CHAPTER SIX

The Third Judge

WM. R. GORSLINE

Upon the resignation of Judge Timothy O. Howe as stated in the last chapter, William R. Gorsline of Sheboygan was appointed to fill the vacancy on February 24, 1855, and in April following was elected to fill out the remainder of Judge Howe's term. In the spring election of 1856 he was elected for the full term. The Sheboygan bar of that period had a number of able lawyers, among them Bille Williams, E. Fox Cooke, and General Conrad Krez, but Judge Gorsline was looked upon by the lawyers of the circuit as being one whose make-up had most of the judicial character of any.

William R. Gorsline was born in Manlius, Onondaga county, New York, June 28, 1823. He was left an orphan at an early age, but through the care of an uncle received a good common school and academic education and being naturally of a studious bent, began the study of the law in his native town in a law office located there.

He came to Milwaukee early in 1845, and after a few months of study in the office of Frank Randall Esq., a lawyer of that city, was admitted to the Wisconsin bar and in the same year opened a law office in Sheboygan.

It would almost seem as if the county offices in those days were the regular perquisites of young lawyers for we find, as in Manitowoc, that Judge Gorsline (to be) became for a part of 1845 and 1846 the register of deeds for Sheboygan county while waiting for law practice, which in due time came to him.

During the years 1850 and 1851 he was county judge of that county, and proved himself a very capable and efficient public officer. The term of office of county judges in those days was two years and the office in fact was really a desirable one, especially to a rising young lawyer. Their compensation was two dollars per day for each day of court actually held and in addition a schedule of fees for services performed in each case chargeable to the parties. They had also a schedule of fees for services as Judges of Probate and Circuit Court
Commissioners so that in the more populous counties they received more than the fifteen hundred dollars of salary which was all then paid to their superiors, the Circuit Judges. Moreover, they were not debarred from practice in the Circuit and Supreme Courts.

At the close of his term Judge Gorsline resumed his practice until, as stated, he was appointed as circuit judge.

About two weeks after his appointment Judge Gorsline came to Manitowoc to hold the regular March term of court. I think it must have been the first term of court at which he presided.

I was then a lad in my sixteenth year. Wandering around one day on the South side of the village, some one made the remark that the circuit court was being held over there. "Over there" was George Dusold's dance hall. Curiosity impelled me to go upstairs and see what a circuit court was like. I edged my way through a small group of men standing in the hallway, stepped inside the door and had a full view of the pioneer court. A bare plastered room guiltless even of whitewash, as I estimate now about 32 by 40 feet, wholly innocent of all attempt at decoration, nothing to break the monotony of the bare wall except a few tin candlesticks hung at intervals, windows only along the north and west sides. Along the side a line of unplanned pine plank benches, without backs, and over in the northeast corner near the curtainless windows were three similar benches in a row, one behind the other presumably, for the jury. Placed near them were two ordinary kitchen tables made of pine boards, unpainted like the benches, without cover of any kind. At one of them sat old "Squire Reuter" (Charles R. Reuter), deputy clerk of the court, writing the records. Eight or ten feet in front of him, at the other table a couple of lawyers sat on plain wooden chairs. At the right of the clerk's table at the end stood the judicial bench, a big wooden rocking chair, without cover or cushions. All were on the same level, no raised platform or elevation of any kind. There sat Judge Gorsline, the third judge of the Fourth Judicial Circuit, representing the sovereignty of the six-year-old State of Wisconsin. A number of men, lawyers and spectators, were scattered around the room, sitting on the benches or standing, leaning against the wall, listening to an argument by some attorney. The place was cold and cheerless; I soon tired of it and stole quietly out.

Such was my first view of the court in which most of my work during fifty years of law practice, was to be done, though I had then no anticipation of it. The completion of the new courthouse the following year changed these primi-
tive conditions very much for the better.

Moses Hooper Esq. of Oshkosh, a leading member of the
city of Winnebago county, in a published monograph on
the early judges, says of Judge Gorsline, "He was a suave,
polished, self-possessed judge;" and such is my recollection
of him as I saw him then and afterwards when holding court
in the new (now old) courthouse. One impression I carried
away was that he looked extremely youthful for a judge. His
age when he went on the circuit bench was about 32 years,
but he was then smooth shaven, and certainly looked much
younger. He had a scholarly, studious appearance and bore
himself with a dignity which became him well upon the bench.

He served as judge of the Fourth Circuit until July, 1858,
when he resigned and went to Colorado. He began practice
of the law in Denver and continued until 1860, when President
Buchanan appointed him one of the United States district
judges of the Territory, and was later reappointed by Presi-
dent Andrew Johnson.

During the period 1867 to 1870 he was one of the justices
of the supreme court of Colorado Territory, filling the office
with marked ability as may be seen by referring to his pub-
ished opinions in the third volume of Colorado reports. After
that period he resumed his practice in the city of Denver,
and so continued until his death which occurred on March
30, 1879.

There are still some in Sheboygan who can recall Judge
Gorsline and have some connection with him. One of the very
ey early settlers of Sheboygan was a gentleman named Lapham.
In his family were two very attractive daughters of marriag-
able age. Judge Gorsline and Billie Williams, then young
practicing attorneys, married these young ladies. About two
or three years after her marriage the wife of Judge Gorsline
died, and later the Judge married a Sheboygan lady named
Newcomb. She accompanied the Judge to Colorado when he
removed to that territory and after his death returned to
Sheboygan and resided with some distant relatives until her
death about five or six years ago.

Through the marriage of Billie Williams into the Lap-
ham family his son, Francis Williams, now a prominent lawyer
in Sheboygan, is a nephew of Judge Gorsline. So far as I
can learn there is no direct descendant of Judge Gorsline by
either marriage.

Judge Gorsline bequeathed to the generation following
him the reputation of a learned lawyer, an incorruptible judge,
careful, painstaking and conservative. His short career in
Wisconsin (only thirteen years) has made him comparatively
unknown and he is well nigh forgotten by all except a few
who have outlived their allotted time; but his after life in Colorado shows that he fully measured up to the high standard set by his predecessors.

It is worthy of note here that Colorado also obtained another very capable and worthy circuit judge from the bar of the Fourth Wisconsin Circuit; for Hon. John R. Bentley who for several years practiced at the Manitowoc bar in its early period, removing later to Sheboygan, and after a few years removed to Colorado and became judge of the Denver circuit. He there won the reputation of being a very able and conservative administrator of the laws.