WALTER REID CLARK

Broward County's Legendary Sheriff:

The Formative Years

by William H. Kramer

When one mentions the name of Walter Reid Clark to a long time Broward County resident, the frequently defensive response usually includes an admonition that Clark was a generous man who was always willing to help the needy. Unfortunately, most current residents have never heard of the former Broward County sheriff unless they have encountered his name in occasional contemporary newspaper accounts which usually dwell either on Clark's alleged complicity in gambling operations and his resulting testimony before the Kefauver committee on organized crime or on his association with the county's only lynching. In a county whose population has grown from less than 84,000 to well over 1,000,000 people since his removal from office in 1950, Clark is rarely remembered as Broward's longest-serving chief law enforcement official or as a dedicated public servant who brought economic benefits to a region sunk in the mire of the Great Depression.

During the four and one-half terms that he served in office, from 1933 to 1950, Walter R. Clark helped to shape the future of Broward County, but his formative period gave no indication of the prominence he would achieve in local, state, and even national politics while in office. Instead, his early life was marked by hardships and poverty.

Walter's parents, James W. and Annie Clark, nee Annie Miller, moved to the Fort Lauderdale area from Tampa in 1902. At that time Broward County had no corporate existence, forming part of huge Dade County which stretched from the southern tip of Biscayne Bay northward to the St. Lucie Inlet. Newlyweds seeking to make a living as farmers, the Clarks chose a homestead on New River about two miles west of the center of the nascent community of Fort Lauderdale. Once cleared of pines and palmettes, this location was ideal. Although no road reached the Clark property, New River served as a highway to transport goods to and from town. A small ferry made the rounds every few days; all one had to do to signal the captain to stop was to raise a flag on a pole.

James Clark built a small but sturdy cabin right at the edge of the river. An unusual, but practical, feature in the design of the home was a door that opened directly onto the water from the kitchen. The door had a threefold purpose. It served as a sort of dock, 1910. During these years, the parents narrowly escaped tragedy in the near death of their first-born son. One day young Walter, seeing the open door in the kitchen, crawled out the doorway and fell into the river. Fortunately, Annie was nearby and was able to pull the toddler out of the water before he drowned.

In an effort to supplement the meager income provided by their farm, James and Annie Clark tried their hands at a number of jobs in the tiny Fort Lauderdale settlement. Annie, an excellent cook, opened a small restaur-
Sheriff Clark's parents, James W. (left) and Annie Clark.

Brothers of Sheriff Walter Clark (left to right): Robert L. Clark, Howard Clark, and Frank Clark. Two of the three also served as law enforcement officers, Robert as chief deputy in the Broward County Sheriff's Department and Frank as a Florida Highway Patrolman.
allowing a person to board or disembark from boats directly to or from the house. It also provided a convenient means of disposing of garbage. Finally, it helped ventilate the kitchen, an especially important feature during the sweltering summer months. The Clarks lived in this home for twelve years, and it was here that the four Clark children began their existence as the sons of dirt poor parents.

Annie gave birth to her first son on December 11, 1904. If not, as was later claimed, the first white boy born in what later became Broward County, Walter Reid Clark was certainly among the first. Over the next six years, the Clarks had three more children, all boys. The second son, Robert Lee, was born on August 15, 1906, the third son, Howard James, on August 11, 1908, and the fourth and final boy, Frank, on September 4, 1910.

Walter R. Clark held the office of Sheriff of Broward County from 1933 to 1950, longer than any of the county's ten other sheriffs. During his seventeen years in office, he became one of Broward's most powerful politicians. In a county populated throughout its history chiefly by "newcomers," Clark owed much of his popularity to the fact that he was a genuine pioneer. Born in Fort Lauderdale in 1904, Clark was widely believed and frequently proclaimed to be the "first white male child born in Broward County." Actually, this claim appears to be somewhat of an exaggeration. Even discounting the possible births of white children in the settlements along the New River during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Beverly McQuarrie was known to have been born in Fort Lauderdale in 1902.

Nevertheless, Walter Clark knew at first hand the hardships and uncertainties of pioneer life in the years when Fort Lauderdale was little more than a frontier village. This article traces the events of Clark's life from his birth to his election as sheriff, and analyzes how his pioneer background influenced his subsequent career.

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Fort Lauderdale School class, 1910s. Walter Clark is in the back row at far right, with the initials "W.C." written above his head.

rant or cafe on the edge of New River at the foot of Brickell Avenue during the first decade of the twentieth century, but this establishment did not remain open long, closing sometime before 1910. In later years, the youngest son, Frank Clark, recalled that his father had served as one of the first law enforcement officers in the Broward County area, beginning a family tradition which would be followed by three of his four sons. James Clark also reportedly ran Fort Lauderdale's first moving picture show, probably Frank R. Oliver's Dade (later Lyric) Theater on Brickell Avenue, which opened in 1910. Apparently none of these enterprises proved tremendously successful, but they undoubtedly helped the family eke out a living when crops failed.

Despite the poverty which encompassed the Clark home, and the countless chores which required help from even the smallest family members, James and Annie believed in the importance of education, in a day when compulsory school attendance was non-existent. Consequently, when Walter became old enough, they sent him to the Fort Lauderdale School, a concrete block structure on South Andrews Avenue which had only recently replaced the one-room wooden building which had served as the settlement's first school. Walter's brother Bob also attended this school for his first few years of education. When not attending school and when their chores were finished, the boys spent their time hunting and fishing. They would continue to enjoy these pastimes throughout their lives, although Bob would concentrate more on hunting. The untamed land around their home provided many adventures, as well as lessons in self-reliance, for the Clark boys.

By early 1914, the family's fortunes had taken a turn for the worse. Despite long hours of backbreaking labor on his farm, and occasional outside jobs, James could not earn enough money to support a family of six. Friends and relatives suggested that he might have better luck in the Lake Okeechobee area, on land that had been partially drained through the recent opening of the North New River Canal, and was now open for settlement. After discussing the family's economic plight with Annie, James decided to move to the north end of the lake. He purchased a tract of land outside Okeechobee City and proceeded to construct a cabin there. The family packed their belongings and moved to their new home in late 1914. This new home did not provide a great deal of comfort. Its dirt floor was cold in the winter, wet during the rainy season, and dusty during dry spells. But the muck lands near Lake Okeechobee were rich and productive, and the family's fortunes quickly improved. James began to raise wild hogs along with his crops, and Annie grew her own vegetables in order to minimize living expenses. The family continued to maintain contact with Annie's brothers and sisters in Fort Lauderdale, a connection which would later prove beneficial.

For the next few years, the Clarks settled into a rather quiet routine,
Throughout his life, hunting and fishing were among Walter Clark’s favorite pastimes. These scenes are from the 1940s.

marked by the hard work and primitive surroundings of frontier life, but untroubled by the financial desperation which had characterized their last years in Fort Lauderdale. After helping establish the family farm, the two oldest boys started school once again, and younger brother Howard began to attend classes for the first time. During their free time, the father, Walter, and Bob often went hunting, although Howard preferred not to join them because he did not like to hunt. When not accompanying Bob, Walter often took his youngest brother, Frank, fishing. On September 29, 1917, when Walter was not quite thirteen, a life-changing tragedy brought this idyllic existence to a shattering end.

Early that Saturday morning, James Clark left the cabin to tend to his hogs and make the normal rounds of his farm. At the barn he saddled his horse, mounted, and rode into the brush. When he drew near the hogs he heard an awful commotion. One of his dogs had clamped down on a razorback, and, despite Clark’s commands, refused to let go. Infuriated that the dog would not obey, James dismounted and attempted to separate the two animals forcibly. With his attentions focused on the two enraged animals, he never noticed the rattle-snake lying nearby. As he stepped toward the battle before him, the snake struck, sinking its fangs into the calf of his leg.17

After the initial shock of being bitten had subsided, Clark had the presence of mind to put a tourniquet on his leg, climb back on his horse, and ride home. When he arrived, Annie sent one of the boys into town to get the doctor and bring him back to the farm. The boy soon returned, but without the doctor, who, for an undisclosed reason, would not make the trip to the farm. Instead, a concerned citizen sent a car to the Clark farm to take James to the nearest doctor, who lived forty miles away in Fort Pierce. James was lifted into the car and whisked to Fort Pierce at the greatest possible speed. Traveling over narrow, country roads, he arrived there early that Saturday afternoon, but too late for the doctor to help him.18 Friends in Fort Lauderdale learned of his demise through a short notice in the Fort Lauderdale Sentinel.19

Now, in addition to her grief, Annie Clark faced a serious economic problem. She was not able to run the farm by herself and did not have enough money to hire help. Walter was not old enough to take over the farm work either. Fortunately, Annie’s brothers and sisters in Fort Lauderdale urged her to return there, so that they could help. Sadly, she realized that she would have to sell her farm near Okeechobee, and, in late 1917, she moved her family back to Fort Lauderdale.20

Upon arrival, Annie and her four sons took up residence with her brother, Henry Miller, on his farm west of town.21 Within a short time, however, Annie used the money from the sale of her Okeechobee farm to buy a two-story house on the corner of what is today Southeast Second Street and Second Avenue.22 At this time, Walter chose to drop out of school, believing that it was more important to work to help his mother support the family than to continue in the seventh grade.23 Mrs. Clark reluctantly agreed, although she insisted that her other sons remain in school.

Despite Walter’s willingness to help, Mrs. Clark realized that a thirteen-year-old boy’s income would not be large enough to support the family. She began taking in boarders, and then conceived the idea of converting the first floor of her home into a diner. The house was in an ideal location, near the center of Fort Lauderdale, which had grown considerably since 1915, when it had become the county seat of newly-created Broward County.24 Mrs. Clark reasoned that she would be able to attract customers for breakfast as they passed her home while going to work, then serve them a lunch at noon, and then draw additional people from throughout town for a large dinner. With Walter’s help, she was able to complete the conversion of the first floor of the house into a dining room within a few months.25

Annie Clark’s dream of establishing a successful business and thus keeping her family together was realized. For the next twenty years, her diner remained a popular eating spot in Fort Lauderdale, catering primarily to the town’s working people. The price of a full breakfast was seventeen cents, and there were no complaints of skimping on the food.26 If the price alone did not attract a customer, the aroma of cooking food that wafted out of the kitchen window next to the main sidewalk did. Mrs. Clark also left a tray
of bacon by the window during breakfast hours as a final lure to those who walked by.\textsuperscript{27} Dinners were fifty cents, for all that one could eat. Many people from throughout Fort Lauderdale saved their money for weeks to enjoy one of these huge meals.\textsuperscript{28}

Walter Clark worked with his mother full time during the first years of the diner's existence. Most of this time he waited on customers while his mother cooked. His brothers also helped in the diner when they were home from school. During the years that he worked with his mother, Walter R. Clark began to develop a personal touch with the people. This particular skill would later aid him when he ran for office, and it became his trademark, once elected, to keep in close touch with the average citizen. Before long, the diner provided a comfortable living for the Clark family, and it soon became apparent that Walter would not have to work there full-time any longer. His mother agreed with him that he should now learn a trade.

By 1920, Walter was working for Bert Lasher, who ran a small meat store next to the A&P grocery on what is today Southwest Second Street in Fort Lauderdale. Lasher was a colorful character who had appeared in silent movies filmed in Fort Lauderdale in the late 1910s, and later went on to run several Seminole Indian tourist attractions. His store resembled a lean-to shack, supported on one side by the larger A&P building, rather than comprising an independent structure.\textsuperscript{29} Inside, the butcher shop was strictly a no-frills affair, dominated by large meat display coolers. Here, Walter Clark learned how to dress various types of meat, but, because of his outgoing personality, he spent more time conversing with people who came there to do business. Thus he began to build a following which would become invaluable once he entered public life. Women from all over town came to the store to buy their beef, pork, and chicken. They knew that Clark would steer them away from inferior quality meats and direct them to superior products, and they knew that he would always show them the best buys.\textsuperscript{30}

Undoubtedly, Clark had learned while working for his mother that people had long memories when they received poor food. Annie Clark also taught her son that a volume business was a successful business, a lesson that he learned well. In order to ensure that his customers returned again to do business, Clark developed the curious habit of placing his thumb underneath the scale's tray.\textsuperscript{31} His customers, both male and female, knew a good deal when they saw one. Word spread that Walter Clark at the butcher shop "would take care of you" when buying meat. Clark's employment at the store lasted until after the 1932 election, when he assumed the office of Sheriff of Broward County.

During the late 1920s, Clark became actively involved in the Croissant Park Christian Church. Besides regular attendance at the Sunday morning worship service, he also assumed a leadership position in the church when he began to teach young people in the Sunday school. Walter R. Clark was held in high esteem by members of the church. As his Sunday school superintendent stated, "If there was a Christian young man in town, it was Walter Clark. Walter was as strait-laced as anyone could possibly be [sic]."\textsuperscript{32} In early 1927, Clark married the former Avis Mae Mull, and on October 2 of the following year she gave birth to their only son, Curtis.\textsuperscript{33}

At this stage in his life, Walter R. Clark presented his Fort Lauderdale neighbors with a near perfect image as a Christian family man and as a church leader.

Clark's exemplary image, along with his friendliness with people both at work and on the street, caused numerous friends to urge him to run for sheriff in the 1932 election, despite the fact that he had no background in either politics or law enforcement. Late one afternoon early in 1932, while returning home from the butcher shop, Clark stopped G. Harold Martin on the street to ask for some advice on the matter. Martin, four years older than Clark, was a successful lawyer, knowledgeable in local politics, and was a fellow member of the Croissant Park Christian Church. "Harold," Clark began, "I need some advice. Some friends and a few politicians are urging me to run for sheriff. As you know, I don't know anything about that office, but they say I can run it. What do you think?" After a moment of consideration, Martin responded that he thought Clark could run the office, but he cautioned Clark to "get a good professional lawman to run your office for you, and get a good secretary who

The Clark home and Annie Clark's diner at Southeast 2nd Street and 2nd Avenue in downtown Fort Lauderdale.

G. Harold Martin, c.1930.
is honest to do the secretarial work. And get [the sheriff's office] out of the liquor business."[34] With these words of wisdom fresh in his mind, Walter R. Clark returned home. Later that month he filed as a candidate for sheriff and began to organize his election campaign.35

Broward County by 1932 was in the throes of the Great Depression which only intensified the economic stagnation begun by the collapse of the great economic and demographic boom of the mid-1920s. In 1920, the county had 5,135 residents, and by 1930 that population had nearly quadrupled, to 20,094.36 As the population grew, and the tourist trade, fueled by increased leisure time and availability of transportation on a national scale, flourished, land prices skyrocketed. Throughout Florida, but especially on the peninsula's southeastern "Gold Coast," feverish land speculation peaked during the summer of 1925. The collapse of this financial house of cards the following year and the onset of a nationwide depression three years after that brought population growth and land development to a virtual standstill, as property values plummeted. Broward County real estate tax assessments in 1931 amounted to $6,173,640, while in 1932 they dropped to $5,616,500.37 Many speculators simply walked away from their real estate investments rather than pay the property tax on their land. The Fort Lauderdale Daily News reported that nearly two-thirds of the county was to be put on the auction block on August 1, 1932, in a delinquent tax sale.38 This lack of revenue caused many county officials undeserved hardships, including non-payment of salaries and reductions in necessary services. One such service, the maintenance of prisoners in the county jail, nearly ended completely because of the lack of sufficient funds. Fortunately, county officials scraped together enough money to maintain the jail temporarily until more funds could be appropriated.39 However, the difficulties faced by county office holders did not prevent an avalanche of entries for office as the 1932 primary elections approached.

Eight men entered the race for sheriff on the first Democratic primary ballot of 1932.40 The acknowledged favorite was J. R. Barnes of Holly- wood, who had heavy political and financial backing from the powerful Rogers and Morris law firm.41 This firm had supported several other county officials in successful campaigns prior to 1932. Barnes already held the county communist vote from the Hollywood district, and the support of Rogers and Morris gave him the edge in the contest for sheriff.42 Barnes' chief opponent was incumbent Sheriff A. W. Turner, who had had the most experience in law enforcement of all the candidates. Turner had been Broward County's first sheriff, having been elected to that office in 1915, when the county was created. He had been removed from office by Governor Cary A. Hardee in 1922 for allegedly failing to enforce the gambling laws of the state, but was again elected to office in 1928.43 He was now fighting for his political life. Others in the multitude of sheriff candidates included William Budd, Brack Cantrell, Lucien Craig, W. M. Johnson, C. M. Moseley, and Walter R. Clark. Clark was a virtual political unknown, although he had received public recognition for being the "first white boy born in Broward County" during the 1931 River Revelry, a celebration of Fort Lauderdale's twentieth anniversary of incorporation.44 He used this recognition to his advantage during the campaign, by promoting himself as the "pioneer candidate" who would not make promises of any kind to anyone concerning distribution of deputies' jobs.45 On June 6, the decision was left to the voters. In a major upset, Clark received 861 votes to finish a surprising second to J. R. Barnes.46

In the second primary to decide the Democratic nomination for sheriff, Clark's campaign again pointed out his pioneer roots, but also placed new emphasis on his being an independent candidate "not controlled by any ring, faction, or clique," a not-so-subtle jab at Barnes, who was generally recognized as the candidate of the powerful Rogers and Morris faction.47 Barnes countered by stating that he was the more experienced man, and proclaiming that he had "no strings or promises tied to his going into office."48 On the twenty-eighth of June, the matter was again decided by the voters, and again Clark won in an enormous political upset. The backing of Barnes by Rogers and Morris had divided Broward's electorate, and Clark's victory strongly signalled their desire for a politically unencumbered sheriff. In the November general election, Clark won a decisive victory over the Republican candidate, Joseph P. Moe, by nearly 1,000 votes, and began a political career that would last until the end of the following decade.49

Walter R. Clark's humble origins gave no indication that he was destined to shape the political and economic future of Broward County. Clark endured personal tragedy and hardships during his youth, but these circumstances shaped his development as a young man. More significantly for the history of Broward County, they also shaped his performance as county sheriff for seventeen years, through the crucial periods of the Great Depression, World War II, and postwar growth.

Walter Clark with Margaret Oliver at the March 4, 1931 "River Revelry" celebration. Proclaimed the "first white children born in Broward County," they were honored as "king" and "queen" of the celebration.
WALTER R. CLARK
Candidate for Sheriff

Is not controlled by any ring, faction or clique. Nor is he connected with any other candidate. He has run a clean campaign. He has made no promises for the appointment of any one as deputy or to any other office. Your support so generously given on June 7th was appreciated and it is again asked when you go to the polls tomorrow.

I have spent my life here and know the needs and requirements of this county.

(Original Ad Paid for by Friends of Walter R. Clark)

Election advertisement from the June 27, 1932 Fort Lauderdale Daily News.

Footnotes


4. Personal interview with Dr. Cooper Kirk, Broward County Historian, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, March 10, 1989.


6. Personal interview with Dessa Clark, wife of Frank Clark, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, April 14, 1989.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.; During his lifetime and afterwards Clark was widely acclaimed as having been the "first white male child" born in what was to become Broward County. This statement was almost certainly in error. A more likely claim for the honor, excluding any children born in the region before permanent settlement began in the 1860's, is that of Beverly McQuarrie, born in Fort Lauderdale in May 1902.


11. Ibid, 29; Photograph of Walter Clark at the Fort Lauderdale School, 1930s, Clark Collection, Broward County Historical Commission Archives.

12. Clark Interview.

13. Smith Interview.


15. Smith Interview.

16. Ibid.

17. Clark Interview.

18. Ibid.


21. Frank Clark Pioneer Biographical Form, Broward County Historical Commission Archives.

22. Photograph of Annie Clark house and diner, date unknown, Clark Collection, Broward County Historical Commission Archives.


27. Kirk Interview.

28. Clark Interview.

29. Kirk Interview; Stuart R. McVey, Fort Lauderdale and Broward County, An Illustrated History (Woodland Hills, Calif.: Windsor Publications, 1983), 70, 73, 80-81.

30. Martin Interview.

31. Ibid.

32. Martin Interview.

33. Clark Interview.

34. Martin Interview.

35. Personal interview with Donald G. Lester, longtime Fort Lauderdale resident and political historian, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, April 18, 1989.


41. Lester Interview.

42. J. R. Barnes Political Advertisement, Fort Lauderdale Daily News, June 27, 1932.

43. Lester Interview.

44. Photograph of Walter R. Clark in uniform of a "king," honoring him as the "first white boy born in Broward County," Clark Collection, Broward County Historical Commission Archives.


