CHAPTER VII

WISCONSIN AND THE STRUGGLE OVER SLAVERY AND THE UNION

It comes as a surprise to many people to learn that slavery ever existed in Wisconsin. The Ordinance of 1787 had made slavery illegal in the whole Northwest Territory. But mine operators from the south brought their slaves with them and put them to work.

Henry Dodge, the first territorial governor of Wisconsin, before removing from the south to Wisconsin, is said to have called his slaves together. He promised that if they would follow him to Wisconsin and work for him there for five years, he would give them their freedom.

They came, and he kept his word, according to the story. In addition to their freedom he gave each of them forty acres of land and a yoke of oxen.1

Colonel James Johnson of Kentucky and James W. Shull, founder of Shullsburg in Iowa county, also brought their slaves with them. They worked in the mines and on the flat boats which carried ore to St. Louis, New Orleans and Pittsburg.

Slaves were also brought to the military posts by southern army officers. For five years, from 1828 to 1833, Lieutenant Jefferson Davis kept a slave in Wisconsin as a body servant, alternately at Fort Crawford and Fort Winnebago.

The people of Wisconsin saw little of slavery. But they saw enough to make them hate it. One woman tells how, as a little girl, she heard a slave mother and her sons cry out as they were hurried to the Mississippi on their way to the south. Two of the sons had been her schoolmates.

"That midnight cry," she said when an old woman, "is not yet forgotten. It helped make my father, mother and myself abolitionists."

Many Wisconsin citizens were part of the organization known as the "underground railroad" system, by which runaway slaves were hidden and passed from one friendly hand to another until they crossed the border into Canada where they were free. The Southern representatives succeeded in getting a law through Congress forbidding residents of the free states to help runaway slaves to escape, and requiring them to help the masters to find them. It greatly irritated the people of Wisconsin to have angry masters chasing their property through the state and insisting on receiving information and help. The Supreme Court of Wisconsin expressed the feelings of the people of the state when it declared the Fugitive Slave Law of the United States unconstitutional.2 The court held that the law violated various sections of the constitution including the Fifth Amendment to the constitution of the United States which declares: "nor shall any person be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law."3 The Fugitive Slave law claimed to give to federal officers the power to seize a man who might later be proved free and to take him into a slave state, there to determine whether he really was a slave or not. Free negroes might be picked up and enslaved in this way. This decision is famous as an instance of a state court declaring a federal law unconstitutional under the federal constitution.

The quaint little college city of Ripon, Wisconsin, claims to be the birthplace of the Republican party. Groups of people were meeting all over the north to protest

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1 Article in Adams County Press, Friendship, Wis.
2 In re Booth, 3 Wis. 1.
3 Same, p. 43.
against the extension of slavery into the western territory of the United States. It is said that the first of such groups to adopt the name "republican party" was one which met at Ripon in 1854. Soon after that, at a mass convention of 8300 people in the Capitol Park at Madison, the name Republican was formally adopted.

In general, Wisconsin people were steadfast enemies of slavery and supporters of a union of free men. Those who came from foreign countries looking for freedom and for a peaceful home, thought slavery hideous. The prospect of the breaking up of the nation was a great disappointment to them. They threw themselves whole-heartedly into the struggle against slavery and for the continued existence of the United States.

When the Civil War broke out, Wisconsin accepted a full share of the burden the war laid upon the states. Wisconsin soldiers were always in the thick of the fight. If you go over the great battlefields of the Civil War,—Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge, Gettysburg, Vicksburg, everywhere you see monuments to this and that Wisconsin
regiment. Scandinavian, German and English names mingle in the list of Wisconsin dead. A pile of cannon balls marks the places where every general fell at Chickamauga. The General Hans Heg, whose name appears on one of them, is the same General Hans Heg whose statue stands at the east entrance to the Capitol Park at Madison.

An interesting illustration of Wisconsin spirit is found in the story of the appeal of Mrs. Harvey, wife of Governor Harvey, to President Lincoln, to let wounded and sick Wisconsin soldiers come home to a Wisconsin hospital to be nursed back to health. Mr. Lincoln thought it rather a dangerous experiment. She assured him that the
men would not desert. They were homesick; they needed northern air. Give them a chance to get well and they would return to fight.

Mrs. Harvey was right. Of one hundred considered nearly hopeless before they were sent to Madison, only seven died in Madison and only five had to be discharged. All the others returned to service.