

by FRANK TRIPPETT

On June 12, exactly three months before enrolled Democrats renominated him for possible election to his eighth four-year term as sheriff, a grand jury indicted Willis McCall for second-degree murder. On the same day Governor Reubin Askew suspended him from office, and field agents of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement arrested the sheriff in his headquarters on the first floor of his jail behind the courthouse in the leafy town of Tavares (pop. 3,261), the seat of Lake County. They took him briefly into custody and filled out a standard 8½x8½ criminal identification card on him.

On his card, they naturally didn't get into matters of his style, how he loves to wear cowboy costumes with high-heel boots on his size-12 feet, and a big Stetson or rancher's hat crowning the round jowly face whose puckery mouth is often busy sucking on a long dark cigar. Or how he often affects a disarming,

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**Willis McCall's brutal reign
of 'law and order'
has lasted 28 years**

High and Mighty Sheriff



aw-shucks way that even a foe has sworn "can charm a snake." They just put down his height at 6'1", his weight at 225, his hair as gray and his eyes as brown. They rolled fingerprints that more than fill up the 10½-inch-wide spaces provided and thus graphically portray the reality of his enormous hands. Under OCCUPATION they put down "Sheriff"—which many of Lake County's 69,305 inhabitants might well have grown up supposing was merely his permanent first name.

Then they came to a space on the card set aside for whatever lore might fall within the embrace of the legend: METHOD OF OPERATION, ACCOMPLICES, OTHER REMARKS. They left this blank. The omission is not odd but inevitable. Because no person holding any appreciable amount of information about this 63-year-old lawman from Lake County could possibly feel anything but despair in the face of a demand that the sheriff's "method of operation" be reduced into a 3½x4-inch rectangle.

That space would not be enough in which even to tell the little homey things about him—for instance, how he once smashed his fist into the head of a palomino horse that had just thrown him in front of guffawing spectators at a big parade in Eustis. How he then turned to a deputy and (never mind the fractured hand that wound up in a plaster cast) said, "I bet that horse won't do that again!"

Nobody bucks Willis McCall with impunity. The man whom blacks quaintly call the High Sheriff of Lake County admitted he took it as "a challenge" last April 13 when he asked the black prisoner in his jail to hand out his paper plate and was told: "Come in and get it yourself!" Instantly he ordered his turnkey to open the door.

And so in the year 1972, with the whole nation wrestling over the question of the rights of suspects and prisoners, Willis V. McCall stood facing Tommy J. Vickers, 38, a broad-faced sometime truck driver with a certified mental disorder that had been noted by the deputy who had hauled him up from Miami the previous day to answer an auto inspection sticker violation. Now, the sheriff looked at Vickers and at the cell's only piece of furniture and said, "Go over there and sit down on the bench." McCall heard Vickers say, "You come in here and make me." The sheriff turned to three prisoner-trusties who were at hand and ordered them to "get ahold of him and set him down." It is undisputed that Vickers resisted and that he and the trusties plunged to the floor. It is a fact that seven days later Vickers was moved from jail to a hospital where he died of "acute peritonitis resulting from a blunt injury to the abdomen." A Lake County coroner's inquest kissed off Vicker's death

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Frank Trippett, a free-lance writer and native southerner, for seven years covered politics for the St. Petersburg Times. He's followed Sheriff McCall's career since 1954.



"The Commies have had a price on my head for 20 years," says McCall. As proof he shows a photographer one of the scrapbooks he has been filling with newspaper stories and hate mail for many years. Here, on the back porch of his ranch house, he points to what he calls "documentary proof" that he's been hounded by liberals too.



lower the flag because he said it would flap against the courthouse and get frayed and cost money. Or how he commonly keeps close by him an attack dog that grows snarly even if a visitor's hand disappears to fetch a cigarette. The sheriff's story neither began with his murder charge nor ended with his acquittal. These developments did not astonish those familiar with the epoch of Willis McCall.

Over the years McCall has been accused not only of cold-bloodedly shooting down prisoners but, in his words, of "everything except taking a bath." Were he charged with *that*, if his past is a guide, he would deny it, claim the charge was cooked up by the NAACP, the Communists and other enemies, then turn up with half a dozen witnesses to establish that, yes, he had been in the tub—but only got there in self-defense and never turned on the water. Then, case dismissed, he would lunge toward his next reelection.

McCall's racism is blatant. He is not typical of his native Florida, which as a state emerged from the segregationist spasms of the mid-1930s to move maybe faster than the nation toward a more just inclusion of blacks into the social mainstream. His attitude is not even typical of his own Lake County, which has accomplished the integration of both schools and recreation areas without a major convulsion. But on this shifting stage McCall has been a constant figure—executing brazen and rambunctious combat against the change transpiring all about him.

McCall sees himself above all as a "law and order" man, a phrase he turns into a single word. In one sentence he gives the sum of what he says is his philosophy: "I respect lawandorder and I believe in lawandorder." If McCall is a law and order

man, though, it is mostly in this sense: he epitomizes the nightmare that law and order can become. In a nation often obsessed less with justice than order, the story of Willis McCall may be instructive. For here is a lawman who has been left utterly free by his fellow citizens to impose on a little society his own notion of order, without the constraints of either civility or constitutional niceties.

Since taking office in 1943 McCall has ruled over Lake County as though he held a title to all of its 1,151 square miles of rolling, lake-strewn terrain, endless ordered orange groves and moss-draped live oaks and little plank churches and barnlike juke joints and, here and there, busy citrus products factories. Here in Lake County live 57,000 whites, 12,000 blacks and a handful of Indians and others of dark complexion; 40 or so percent of the county's population subsists at the poverty level or below.

In 1909, in the hamlet where he still lives, McCall was born into poverty and a scratch-hard childhood he left behind at 21 when he married a local girl and started a dairy venture. Abandoning that in 1935, he became a fruit inspector—a job that for nine years let him know and befriend the big citrus men who ran the county. These same powers backed him in 1944 when he jumped into the race for sheriff, mainly, a friendly reporter writes, "because he thought he would like to be sheriff." McCall's wish was fulfilled amidst never-proved rumors that he had ties to local gambling interests. Early in his first term he won a reputation as a heavy-handed lawman sympathetic to the citrus industry's need for cheap labor. Half a

dozen black workers accused the sheriff of beating or jailing or fining them if they failed to show up for work at certain citrus companies. The only thing that came of this was that his constituents handed him the second term, during which—on Nov. 6, 1951—he ceased to be merely another county sheriff.

On that day, tall, burly Willis McCall suddenly became *somebody*. He shot down two prisoners in an episode that exploded into the world press and made him better known than anybody in the county and most big shots in the state. McCall's fame came at the expense of two young blacks, Samuel Shepherd and Walter Lee Irvin, who had been sentenced to die for their alleged roles in a notorious 1949 rape case. The U.S. Supreme Court had overturned their convictions and ordered new trials, and on the morning of Nov. 6, 1951 McCall picked them up at the state prison in Raiford and, with the two manacled in the back seat, drove off toward a hearing that they never reached, for sharply contradicted reasons. McCall first reported on his radio he had killed them both and later testified he had stopped to get out and check suspected tire trouble when the prisoners rushed him and tried to escape, so he squatted by his car and shot them. Each had bullets in the chest, neck and head. Miraculously, Irvin survived—and swore that McCall ordered them out of the car and without provocation tried to execute them both. A coroner's jury cleared McCall, and later, after

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Allen and Laura Platt are of Croatian Indian descent. In 1954 McCall said they were Negroes and forced their five children out of a local all-white public school.





Jesse Daniels, back with his mother, was confined 14 years after McCall railroaded him on a rape he didn't commit.

No county official ever bucks McCall

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the Justice Department charged civil rights violations, so did a federal grand jury. Exonerated, however, failed to silence certain tantalizing questions—how, for instance, if McCall squatted by his car and shot his way out from under two assailants, had a bullet lodged in the sand beneath Irvin's body where the FBI found it?

The episode became a lurid new chapter in an alleged rape in which another defendant had already claimed he had confessed only because, the *St. Petersburg Times* reported, "McCall took him in his office alone and, with a gun, forced him to make the statement." A fourth suspect had been shot dead by a sheriff's posse ten days after the rape was reported. And the report itself had touched off rioting and house-burning terrorism. The na-

tional press came to call the whole affair "the Little Scottsboro Case," and in 1951, with the killing of Shepherd and the wounding of Irvin, it fell under a high-noon glare of publicity as never before.

Afterward, Willis McCall bestrode his landscape as a local celebrity and began to act as though he were larger not only than life but law. In 1954, the year of the Supreme Court's landmark desegregation decision, McCall burst into national headlines again by barging into the home of farm workers Allen and Laura Platt and ordering them to get their five children out of the white public school in Mt. Dora. The Platts were Croatian Indians, but McCall said he knew better, and with a school principal in tow the sheriff announced his proof that they had Negro blood. He pointed to the 13-year-old Platt girl and said: "I don't like the shape of that one's nose." So out went the Platt children, and the family moved through a year of hellish harassment before a court upheld the right of the children to go to school in a community where they could no longer bear to be. Across the board, no school or political official in the county challenged Willis McCall. For keeping the spotlight on him during the Platt affair in her weekly *Mt. Dora Topic*, editor Mable Norris Reese Chesley earned not only national recognition but a burning cross in her yard, the poisoning of her dog and the visit of an unidentified man who warned her landlady that if the McCall critic were not evicted, "the house might burn down."

McCall survived denunciations then as he did those which arose later, when he allowed the widespread circulation of lurid photos taken as evidence against a black airman and a white woman who were "caught" nude in bed in McCall's

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own fishing cabin (an episode that an ex-deputy says McCall himself set up). And he survived the disclosure by the FBI that the plaster footprints which sent two young blacks to Death Row on a 1960 rape charge had been falsified by two McCall deputies.

One of his most intriguing cases began back in 1957, but it is still alive today. A well-to-do socially solid matron reported that she had been raped by a black man in her home while her politically well-known husband was out of town. McCall jailed no fewer than 23 black suspects and questioned as many as 30 in the next few days. Then McCall surprised almost everyone by announcing the confession of a white youth, Jesse Daniels, 18, whom he had arrested and held incommunicado, not even permitting his parents to see him. Before this, Daniels had been known only as a harmless kid who rode around town on a bike, who had taken 11 years to get to the fifth grade, who still slept with a teddy bear in a bed in his parents' room.

Once charged, Daniels was dispatched to the state mental hospital in Chattahoochee after an extraordinarily odd commitment proceeding. The judge had a commitment order already written before Daniels was brought before him for a "hearing;" and the judge had personally selected a retired state attorney as defense lawyer. The defense consisted of instantly acceding to the prefabricated commitment order and adding: "I see no reason to call in the doctors." Thus Jesse Daniels was locked away in a Chattahoochee ward after having met with his parents for only a five-minute visit, during which McCall made certain the case was not discussed. The sheriff had physically jerked Mrs. Daniels away from the cell as her son said: "Mama, I'm not guilty."

Jesse Daniels remained locked in Chattahoochee for 14 years—while his father died and his mother, a hotel maid of meager means, waged a ceaseless and heartbreaking effort to get him out. She finally succeeded last year with the help of a Daytona Beach lawyer, Richard Graham.

But this amazing case raised even more astonishment this year after Jesse Daniels was brought into a confrontation with the notary public, Mrs. Margaret Hickman, who had certified his confession. When the now 33-year-old man walked into a room in Orlando where a legislative committee was studying the case, Mrs. Hickman took one look at the shy, slender man and gasped: "Is *this* the real Jesse Daniels?" Assured it was, Mrs. Hickman cried out: "But it was a Negro whose confession I took, and I watched him sign it!"

To those who followed the case over the years it seems perfectly clear that Daniels was railroaded to confinement on a charge of which his own parents might have swiftly cleared him at the trial that was never held—since they knew he had never left his bed the night the rape occurred. But why, in the world of Willis McCall, would this have been done to a *white* youth? Could it have been—as some knowledgeable onlookers speculate—that some party or parties simply decided that it would be *nicer* for the society matron to have been raped by a white man than by a black?

Thus carrying a personal history that might have been an unbearable political weight to any other man, McCall barged into his campaign for reelection this year amidst the general expectation that once again he would emerge as the high and mighty lawman of Lake County. The climate of fear that he had engendered remained. It was one in which his foes believed their phones were tapped, and even incidental critics told of being spooked and tailed by deputies. If there was any substantial anti-McCall sentiment burgeoning, the typical citizen studiously avoided venting it in public. So observers had no reason to doubt that most people in the county would—in another uncritical tribute to the man's legend and the phrase "law and order"—once again vote for McCall. Nor did anyone doubt the accuracy of McCall's own assessment of his traditional support, which still, as always, included the cream of the county's business establishment and some huge portion of former migrants from the North who had settled in mobile homes and little cottages. "People," McCall said of all his diverse supporters, "have confidence in me. They know where I stand."

There were, to be sure, a few vigorous critics. One of the most aggressive was a pilot-rancher and former deputy, Noel E. Griffin Jr., a stocky, energetic man who kept a .38 Smith & Wesson holstered to the steering column of his car. Griffin, with another ex-deputy, had brought to light the scandal of the falsified footprint evidence. And he had testified that McCall fired him in 1961 soon after he told of having evidence that a fellow deputy was taking payoffs from a moonshiner. This year Griffin campaigned indefatigably against McCall—but not even he indulged in any optimism that his former boss could be brought down.

The direction of things to come seemed indicated by the very way McCall remained so close to his old seat of power even after his suspension. Since June 12 he had continued to drop by the sheriff's office in Tavares several times a day. In fact, a rural mail carrier, Jim Conners, said he once visited the office and asked for "the sheriff," expecting to see interim sheriff Frank Meech, but had been directed by the chief deputy to the office where Willis McCall was sitting. "I meant Mr. Meech," Conners said. "Well," said the deputy, jerking his head toward the inner sanctum, "he's the sheriff, and don't you forget it."

Most people seemed not to. So much so that it appeared McCall's Republican opponent, Guy Bliss, would never get his cam-

paign off the ground, despite his qualifications. Bliss had completed a career as a policeman in Detroit before moving to Mt. Dora, where he had served as mayor and municipal judge. But Bliss couldn't get anybody to back him openly. Even those who would promise their votes were afraid to put bumper stickers on their cars or allow his campaign signs and literature on their premises.

Yet signs urging voters to "KEEP MCCALLSHERIFF" were as prolific as weeds. The big brawny lawman himself was everywhere, shaking hands, smiling, waving and turning on that snake-charmer manner of his. One visitor to his ranch said McCall displayed a scrapbook of his murder trial clippings "as proudly as a wedding day book." McCall in fact had never seemed more buoyant. In one of his baggy brown silk suits and street shoes, he turned up with a gaggle of other local candidates for an open-air rally at Lake Sumter Community College near Leesburg, and to a mixed crowd of 300 students vowed he

felt "happy even in this hostile group of hippies." Then, shrugging off minor heckling, he unwound his usual spiel on "lawandorder" and smilingly issued a "confident" prediction that he would "be sheriff for four more years."

Nobody seriously doubted that he was right—until election night last week. The first returns showing Bliss leading McCall were met with astonishment and disbelief. As the trend continued, McCall backers kept muttering, "It's not over yet." But it was. Lake County voters decided—13,877 to 11,895—that after 28 years they had finally had enough of McCall's brand of "lawandorder." Observers attributed the upset to new young voters, recently arrived residents and a heavy black vote. Sheriff-elect Bliss said, "The intimidation, the fear, the overpowering egotistical kind of operation—people were just fed up with it."

Willis McCall finally sank under the weight of his own history, the legend that was inevitably resurrected with his indictment, trial and suspension. But he himself added nothing to the postmortems. Early last Tuesday evening, McCall had come smiling and reaching for hands at an election night party in Leesburg. As the verdict began to grow clear, he abruptly departed—with his three sons massed about him almost like bodyguards—leaving without a goodbye or a thank you, high and mighty no more. ■

Campaigning casually, McCall stopped to chat with a voter after lunching with his wife, Doris, at a Eustis drugstore

