

80 This story relates how I got my job as a magistrate, and a very cynical view of politics and the
81 law.

82 JURISPRUDENCE

83 It was a fluke that I got the job at all. A *special master* was to adjudicate disputes
84 between the taxpayers and the County Property Appraiser. The job was restricted to certified
85 members of a recognized *real estate* appraisal organization. Most property taxes were levied on
86 real estate. *Personal property* was not considered in the law that determined how special masters
87 were selected, despite representing the source of about a quarter of the County's revenue.

88 I had just joined and been certified by the American Society of Appraisers in 1978. It was
89 formed as a multi-disciplinary society with personal property designations as well as real estate.
90 I was the only member in the Miami chapter with a *residential contents* certification. The others,
91 with one exception, were real estate. The exception was machinery and equipment. The ASA
92 competed with the more prestigious American Institute of Real Estate Appraisers that only
93 served the real estate profession. My hope was that I would get referrals from the real estate
94 appraisers, and that some letters after my name would make my business card look better.

95 Mel was an ASA real estate appraiser who also served as a special master. I had known
96 him from my freshman year at Florida. He was no brain trust and didn't last long at Florida in
97 the days when enrollment was limited by the State Legislature to 5,000 students, and some 2,000
98 new freshman would enter each year. His mother was politically active and was on the Miami
99 City Commission. Her connections virtually guaranteed him an appointment. That was a good
100 thing for him. Most the other masters had an appraisal practice as well. Being a master was
101 pretty much Mel's only gig. He was having a dispute with another real estate appraiser who also
102 served as a master, and concocted a plan to get even. Alan was the sole master at the time

103 hearing personal property cases. His only certification was in real estate, and Mel was hoping to
104 have me bump him out of his job.

105 * * *

106 The ASA would meet for lunch at a good restaurant once a month. It was about the only
107 time I would put on a coat and tie since returning to Miami. All the programs and issues
108 discussed were about real estate. They weren't interested in bric-a-brac, and I wasn't interested
109 in easements, capitalization rates or mortgages. Mel had showed up at that luncheon and made a
110 point of sitting next to me. I was happy to have someone to talk to, although he would not have
111 been my first choice.

112 "How ya doing? Where ya been? Heard you were working as an engineer."

113 "I was working mostly in California and came back a couple of years ago to try the
114 antiques business." Handing him a card. "I am doing appraisals as part of that."

115 "Why don't you become a special master?"

116 "I don't think I am qualified. All the masters are real estate appraisers, and I don't know
117 much about appraising machinery and equipment."

118 "Alan is hearing personal property cases. That sonofabitch is no more qualified than you.
119 The Property Appraisal Adjustment Board meets next week to appoint the masters. Put in an
120 application right away."

121 * * *

122 By coincidence, my brother-in-law's law partner was the attorney for the PAAB. I called
123 to ask him what he thought of my chances.

124 "Slim to none. You don't know anyone, they are happy with who they have, and the law

125 calls for a *real estate* appraiser. Don't waste your time."

126 I put in my application anyway. My brother-in-law was no fan of mine, and I didn't
127 entirely trust his partner.

128 * * *

129 The PAAB was formed from members of the City Commission and would meet to
130 appoint the special masters who would hear taxpayer's appeals. In those days being a special
131 master was a good deal. It paid eighty dollars per hour and you got paid for eight hours a day
132 when you worked. They would schedule about sixty cases a day in two sessions, often they were
133 multiples of the same things like Burger Kings or supermarkets; some were settled or the
134 taxpayer simply didn't show up. On a good day you might spend only a couple of hours actually
135 hearing cases. On a really good day you were free to hangout around the county administration
136 building or explore downtown Miami. It all paid the same.

137 The PAAB appointment meeting agenda included house cleaning items, followed by the
138 applicants who were given three minutes each to make their pitch. The Board would then vote
139 for its selection. In the housekeeping portion of the meeting the chairman talked about the
140 difficulty of getting personal property masters.

141 "Getting a personal property appraiser is like finding a maid who does windows. They
142 are out there, but try to find one."

143 It sounded to me like the fix was in. When I was called to the podium I took the ball and
144 ran. "I do windows. Only windows," and then went on to briefly describe my qualifications. It
145 was a shoe-in.

146 * * *

147 The only preparation for the job was a half day orientation meeting, a haircut, and freshly
148 shined shoes. My wife, Jill, was to pick up her father at the airport that day. He was going to
149 stay with us while recuperating from cancer surgery that included the removal of one of his
150 lungs.

151 The PAAB administrator — concerned about how I was going to do — had scheduled
152 small mom-and-pop businesses, thirty in the morning and another thirty in the afternoon. It
153 seemed like they all showed up, and I was running behind schedule. After hearing a few it was
154 clear, that before they all blurred together, decisions had to be made on the spot . If I told a
155 taxpayer my decision — and it didn't go their way — sometimes you couldn't get rid of the
156 them, so I would lie. "I will review the facts of the case and you will get my decision in the
157 mail." Waiting for the transcripts to review each case would double the time it took to make a
158 decision, and by then the testimony would be stale.

159 Just as my morning was coming to a theatrical crescendo of flying paper and wailing
160 taxpayers one of the PAAB clerks came into the hearing room, and whispered into my ear.

161 "Your wife is on the phone upstairs."

162 "Tell her I will call when I get a break."

163 "She said its an emergency."

164 I excused myself and ran upstairs. Jill was sobbing on the phone. "I am at Jackson
165 hospital with my Dad."

166 "How is he?"

167 "He's okay. I broke my wrist."

168 "The doc is coming. . . . sob. . . We need a lawyer. . . . sob . . . I will call back as soon as I

169 can.” Click.

170 I am now having to go back to hearings and wait for the other shoe to drop. There wasn’t
171 time to go to the bathroom, may as well lunch.

172 * * *

173 The next call came about two.

174 “Where are you?”

175 “Police station.”

176 “What about your Dad?”

177 “He’s here too.”

178 “What happened?”

179 “Dad was waiting by the curb in the terminal. A guy in a big Cadillac cut me off when I
180 tried to pull over. . . . Dad kicked his door in. . . . The driver got out of the car. . . . When dad
181 backed up he tripped over his bag. . . . I saw him go down and thought the man hit him. . . . I got
182 out of the car, ran to my Dad, and punched the Cadillac guy. . . . He went out like a light, and I
183 broke my wrist. . . . I just want to go home.”

184 “I’ll find a lawyer to get you out.”

185 The only lawyer close at hand was my brother-in-law’s partner who was upstairs in the
186 event any of the masters might have a question.

187 “Steve, I need a favor . . .”

188 * * *

189 Nothing more than Jill’s broken wrist came of the altercation at the airport. Jill insisted it

190 was self-defense, and there were no other witnesses besides the Cadillac guy. He didn't have a
191 chance. Framing a story a that would make him look good, or even generate any sympathy, was
192 impossible. Alan was reappointed as a master, we became friends, and he deferred all the
193 personal property cases to me. When his mother lost an election for mayor, Mel lost his job and I
194 never had any more to do with him.