

## Miami-Dade court celebrates 100 years of justice

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On June 26, 1911, Miami-Dade Circuit Judge L.W. Bethel ordered W.W. Prout to pay a \$2,479.50 debt to Merle & Heany Manufacturing Co.

If not, Prout's property would be auctioned on the courthouse steps: three Walhalla-brand billiard tables, 12 pool tables, one tobacco case and one cigar case.

That seemingly mundane legal action became the first logged into records of the 11th Judicial Circuit, at the start of what would become a sprawling court system. Over the past century, its judges have meted out justice for everyone from aggrieved citizens and divorcing couples to crooks and killers of every sort.

The circuit -- which grew from two judges in 1911 to 123 in 10 courthouses today -- will kick off a yearlong series of events on Monday, culminating in next year's centennial celebration. A centennial banner already hangs from the historic downtown courthouse, 73 W. Flagler St.

The celebration will cast a spotlight on the circuit's rich history -- from divorces of celebrities such as boxer Muhammad Ali and baseball great Ted Williams, to the landmark tobacco trial of the 1990s, to the trial of a man who tried to assassinate President Franklin D. Roosevelt at Bayfront Park.

More recently, jurors in Miami-Dade courtrooms have convicted notorious murderers like serial killer Ted Bundy, Coconut Grove "Black Widow" Joyce Cohen, Citrus County child predator John Couey, and Ana Maria Cardona, who killed her son Lazaro "Baby Lollipops" Figueroa.

"Miami, for some reason, seems to generate so many great stories, and the courthouse is no exception," said Circuit Judge Scott Silverman, the court system's historian. "We hear some of the saddest things, and some of the funniest things, every day. We are the stage, at times, for the human experience."

### ARTWORK UNVEILED

At Monday's kickoff, artist Romero Britto, at the Woman's Club of Coconut Grove, will unveil four art pieces commissioned for the centennial, painted with help from 24 local high school students.

Over the next year, events will include a reenactment of Al Capone's 1930 perjury trial here, a 5K run past key Miami landmarks, and symposiums that will examine how diversity, civil rights and media coverage in the circuit has evolved over the years.

The circuit's history will be taught in Miami-Dade schools in October, and the committee will sponsor essay, poster and speech contests.

"This celebration of 100 years is not just a celebration for judges and attorneys," said County Court Judge Beth Bloom. "It's a celebration for the community."

Monday's event will also honor the "Committee 100," a group of 100 Miami attorneys who have donated money to support the yearlong celebration. They'll also be honoring the countless clerks,

staffers, lawyers, bailiffs and judges who toil daily with little fanfare.

At the turn of the century, Dade County stretched from the Florida Keys to Palm Beach County and was so sparsely populated that judicial hearings were often canceled if a judge couldn't make it.

"You would have a judge literally on a horse and buggy who would come down from Central or North Florida to hear cases," said attorney Joseph Serota, the committee's chairman.

In 1911, Florida's legislature created the 11th Circuit, and appointed Key West's Bethel as the first chief judge. His only cohort was County Judge Redmond Gautier.

While the early cases were mundane -- the first divorce was recorded as between Elizabeth and Henry Dean, also on July 5, 1911 -- the sensational arrived quickly when the corpse of 15-year-old Hettie Parcell was pulled from the Miami River.

On Sept. 11, 1911, a 12-person jury -- "one of the most intelligent and conscientious bodies of men ever occupying the jury box in Dade County" -- found a man named P.C. Cox guilty of participating in her murder, according to a Miami Metropolis newspaper account.

The all-male jury, mostly farmers, also included a trucker, painter, barber and a boat builder.

## **1925 COURTHOUSE**

The high-profile trials continued as a new courthouse, finished in 1925, was built around an original, two-story pillared courthouse that featured a monument to the Confederacy.

The centennial celebration will pay homage to many of the early cases that drew world headlines.

They made famous names like Capt. William Lancaster, a British aviator acquitted of murdering a romantic rival in 1932; and Giuseppe Zangara, who tried to assassinate Roosevelt at Bayfront Park and fatally shot the mayor of Chicago. He was sentenced to die.

And, of course, Al "Scarface" Capone, who lived off-and-on in Dade County and beat a perjury rap in a 1930 trial at the historic courthouse.

## **RECREATION**

Capone's trial will be recreated Sept. 28 by lawyers dressed in 1930s garb in the historic, refurbished Courtroom 6-1. The linchpin: a recently discovered transcript of Capone's testimony, a rare surviving document of the famed gangster's own words.

"We make so many movies off real events, and we take such liberties and license with them," said Miami historian Paul George, who is writing a book on the 11th Circuit's history.

"Here, we have a reenactment based on real testimony. It's great."