

The Writings of Judge George G. Wright

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THE WRITINGS OF JUDGE GEORGE G. WRIGHT.

V.

ASSOCIATES IN THE LEGISLATURE.

In the senate of 1848-49 and 1850-51, I remember my colleagues Dr. J. F. Sanford (first session), and Dr. J. B. Spees, (second). Sanford was then and after among the ablest and most distinguished surgeons of the West, and was for a long time connected with the medical college at Keokuk. He was a man of keen intellect—the quickest perceptions—confident of his own ability—a ready talker and proud of his profession. Dr. Spees was of most modest demeanor—but little familiar with legislative work—honest and true to every obligation.

Then, too, was Francis Springer. We called him by direction of John P. Cook “Sir Francis Burdette”. He was one of eight Whigs in a body of twenty-six (Cook, Wheeler, Springer, Sanford, Sprott, Browning, Jay, Wright). Had been President of the Territorial Council, afterwards District Judge and President of Constitutional Convention of 1857. [He is] still in life, approaching if he has not reached the fourscore line. Is with his son and daughter in Louisa county part of the time (and there he settled fifty years since), and part with his two sons in New Mexico,—noble children, honoring him and honored by him. Their mother was a daughter of Judge Coleman, a true-hearted old Whig and a splendid gentleman of the old school,—few such in Iowa. [Springer] was even more level-headed than Burdette, safe, cautious, clear-headed, the perfection of the gentleman in all his habits, with few if any enemies, and friends everywhere.

Dr. John J. Selman was president of one session and Dr. Enos Lowe of the other; both from Indiana. I knew the latter in his early manhood and the former in Van Buren county where he first settled,—going to Bloomfield in Davis county of which county he was senator. He was Territorial elector on the Cass-Butler ticket of 1848. Lowe was delib-

erite—slow in his movements—somewhat timid in expressing his opinions—not much of a talker but a good presiding officer. Schuman was quick—struck at random—extreme in his political views—depended upon the “light of reason in the common courts”—was genial—a little erratic in his habits—but withal acquitted himself well. Both had been members of constitutional conventions—Schuman of the Second, and the former—Lowe—member and president of the first.

John P. Cook was the always happy, genial man of the senate. Few men in the State had manners more popular. He was the friend of everybody and everybody was his friend. Always the life of every social circle, he could sing a song or tell a story, whether in Irish, Dutch, or English, and to any man—unless it may have been Judge Joseph Williams, of whom more perhaps hereafter.—An early settler—among the first in the Cedar valley, he was of a family—Dobson, William, Ira, which has most happily impressed itself upon Iowa. His son Edward—Davenport—is among the leading lawyers of the State. John P. was in congress in 1856, I think. Was a leading lawyer and few men were ever stronger, more inviolable before a jury, “for twelve good and lawful men.” Not a student, he nevertheless had a tact and intuitive perception of legal principles and a facility for grasping and grasping facts—and too, of judging human actions—of judging men quite as dangerous an antagonist as one who paid to be more and the affairs of the world less. He loved his work—was attached to good men, and worshipped the large, jolly side of life, and had a most profound contempt for pretensions, slanders or hypocrisies.

Warner Lewis was from Dubuque. A son of a son—Vergil, I believe, was the soul of honor and the English type of the old school gentleman. Not the most “gentlemanly” he was nevertheless always listened to with attention, for his friendships were so sincere, his availability, so admitted. His sincerity so admitted that he always commanded respect. He was as childlike as a “prince of the og, I should” and always stood for home and all that word implies and includes. Adhering to old views and ideas he was at first opposed to any extension of the rights of women—as to separate prop-

erty or the like—but after reflection—and he was a man who listened and thought well—he changed his views and actually aided in the little gained, as will appear in the code of 1851. He was as far from any and all vices as any man then or since in public life. And living to a good old age, he died poor, without (as far as I know) a stain upon his record private or public.

John T. Morton and Evan Jay were from Henry county at different sessions. John liked his ease—preferred a dog or fishing tackle to book or work. Then in the prime of youthful manhood, he was good-looking—indifferent to dress—a royal Whig—worked on committee when necessary—in his place if it was important—and a keen sense of the ludicrous and ready to get any one into a harmless scrape if thereby fun could be found. He is in Kansas now—has been clerk of the Federal court, police judge—and is thus well known. He was ever true to "High Henry" and had scores of friends and especially with the young people—the active, enterprising people of his county.

Evan Jay was in many respects just the opposite. A farmer, he was not much of a farmer, even in his habits and dress—didn't take much to dogs or fish tackle, but more to good nurses and the pleasures of the tavern. And yet he was a shrewd chap—good sense—an able politician—strong arguments, common sense—and able to grasp all sides of a difficult (especially legal) proposition—and draw to his conclusion directly and usually with correctness. Evan was from Indiana, I think, and loved to talk of the early days and scenes of his "Hoosier" life. We have not a greater man—none able to lay up his life after few more faithful to a trust. He was a most jolly laughter—told and liked a good story—not always exactly the most pertinent that it was in color. Had something of the Quaker vein, and thus had additional strength in that county. And yet he was not in reality much of a Quaker, though a good, plain, perpendicular citizen and legislator.

George Hepner—an odd bird from Parke county, Indiana. George took naturally to politics and was a most laboring, old-fashioned Jackson Democrat. Without much education, he

nevertheless, having a good presence and fair assurance, impressed himself well. He was chairman of committee on corporations, and had all the old-time distrust and hostility to everything like exclusive rights and special legislation on the subject of corporations, whether successful or otherwise. I remember that Freeman Alger of Muscatine, also a Democrat, wanted some special legislation to help out some defect in the unsatisfactory working of their ferry privilege at the old town of Bloomington (Muscatine). His constituents were clamorous and he was very anxious. Hepner stood in his way and more than once reported against the relief asked. Time went on, and near the close of the session a very sturdy delegation appeared from Des Moines county (Hepner's county) seeking much the same relief and the committee changed fast. Alger was a plain man—unusually quiet—and had said but little—few thought it was in him, but I never knew any one receive such an unmerciful scoring as he gave Hepner. Enos Lowe (Hepner's colleague) had called Hepner to the chair and took charge of the bill, and Hepner asked for mercy until he could get the floor. It was of no avail. Alger had his revenge. Des Moines county succeeded and so then did Muscatine. Alger ranked very high after that, and especially since it occurred that night that a traveling troupe of burnt corkers were given the use of the Senate chamber (free tickets to Senators and officers!) and in their local hits two of them took off Hepner and Alger to perfection,—imitated them in speech and action (and I always thought that John P. Cook, with possible assistance, put them up to it! They certainly were well instructed).

Hepner lived at Augusta—settled there at a very early day—had had prior legislative experience and stood well with his party in his county. This is evidenced in the fact that he was a member of the First and Second Territorial Council, of the Fourth and Fifth Territorial House, of the First Constitutional Convention and Third and Fourth State Senate. As I have said, he was rather fine looking—dressed well—loved society and was somewhat vain.

M. D. Browning of Des Moines [county] was a member of the Third Territorial House and of the First, Second and

Fourth State Senate [also Fifth]. His ability and happy, cheerful nature no one denied. He was a good lawyer—not so much from reading as from readiness to elicit and apply—almost by intuition—rules and principles to facts. Had the most wonderful tact before a jury—repeated the Bible with more facility than any lawyer I ever knew, and could beat, or circumvent oftener, those of more laborious habits and greater application by his happy manner and adroit statement of his proposition and argument. (Was a brother of O. H. Browning of Quincy in Johnson's cabinet.) He and Billy G. Haun of Clinton in the House, Fourth State Assembly (the latter had a distillery), were much together, for Haun had for himself and friends always a good supply of the "original package." (Boarded at Crummys', I think.)

Browning had a most intense dislike of shams, as also of long-winded and prosy speakers. Always wanted to hurry things to a vote and adjourn. He was a Whig then, afterwards district attorney under Johnson and died a Democrat. Was in the habit of talking to himself—making the most humorous and amusing comments on the speeches of others while they had the floor, and as my seat was next his I could not but hear and enjoy the fun. He was seldom still. If not walking about, he was talking, commenting, making caricatures on paper, moving in his chair—for Milton could not be still—listen quietly. Even if he took part in a debate, he was in advance to himself, amusing his antagonist, spitting out his sarcasm or anticipating his speech or arguments. Some men he loved to guy and put on the rack and would go out of the line of debate to do it. Gen. T. S. Espy, senator from Lee, was an intense Democrat—loved to talk—took part in everything, almost. On stating all his propositions he was wont to say, "I apprehend, Mr. President"—and oh, how Browning ridiculed his "apprehensions" and loved to lay bare what he esteemed and termed his sophistries. Browning was of much more than average ability—not of the best habits—good brain—with study and application he could and would have been, if true to himself, among the strongest and leading men of the State. A Kentuckian—his old notions and love of slavery shadowed at least his political life.

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