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The Law And Virgil Hawkins This Is A Story About A Man Who Had A Dream, Realized It After Many, Many Years -- Then Watched Everything He'd Worked Toward Slip Away. It Is A Story About The Effort To Find Justice, And About The Ultimate Justice Of Life Itself.

March 8, 1987|By Barbara Stewart of the Sentinel Staff

It's a stifling autumn afternoon and Virgil Hawkins has already run out of things to do. Early this morning he weeded the camellias. Mid-morning he drove his wife to visit her sister. At noon he washed the dishes. Now, he's lounging in a worn Naugahyde La-Z-Boy with his shoes off, restless and bored.

At 80, Hawkins' life has settled into a slow and uneasy rhythm. He spends hours in his sweltering hot pink stucco house in Leesburg, hoisting himself from armchair to kitchen to front porch, guarding his ailing health. He combs through folders of yellowed news clippings. He shuts his eyes and dreams up chapters of a book. His book. A book about his 30-year battle to practice law. A book about being black and striving for equality and justice. A book about being insulted and denied and then -- only then -- achieving his goal. A book about his triumph. But not about his fall.

Not about his ouster from the Florida Bar just nine years after he finally won admittance. Not about the charges of incompetence and malfeasance. Not about his arrest two years ago for embezzling \$15,000. Not about being a civil rights hero placed on a pedestal and then toppling from it.

These have no place in the story Virgil Hawkins wants to write.

He can almost see the words on paper. Then he frowns, his brow crinkling, and pulls himself back into the here and now. He eases himself up from the easy chair, calloused feet sticking out from gardening trousers that end above the ankle.

He'll start the first chapter soon, maybe even tomorrow. And when the last chapter is read, perhaps young blacks will have something to revere and remember . . .

Virgil Hawkins Jr. had a favorite daydream as a boy. Skinning pine trees in the back country of Okahumpka, a Lake County farm town, he would lean on his ax and picture himself in court, impressing judges with his eloquence.

His father, the Rev. Virgil Hawkins Sr., would have exploded if he'd known about his son's dreams back then. To the preacher, lawyers were money-grubbing thieves living off the troubles of decent folk. The preacher was a prominent man in Okahumpka, but he sweated for his pay and made sure his eight children did, too. Sundays, he preached at the plain box-shaped African Methodist Episcopal Church in Okahumpka. The rest of the week he picked ripe oranges and skinned pine trees for turpentine. Skinning trees was boring and backbreaking work, and his namesake, who helped him, hated it. What young Virgil loved was talking. And he vowed to someday make a living with words.

Jobs for thinkers -- black thinkers, in particular -- were scarce in Lake County, though. Like the Wild West, Lake County in the 1920s ruled itself. There were cowboys and pioneers and all-powerful sheriffs and judges. And virtually all of them were white. Black people picked oranges or skinned trees, cooked for rich whites or taught in black schools. And a poor black man arrested in Lake County would be out of luck.

Young Virgil used to crouch in a kitchen corner, listening as his daddy comforted the neighbor women who came by from time to time. They'd be crying about husbands locked in jail for weeks, waiting to be tried for betting dimes on dice. And their children would be hungry and whining for daddy. "Trust in the Lord," the Rev. Hawkins would say. "Don't waste money on a cheating lawyer. Pray."

The Rev. Hawkins could comfort the women, all right, but he couldn't pry their husbands out of jail. Only lawyers could do that. Women who hired a lawyer got their husbands home. Those who stuck to prayer had to wait.

As he grew older, the preacher's son quietly vowed to become a lawyer one day. He would go to the University of Florida College of Law, where he heard judges and big-time attorneys went.

Dreams don't often take shape in reality. And for a young black man back in the '20s and '30s, this was particularly true.

Public education didn't continue beyond the 10th grade for blacks in Lake County, so young Virgil Hawkins was sent to Edward Waters College in Jacksonville for his high school diploma. He went on to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, but was forced to return home to make money after a year. Once back, he married Ida Frazier, an Ocoee teacher, and began hunting for a job.

The Depression had dried up work, but Hawkins scraped up money by using his wits. He used his gift for gab to sell insurance for Afro-American Life in Jacksonville before landing a job as teacher and principal at Groveland elementary school in south Lake County.

It wasn't the occupation he'd sought, and sometimes he would find himself daydreaming in fifth-grade math class about coming to the rescue of some neighbor jailed for snitching oranges. But then something would snap him out of the dream and he would remember that only white men could go to Florida's law schools.

Hawkins taught at Groveland for years, driving 50 miles a day from his modest house in Ocala. Then, at age 43, he found another calling that meant moving from a farm town to an academic community of professors, students and activists. He became public relations director at Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, taking classes for a B.S. degree in his spare time. These were the late '40s, and there were plenty of people eager to argue about justice and civil rights. Virgil Hawkins was exhilarated.

In the daytime he would give rich white patrons tours of the campus. Good-natured, sunny, joking Hawkins would talk them to death. Charles Cherry, now editor of the Daytona Times, remembers that whenever visitors were foisted on Hawkins, they'd come away reeling.

At night, though, Hawkins wanted to listen as well as to speak. He would badger his friends to come over, then serve them coffee to keep them talking into the night. The bull sessions were congenial but intense, and always they centered on civil rights. Hawkins was impatient with moderates who said that if you worked hard, were polite and patient, justice would be yours -- eventually. Hawkins sided with the doers who wanted to force rights on the country then and there. Not through violence -- Hawkins was, after all, a preacher's son -- but legally, through the courts and the law.

Hawkins felt himself alive with thoughts, as eager as any young man on campus. Suddenly, his old dream of being a lawyer was renewed. I'll do it, he thought to himself. And at Florida, not at Howard.

At the time, Howard University in Washington, D.C., was the closest black law school around, and Hawkins had talked with many lawyers who had graduated from there. Blacks who wanted law -- or any other graduate degree -- trekked north by bus, charging the fare to the state. Hawkins had heard tales of dreary rooming houses, freezing weather and homesickness.

"I couldn't afford Washington," he recalls today. "And my wife -- she'd never live so far from her family. And I didn't want Howard. I wanted Florida. My granddaddy felled trees here and my daddy paid taxes here."

Even before he ripped it open, Virgil Hawkins knew what the University of Florida letter said. The law school wasted no words in rejecting him.

The year was 1949 and the NAACP was ready to push for integration in the schools. Only thing was, it needed a victim willing to sue. "We had to have a plaintiff," recalls Horace Hill, the Daytona Beach lawyer who would come to represent Hawkins.

Hawkins was the perfect plaintiff: cheery, fired up, middle-aged, employed, with a supportive wife and no children who could be hurt. Stubborn enough to sue until he won. "Virgil roots in," Hill says. "He's got a grip like a pit bull."

With Hawkins standing steadfastly out front, the NAACP took its case to the Supreme Court of Florida. The justices were, to say the least, disconcerted. This Negro, Hawkins, was a Florida resident all right, and he had a Bethune-Cookman bachelor's degree, but he wanted the impossible. Still, his case could make nasty headlines, so better placate him and stop the suit before it could reach the U.S. Supreme Court. If blacks wanted a Florida law school, fine: The state would add one to Florida A&M, the black college in Tallahassee. This it did.

And so, some 20 months after his initial rejection letter from the University of Florida, Hawkins received another. His eyes narrowed as he opened this second letter. The university was offering to shunt his application over to the new Tallahassee law school.

As he recalls that letter today, Hawkins sits up abruptly in his La-Z-Boy, his voice rising indignantly. The insult is old but it still hurts. "You mean to tell me a brand-new, half-baked law school would be as good as the University of Florida?" he says. "The school where judges went? Did they think I was stupid? I didn't want Florida A&M. I wanted the University of Florida. And that's what I was going to get!"

Once again, the NAACP brought suit on Hawkins' behalf, and this time word of his crusade made the news. "Virgil was the vocal one out front," recalls George Allen, a Fort Lauderdale attorney. "All the rest of us blacks up at Florida A&M were watching and cheering him on. 'Get 'em, Virgil!'"

Not everyone was cheering, though. "You've got your law school," the moderate blacks told him. "What are you trying to prove now?"

"Your daddy would be ashamed," one minister said. "Have you forgotten, 'Blessed are the peacemakers?'"

"Peacemakers," Hawkins replied, "aren't always quiet."

Hawkins started receiving hate letters: "Your daddy was a monkey and you're a nigger," was a favorite tack. Meanwhile, lawyers' fees were draining his salary, and banks continued to turn him down for loans. A suit against the state of Florida was not a popular investment

Bethune-Cookman, however, stuck by Hawkins. One patron dangled \$60,000 in front of then-college president Richard Moore and told him, "Fire Hawkins and the money's yours."

"Keep it," Moore said. "We'll get by without your money."

Meanwhile, Hawkins stood by his suit, and yet the battle never became one of enmity for him.

"It wasn't life-and-death for Virgil," Hill recalls. "He wore it like a loose belt."

Five years after Hawkins' suit against the University of Florida, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on his petition as well as another landmark civil rights case. In *Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education*, the judges ordered the Kansas city to integrate its public schools. In *Hawkins vs. the State of Florida*, they ruled that blacks must be allowed in the University of Florida law school.

When he heard the news, Virgil Hawkins hugged Ida, and laughed aloud with the NAACP lawyers. Five long years of suits and hate mail were over. Hawkins, age 48, was on his way to Gainesville.

But the mood at the state supreme court was less jovial. Outside interlopers -- "social boll weevils, fruit flies, potato bugs, bean beetles" -- were destroying the South, the judges wrote in response to the U.S. Supreme Court. Students would riot if integration were forced.

Then Hawkins got his third letter from the University of Florida. A rejection. The state was defying the Supreme Court. Hawkins' temper was wearing thin. He was already old for law school, but too stubborn to quit. He would be a Florida lawyer.

For four years, the university continued to hold out. And finally, when it could do so no longer, it found another way to keep Virgil Hawkins out: It raised the cutoff for the Law School Aptitude Tests to just above Hawkins' score -- and made the higher score retroactive.

"Virgil got down," Horace Hill recalls. "Real down."

All those years of chasing a dream -- wasted. "I lost heart," Hawkins says softly. The law-office sign, the imagined defense cases of the poor, the jokes exchanged with judges -- all the things he'd dreamed about. He'd fought in court for 10 years and won entrance for other blacks -- but not for himself.

Depressed, defeated, Virgil Hawkins decided to leave town and make a new start. He picked Boston. There, he won a scholarship to the New England College of Law, picking up money as a night janitor at the Harvard Club. By the time he earned his law degree, he was 59 and lonesome for home. "Boston wasn't for me," he recalls today. "The snow, the rush. I like quiet, peace. Orange trees, friends, warm weather. Not all that speeding around."

Hawkins returned to Florida and applied to take the Florida Bar exam. He was told he couldn't because the New England College of Law wasn't accredited. This time, Hawkins surrendered. He bought a two-bedroom house in Leesburg and took a job with a grants program for the needy. For nine more years, he tried to quash the old dream. But it wouldn't die.

Hawkins was nearly 70 now, and time was running out.

He began brooding on the injustice in his spare moments. He should have gone to the University of Florida back in 1949, he thought. And so once again, Virgil Hawkins decided to take action. He appealed to the Florida Bar, and this time, it offered a compromise: If he could pass a bar exam, he could practice.

But the compromise was clearly too late. "I couldn't pass that test," Hawkins says. "I'd been out of school too long. It's like typing -- details slip away."

Still undeterred, Hawkins sued to practice law without taking an exam. The bar protested, but the state supreme court sided this time with Hawkins. It had taken a lifetime, but Hawkins had finally won.

In November 1976, Hawkins opened the law office he had long dreamed about in downtown Leesburg and painted on the window: "Virgil Hawkins, attorney-at-law." He was honored by a "Dream Comes True" banquet organized by neighbors at the Leesburg Community Center. He smiled proudly as 700 well-wishers rose and applauded him. He was 70 and as excited as he'd been in the old days at Bethune-Cookman College. His new office in downtown Leesburg was cramped and the furniture was thrift shop. But none of that bothered Hawkins.

In the early months, he sat in his office and waited for clients, who came -- but slowly. Most of them were on welfare, however, and couldn't pay. He was stung when black friends gave their business to white lawyers. He could have used a few paying clients. But "I couldn't turn anyone away. I was busy, busy, busy. I got so tired and didn't even know it."

Law was complicated, with forms and statutes and cases to research. The pace was fast, and Hawkins got confused.

The confusion soon got him in trouble with the bar. In 1980, Hawkins defended Otis Williams, a Wildwood man charged with trying to shoot his wife's lover during a car chase. Williams was found guilty of aggravated assault and sentenced to prison. He appealed, saying that Hawkins had botched his defense and held back two plea-bargain offers.

The bar, looking into the case, backed Williams up. According to bar investigator David McGunegle, Hawkins hadn't taken depositions or photos before the trial. He allegedly also encouraged a defense witness to lie. Hawkins told Williams' new wife, Annie Jane, to give a false name on the witness stand. If the jury knew she was Williams' wife, Annie Jane claims to have been told, they'd ignore her positive testimony. So Annie Jane gave her maiden name of Blackman rather than Williams.

Today, Hawkins says Otis Williams lied and that "Clarence Darrow himself couldn't have defended him better than I did." Nonetheless, the bar reprimanded Hawkins and put him on probation for two years.

In the meantime, he had other problems. He couldn't pay a secretary, and had to ask civil court clerks how to file forms. His desk was piled with papers, among them bills. Finally, Hawkins found himself being sued for back office rent -- and suspended by the bar for owing dues.

Hawkins was clearly in over his head. He figured it was the bar's fault, that its members wanted him to fail. Other lawyers, however, saw it differently. "Virgil should never have been allowed to practice law," says Gordon Savage, a longtime Leesburg lawyer. "He tried for so long. He grabbed the goal, but he didn't know how to use it."

The bills, the reprimand -- these were the least of Hawkins' worries by 1984. That year, he was accused of having stolen \$15,000 from a nephew's Veterans' Administration trust fund. Since the nephew was incompetent to care for himself, a relative was appointed to dole out his money. Hawkins was hired to draw up the legal papers. But, according to the bar investigation, he also had the VA checks sent to him, and spent the cash on a car and a washing machine. When the VA caught on, it hired a different lawyer and demanded that Hawkins give back the money. Hawkins dipped into another client's trust fund to pay back the VA, the bar alleged. But it wasn't enough, the VA complained and a bar investigation exposed the mess.

Hawkins was arrested for grand theft. He pleaded no contest to avoid a trial. He was put on probation and ordered to make payments on the stolen money. Hawkins drove to his office, packed his law files and disconnected the office phone. In April 1985, soon after the settlement, he resigned from the bar. "No, it's not over," he said, his voice shaking, to a reporter at the time. "I'll practice again. But I don't see how . . . "

Old friends offered sympathy.

"They picked on him," says Charles Cherry of the Daytona Times. "Maybe he made mistakes -- but not from malice. Maybe Virgil let details slip. He needed a good secretary."

Hawkins never got a fair chance, Horace Hill says. "Other lawyers should have thrown their arms around him. Judges would have done that for a white lawyer. We all felt he wasn't given the same opportunities."

Other black lawyers -- acquaintances who admired Hawkins' fight -- tried to ignore the bad news of his resignation. They didn't want to know the details. They wanted to remember the Hawkins who made civil rights history, not the one who allegedly stole from clients.

Belatedly, honors came, among them the Virgil Hawkins Fellowships. Since 1983, the Legislature has set aside \$100,000 a year for black law students at the University of Florida and Florida State. Many of the recipients figured Virgil Hawkins to be a wealthy patron.

"Ninety-nine percent of the class had never heard of him," says Juliet Murphy, a third-year law student who heard Hawkins speak to her class in 1984. "Their eyes were opened. They were amazed. That happened here? they kept asking. Mr. Hawkins was charming. So proud of himself, of everything he did." Hawkins grows impatient when he runs into young blacks who don't know him. He deserves to be honored for a lifetime of suing, dreaming, pursuing justice. Young people today walk right into law school with no idea of how he sweated. He opened the school up to them, but now he's forgotten.

"They don't understand how much we did for them," Hawkins says. "They think it was always like it is now. They say, 'What was the problem? Why couldn't you just go to school like I do?' They don't know the story of their people."

The story of their people. He leans back slowly in the easy chair. If he can jot down some notes, he'll start writing this afternoon. But there's the newspaper to read, and his wife to drive to Publix.

Once, Hawkins rushed about like a madman, but these days he won't be hurried. Time has slowed and Hawkins passes the hours lying back, thinking, reflecting on the good times, not the bad. The times when his friends cheered him on. The late-night bull sessions at Bethune-Cookman, balancing on the edge of a new day. The questions from curious and impressed Florida law students: "You mean they did that to you? And you sued them? And you didn't give up? And it all happened here, at the University of Florida?" The old friends who defended him, who insist he was a civil rights hero who opened up opportunities for black people.

"I know what I did," Hawkins says, his voice firm. "I integrated schools in Florida. No one can take that away from me."