CHAPTER FOUR

HONORABLE CHARLES H. LARRABEE

I have hesitated about publishing this sketch of the above gentleman, for he cannot be classed either as a member of the court or bar of Manitowoc County. But he came in contact with the bar and the people here in so many ways and capacities that in the interest of history he is worthy of mention. Even in the manner of his birth, he was in touch with the territory which comprises our county. He was born in Rome, Oneida County, New York, November 9, 1820. He was the son of Major Charles Larrabee, United States Army, who greatly distinguished himself by gallant services in the war of 1812. It so happened that when Judge Larrabee was born, the father was commandant of Fort Howard, at Green Bay, then and ever after the county seat of Brown County of which Manitowoc was a part. He went with his parents to Cincinnati, Ohio, where he received his early education, supplemented by graduating at Granville College. He studied law in Springfield, Ohio, and later was admitted to the bar at Pontotoc, Mississippi. He settled at Chicago in 1844, edited a paper there and served one term as city attorney. He removed to Wisconsin in 1847, settled at Horicon, Dodge County, and was elected delegate from that county to the second constitutional convention, which framed our present constitution. I have written elsewhere of his holding the term of court for Judge Stow and of his manner of rushing business, getting through with a calendar of sixteen cases, including three jury trials and two court trials in two days.

When the separate Supreme Court system was adopted, Judge Larrabee was a candidate for chief justice against Edward V. Whiton in the spring election of 1853 and made a canvass of Manitowoc County where he had made some acquaintances, but was defeated. He was re-elected as judge of his circuit, however, and acted in that capacity until 1858.

In that year he became a candidate for Congress in the Third Congressional district which again brought him in touch with Manitowoc County. It was in that campaign I first saw him. It was an exciting time for the country was getting
warmed up over the slavery question and he and his opponent, Charles Billinghurst, stumped the district, with great energy.

Judge Larrabee spoke at the courthouse here in that campaign. It was the first political address I had ever heard and I can recall vividly the fiery energy of his fierce denunciations of the abolitionists and their disregard for the constitution and the sovereign rights of the states. His energetic speeches were effective to the extent of carrying the county and district by a decisive vote. He was our representative in congress during the years 1859–60, and at the solicitation of Honorable Joseph Rankin then member of assembly for the second district comprising Mishicot and the northern towns succeeded in having a new postal route established through that section. One of the offices on the line was named “Larrabee” in recognition of his efforts, and though the postoffice was discontinued when the rural routes were established, the little village is still called Larrabee.

Berryman’s History of the Bench and Bar quotes Judge Larrabee as saying that he resigned his place on the bench to make the canvass for congress at the request of Hon. Stephen A. Douglas. Undoubtedly his residence in Chicago and his prominence as editor and lawyer had made him well acquainted with Douglas, who was then the prospective Democratic candidate for the presidency. Whether such request was made or not, I know Judge Larrabee was an ardent admirer of Stephen A. Douglas and strenuously preached his doctrine of “Squatter Sovereignty” as the Republicans derisively called it, both in Manitowoc and Two Rivers where he delivered speeches. At the end of his first term he was re-nominated as candidate for reelection, with Hon. A. Scott Sloan as opponent. He canvassed the district vigorously, advocating the election of Douglas and referred to the Breckenridge Democrats in scathing terms in all his speeches. He went down to defeat with the ticket he represented, national, congressional, state and county.

I was much interested in this campaign of 1860, though not yet a voter, and heard both Larrabee and Sloan, deliver addresses during the canvass. Larrabee and Sloan were residents of Dodge county, they were both strong men, natural leaders and belonging to opposite parties were pitted against each other in nearly every political contest. Sloan defeated Larrabee once for the office of circuit judge and later for congress, while Larrabee did exactly the same with Sloan.

Later events in my life brought me in some respects in close contact with both of these gentlemen.

In 1861 when the Civil war began, I was in my nineteenth year and like most lads of my age volunteered in the first
company Manitowoc raised for the war. The company was assigned to serve in the Fifth Wisconsin regiment.

Judge Larrabee, like Gen. Bragg, Gabe Bouck, Matt. Carpenter and most of the Douglas democratic leaders was intensely loyal to the Union. He enlisted at once as a private and was immediately appointed a major and assigned to the Fifth Wisconsin. Thus I was brought into such daily association with him as a man in the ranks is likely to have with a field officer of his regiment, not very intimate in garrison or camp duty, but in a campaign, at times very close. He lacked many of the elements which go to the make up of a good military officer. He was too impulsive, lacked steadiness, and coolness in a crisis, though personally brave and courageous. Still he was fairly well liked by both officers and men of the regiment. He left us to join the Twenty-fourth Wisconsin, of which regiment he had been appointed colonel. That regiment was sent west and was assigned to the brigade commanded by Gen. Phil Sheridan. There was, after the battle of Stone River, considerable quiet talk to the effect that Colonel Larrabee made some changes in the disposition of his regiment, while under fire, which were neither ordered nor approved by the brigade commander. There was a clash, and Phil. Sheridan was a bad man to clash with. Whatever the reason, Col. Larrabee soon after resigned and took no further part in the war.

As I recall him now, after the lapse of more than fifty years, I think that a man of his temperament, impulsive, abrupt, arbitrary and dominating, judged by his manner alone, would impress an ordinary lawyer as being very unpromising material from which to create a judge. And yet, any one, who now reads his judicial opinions printed in the early volumes of Wisconsin reports, cannot fail to recognize the essential elements of a strong judicial mind and character. They are marked by wide learning in the law, good literary composition, strength and breadth of argument and keen incisive power of discrimination. Had he remained longer upon the supreme bench, especially after it became a purely appellate and separate court, I think he would have made a reputation as a great judge ranking with Whiton, Dixon and Ryan, whose decisions made the Wisconsin judiciary famous.

At the close of the Civil war he removed to the Pacific coast, settling in Oregon Territory, where he entered upon the practice of the law and was rising to great prominence in professional and political life, when he met an untimely death in a frightful railway accident.

As stated, Judge Sloan succeeded Judge Larrabee as congressman for the Third District of which Manitowoc was a
part. His son, Harry E. Sloan, later a prominent lawyer of Superior, joined the Fifth Wisconsin in the winter before the Wilderness campaign and his father visited the regiment where I met and conversed with him. Soon after I was admitted to the bar I made several appearances before Judge Sloan then presiding over the Thirteenth Circuit. My recollection of his early contests with Judge Larrabee and comradeship in the army with his son made a basis for acquaintance and we became very friendly. I have a strong impression that Judge Sloan came to Manitowoc and held court either for Judge Campbell McLean or Judge David Taylor to dispose of some cases in which one of them had been counsel, but have not been able to find the record and may be mistaken. Judge Sloan served the Thirteenth Circuit as judge for fourteen years and died in April, 1895 while still in that office.