

**Hear it From the Judge**

Judge Randall J. Slieter

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**Pioneer Battles Over Courthouses & 21st Century Challenges**

*(Submitted by guest author, Judge Steve Halsey, Wright County District Court chambered in Buffalo. In future articles, Judge Slieter will recount the courthouse battle in Renville County)*

Buried in Minnesota history of the last half of the 1800's are not only famous courtroom battles, but also battles over the location of the courthouse within the county. Upon a petition of a sufficient percentage of voters from the most recent election, a vote would be taken on the issue of moving the county seat. These disputes were filled with bribery, theft of records, offers of rent-free buildings, and much intrigue.

Wright County, has quite a colorful history as recounted in Minnesota Courthouses by Victor C. Gilbertson:

Wright County was established and organized in 1855 because settlers in the area understandably felt the nearest county seats of Cass and Sibley Counties were too far away. The new county's seat was at Monticello, formerly Moritzious, which had been settled a few years earlier.

Buffalo tried to obtain the county seat in 1862 and again five years later. This time the offer of a courthouse rent-free for five years apparently convinced the voters to make the change.

A similar dispute took place in Lincoln County in southwestern Minnesota that Victor Gilbertson describes as follows:

In 1881 ...the town of Lake Benton bribed the approaching railroad to run south of the lake rather than north through Marshfield and was thereby able to win the county seat. A structure built on land donated by a subsidiary of the Chicago Northwestern Railroad was rented for a courthouse.

In 1901, the Tyler-Astoria branch of the Northwestern, a new rail line across the northern part of the county, led the circulation of a petition for a vote to move the seat to Ivanhoe where a courthouse site was donated by the proprietor of the town. The petition and vote succeeded and the records were removed at once by special train to a former bar in Ivanhoe which served rent-free as a courthouse for one year. Later district sessions were held at the Wilson Opera House.

Lake Benton naturally appealed; the Minnesota Supreme Court held the election illegal and returned the seat to Lake Benton.

As rural counties see decreased population trends, fewer resources are available and may result in delays and less-frequent judge time in sparsely-populated counties. As an example, the 9th Judicial District consists of 17 counties in the northwest corner of the state, from Aitkin County in the far southeast to Kittson County in the far northwest of the judicial district. The county seats of these two counties, Aitkin and Hallock respectively, are 300 miles apart. This creates challenges for lawyers, court administrators, litigants, judges, and the general public that do not exist in the Twin Cities' courts. It demands efficient use of technology, such as interactive television and interpreters by phone, for some hearings and options to eliminate or reduce travel times and costs. Due to ongoing state budgetary deficits, more changes will likely occur. Stay tuned!