

May 20, 1947: County officials nearly duke it out over door

CLEARWATER - County Commissioner Ed Beckett challenged Tax Collector Jay B. Starkey to fistic duel; hot words flew like machine gun bullets. All because the tax collector wanted a door cut in the wall of his tag office at the courthouse without first getting permission of Pinellas County fathers.

The set-to was almost without parallel in County Commission history and only the energetic gavel-wielding of Chairman John Chesnut averted what was shaping up as a test at arms in the courthouse corridor.

Collector Starkey touched off the fireworks by appearing before the commission immediately after it convened to complain officially regarding Commissioner Beckett's interference in the door cutting.

The tax collector explained that he had asked the contractor now engaged in remodeling the north wing of the courthouse to cut an extra door in the tag bureau suite, never dreaming that he needed the okay of the County Commission.

"It seems Commissioner Beckett took it upon himself to stop the work," Starkey said.

"That's wrong," interposed Chairman Chesnut, "I stopped it."

"Well, don't you ever come in my office and tell me what to do," Starkey replied, turning directly to Beckett. "I still think Ed Beckett was responsible for stopping the work."

Beckett, his face flushed and half rising in his chair, shouted, "You go ahead and run your tag office and I'll run my job."

"Well, I'm telling you," Starkey shot back, "You had better stay out of my office. Don't ever come in there anymore, and don't ever tell me or my employees what to do, and what not to do."

"Let's take this thing outside," countered the county commissioner from Tarpon Springs.

It was a tense situation and Beckett's temper was hitting the stratosphere because Starkey not only ignored the challenge to fisticuffs, but laughed at the challenger.

At this point, the three St. Petersburg commissioners - Orville Harris, W.H. Belcher and Andrew S. Potter - came to the rescue of the tax collector. Harris said he saw no reason to deny any county official the right to make any alterations he wished in his office facilities.

"But this building is in charge of the Board of County Commissioners," Beckett declared. "No permission was ever granted Starkey to go around cutting doors."

Commissioner Harris then moved that the board formally and officially grant the tax collector permission to cut the door and Beckett demanded an unprecedented roll-call vote on it.

Circuit Clerk Ray E. Green called the roll slowly and deliberately. Voting for permission to cut the door were Commissioners Chesnut, Belcher, Harris, Potter; against, Beckett.

Whereupon Starkey, smiling broadly, thanked the board and returned to his office on the first floor.

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