

# Bethinking of Old Orleans <sup>4-18-84</sup>

C.W.Lattin • County Historian



(L. Monacelli Photo Copy)

Vol. VI

No. 16

JUDGE BERNARD RYAN 1891 - 1976

*"To know a truth well, one must have fought it out."*  
—Novalis

Bernard Ryan was born in the Town of Gaines on May 28, 1891. The family home was a large brick house which his father, Daniel B. Ryan had built in 1890 just north of the Village of Albion. Mr. Ryan graduated from Albion High School in the Class of 1907 and read law for two years before being admitted to the Albany Law School from which he graduated in 1912.

During World War I, he was commissioned a second lieutenant, was wounded in action and later was discharged as a first lieutenant. Following the war in 1919 he was one of the leading forces in the organization of Albion's

Sheret Post #35 American Legion and was the first commander of that Post. He was also a member of the 78th Division Veterans Association of Western New York. In 1921 he married Harriet Earle Fitts who was a newspaper writer and novelist. The Ryans had four sons who grew up in Albion. The eldest, William Fitts Ryan became a representative in Congress for the upper west side of Manhattan and served from 1961 until his death in 1972.

During the 1920s, Bernard Ryan ran twice on the Democratic ticket for District Attorney but was defeated both times by the incumbant William H. Munson. Active in Democratic Party politics, he was elected chairman of the Orleans County Democrat Committee. He served as a delegate to the National Democratic Convention in 1928 and delegate-at-large at the 1932 convention.

Although Mr. Ryan had been admitted to the bar and maintained a law office on East Bank Street in Albion, he toured widely as an actor in Jessie Bonetell's stock company and appeared with the Winthrop Ames stock company in Boston. He was later both a stage manager and actor on Broadway. In 1920 Bernard Ryan first met Eleanor Roosevelt when she was on a campaign tour in Western New York as a Woman Suffragette. From this period of time the Ryans and Roosevelts became close friends. In 1929 Franklin Roosevelt, then Governor of New York, visited the Ryans at their home in Albion while touring the state by canal boat. In August 1930 the Roosevelts were again house guests of the Ryans when a historic marker was dedicated at Gaines. During the years Franklin Roosevelt was President the Ryans were frequent visitors at the White House. Harriet Ryan always sent the President a birthday cake.

It was in 1930 that Roosevelt, while still governor, appointed Bernard Ryan to the Court of Claims in New York State. Later Ryan became the Chief Judge and served a total of 32 years on this Court bench. He retired in 1961 at the mandatory age of 70 after being reappointed to successive terms under Governors Lehman, Dewey, Poletti, Harriman and Rockefeller. Decisions in the Court of Claims are made by Judges rather than juries so Mr. Ryan's work involved weighing complicated engineering evidence in cases such as disputes between the State and construction contractors. He also ruled on a wide range of personal injury cases in which the State was accused of negligence. "He believed some of what was told him and awarded cash accordingly. And when he didn't he rarely minced words saying why."

In later years the Ryans spent the winter months in New York City and the summers in Albion where Judge Ryan continued to maintain a law office until his death.

The photograph of him shown here in military uniform was taken for a campaign poster when he was running for District Attorney over sixty years ago. Although he lived to be eighty-four, age did little to disguise his facial features.