

Jean Anton Flittie

(July 4, 1866 – February 15, 1927)



(1907)

.....

Departures [from Norway] swelled into three great waves between 1865 and 1915. A major exodus to America erupted in 1866 and lasted until the Panic of 1873. Corresponding in length to America's business cycles and in magnitude to bulges of young and unestablished adults in Norway's population, the emigration drew upon those who felt uncertain about their future prospects in the home district and who glimpsed opportunity in the news they heard about America. Immigrants during these years filled Wisconsin's western counties and spread across the northernmost counties in Iowa. Even greater numbers, however, rushed northward into the west-central prairies of Minnesota. By the 1870s, as business conditions improved in the United States and Norway's economy slipped into a lengthy depression, "America fever" rose once again and erupted into the greatest emigrant tide of all. Tens of thousands, many of them young products of the fertility surge of two decades before, gathered the needed resolve to uproot themselves in order to pursue better lives overseas. A torrent of new arrivals spilled into the Red River Valley of Minnesota and spread across eastern North Dakota before ebbing as the United States plunged into depression in the 1890s. The last wave of emigration, from 1899 to 1915, sent yet thousands more into western Dakota and remaining lands in mountain states, the Pacific Northwest, Alaska, and western Canada and thereafter into America's burgeoning cities.¹

In the first wave was the Flittie family. Johannes, Anna and their children arrived in 1869 and staked out a homestead of eighty acres in Watonwan County, Minnesota. One son, Jean, born in Norway on July 4, 1866, would become one of Mankato's most prominent lawyers, a valued advisor to local businesses and a federal bankruptcy referee. His path to the legal profession is a text-book example of the lives of many young men in the late nineteenth century: he worked in the family trade, got an education, taught school, read law, was admitted to the bar, and began "practicing his profession," to quote a popular phrase of the period.

Johannes Flittie was a farmer, and Jean Flittie worked on the family farm for years, while attending local school. In 1888, after graduating from Mankato's Normal School, he became a school teacher — a common job for many lawyers before they entered the profession in the nineteenth century. About 1890 he began reading law in a Mankato firm, but wanting a more formal

¹ Lowell J. Soike, *Norwegian Americans and the Politics of Dissent, 1880-1924* 24 (Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1991).

education, he enrolled the Law Department of the University of Minnesota in the fall of 1891, graduating the following June. He was admitted to the bar on June 3, 1892.² Returning to Mankato, he became an associate of Clifford L. Benedict and their firm's business card appeared in the local newspaper:³



For most of the next thirty-five he practiced law in Mankato. Like many recent immigrants, he found a need to participate in community affairs. At various times, he served on the city's library board and park and utility commissions. He also earned a reputation for having an "unusually keen and broad judgment in business matters." Undoubtedly it was this ability that led federal Judge William Lochren to appoint him Referee in Bankruptcy for the Second Division, which encompassed a large swath of southwestern Minnesota, in 1898.⁴ Repeatedly reappointed, he held this post for the next quarter century.

In November 1907, he delivered a lengthy, insightful memorial to Judge Martin J. Severance who died on July 11th.⁵ That year he also subscribed to Albert Marquis' *Book of Minnesotans*.⁶ In his sketch, he listed two hobbies: fishing and gardening. He had a passion for fishing and ten years later

² *1 Roll of Attorneys: Supreme Court, State of Minnesota, 1858-1970* 28 (State Law Library, 2011). At this time, a graduate of the University's Law Department was automatically admitted to the bar.

³ *Mankato Free Press*, April 4, 1893, at 1. It is not known how long this firm lasted. As his bankruptcy duties expanded, he likely spent less time in his private practice.

⁴ *New Ulm Review*, August 3, 1898, at 5 ("Judge Lochren has appointed Frank L. Randall of Winona and Jean A. Flittie of Mankato as referees in insolvency under the new bankruptcy law."). The Second Division covered twenty-one counties in southwestern Minnesota: Freeborn, Faribault, Martin, Jackson, Nobles, Rock, Pipestone, Murray, Cottonwood, Watonwan, Blue Earth, Waseca, Le Sueur, Nicollet, Brown, Redwood, Lyon, Lincoln, Yellow Medicine, Sibley and Lac qui Parle.

⁵ *Mankato Free Press (Weekly)*, November 15, 1907, at 5. A copy of drawing of him in this newspaper, is posted on the first page of this article. His complete memorial address is posted in "Memorials to Judges of the Sixth Judicial District" 13-19 (MLHP, 2014).

⁶ The entry in Albert N. Marquis, ed., *The Book of Minnesotans: A Biographical Dictionary of Leading Men of the State of Minnesota* 165 (1907), chronicled his life to date:

FLITTIE, Jean A., lawyer; born in Norway, July 4, 1866; son of Johannes and Anna (Afdem) Flittie; came to Minnesota with parents, 1869; educated at Mankato Normal School, graduating, 1888, and in Law Department, University of Minnesota, degree of LL.B., 1892; married at Mankato, Sept. 27, 1898, to Elizabeth F. Keysor. Has been engaged in practice of law at Mankato since 1892; referee in bankruptcy for 9 years. Director National Bank of Commerce. Lutheran. Member Masonic order, I. O. O. F., B. P. O. E., M. W. A. Recreations: Fishing and gardening. Address: Mankato. Minn.

published an enthusiastic account of fishing in lakes in Blue Earth County in *The American Angler*, which was subtitled “The Contemplative Man’s Magazine” — an apt description of the author.⁷

Two years later a longer self-sketch was published in Thomas Hughes’ *History of Blue Earth County*.

FLITTIE, JEAN A.— No section in the United States evinces a more virile element of nationality than the middle northwest, to which the Scandinavian peoples have contributed so much in both quantity and quality. In agriculture, the industries, business and the professions, the hardy Norseman has advanced to peaceful conquest with the determination and bravery of the ancient days of war. Minnesota has especially welcomed him with open arms; she has enthusiastically received him because of himself and because of the strength which he brings to her institutions and her citizens.

No better representative of Norway and the Norse character, transplanted and Americanized, no more valuable addition of this nationality to the real strength of a Minnesota community can be adduced than the person of Jean A. Flittie, the well known lawyer, financier and public man of Mankato. He was born in the Fatherland of strong men July 4, 1866, and perhaps the fact that he came into being on the day of America’s independence anniversary may have had a bearing on his future life. His parents, Johannes and Anna Flittie, came to America in 1868 and located on a homestead of eighty acres, in Riverdale

⁷ He wrote:

Mankato is well located as far as good fishing is concerned. It is situated on the Minnesota River near the confluences therewith of the Le Sueur and Blue Earth Rivers. There is excellent fishing in all of these rivers from early May till late in the fall. Small-mouth bass, rock bass, wall-eyed pike, sand pike, crappies, silver bass, channel cats, bullheads and pickerel abound in all of these streams, furnishing fine sport for the angler during the entire summer season.

Near Mankato there are also many beautiful lakes where there is good fishing. Twelve miles to the east are Madison, Duck and Ballantine Lakes. Two miles further north are lakes Washington and George. And eighteen miles east from Mankato are lakes Francis, Elysian and Tetonka, all large and beautiful bodies of water, picturesquely situated in a hilly and wooded country. Perch pike, perch, sunfish, crappies, rock bass, silver bass, small and large mouth bass, bullheads, catfish and pickerel are numerous in these lakes. I have caught wall-eyed pike weighing more than eight pounds, and bass weighing five or six pounds are common enough. No finer sport than this. Jean A. Flittie.

2 *The American Angler* 208 (August 1917).

township, **Watonwan county, Minnesota.** Virtually all the father's life in Minnesota was spent in farming, and he died in 1900 at the age of seventy-eight. His wife and the mother of seven children (all living) survives him, being eighty years of age.

Jean A. Flittie, the fifth child in the family, received his early education at a parochial school attended by children of his nationality in Watonwan county, assisting his father on his farm and later going to the regular district school. His course of four years in the Mankato Normal School was terminated by his graduation in 1888, and then for a period he taught in the village schools of Mayville, North Dakota. But his strong, active, eager and practical mind craved a more varied experience, and as a means toward this end he commenced the study of law in the office of Pfau & Young, of Mankato, where he remained for one and a half years. In the fall of 1891 he entered the law department of the University of Minnesota, being graduated in the following June and admitted to the bar. In December, 1892, he commenced practice in Mankato, and has reached a position of high honor and influence both as a lawyer and a citizen. In 1898 Judge Lochren, of the Minnesota Federal Court, appointed Mr. Flittie Referee in Bankruptcy, and, under four successive re-appointments, he is now serving his tenth year.

Mr. Flittie stands high both in legal and financial affairs, being a director of the National Bank of Commerce of Mankato, and a man of unusually keen and broad judgment in business matters. He is also widely known fraternally, being a member of Modern Woodmen of America and B. P. O. E., as well as Past Master in the Masonic Lodge and Past Noble Grand of the Odd Fellows.

Married September 27, 1898, to Miss Elizabteth Keysor, daughter of Captain Clarke Keysor, of Mankato, Mr. Flittie is the father of one child, Louise Ingrid.⁸

In 1914, he ran as a Democrat in the Second Congressional District. It was an open seat, but the district leaned Republican, and he was swamped by Franklin Ellsworth, a lawyer from St. James:

Franklin F. Ellsworth (Republican).....	18,888
Jean A. Flittie (Democrat).....	10,760
John R. Hollister (Socialist).....	1,326
Paul F. Dehnel (Progressive).....	3,206⁹

⁸ Thomas Hughes, *History of Blue Earth County and Biographies of Leading Citizens* 400 (1909).

⁹ Bruce M. White, et al, *Minnesota Votes* 98 (Minn. Hist. Soc. Press., 1977).

Under the lax ethical standards of the day, he was not required to resign as Bankruptcy Referee.

Henry Castle's *Minnesota: Its Story and Biography*, published in 1915, has the following entry on Flittie and his family. Not surprisingly, it borrows much from the profile in Hughes' county history.

JEAN A. FLITTIE'S chief service as a lawyer at Mankato has been rendered through his occupancy of the office of referee in bankruptcy, which he has held for a number of years. His findings have been almost uniformly satisfactory, and in this quasi-judicial position he has gained the respect and esteem of all who have handled matters under his jurisdiction. Mr. Flittie has been a member of the bar more than twenty years, and has also been an important factor in local civic and municipal work.

Jean A. Flittie was born in Norway, July 4, 1866, of Johannes and Anna (Afden) Flittie. The paternal grandfather, Thron Flittie, died in Norway where he was a farmer. There is a farm in Norway called Flittie, and the family have had their residence there for a number of generations. Both parents were born in Norway, Johannes on July 14, 1823, and his wife on July 24, 1827. He died in September, 1900, and she on September 8, 1909. On July 4, 1869, just three years after Jean was born, the family set out from Bergen, Norway, taking passage on a sailing vessel, and after seven weeks on the ocean landed in Quebec. They came on to Minnesota and the father homesteaded a farm near Madelia, and that farm is still owned by the family. The father was reared in the faith of the Lutheran Church, but later became a Seventh Day Adventist. He was a republican in politics but took little part in public affairs, since he never learned to speak the English language. Though he was a poor immigrant when he arrived in Minnesota, by industry he succeeded in rearing his family in some degree of comfort and fitting them for useful citizenship. There were nine children in all, and the five still living are: Jorgen, a farmer at Brookings, South Dakota; Mrs. Hans Jorgenson, whose husband is a merchant tailor at Mankato; Matt J., living at Battle Mountain, Nevada; Jean A.; and Thron, who occupies the old homestead. One of the sons, John Flittie, who was born in Norway March 22, 1856, and died Williston, North Dakota, January 21, 1913, gained a prominent position in the Northwest. He was graduated from the Mankato Normal School in 1878, and moved out to Dakota Territory soon afterwards. He was a member of the legislature for one term at Yankton, and was the first secretary of state in North Dakota, serving two terms.

Jean A. Flittie received his first training in local schools near his home, and in 1888 graduated from the Mankato Normal School. Four years of his early career were spent in teaching and for two years he was principal of the schools at Mayville, North Dakota. In 1892 Mr. Flittie was graduated in law from the University of Minnesota, and took active practice at Mankato in 1893. For more than sixteen years he has held the office of referee in bankruptcy.

In 1898 Mr. Flittie married Elizabeth Keysor of Mankato, a daughter of Capt. Clark Keysor, who gained his title by service in the Civil War in Company E of the First Minnesota Regiment. Captain Keysor was of an old New England family, and his wife is the granddaughter of a Revolutionary soldier. Mr. and Mrs. Flittie are the parents of one daughter, Louise Ingrid, now fifteen years of age and attending high school. The family are members of the Methodist Church. Mr. Flittie has served as master of Mankato Lodge No. 12, Ancient Free & Accepted Masons, has passed the chairs of Mankato Lodge No. 15, Independent Order Odd Fellows, and a member of the Modern Woodmen of America, and Mankato Lodge No. 225 Benevolent and Proactive Order of Elks.

His part in politics has been as a member of the Democratic party. In 1914 he was candidate for Congress from his district, but was unable to overcome the heavy normal republican majority. For six years he served on the library board, was also member of the park commission, and was on the city's utility commission. Mankato people recognize his thorough public spirit and his usefulness in any responsibility placed upon him.¹⁰

In the early 1920s, now a widower, he developed health problems. In November 1923 he resigned from the bankruptcy court, and Horace W. Roberts was appointed his successor. But he rallied, and for a time returned to work. By 1925, however, his health was in rapid decline, and he moved to Watertown, South Dakota, to reside with his daughter. There he died on February 15, 1927, at age sixty. The evening *Free Press* carried his obituary:

JEAN A. FLITTIE IS CALLED BY DEATH

Pioneer Passes Away at Daughter's Home in Watertown,
S. D., this Morning

¹⁰ Henry A. Castle, *3 Minnesota: Its Story and Biography* 1605 (1915).

EMINENT LAWYER

**Former Referee In Bankruptcy
Here For Thirty Years**

Word was received this morning from Watertown, S. D., announcing the death of Jean Anton Flittie who was prominent as an attorney and referee in bankruptcy in this city for thirty years. The deceased was found dead in a garage at the rear of his daughter's home, where he had been making his home since retirement from active life in this city about two years ago.

Mr. Flittie was for a great many years one of the popular attorneys and public speakers of this city, where he had many friends. He was born in Norway, July 4, 1866 and perhaps the fact that he came into being on America's independence anniversary may have had a bearing on his life. His parents, Johannes and Ann Flittie, came to America in 1868 and located on a homestead of eighty acres in Riverdale township, Watonwan county. Virtually all of the father's life in Minnesota was spent in farming and he died in 1900 at the age of seventy-eight.

Lived in Watonwan County

Jean Flittie, the fifth child in the family received his early education at the parochial school attended by children of his nationality in Watonwan county, assisting his father on the farm, and later going to the regular district school. His course of four years in the Normal School at Mankato ended in 1888 in his graduation. Then for some time he taught in the village schools of Mayville, N. D. But his strong active and eager mind craved for a more varied experience and as a means toward this end, he commenced the study of law in the offices of Pfau and Young of Mankato, where he remained for one and a half years. In the fall of 1891 he entered the law department of the University of Minnesota being graduated the following June and admitted to the bar. In December 1892 he commenced the practice of law in Mankato, and reached a position of honor and influence both as a lawyer and a citizen.

Appointed Referee

In 1898 Judge Lochren of the Minnesota federal court appointed

Mr. Flittie referee in bankruptcy. Mr. Flittie held that position with distinction up to November 1923, when owing to failing health he resigned his position and was succeeded by Horace W. Roberts, the present incumbent.

Mr. Flittie stood high in financial circles in this city. At one time he was one of the directors of the National Bank of Commerce. He was a man of unusual keen and broad judgment in business matters.

At the time of his death Mr. Flittie was a member of the Mankato Odd Fellows lodge and the local Masonic fraternity. He was united in marriage on September 27, 1898 to Miss Elizabeth Keysor, daughter of the late Mr. and Mrs. Captain Clark Keysor. Mrs. Flittie died about nine years ago and is now buried in Glenwood cemetery. Mr. Flittie is survived by one daughter, Mrs. Edward Kroeger of Watertown, S. D. He is also survived by one brother living in Brookings, S. D., and another brother living in Madelia.

Mrs. Clark Keysor, now ninety-four years old, is mother-in-law of the deceased and Mrs. Amy Carpenter is a sister-in-law.¹¹

His death was noted a few months later in the *Journal of the Association of Referees in Bankruptcy*:

JEAN A. FLITTIE

Filling the office of Referee in Bankruptcy for the Second Division, District of Minnesota, since about 1898, Jean Flittie died a few months ago at the home of a daughter. He found it necessary to relinquish the office of Referee about 1923 when he experienced a physical breakdown due to overwork incident to that office. He was reappointed subsequently but unable during the last few years to give active attention to the work.

Mr. Flittie was born in Norway, July 4th, 1866, but when three years of age was brought by his parents to Minnesota where his father homesteaded a farm near Madelia. He was graduated from the Mankato Normal School, and spent a few years in the teaching profession. In 1892 was graduated in law from the University of Minnesota and entered active practice at Mankato in 1893. He was married and the father of a daughter. Mr. Flittie was a member the Methodist Church, a Mason, an Odd Fellow

¹¹ *Mankato Free Press*, Tuesday, February 15, 1927, at 7 (photograph omitted).

and Elk. A Democrat in politics, he was the Democratic candidate for Congress from his home district in 1914. At Mankato he served on the Library Board, and was member of the Park Commission and the city's utility commission Mr. Flittie's long service as Referee gained for him the commendation of the many lawyers who practiced before him.¹² ■

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**RELATED ARTICLES ON
BLUE EARTH COUNTY LAWYERS & JUDGES**

“The Blue Earth County Court House” (MLHP, 2010).

Thomas Hughes, “The Bench and Bar of Blue Earth County” (MLHP, 2014).

“Memorials to Judges of the Sixth Judicial District”
(MLHP, 2014).

“James Brown (1821-1889)” (MLHP, 2014).

William B. Davies (1848-1918)” (MLHP, 2014)

“William C. Durkee (1842-1882)” (MLHP, 2014).

“Orrin O. Pitcher (1830-1902)” (MLHP, 2013).

“Jerome E. Porter (1843-1910)” (MLHP, 2013).

“Lewis Porter (1829-1876)” (MLHP, 2014).

“Horace W. Roberts (1877-1957)” (MLHP, 2014).

“Ira P. Shissler (1844-1903)” (MLHP, 2013).

“Benjamin C. Taylor (1871-1919)” (MLHP, 2014).

“Austin C. Woolfolk (1836-1880)” (MLHP, 2014).

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Posted MLHP: April 1, 2014;
Revised June 29, 2014.

¹² I *Journal of the Association of Referees in Bankruptcy* 86 (June 1927). A memorial by the Blue Earth County Bar Association has not been located.