veterinarian from Montgomery County referred to me by an attorney who represented the owner of Leo the Lion, against whom the Township of Abington had initiated eviction proceedings for violation of the ordinance prohibiting the keeping of wild animals. The problem was that Leo was never on-site when the law arrived; so, the township solicitor subpoenaed the vet to produce his files, to prove that he had treated the animal at that address. We filed a motion to quash the subpoena on the ground that forced production of the documents would violate the vet’s Fifth Amendment privilege because it would, according to the township ordinance, expose

him to liability as an aider and abettor of Leo’s owner’s alleged violation. Ditto, re the testimony sought from the vet. We won the battle, but lost the war, when Leo, who was old, toothless and infirm, died during the pendency of the proceedings.

The publicity in Leo’s case brought another animal lover to my door. Ruth Supplee, who owned an ocelot, was being

prosecuted for creating a nuisance and risking catastrophe, not for anything she or her pet did that actually broke the law, but because she stopped traffic and created a risk of collisions whenever she walked her pet on the main street of the suburban community in which they lived. We settled the matter with an agreement that she and the ocelot would keep to side streets, so as not to cause traffic congestion and possible “gaper” accidents.

A woman, who shall remain nameless here, consulted me with regard to starting divorce proceedings against her husband, and asked me if adultery was a sufficient ground for divorce. When I assured her it was, she asked, “His or mine?”

Anne C., the owner of a Center City card shop, asked me to file whatever legal proceedings were necessary to correct her birth certificate. When I asked what was the error in the original, she acknowledged there was no error; she simply wanted to lower her age by five or six years.

Speaking of changing birth certificates, I had a client ask me if he could change his before his case went to trial. He wanted to change his name from Oscar Murray to “Oscar Not Guilty Murray.” I told him he didn’t need to change his birth certificate to call himself by any alias he wanted; but changing his name wouldn’t change the evidence against him. He said, “I know that, LaCheen. I just think if the jury hears the judge refer to me as ‘Not Guilty,’ maybe they will too.”

Michael R., who was in the process of a gender transition, wanted to “amend” his birth certificate to change the notation of his sex at birth from male to female, and his name to Maria.

Mary Ellen C. was a pretty, kitten-faced young woman with a turbulent past. She had been abducted, taken to Las Vegas and married at 16; then abducted from her abductor by a client of mine who paid for her divorce, married her, and later beat her badly. She then shot and killed the man he found her in bed with, after seeing her car parked outside a motel on his way home from a hard day’s work as a daytime house burglar. Mary Ellen

recovered from the beating, but was never the same. Several years later, she asked me to sue the Beatles for stealing so many of their best songs, which she, not they, had written. According to her, the most important song of hers that the Beatles had stolen was "In My Life."

Gert Cannon retained me to file a suit for slander against a supervisor at work, who had called her a "bum." Finding a slang-definition dictionary to prove that calling a woman that name was an allegation of unchastity, and, therefore, slander per se, we were able to overcome preliminary objections; but the suit was dropped by Cannon when she married her slanderer.

Ernestine A., whom I represented in an accident claim, was a tall, pretty, honey-colored woman, who had a stutter so severe that she actually hit herself when she tried to speak, slapping herself in the stomach or across the chest in a desperate attempt to control the stutter. After I arranged a personal interview with the claims adjustor, he settled her claim quickly, and fairly.

Ernestine married a man named Gene Johnson, who later retained me to obtain a patent for a product he invented - a patch of artificial hair to be applied to a man's chest when he wore an open-collar shirt - which he called "Masculine Fleece." When I explained that I believed, in order to be patented, a product required a moving part, but I thought that similar protection might be obtained by way of a design patent, and the name could be registered as a trademark. I referred him to a patent lawyer. Apparently, he didn't get the feedback he was looking for, because I never heard from him again.

Birdie Garvin consulted me to obtain remuneration and damages from an advertising company which had painted a large, mural-size commercial advertisement on the side of a building he owned in West Philadelphia, having done so without first obtaining his permission. We sued, and were able to negotiate a contract which paid him \$20 per month; which was faithfully paid until Birdie sold the building. The new owner negotiated a better contract with another advertiser. That generated a breach of contract suit against Birdie, which we defended successfully.

Louise Glading Stewart, a woman in her late 60s, who might have been called "an old maid," lived in an apartment house in the section of West Philadelphia which she still called Kingsessing. She had the misfortune to suffer from what Dr. Freud might have described as hysterical fantasies - she believed that snakes came into her bedroom at night. An unkind person might have said it was wishful thinking on her part. I arranged to have a client who lived nearby respond to her phone calls with a personal inspection, for which she paid him \$20 for each house call. Stewart died in the early 1960s. She had no heirs at law, and her will bequeathed everything to various charities, except her favorite leather-bound, zippered Bible, which she left to me. I have it still.

I represented Alice Y., a young woman referred by her sister, in a support action for herself and her child. A year or so later, without having had any contact in the interim, she began calling me from a mental hospital where she was confined, apologizing that she had been unable to keep our wedding date, but would be

coming home soon. The calls continued periodically for almost 10 years.

I had several clients who would not take the elevator to my office, which was on the 31st floor of the Lewis Tower Building, at 15th and Locust streets; one because she was claustrophobic; another because he was acrophobic; a third because she suffered from Triskaidekaphobia. As to the last, when I explained that was fear of 13, not fear of 31, she explained in return that she was also dyslexic! All in all, I spent a lot of time meeting clients in the luncheonette on the ground floor, and as much or more meeting clients in the Penthouse Restaurant on the 33rd floor. I was there so often, I eventually came to represent the owner as well as the waiters and bartenders in various matters.

Lois Green, "Dressmaker to the Stars," claimed to be owed money for dresses she had made for Dinah Washington, several local jazz musicians and Johnny Mathis. She also claimed that Louis Armstrong was her "play daddy."

Eileen D. had been injured when her car was rear-ended at a stop light, and she was pushed forward into the steering wheel, causing bruises and contusions of the chest and arms. When she was examined by the insurance company doctor several months

later, he inquired, discreetly, whether she had any residual bruising. She said no, but she did have photos taken shortly after the accident, and produced several Polaroid shots of her bare chest, which clearly showed significant bruising. The adjuster called shortly after, and made an appointment to view the photos in my office. We negotiated a generous settlement. Several months later, Eileen called to refer to me a friend of hers, who she described as being "very smart," saying "she's the one who came up with the carbon paper bruises." I said that, under the circumstances, I thought her friend should find another lawyer.

Then there was Honia Alexander-Jacques, referred to me by Lois Green. A true mystery woman, "Mrs. Jacques," as she referred to herself in the third person with a disturbingly off-key French accent, comported herself like the proverbial kept woman of bodice-ripping romance novels. Her need for legal services was never quite clear; she apparently just enjoyed having a lawyer on retainer, who she could query about matters of little consequence, someone who she could simply call upon for advice about mundane matters like transferring an out-of-state driver's license, recording a lease, writing letters of complaint to her landlord and to various "tradespeople."

Mrs. Jacques' apparent opulence and "high society" ways did not endear her to the people with whom she came into contact. She was rumored to be an erstwhile exotic dancer, real name "Sonia," who was the "other woman" in some cross-cultural relationship with a wealthy New York blue-blood, the "husband" she referred to as "Monsieur Jacques." Although I represented her in a dozen or so minute matters over a period of years, I never found out anything more than she had been willing to disclose during her first appointment, when she showed up in my office with a mini-poodle dressed in a blanket-coat created by Lois Green - which matched her own purple fur - whom she addressed in fractured French as "Chien CoCo." And one day,



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she was just gone, leaving no forwarding address.

But, clients weren't the only "weirdos" at large. Some of the lawyers I met "weren't wrapped too tight," either, as we said back then.

Richard P., a young lawyer who rented an office in our suite, dressed like a dandy out of the 19th century, wore spectacles with bottle-thick blue lenses, and spent his days calling his father with names and addresses which he culled from news stories of accidents, information for his father to use to solicit clients.

Robert F., the attorney who rented Richard's office after we asked Richard to leave, did not stay too long either, as soon as we learned that he was seeing women at the office at night for the purpose of hypnotizing them for "therapeutic purposes." We did not wait for an explanation as to who was giving and who was receiving, or indeed, the exact nature of the therapy; and suggested to "Robert the Mesmerist" he ought to practice his art in some other precinct.

And, it wasn't only the clients and the lawyers who were guilty of strange behavior and/or involved in bizarre situations. The secretary of one of my associates has been married to a man who fire-bombed her home at a time when she and her children were asleep. Luckily, they got out safely, and he got 20 years. Her next husband dropped her off at work one morning, then held up the bank next door and ran into our building, where he changed clothes in one of the bathrooms on our floor, and then stopped by to chat with his wife while the police made a floor-by-floor search of the building. He was arrested when he tried to leave the building an hour or so later. I happened to be out of town that day, and missed all the fun.

Carol S., earlier secretary to another associate, tore out a half-dozen checks from the back of the checkbook, made them payable to herself, and forged a partner's signature. We didn't find out about the theft until after she had left our employ, and had already been arrested at some other job where she got caught doing the same thing.

There was little Kathy Alexander, a true child of the 1960s, who came to work dressed like Mickey Mouse in his costume as the "Sorcerer's Apprentice," a long, floor-length green dress, patterned with black stars, wearing a matching cone-like pointed cap. She lasted just long enough to save enough money to get her to San Francisco, where she wanted to join The Diggers, leaving behind a wafting of "weed."

"Tab Murphy" deserves a book of his own. He was a Center City fixture, never around if looked for, always turning up when he had a question, often at the most inconvenient moments. Tall, thin, with a scraggly, hermit-like beard, he was not only a "sight" but a "smell" as well. His clothes, though ragged, were always clean; but he never washed. He was, he said, "into" the smell of people, because that's how you could tell who they really were, by their natural smell.

Tab never had a legitimate job in the more than 40 years I knew him. Somehow, he managed to survive, although from time-to-time he would ask me to let him "hold" \$7 or \$6 (never \$10, never \$5; never \$6 or \$7, always "\$7 or \$6"), which he almost always repaid months later. Neither I, nor anyone else

who knew him - and it seemed that everyone I knew, knew him - really knew how he survived. At various times, he was rumored to be a police informant, a runner of errands for politicians, or the mob; and the eccentric scion of a wealthy blue-blood family. And, no one believed his name was really Tabias Murphy.

Because of our relationship, there came a time when Tab disclosed to me his real name and family history. His fore bears were in fact Irish; they were almost to a man involved in law enforcement, and their name, although not Murphy, was just as redolent of The Auld Sod. Tab's first name at birth had been Clement.

As for his own say in the matter, Tab always claimed to be on the verge of producing a concert. For years, it was to be Charlie Byrd, the great jazz guitarist. Later, it was local jazz artists like Byard Lancaster or Pat Martino. As far as I knew, they were all pipe dreams, their only purpose being to justify Tab's request for money supposedly to print circulars or tickets.

Tab's feats of legerdemain were legendary. One of the stories that circulated about him was that, he was asked to watch a dog owned by his friend, Center City Sonny - a character worth a book in his own right - sitting in Rittenhouse Square one day; and when Sonny was late in returning as promised, Tab took the dog home, dyed it black with liquid shoe polish and sold it for \$25. That little caper got Tab arrested; but we succeeded in retrieving the dog and returning it to Sonny, and the charges were dropped. Tab always insisted it had been a practical joke, and that he had never really sold the dog, only "stashed" it with a friend as security for a loan.

But, that wasn't all there was to him. Although he sounded illiterate, and started every sentence with the soon worn-out and annoying "Scuse me, may I say something?" he demonstrated another side to his persona, deeper and far more sensitive than one imagined possible. When Tab's wife Myra developed a brain tumor and required surgery, Tab shaved his head too, to keep her company. After Myra died, Tab "married" Debbie; with whom he had two sons, named Sean O'Casey Murphy and Thelonious Monk Murphy, in keeping with the name of his first son, Brendan Behan Murphy.

As I said earlier, about Tab I could write a book; the tales of his peccadillos are as legendary as they are esoteric. At some point, Tab dropped out of sight. At last sighting, some years ago - he must be in his mid-70s by now - he was supposedly pushing a rolling cart on the boardwalk in Atlantic City, trying to raise money to produce a jazz festival on the beach.

I keep remembering old faces and old cases, and the way it was. There are probably just as many more as I have mentioned here, lurking in the attic of memory, waiting to spring to mind when least expected. For the moment, they will continue to gather dust. ■

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He was, he said,
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