



JUDGE GEORGE G. WRIGHT

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When the heart pulsation ceased, and the surcease of life came to George G. Wright, the state, Polk County, and the City of Des Moines parted with one more widely known and intimately connected with their history than any other person. Born in Indiana, crippled in early childhood by a severe attack of Rheumatism, cut off from all the sports of boyhood, he found compensation therefor in books. Each county in the state then had authority to select two worthy young persons for free tuition in the State University. They were usually dubbed charity students by the "regulars," and young Wright was accordingly ranked in that class, but, undaunted, he studiously and zealously took on the task before him, graduated with high honors at the age of nineteen, then read law with his brother, was admitted to the Bar in 1840, and in September of that year went down the Wabash and Ohio rivers, up the Mississippi, landed at Burlington, thence by stage to Keosauqua, which contained a few log houses, and had just been made the County Seat of Van Buren County. The country was sparsely settled, and presented poor encouragement to a young, ambitious person, but strenuously optimistic, he looked ahead. He was energetic, industrious, social, and of that temperament which wins friends, esteem, confidence, and, in 1846, he was appointed by the court Prosecuting Attorney for the county.

In 1846, he was nominated for delegate to the Territorial Council, which made the first Constitution of the state. His opponent was the father of his wife, Thomas Dibble, an old-fashioned Democrat of the Bourbon type, who didn't believe a Whig had any right to hold a public office. The district comprised Davis, Appanoose and Van Buren counties. Wright was a Whig, and there were not enough Whigs in the district to elect a Corporal's Guard, but his Van Buren friends expected him to pull through, the other counties being sparsely settled. He took the field, made the contest, shook hands with

the voters, "jollied" the women and children, and returned home declaring he had the promise of every voter in Appanoose County, but was a little in doubt about Davis. When the returns came in, of the twenty-six votes cast in Appanoose County, he received one. He immediately wrote the chairman of the Canvassing Board to send him the name of the man who cast that one vote, declaring he would send him a dress for his wife. He never found the man, but he used to say sixteen different men claimed the dress, and he was ready always to give it to the right person.

In 1848, he was elected State Senator from Van Buren County for four years, which included the Second and Third General Assemblies. Most of the members at both sessions were hard money Democrats, or Loco Focos, as the Whigs called them, from an incident which occurred in Tammany Hall, New York. The meeting got into a furious row, the chairman fled from the hall, and the lights were suddenly extinguished to break it up, but some standpatters re-lighted the lamps with loco foco, or lucifer matches, which had just come into use. In the Harrison campaign, in 1840, the nickname was universal. A tobaconist (sic) got out a cigar with a match stuck in one end for lighting it, which he called the Loco Foco Cigar.

The Democrats, true to their hard-money proclivities, passed a law prohibiting banking by any person, association, or corporation, or creating any paper to circulate as money, but neglected to prohibit the circulation of foreign bank notes. The result was, the state became flooded with rotten, worthless, foreign stuff, the gold and silver was "salted down" by every person who could get a dollar, mechanics worked month after month without seeing a piece of metallic coin, culminating in the financial crash of 1857, which strewn the country with commercial and industrial wrecks.

They also passed the so-called prohibitory law, which abolished saloons, but provided for the sale of whiskey the same as tea, coffee, and codfish, by which came the ubiquitous "county grocery" of that day, the authority to keep a grocery being granted by the County Commissioners.

It was at the third session all the un-laid-out portion of the state was parceled into sixty counties and named. The contest for names was spirited,

and for once George, who had become quite noted for his parries and repartees to the witticisms of his confreres, got stumped. When "Wright" was suggested as the name for one county, several senators at once wanted to know what "Wright" was intended. Senator Leffingwell, the leader of the Democrats, with a twinkle in his eye, arose and moved that the name "Wright" be stricken out, "for," said he, "I understand the suggestion was made in honor of the Senator from Van Buren. He is a very young man, and we don't know what he may sometime be guilty of." George was stumped, and failed to respond to the remark, when another member announced the honor was intended for a brother of George G.

The most important work of that session was the compilation of the first Code, involving the putting in statutory form the unwritten law on many subjects, and reconstructing the entire judiciary system. Judge Casady, who was the Senator from Polk County, says Judge Mason and Wright made that Code; that Wright worked day and night upon it, and when, toward the end of the fifty-day limit of the session—their pay was two dollars a day for fifty days and one dollar a day thereafter—opinion was expressed that an extra session would be necessary to finish the Code, Wright took the floor and declared he would never consent to adjourn until it was completed and passed, and he held the members to it sixteen days at one dollar a day. Two of the measures in it, specially prepared by Wright, were those abolishing imprisonment for debt, and the homestead exemption, both of which are in force to-day practically as he wrote them.

In 1850, he was nominated for Representative in Congress in that district, which comprised the south half of the state, and overwhelmingly Democratic. His opponent was Bernhart Henn, a good friend of his. They traveled the district together, and slept in the same bed. The Des Moines River Improvement scheme was the all-absorbing subject of public thought; it permeated the whole politics of the state. Every candidate for public office was measured by his zeal in its behalf, so it was the main effort of Henn and Wright to show their superior faith and effort in the project, and many laughable stories they used to tell of their campaign. Wright said Henn would

wake him up in the night, shouting in his sleep: "I am loyal to the Des Moines Improvement," and one day they were riding along when Henn saw a man at work in the field. Both started after him to get his vote, but Wright being lame, Henn beat him, hurrahing for the river improvement as he went, only to find the man a dummy set up to scare crows. Wright was defeated, and he used to say it was because Bernhart knew every Democrat in the district, could call them by their "front" names, and he couldn't.

In 1854, when not thirty-five years old, his legal ability and popularity prompted the Whigs to select him as their candidate for Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. His opponent was Edward Johnston, the strongest man in the Democratic party. In the joint convention of the Legislature, that then being the body to fill the place, he received fifty-three votes and Johnston forty-five. He was continuously re-elected for fifteen years.

During his service on the bench, the entire judiciary system of the state was changed. The most abstruse and intricate questions, involving vast interests of the state, corporations, and individuals, ever before that court, were solved, and precedents established which have been accepted and confirmed by the highest tribunals of the Nation. In fact, the present jurisprudence of the state rests upon the foundation laid by Judge Wright and his early associates, Woodward, Isbell, Stockton, Lowe, Dillon, and Cole.

The opinions of Judge Wright, running through the first thirty volumes of the Iowa Reports, are deemed models of perspicuity, clearness, and soundness. One of his notable decisions was respecting the running of hogs at large. Under an Act passed by the Legislature in 1857, the first local option law in the state, a case was taken up to his court on the constitutionality of the law, the appellant claiming the law was unconstitutional on the ground that it was class legislation, giving hogs the right to go where they pleased in one county and not in another county. The Judge held that hogs were not necessarily "equal before the law," that is, the law need not affect all hogs alike; that as the law had provided where the people of a county—and every county had the same privilege—had voted for or against hogs running at

large, the law was constitutional as a police regulation. That decision established the rule of local option.

In 1855, the Judge came to Des Moines, and soon after, with Judge Cole, organized the Iowa Law School. The first class consisted of twelve, and I venture to say no class ever received so complete, liberal, and valuable instruction as that. Judge Wright was a favorite of young men, and had the happy faculty, possessed by very few, of expressing his views in attractive form. He strove to impress upon the class his ideal of moral and professional rectitude, and sound fundamental principles of the science of law. To him, shystering and so-called sharp practice was abhorrent. I recall one day when he said: "While it is the duty of a lawyer to protect the interests of his client and secure the verdict of a jury, with all his power, he should never resort to trickery, but keep within the law and the facts. Above all things, never attempt to deceive the court, for nothing will so utterly degrade you, and destroy your standing." An apt illustration of this occurred soon after, in the United States District Court here, before Judge Samuel F. Miller, of the United States Supreme Court, well known to old-timers as a rigid disciplinarian. Every member of that law class, I think, was present. The case before the court was a very important one, involving intricate points of law, multifarious individual interests, and millions of money. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, a very prominent attorney, in his argument, made a statement to which the Judge quickly retorted: "Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, do you state that as a proposition of law?" The attorney started again, when the Judge curtly cut him off with, "Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, the court knows all the law in this case; take your seat." The effect of the rebuke upon the lawyers present was intensely manifest.

In 1868, the Iowa Law School became the Law Department of the State University, and its graduates alumni of the University. Judge Wright continued with the school until June, 1896, when he gave his last lecture.

In 1870, the Judge retired from the court, and, yielding to the importunities of his friends in the south half of the state, became a candidate for United States Senator. His opponent was William B. Allison, who had been four times elected to the Lower House.

His friends claimed he was logically entitled to promotion, but the popularity of the Judge was irresistible, and he was elected on the first ballot, which probably no other man in the state could have secured. He served six years, on four important committees, and declined a re-nomination, which ended his public office-holding.

During his many years in public office, he was often pressed into service in civic affairs not political. In 1860, he was elected President of the State Agricultural Society, and during his four terms, by his good judgment and wise counsel, the Society was put on the road to the high place it now occupies.

In 1879, he was elected a director of the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad Company, which place he held during his life.

In 1882, he was elected President of the Polk County Savings Bank, and President of the Security Loan and Trust Company, which places he held until his decease.

In 1885, he was elected President of the American Bar Association, in honor of his nobility as a jurist, statesman, and citizen, and served two years.

He was the founder of the Pioneer Lawmakers' Association, and at its permanent organization, in 1892, was elected its President. He held the place so long as he lived. It was in that relation he had the most enjoyment of all the multifarious associations of his eventful life. He knew all the members, called them by their "front" names, and they knew him. At the reunions of those survivors of pioneer days, when were recounted the events of early days, the contests, political and otherwise, the success and defeats, their incidents, and as a body, in genuine good fellowship, all old animosities forgotten and forgiven, the Judge, with his rich fund of anecdotes, witticisms, and happy repartee to the cute thrust of some fellow, made the occasions a source of solid enjoyment.

The very last letter he wrote was to one of the officers respecting an approaching reunion, in which he expressed joyous anticipation of its coming, but the twilight portending the coming night was already about him, and before the assemblage met he had ceased to be.

During the Civil War period, incapacitated from military service by lameness, he sustained the Government by every possible means, and many

a soldier and his family found him a friend when needed. In recognition of his patriotic service, the Military Order of the American Legion of Honor made him a member of the Third Degree, one of the only three civilians on whom the degree has been conferred, the others being James Harlan and William B. Allison.

Politically a Whig, until the Republican party was organized, he never sought a political office. His forty years' holding of public office and of fiduciary trusts was in response to the spontaneity of public demand, regardless of politics.

Socially, he was the embodiment of all that is good and ennobling in social life. His sympathies embraced all human interests. His hold upon the hearts of the people was marvelous. At social functions, he was always a favorite; at banquets, as toastmaster or after-dinner speaker, he had few equals. In fact, he was preeminent in the social life of the entire state. In every department of civic life, he exemplified the highest type of manhood, an inspiration to the young, and the pride of the Commonwealth.

By profession of faith, he was a Methodist, but his broad, catholic spirit accepted and cherished the Christianizing influence of all denominations.

His home was the reflection of his beautiful nature. Within its portals there was love, content, and happiness.

He deceased January Eleventh, 1896.

June Third, 1906.

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