BOOK REVIEW


William Cahill, a retired Florida Atlantic University professor, and Robert Jarvis, a Nova Southeastern University law professor and prolific author, have written the first history of one of the largest county sheriff’s offices in the country, the Sheriff of Broward County, Florida. This is an engaging and highly readable book.

Using largely newspaper sources, along with official correspondence of the Broward Sheriff’s Office, this much-needed and well-written study traces the history of the organization from the creation of Broward County out of parts of Dade and Palm Beach counties in 1915, to the downfall of Sheriff Ken Jenne beginning in 2004, after winning the Democratic nomination for re-election as Sheriff by an overwhelming margin.

Although the book’s title might seem jarring to some, it reflects the state’s history in reclaiming swampy lands during Governor Napoleon Bonaparte Broward’s administration beginning in 1905, as well as the decades of scandal and corruption in and out of the Sheriff’s office and throughout Broward County.

The authors’ method in describing the evolution and growth of the Sheriff’s office is chronological and biographical, leaving to others comparative and analytical studies. They set the stage by describing the frontier justice prior to the county’s creation. Before 1915, there were only three incorporated towns: Dania, Pompano and Fort Lauderdale. Broward County had no jail. A town marshal had to lock a prisoner to a railroad boxcar until a Miami lawman arrived to take the prisoner to the Dade County jail. In those early years, cattle wars, hangings, lynching and duels, along with tar-and-feather punishments in the Florida wilderness, were commonplace.

Beginning with the biography of Aden Waterman Turner, the authors tell the story of Broward County’s first sheriff (1915-22, 1929-33). Turner confronted bootleggers, destroyed stills and intercepted smugglers from the Bahamas. Soon, Turner operated the county’s first jail, executed arrest warrants and served subpoenas. In 1930, local newspapers circulated reports that Chicago gangster Al Capone had purchased 50 acres of desolate acreage in Deerfield Beach along the Intracoastal Waterway. The authors of this book state that Capone took an “option” to purchase the property. In truth, Capone’s Miami attorney Vincent Giblin bought the property and took title merely as “trustee” for an unidentified beneficiary or beneficiaries, refusing to name his client. Speculation has only multiplied the number of stories about the transaction. See, e.g., Warranty Deed executed by E. B. Davis, Inc., in favor of Vincent C. Giblin, Trustee, on June 7,
1930, and recorded in Deed Book 216, at page 519, of the Public Records of Broward County, Florida. This is a quibble, but a misunderstanding left uncorrected in the press over the past eight decades.


In a postscript, the authors describe the beginning of Jenne's downfall, starting with doubts over Jenne's use of "PowerFrac" in evaluating employees based upon crime clearance statistics. The story ends sadly with the jailing of the first sheriff ever to be convicted of a crime in Broward County and the appointment of career lawman Al Lamberti to fill the vacancy left by Jenne's resignation.

Of all the sheriff stories recounted, the most interesting is easily the story of Walter Clark, remembered kindly by some as a good and decent man but by most as a racist who oversaw a county besieged by organized crime, which openly operated gambling in nightclubs and on the county's streets. The notorious lynching of Rubin Stacey, a black man who allegedly assaulted a white woman on Davie Road, occurred during Clark's administration in 1935. The coroner's inquest found the sheriff's deputies blameless, attributing the hanging to "person or persons unknown (93)." Governor David Sholtz ordered prosecutors to undertake a full investigation, which led to a grand jury hearing. After two days of hearings, the grand jury largely supported the inquest's findings.

Florida governors suspended Clark twice for failing to perform his duties as sheriff. Governor Spessard Holland suspended Clark in 1942 for allowing open gambling and bookmaking. Eight years later, Governor Fuller Warren suspended Clark for, again, permitting widespread gambling. The suspension followed Clark's embarrassing performance before the Kefauver Committee investigating organized crime in Broward County. Missing from the bibliography are the records of the Kefauver Committee, which contain a verbatim transcript of Clark's testimony. The authors do not undertake a comparative study to determine whether Broward County's experience with Clark was unique or typical of its time. Although we know that investigations into alleged Communist activities took place in Dade County and in Tallahassee during the early 1950s, this study does not tell us whether such investigations took place in Broward County. Absent from the bibliography is Robert Lacey's well-documented, Little Man: Meyer Lansky and the Gangster Life (Little Brown, 1991). Lacey's book includes well-sourced material on organized crime in Broward County, including a note referencing an interview with Broward criminal defense attorney Joseph Varon, Lansky's Broward attorney.

Although the authors detail the work of several Broward prosecutors in enforcing the law, the authors inexplicably omit the story of Broward County's only assistant state attorney who took the casinos to court in 1948. Supported by ten prominent Broward County citizens, Fort Lauderdale prosecutor Dwight L. Rogers, Jr., secured an injunction shutting down the Colonial Inn and several other nightclubs where gambling openly took place.

The story of Nicholas G. Navarro also makes for interesting reading. A career lawman, Navarro fought his way to the top through the ballot box and the court system. Born in Cuba, Navarro moved to Pennsylvania in 1950 to live with family members. He joined the U.S. Army and fought in the Korean Conflict. He started his law enforcement career in Miami in 1959, as a police officer. Later, Navarro joined the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (precursor to the Drug Enforcement Agency). After Navarro returned to South Florida, Broward Sheriff Ed Stack hired Navarro to run the organized crime division. Elected as a "nonpolitical" Sheriff of Broward County in 1985, Navarro immediately made headlines by firing 30 of the agency's 600 deputies. Other headlines include confronting Judge William Hoever over federal caps on jail population, ignoring Broward Chief Judge Miette Burnstein's mandate that deputies provide better security at the County Courthouse, and his deputies appearing in action on the popular FOX television series COPS.

The book ends with a short chapter on the growth of the Broward County Jail from a few cells in the former Dade County School House at Fort Lauderdale to five separate jail campuses in Fort Lauderdale and Pompano Beach. To this reviewer, this chapter seems an afterthought. To some readers, this material may have been more easily integrated into the text chronologically as the narrative unfolds. There is a small factual error in the story of the Alderman hanging for murder on the high seas at the Coast Guard Base on Fort Lauderdale beach. The authors state that Alderman and his confederates were "placed on trial before Judge Halsted Ritter (329)." However, as a reading of the case cited by the authors at note 872 reflects, U.S. District Judge Henry D. Clayton of the Middle and Northern Districts of Alabama presided over the Alderman trial, not Ritter. Ritter decided Alderman's place of execution after his conviction. See, also, Longley, What Measure You Mete: The Life and Times of Judge Halsted Ritter (New York: Universe Press, 2003), pp. 49-51.

This is a highly readable first history of the Broward County Sheriff's Office. The bibliography is comprehensive, with only a few notable omissions. The notes, largely from newspaper sources and sheriff's correspondence files, document the material well and provide colorful stories for an engaging narrative. Missing from this study are oral history accounts of many of the sheriffs of Broward County. Many today remember Walter Clark and other more recent sheriffs discussed in this book. Absent also are references to clerk minutes of early Broward County court proceedings, including the minutes of grand jury proceedings, as early as 1915 on microfilm.

The illustrations, and there are many, help to tell the story. Some, like the photographs of tombstones, do not add much, if anything, to the narrative. The 1935 photograph of the public lynching of Ruben Stacey is, however, to paraphrase an old saying, a picture that shouts "a thousand words," a stark reminder of a day not so long ago when law and order dissolved into murder.

This is an excellent book well worth reading by anyone interested in the history of Broward County as well as the evolution of one of the largest sheriff's offices in the country. Those interested in criminal justice, in general, and Florida politics will find this work worthwhile as well.