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Clarksdale--Reverend Rayford's Trial

The Reverend J.D. Rayford, 69, was tried ~~xxxxxx~~ in City Court on July 2 on a charge of drunken driving. He pleaded nolo contendere and was fined \$111. He is at present free on a \$222 appeal bond, which was put up by the Reverend R.L. Drew. He had originally been charged with speeding also, but this charge was dropped on the recommendation of the city prosecutor, James A. Phyfer. Judge Edward Connell presided.

Judge Connell argued with attorneys Ben Grisham and Tom Seymour for about a half an hour about ~~their qualifications~~ the propriety of their representing Rev. Rayford. The judge took the position that since Rev. Rayford had not personally attempted to engage a local of at least Mississippi lawyer, it could not be demonstrated that the out-of-state lawyers were appearing in the absence of local counsel. He also made the point that the out of state lawyers should have attempted to qualify before the Mississippi bar. When Grisham protested that he had no intention of practising law in the state on more than a one-case basis, Judge Connell said that he believed that their presence in Memphis indicated that they planned to practise law in Mississippi for at least two weeks. The judge made it abundantly clear that out-of-state lawyers would not in the future be permitted to appear in his court. When Grisham raised the point that the accused was allowed counsel of his own choosing, this was evaded by the judge.

In the end, the issue was temporarily at least resolved by the judge's directing Rev. Rayford to enter his own plea. He would not allow Grisham to plead for him. Since the plea was nolo contendere and there was no defense or cross-examination, the judge found him immediately guilty and technically, the lawyers did not represent him. The city prosecutor, I might add, seemed somewhat more willing to accept Grisham and Seymour, since he expressed concern lest Rayford be deprived of counsel, but he did attempt to show that Rev. Rayford was able to afford regular counsel and thus was not dependent on the LODL for representation. Both the judge and the prosecutor maintained, of course, that the Reverend's case was a simple traffic offense without political overtones and the judge complained rather bitterly about the "unnecessary notereity" the case had received in the newspapers. (There was one story in the Clarksdale Press-Register about the "New York lawyers" who were representing Rayford, but the judge claimed that many papers had carried stories on the case.) The judge, by the way, admitted prior knowledge of the case. When Grisham taxed him with this, the judge said that this was the fault of Grisham's office and of the newspapers, which had unnecessarily brought the case to his attention.