

JAMES A. BROWN

(1853 -1929)

JAMES A. BROWN arrived in Fergus Falls in 1883, was admitted to the bar three years later, and joined William L. Parsons in a partnership known as Parsons & Brown. This firm was dissolved when Parsons was appointed to the Seventh Judicial District Court by Governor Eberhart in late 1913.¹ For the next seven years, Brown practiced alone. He was one of the most prominent members of the Otter Tail County bar, which before the First World War, was small, numbering about twenty lawyers.² A county history published in 1916 carried this biographical sketch of him:

JAMES A. BROWN.

Among the oldest and best-known lawyers of Fergus Falls, this county, who, besides being a lawyer, is prominent in the industrial and financial circles of Otter Tail county, is James A. Brown, a native of Chautauqua county, New York. The extent of his industrial and financial interests will appear from a plain statement of facts. He is the president of the Fergus Packing Company, president of the Fergus Falls Iron Works Company, president of the First National Bank, of Deer Creek, and president of the First State Bank, of Powers Lake, North Dakota. He is also secretary of the James Land and Mining Company, with property near Brainerd. Moreover, he has been prominent in religious circles in Otter Tail county and is one of the substantial members of the Episcopal church in this section of the state.

¹ See "William L. Parsons (1858-1939)" (MLHP, 2012).

² John W. Mason, "The Otter Tail County Bar" in *I History of Otter Tail County, Minnesota* 351-2 (B. F. Bowen & Co., 1916). It is posted separately on the MLHP.

James A. Brown is the son of Ira B. and Ursula (Alverson) Brown. Ira B. Brown was a native of New York state and a well-known and successful farmer in the Empire state. He was of English-descent. His wife was of Scottish descent.

James A. Brown received his early education in the Forestville Academy, at Forestville, New York. Afterward he entered Hamilton College and was, for several years, a student at that institution, receiving the degrees of Bachelor of Arts and of Master of Arts. From Hamilton College, Mr. Brown went to Oxford, New York, where, for some time, he was principal of the Oxford Academy.

Two years after Mr. Brown's marriage, he came West, locating at Fergus Falls, and three years after settling there was admitted to the practice of law and soon thereafter engaged in the practice with W. L. Parsons as a partner, an arrangement which continued until 1911 (sic), since which time Mr. Brown has been practicing alone.

In 1881 James A. Brown was married to Mai Mygatt, a daughter of Henry and Maria (Tracy) Mygatt. Mr. and Mrs. Brown have no children. Since coming to Minnesota, Mr. Brown has taken an active interest in religious affairs. He is a trustee of the Episcopal diocese of Duluth and one of the members of the standing committee. He was also a delegate to the convention of the Episcopal church in Cincinnati in 1910 and to the convention at New York in 1910. He is the treasurer and a vestryman of the St James church of Fergus Falls. His life is, therefore, a well-rounded one and well divided among the various interests which ought to attract the attention and interests of a normal man living in the average American community. His well-rounded conception of life has made him a most valuable citizen of Otter Tail county, where he is highly respected and where he enjoys the esteem of his neighbors and fellow

townsmen. In the strictest sense of the word, he is a man of affairs and interested in everything which pertains to the welfare of his home city and county.³

In late 1920, Brown hired a young associate, Roger L. Dell, a graduate of the St. Paul College of Law who had just been admitted to the bar. Later they entered into a partnership, Brown & Dell, which ended shortly before Brown's death on May 10, 1929. The following day the *Fergus Falls Daily Journal* carried Brown's obituary:

FERGUS FALLS DAILY JOURNAL
Saturday, May 11, 1929 Page 3

City Mourns Death of James A. Brown

**Leading Attorney and Promi-
nent Citizen For 45 Years,
Dies From Heart Trouble**

Mr. James A. Brown, who has been a prominent and highly respected citizen and attorney of this city for the past forty-five years, died at his home on Vernon avenue at 8 o'clock Friday evening from hardening of the arteries and heart trouble. He was ill about three weeks ago, and while he rallied and seemed to improve for a time, his condition again became worse this week, and during the past two or three days, friends have realized that recovery was impossible.

³ John W. Mason, II *History of Otter Tail County, Minnesota* 58-9 (B. F. Bowen & Co., 1916). Brown, as a financial sponsor of the publication of Mason's two volume history, undoubtedly wrote or edited this profile, and this explains its excessive flattery.

Mr. Brown was born in Chautauqua county, New York, and was 76 years old at the time of his death. He was a son of Ira B. and Ursula Brown, his father being a well known and successful farmer of the Empire state. His father was of English and his mother of Scottish descent.

Mr. Brown was educated in the Forestville Academy at Forestville, N. Y., and afterwards entered Hamilton college, where he received degrees of Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts in the class of 1879. From Hamilton college he went to Oxford N. Y., where he was for some time principal of the Oxford Academy.

In 1881, he married Miss Mai Mygatt, daughter of Henry A. Mygatt and their married life has always been exception-ally happy, they being deeply devoted to each other. They located in Fergus Falls in 1883 and have ever since resided here.

Mr. Brown engaged in the practice of law with W. L. Parsons, the firm being known as Parsons & Brown, and this partnership continued until Judge Parsons went onto the bench in 1911 (sic). He later formed a partnership with Roger L. Dell and the firm was known as Brown & Dell. This partnership continued until very recently.

During all of these years, Mr. Brown was not only a highly successful attorney, but he was one of the most influential citizens of the city and county. He was prominent n business circles and was for several years president of the Fergus Iron Works Company, president of the First National Bank of Deer Creek, president of the First National Bank of Powers lake, N. D., secretary of the James Lund Mining and Land Co., which own mining lands near Brainerd, a director in the Fergus Casket company, and also a director in other business enterprises.

He took an active and intelligent interest in politics but devoted his time and talents to assisting others, rather than in aspiring to office himself. In pioneer times, his friends in 1887 insisted on placing him in the field as a candidate for mayor and he tiled with the late Jacob Austin for that position, following an interesting contest. He was for years chairman of the city park board and devoted a great deal of time and thought to its affairs, being deeply interested in making the city more beautiful and a better place in which to live.

At the outbreak of the World war in 1914, Mr. and Mrs. Brown were in Berne, Switzerland, and heard some of the first guns fired at Mulhouse, Alsace Lorraine. All was turmoil and excitement at Berne. There were a great many tourists in the city, and this naturally added to the confusion. All were eager to get out of the country as soon as possible. Tourists had difficulty in getting checks and money orders cashed and Mr. Brown was named as one of a committee of six to help those who were unable to get money. This committee was successful in taking care of those in distress. Mr. and Mrs. Brown returned from Europe on the Steamer Olympic. It was a perilous journey, as there was constant danger of being blown up by mines. When this country entered the war, Mr. Brown was called to serve on the organization committee in which capacity he served faithfully and well.

He was a leading member of St. James Episcopal church, and took an active interest in church affairs. He was for years trustee of the Episcopal Diocese of Duluth and a member of the standing council. He was a delegate to the National Episcopal convention in Cincinnati in 1910 and to the convention in New York in 1913, and later to St. Louis. At the time of his death he was chancellor of the Duluth Diocese.

Mr. Brown was a man of affairs, deeply interested in everything that pertained to the welfare of his city, his

country, his state and his nation. He was an able speaker, and a loyal and devoted friend, and in his passing the community has lost one of its most highly respected citizens. He is survived by his wife, but no children.

Mr. and Mrs. Brown traveled extensively, visiting Europe on several occasions, and have also spent considerable time in the eastern states in recent years.

Roger Dell continued to practice in Fergus Falls, formed another law firm, and eventually rose to the apex of the judicial triangle. A memorial to him in the Supreme Court on May 31, 1966, described his beginnings:

He was admitted to the Bar of the State of Minnesota on October 7, 1920, and immediately commenced the practice of law at Fergus Falls, Minnesota, as an associate of one James E. (sic) Brown, subsequently becoming a partner of the latter, the firm being known as Brown and Dell. Mr. Brown died a short time thereafter, and Judge Dell continued to practice alone or with part-time associates or assistants Judge Dell [was appointed] to this Court as Associate Justice on January 12, 1953. He was appointed Chief Justice of this Court on July 16, 1953. He terminated his tenure of such office in 1962 for personal reasons.⁴ ■

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⁴ “Roger L. Dell” in *Testimony: Remembering Minnesota’s Supreme Court Justices* 330 (Minnesota Supreme Court Historical Society, 2008).