

William L. Parsons

(1858-1939)

WILLIAM LORENZO PARSONS' professional life may be divided into three chapters. The first ran from 1882, when he arrived in Fergus Falls, to 1913. During this period, he practiced law with James A. Brown, their firm being known as Parsons & Brown, and he also served as a federal bankruptcy referee.¹ The second ran from 1913 to late 1927, when he sat on the district court bench.² The last chapter—retirement—ended with death in 1939.

A history of Otter Tail County published in 1916 carried the following sketch of Parsons:

JUDGE WILLIAM L. PARSONS.

William L. Parsons, judge of the seventh judicial district of Minnesota, was born in Westfield, New York, in 1858. He was educated in Westfield Academy and later attended Hamilton College where he was graduated in 1878. After being admitted to the practice of law in 1882, Judge Parsons came West and settled in Fergus Falls and from then until 1913 he followed his profession in that place. From 1898 to 1913 he was a federal referee in bankruptcy. In April, 1913, he was appointed judge of the seventh judicial district of Minnesota, and in November, 1914, was elected to that office for a six-year term.

¹ See "Referees and Judges of the Bankruptcy Court for the District Court of Minnesota, 1898-2013." (MLHP, 2010).

² Because of the crowded docket in the Seventh Judicial District, the 38th Legislature provided for the appointment of a third judge. 1913 Laws, c. 320, at p. 464 (effective April 16, 1913). This was the slot that Parsons filled.

Judge Parsons was married in 1884 to Mary Moorhead McLane, of Westfield, New York, and to this union four children have been born: Margaret, Ruth, Katherine and Marion. Margaret is the wife of George B. Wright, a lieutenant in the United States navy, and has one child, William Parsons. Ruth married Dr. C. C. Burlingame, assistant superintendent of the Fergus Falls state hospital.³

Parsons ran unopposed not only in his maiden election on November 3, 1914, but also in elections in 1920 and 1926, which is a testament to how high the bar regarded him.⁴

A year after his last election, Parsons retired. The Otter Tail County Bar passed resolutions of gratitude for his fourteen years of service. They were quoted extensively by the *Fergus Falls Daily Journal* in an obituary following his death on January 13, 1939:

FERGUS FALLS DAILY JOURNAL

Saturday, January 14, 1939

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Judge Parsons Died Last Night

Able Jurist and Beloved Citizen
Called Away at
His Home Here

³ John W. Mason, II *History of Otter Tail County, Minnesota* 49 (B. F. Bowen & Co., 1916).

⁴ In the general election on November 3, 1914, he received 18,482 votes; on November 2, 1920, he received 41,370; and on November 2, 1926, he received 35,690 votes. See 1915 *Blue Book*, at 545, 1921 *Blue Book*, at 528, and 1927 *Blue Book*, at 352.

**Practiced Law and Served On
District Bench □ Three
Times Elected Judge**

Judge W. L. Parsons, a prominent attorney, judge of the District Court here for a great many years, early pioneer, and beloved citizen died at his home in this city at ten o'clock Friday evening. He had been in failing health for some time. Death was due to pneumonia.

Judge Parsons was born in Westfield, New York, August 20, 1858 and dies at the age of 80 years, four months and 23 days. He was educated at Westfield Academy and later attended Hamilton College where he graduated in 1878. He studied law and after being admitted to practice came West and settled in Fergus Falls in 1882. He formed a partnership with James A. Brown, now deceased, and the firm of Parsons & Brown was for many years among the most prominent law firms in western Minnesota.

Judge Parsons was federal referee in bankruptcy from 1898 to 1913. In that year the legal work of the District had reached such proportions that an additional judge was needed and he was endorsed by the Bar for the position and appointed by Gov. Eberhart. He was elected judge in 1914, 1920 and 1926, the terms in each instance being six years. He resigned the judgeship October 10, 1927, as the work necessitated his being away from home a great deal and since that time he has continued to make his home here.

Judge Parsons married Miss Mary Moorhead McLane of Westfield, New York, in 1884 and to this union four children were born. They are, Margaret, now Mrs. George B. Wright, wife of

Captain George B. Wright, U. S. N. retired of Orwell, Vt.; Ruth, Mrs. C. C. Burlingame, wife of Dr. Burlingame, former assistant superintendent of the State Hospital here and now one of the leading members of the nation's medical profession, and operating a large hospital in Hartford, Conn.; Miss Katherine Parsons, of Minneapolis; and Marion, now Mrs. James Cowin, also of Minneapolis.

Judge Parsons was an outstanding citizen from the time of his arrival in Fergus Falls. He was a member of the Library Board, the Wright Hospital Board and a charter member of the Chippewa Club. He was one of the oldest members of the Chi Psi Fraternity and never lost interest in his college organization. No citizen stood higher in public esteem.

The funeral will be held from the residence at 2:30 tomorrow, Sunday, afternoon and will be conducted by Rev. Mr. Stickney. The remains will be laid at rest in Oak Grove cemetery.

Following Judge Parsons' resignation in 1927, the Otter Tail County Bar Association adopted resolutions, which will be heartily endorsed by every citizen who knew Judge Parsons. These resolutions read in part as follows:

"We remember with pleasure and satisfaction the many characteristics which, in our judgment, contributed to make you an ideal trial judge and which made of your courtroom a sanctuary of justice where the poor and the rich, the high and the low, the learned and the ignorant, did appear upon a common platform of common justice. You would appear interested and attentive when you must have been bored by unprepared or incompetent statements of law and fact. And in these modern times of resolutions and platforms,

of insinuations and epithets, where even the judges of the highest court in the land, and, we believe, in the world, are referred to with distrust and disfavor, it is as reassuring as it is pleasant to recall that when you went up to the judgment seat or ascended the bench, all men admitted that, while you did not wear an wig or a robe of cloth, you wore the beautiful and glorious robe of righteousness and rendered your tribunal “a fit emblem of that eternal throne of which justice and judgment are the eternal habitation.”

“In your presence, and before the court over which you presided, the lawyers found the practice of the law a comparatively easy task because you were at all times, courteous to the members of the Bar, to the young or new member, and to the old and familiar practitioner without distinction. You furnished assurance to the diffident, and suggested courtesy and consideration as fit tributes of the prominent practitioner. Everybody before you had “his day in Court.” If a lawyer did not know the facts or the law of his case, you would, without infringing upon the rights of the other party and without doing injustice, suggest or supply.

“You appreciated that “the great end of a judicial proceeding is that justice be done to parties litigant” and to the end that this object might be obtained, no duty was too onerous and no labor too great because you also realized that the judicial department comes home in its effect to everyman’s fireside. It passes upon his property, his reputation, his life, his all.

“We do not wish to forget another fact which characterized your administration of justice from the Bench. You applied to the cases, submitted to you for trial, great labor and legal learning. The

result is, as we believe, that your record before the Supreme Court equals, if it does not excel, the record of any other trial judge in the history of the State of Minnesota, considering the immensity of the litigation disposed of under your direction and the extent of the territory of your court. Your record in the Supreme Court will stand as a monument to the many virtues of your judgeship.”

In an editorial in the same issue, the *Journal* mourned the loss of “the perfect citizen”:

JUDGE W. L. PARSONS

The death of Judge W. L. Parsons last evening marks the passing of one of this city’s best and ablest citizens. Fergus Falls, in its sixty or seventy years of history, has had many scholarly men, but in William L. Parsons, these qualities were so combined as to approximate the perfect citizen. Finely educated, he knew nothing of conceit; with a keen sense of humor, he knew nothing of malice. Learned in the law, he used his knowledge to further the ends of justice only. Idolized in his home, beloved in the community, he has lived a life such as few men have lived.

His life work done, and well done, he passes in the full strength of years, peace to his memory.⁵ ■

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Posted MLHP: February 14, 2012.

⁵ *Fergus Falls Daily Journal*, January 15, 1939, at 2.