



Unlikely Friends

Friendship would appear highly unlikely between Trapper Nelson, a rebellious swamp trapper and Judge Curtis E. Chillingworth, a stern, disciplined, circuit court judge, but the connection was real.

One came to town (Jupiter) riding the rails as a hobo on a freight train with an eighth grade education; the other a graduate of Annapolis served thirty two years as Judge of the Circuit Court of the Fifteenth Judicial Circuit of the State of Florida.

The common denominator for the two diverse personalities was land speculation, hunting cabins on the "Wild and Scenic" Loxahatchee River and most of all the love of fishing.

Years later, Trapper Nelson and Judge Chillingworth would have one more factor in common -- they both died violently in unrelated cases.

Nelson, known for his obsession with real estate, often bid against Judge Chillingworth on land deals, but their love of fishing and hunting kept them friends.

That friendship ended on June 15, 1995, during the dark early morning hours when two men went into the Judge's oceanfront home in Manalapan. The men

bound the Judge and his wife, Marjorie, and repeatedly struck them as they were dragged to the killer's boat on the beach.

The two mean, Floyd "Lucky" Hotzapfel, a convicted felon, and George "Bobby" Lincoln, a bolita and moonshine operator, took the shivering couple far out into the gulf stream. The killers tied weights on Majorie Chillingworth and pushed her into the rough seas. The Judge, who was also bound and weighted with a boat anchor, jumped over board into the water and tried to swim towards his wife. As the Judge kept his head above water despite being bound and weighted down, one of the men smashed the Judge's head with the butt of a shotgun and watched as the Judge slowly sank beneath the waves.

The police had few leads and the case seemed to be at a standstill until an informant advised police that Hotzapfel had been bragging with drinking cronies that he had . . . "taken care of the Judge and his wife."

Using the informant, police set up a hotel room for a high stakes game. As the men began drinking, the conversation turned to the Chillingworth case with Hotzapfel describing the entire incident, including the Judge's last words to his wife . . . "remember, I love

you." and his wife's reply, . . ."I love you too." Hotzapfel said, "Ladies first," and pushed her in. The police, who were in the next room taping the conversation, shook their heads in disbelief.

The case was a sensation in 1960 when it was learned that Joseph Alexander Peel, Jr. once West Palm Beach's only municipal judge, was behind the murders. It appears that Peel had a high living life-style that was funded by moonshiners and bolita rackets in South Florida. When the police came to him for warrants, it was the Judge who tipped off those who paid him protection money.

It was, however, Peel's private practice of the law that was brought to Chillingworth's attention. During the trial in 1961 the court learned that Peel had appeared twice before Chillingworth; in 1953 and 1955 for gross mishandling two separate divorce cases. Word was out that Chillingworth concluded that Peel was a disgrace to the profession and was going to end his career.

During the trial it was revealed that Holzapfel and Lincoln were Peel's associates in other criminal enterprises. After the second chastisement and stinging words of condemnation received while standing in front of Judge Chillingworth, Peel met with his two partners and told them, "We'll have to get rid of the judge."

Peel was convicted and sentenced to life as an accessory, before the fact in April 1961. Paroled shortly before his death because of terminal ill health, he died in 1982, but not before finally confessing to the two murders.

Although Trapper Nelson's early years were wild ones, gaining notoriety as the Tarzan of the Loxahatchee River where he wrestled alligators and sometimes heiresses; he also had a serious side which included sharp business practices. He became engrossed in real estate and continued to buy land at every opportunity until he almost had 800 of valuable land including waterfront.

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Celebrities, the rich and the famous, including society heiresses, who visited the jungle hideaway prompted the notice that sex, intrigue and perhaps murders were involved in his death.

Friends noticed a dark side as Nelson began to become paranoid about his land, as he imagined people were trying to take his property away from him. Becoming more reclusive and suspicious, he put up gates and cut trees to block the south end of the Loxahatchee River



near his camp, to prevent people from getting into his living area. When two hunters did trespass, Trapper took their rifles, smashed them on a tree and told them that if they ever came back he would kill them.

Other antisocial incidents only increased a growing list of enemies who might have wanted to see Trapper's demise. Trapper seemed to get worse. He holded up like a hermit and the only way he would see anyone was after he received a letter asking for an appointment.

His health also became a problem as he became obsessed with sickness and complained about his stomach, saying that he thought it might be cancer. Friends tried to encourage him to go to a clinic, but he was afraid of doctors and refused.

In July 1968, an old friend wrote to Nelson and made an appointment to meet at the home of John DuBois. When Nelson failed to show, the friend left town, but John DuBois thought it was strange and called the post office and learned that he had not been picking up his mail. John DuBois became concerned and went to the camp to check on his old friend. Going around to the rear of Nelson's cabin, DuBois was shocked to see Nelson's decomposing body lying near his hammock with his shotgun nearby.

Investigation revealed that the body had been decomposing for several days and had a gun shot wounds in the upper chest and an exit wound in the back of the head. Rumors were circulating. Everyone had a theory as to what happened. Some thought it was murder due to his numerous enemies.

Others suggested the suicide theory, saying he was a sick man who thought that he had cancer. Apparently the coroner's jury agreed with the later and delivered a verdict of "suicide".

Martin County's Deputy Sheriff, Slater Grose, said in a news article, "Pretty clear cut case. He was a sick man and he knew it." One of Nelson's friends wondered, "He had a lot of enemies, a lot of people were jealous of him. I wouldn't rule out that somebody sneaked up on him."

Judge Chillingworth and Trapper Nelson both legends in their own time may also be remembered as good fishing buddies on the "wild and scenic" Loxahatchee River that they both loved so much.