CHAPTER SEVEN

The Bar

One of the first acts of the commissioners of Manitowoc county after its organization in 1839 at which time the first election was held, was to erect a county building at the Rapids. Here the county offices were located and records kept, but it did not attain the dignity of a “courthouse” until 1848 when, as stated, the judicial power which had been retained by Brown county was bestowed upon us. The original “county house” cost the sum of $650. When it became a “courthouse” it was enlarged and changed somewhat, and that indispensable annex to a well ordered judicial system—a county jail, was built on. It had been used also as a schoolhouse and hence the early records, speak of Justice Stow and Judge Howe, holding court in the schoolhouse. On April 30, 1852, it was destroyed by fire and advantage was taken of the fact to bring about the removal of the county seat to Manitowoc. This was duly accomplished in 1853 and thereafter the courts were held in that village. The sessions were held in various temporary places. Once at the private residence of Col. Peleg Glover, other times in the South Side school house and the dance hall of George Dusold at the corner of Seventh and Jay streets, until the courthouse was completed in 1856 on the site now occupied by the present county building.

The first two chapters of this series brought the history of the bar to the year 1854, at which time it consisted of six members, three of the original four present at the organization of the court in 1848 and the addition of George Reed, Nic Wollmer and S. A. Wood. Meanwhile the county had been developing rapidly. The flood of German immigration brought many desirable citizens, some of them persons of considerable wealth and also good business ability. This was supplemented by a considerable Bohemian immigration which settled up a large tract of territory now comprised in the towns of Kos-suth, Franklin and Gibson. All this made for business and in one way and another the little bar had plenty of profitable work.

But 1854 was a tragic year in the legal history of Mani-
towoc. The cholera epidemic which made its first appearance in 1850 and made its presence known by sporadic cases from time to time afterwards, broke out with great virulence that year all over Wisconsin. Among many other deaths were those of Ezekiel Ricker and James L. Kyle within a few weeks of each other, Judge J. H. Colby had died in May of the previous year and E. Holmes Ellis had returned to Green Bay to take up practice there. There were left only two trained lawyers in the county, George Reed and S. A. Wood. George Reed was never, in fact, a general practitioner and to the best of my recollection had ceased even then to maintain an office. He was busy in corporation projects. He had organized the Manitowoc and Menasha Plank Road company, a toll road, and constructed about five miles of it. He had also organized a railway corporation, the Manitowoc and Mississippi Railway Company to which he devoted a great deal of his time, and in addition had established a quite extensive mercantile business which, however, only lasted two or three years.

This situation accounts largely for the fact that at the September term of the court for 1854, S. A. Wood was sole attorney for sixteen of the twenty-three cases on the calendar, and was sole attorney in six of the seven chancery cases at special term the following January.

The rapid growth of the county and village, the breaking of ground for the building of a railway, much talk of other projects, and especially the loss, by death and removal, of two-thirds of the working lawyers of the growing section, soon became known throughout the state, and lawyers looking for a location thought the chances good.

So in the late fall and winter of 1854 came to the Manitowoc bar, L. T. Warren, George C. Lee and Charles H. Walker from outside places, while Edward Salomon, a resident of Manitowoc, later governor of Wisconsin, appears to have come to the bar about the same time, though the date of his license to practice does not appear.

George C. Lee and Charles H. Walker joined their forces and formed what was the first real law partnership in Manitowoc under the firm name of Lee & Walker. The earlier firm of Ricker & Wollmer was in fact only a real estate partnership, Wollmer not being a member of the bar when it was formed.

The supply of lawyers appears to have kept pace with the demand for at the March term in 1855, William H. Hamilton, who to the best of my recollection had previously been located at Racine, Wis., joined the bar, moved his family here and settled down to work in general practice. At the same time came Isaac H. Parrish from some place in Michigan, who also
was enrolled, sent for his family, built what was then a somewhat pretentious home for them and became a hardworking and influential member of the community. I have always remembered Judge Parrish, as he afterwards became, because I was very chummy with some of the boys in his neighborhood, and soon after I entered the profession, I purchased the house he then built in the Second ward and made it my home for forty-six years. At the same term Charles Esslinger, one of the leading pioneer Germans, obtained a license to practice and he and Judge Parrish formed the law firm of Parrish & Esslinger which lasted two or three years.

With the exception of Edward Salomon and Charles Esslinger all these newcomers were trained lawyers and had more or less experience in practice before coming to Manitowoc. All were married men with families, excepting L. T. Warren and George C. Lee, some of them with grown up children. This marked the difference in conditions from the lawyers of ten years previous who were all young men, fresh from their schooling and recent admission to the bar.

L. T. Warren soon cast off his bachelorhood by marrying Harriet Steele, the eldest daughter of Richard Steele, a pioneer farmer at the Four Corners, a very attractive and handsome young woman, sister to the late Mrs. E. S. Bedell of the Rapids.

The inflow of lawyers still continued and at the September term of 1856, John D. Markham and George Rice, both from New York state, and John A. Daniels, made their first appearance. I have no recollection of Mr. Daniels whatever, neither of seeing him or hearing him referred to in later years. I am inclined to think that he must have been an attorney who located in some other county of the circuit and desired to obtain his license, which, of course was operative throughout the circuit.

J. D. Markham became identified with the Manitowoc bar during the whole of his life thereafter, brought his wife and built a home now occupied by his lawyer son, Robert Markham.

George Rice, also brought his wife and family, built a home on Buffalo street, being the building later owned and occupied by Honorable Joseph Vilas and still later owned and occupied by A. J. Schmitz, Esq. He worked up a considerable practice, taking an active part in local matters, and acquired considerable influence. He was then in middle life, and had an interesting family. His two older children were my classmates in school.

In the following year three more lawyers appeared and joined up. At the April Term, 1857, there were admitted
Benjamin J. Sweet, who at once joined with George Rice to form the firm of Rice & Sweet, attorneys-at-law, whose "shingle" remained nailed on a building on York Street, long after both of them had left the city.

William M. Nichols, a former resident and lawyer of Orange, New York, sent for his wife and small daughter, settled down to work for himself and Manitowoc, especially for himself. He built a good home on the site now occupied by the residence of Honorable L. J. Nash, and practiced law strenuously for several years.

A little later came the last of the trio, John R. Bentley, a very able and accomplished young lawyer, who rented an office on Eighth Street on the North Side, and hung out a modest sign to inform the people that he was an "attorney-at-law."

After about two years' practice the firm of Rice & Sweet dissolved, Sweet going to Chilton, Calumet County. In 1860 Sweet was elected state senator, the district then comprising the counties of Calumet and Manitowoc.

John R. Bentley continued in practice in Manitowoc some five or six years and then removed to Sheboygan and continued practice there. After the Civil War he formed a partnership with the late United States Circuit Judge W. H. Seaman, the firm being Bentley & Seaman. Both B. J. Sweet and John R. Bentley became men of national reputation, though not precisely in the field of law.

Now came an ebb in the tide of legal immigration which had been flowing into Manitowoc County. The year 1858 shows no accessions to the bar. The bright prospects of Manitowoc becoming a metropolitan city had faded away to mere shadowy hopes. The railroad projects on which so much depended had come to a standstill, blocked by petty quarrels among the projectors. Financial panics lasting from 1856 to 1859 made hard going in all lines of business and law business suffered with the rest.