

LA CROSSE, WISCONSIN, 1862-1882;
CRIME, THE POLICE COURT, THE NEWSPAPERS

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ABSTRACT

In its early years, La Crosse, Wisconsin, was a typical frontier river town. Its tough and troublesome citizenry filled the police records with tales of crime and violence. This paper discusses the activities of the police court, the men who served as police justice, and the newspapers' attempts to start a campaign to purge the city of its evil-doers.

The morals of La Crosse declined with the morals of the woods, as the lumberjacks and rivermen came to the city and spent their money on whisky and women. La Crosse had plenty of both to offer. As early as 1857, the residents of the city organized a vigilance committee to deal with its less than honorable segment of society. By 1862, the demand for law and order had resulted in the establishment of a police court whose task was to administer justice to La Crosse's numerous lawbreakers. The police court had the criminal jurisdiction of a justice of the peace within the limits of the city and exclusive jurisdiction of offenses against the ordinances of the city of La Crosse. From 1862 to 1882, four men served as police justices for the city. August Steinlein served as acting justice when the elected police justice could not perform his duties. These men handled over 8,000 cases ranging from the simplest misdemeanor to the heinous crime of murder. The Justice of the Police Court could fine and/or imprison persons guilty of breaking the law or refer a criminal to a higher court if the offense warranted such legal action. Without the police court and the men who served as police justices, La Crosse's transition from a frontier river town to an orderly, law-abiding community by 1885 may not have been possible.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In its early years La Crosse, Wisconsin, was a typical river town. Its location made it a key point on the Mississippi River.

The site of the city is in latitude forty-three degrees, forty-nine minutes, longitude ninety-one degrees, forty-one minutes, and is nearly midway of the Continent. The city stands on the east bank of the Mississippi, 660 miles from St. Louis and 197 from St. Paul. The city of La Crosse, has a waterfront of over five miles, and is built in two distinct districts, separated the one from the other by a mile of low marshy ground. At the northern end of the town, the Black river, after wandering about in numerous sloughs, manages to join the 'Father of Waters.'¹

La Crosse became a "gateway city" through which a multitude of diverse elements passed on their way to populate the great Northwest. Raftsmen from the lumber camps stopped at the city for rest and relaxation on their journey to southern markets. The lumber industry helped give La Crosse its start with logs from northern Wisconsin floated downstream for sawing and for construction into lumber rafts for the trip down the Mississippi.² The morals of La Crosse declined with the morals of the woods; when the men were paid off most of them spent their wages on whisky and in the bawdy houses, with which La Crosse was well supplied.

Travelers of all descriptions stopped at La Crosse on their way up or down the Mississippi on the steamboats. Gamblers, confidence men,

¹Pratt and Owens, La Crosse Illustrated, Historical, Picturesque, Descriptive (Art Publishing Company, 1887), p. 4.

²John Goadby Gregory, ed., West Central Wisconsin: A History (Indianapolis: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1933), p. 601.

murderers and other lawbreakers were inevitably represented among the crowds. Individuals of varying degrees of responsibility or irresponsibility engaged in a wide variety of activities designed to make money. Many of these activities were illegal and brazenly defied good order and decency. The "wide-open" atmosphere of the city enabled crime and vice to flourish practically unrestrained.³

In the two decades since its origin, the population of La Crosse reached 3,860 by 1860 and continued to increase while prospective citizens wrote the La Crosse Board of Trade inquiring about the merits of the city. In 1863 the secretary of the Board of Trade sent the following description of the city to a prospective resident in New York City.

La Crosse; a jail, court house, city lockup, three gambling rooms, six or seven ministers, fifteen millinery stores, one iron cannon, three fire companies made up of first rate boys in the muscle, several marriageable girls, two coffin shops, two ice cream saloons, a few jealous wives and husbands who have cause, four new railroads in contemplation, hogs in the streets, money in the banks, and a good prospect for more. La Crosse is a go-ahead place, smart as a whip, sandy as a red hob;⁴ out of debt, democratically governed, and on the road to prosperity.

While the Board of Trade tried to encourage the prospective citizen to come to reside in the city, the La Crosse Daily Democrat denounced the Northern Union Line for bringing undesirable elements to the city. Thieves, pick-pockets, scoundrels and vagabonds were just a few of the epithets applied to these men that constituted "a portion of the vermine that is always found on the hulks of that line."⁵ Two months later, the La Crosse Daily Democrat urged extreme measures to rid the

³Ibid., p. 601.

⁴Augusta Levy, "Reminiscences of pioneer days in La Crosse, Wisconsin" (n.p., n.d.).

⁵La Crosse Daily Democrat, June 28, 1867.

city of its unsavory element. The paper asked the citizens of La Crosse to lock their doors and fasten their windows. The editor felt that killing several of the "midnight marauders" would have a beneficial effect in ridding the city of their presence.⁶

In the decade of the 1870's the public became concerned with enforcing liquor laws. The license fee that had originally been \$100 was reduced to \$50 in 1862. A demand developed to increase the fee. State and local laws requiring the midnight closing of saloons and the blue law prohibiting the sale of liquor on Sundays were sources of discontent to some city residents. For not all of the citizens of La Crosse felt the need for such laws; as in other frontier communities many residents, both native and foreign born, had left behind the restraints of family and other social influences to which they had been accustomed when they came west. Lumbermen after working in the woods or on the rivers, isolated for months with little recreation, came to La Crosse to frequent its bars and bawdy houses. Factory and mill workers who often worked ten to twelve hours a day, six days a week, looked upon Sunday as a day to enjoy the relaxing atmosphere of the saloon.

Residents of La Crosse also debated the matter of gambling at saloons at almost every election time for more than thirty years. Most citizens wanted to rid the city of the drunkenness, gambling and vice that were evident to everybody, but couldn't agree on how it should be done. One group wanted strict enforcement of the law, but the other group believed such enforcement would curtail the personal liberty of good citizens and that such enforcement was virtually impossible. Although there continued to be demands for the arrest and prosecution of

⁶Ibid., August 7, 1867.

those violating the Sunday closing law, successful prosecutions were difficult because few citizens would swear out complaints or act as witnesses. It was seldom that a jury would convict the accused.⁷

By 1880, the population of La Crosse had grown to 14,505 and its tough and troublesome citizenry had filled the police records with tales of crime and violence. On October 8, 1880, the common council of the city adopted a reform ordinance entitled, "An ordinance to provide for the government and good order of the city of La Crosse, for the suppression of vice, and immorality, and the prevention of crime."⁸

The February 9, 1936 issue of the La Crosse Tribune describes the ordinance as follows:

The first section prohibits gambling by the use of any table or roulette wheel, faro bank, equality, keno, bagatelle or any kind of gambling table or device.

The next provision prohibits betting of any money or property, notes, drafts, checks, chips or any other paper representing money at any game played or playing any game whatever with cards or dice. Penalty for violation of this provision is not more than \$50, while violation of the first section is punishable by a fine not exceeding \$200. Frequenters of gambling houses are also subject to a fine of not less than \$5 nor more than \$25.

Another provision of the ordinance reads as follows: 'No person shall swim or bathe in the Mississippi river, Black river or La Crosse river, within the corporate limits of the city of La Crosse, between the hours of sunrise and sunset of each day under a penalty of not less than one dollar, nor more than ten dollars for each offense.'

Hikers may be interested in the provision which prohibits any person to appear in a public place in dress not belonging to his or her sex, and which is punishable by a fine of not less than twenty nor more than \$100.

The law makers also made provision to protect animals in the same ordinance when they included, 'Any person who shall cruelly beat, expose to the elements without proper covering and protection, overdrive, overload, maim, wound, torture, torment, cruelly beat or kill, or fail to provide the necessary food, water, shelter, or in any manner injure or abuse any horse, ox or other animal, shall be pun-

⁷Albert Sanford and H. J. Hirshheimer, A History of La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1841-1900. (La Crosse County Historical Society, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1951), p. 227.

⁸La Crosse Tribune, February 9, 1936.

ished by a fine not exceeding twenty-five dollars.'

Any person who shall be found intoxicated in any street, thoroughfare or public place, or the use of indecent or profane language, or who shall be engaged in fighting, or who shall make or assist in making any riot, noise or disturbance, or shall countenance any riotous or disorderly assemblage, shall be subject to a fine of not less than one nor more than \$100.

Sounding of steamboat whistles on any steamboat landed at the levee is also a violation of the ordinance, unless sounded as an alarm or signal of danger.

All idle persons, wandering abroad and lodging in sheds, barns, outhouses or in the open air and not giving a good account of themselves are subject to a fine or imprisonment of not less than ten days nor more than six months.

Another section of the ordinance was designed to prevent the interference with the old gasoline street corner lights and reads as follows: 'Every person who shall wilfully, maliciously or wantonly break the glass on any street lamp post or in any window or skylight in the city, or extinguish any lamp or climb upon any post, or destroy, remove, throw down or injure any fence or other enclosure on land, or interfere with any gate, *** shall upon conviction be punished by a fine not exceeding \$100.'

Other provisions of the ordinance prohibited interruption of any private or public school or Sunday school or church or other place where religious worship is held or disturb any other lawful assemblage of people; unlawful use of firearms in cemeteries; penalty for interfering with anything in cemeteries and posting of bills upon any fence or building without the consent of the owner.

An interesting section was that providing for a rock pile and reads as follows: 'It shall be the duty of the chief of police whenever in his opinion a sufficient number of persons shall be in confinement for offenses committed against the provisions of this ordinance or against the provisions of any other ordinance of the city of La Crosse, to provide, with the advice of the mayor, a suitable person as overseer, and also to put balls and chains on each of such several persons in confinement to pounding or breaking stone under the direction of said overseer, said stone to be used in making docks, street crossings within the city of La Crosse.

'It shall be the duty of the mayor, at the expense of the city, to provide all the balls, chains and tools that may be necessary to be used in carrying out the provisions of this section.'

The adoption of this ordinance helped bring to a climax the debate that had been raging for several decades--whether or not La Crosse should be a "wide-open town."

⁹Ibid., February 9, 1936.

CHAPTER II

THE POLICE FORCE

The need for law and order in La Crosse became more and more apparent to the citizenry as the population increased. From 1856 until an amendment of the city charter in 1870 made other provisions, the police force consisted of a city marshal and one constable for each ward.¹ These were turbulent days in La Crosse and in 1857 citizens organized a vigilance committee to rid the city of its unsavory evil-doers. On July 6, 1857, a group of two or three hundred residents rendezvoused at the courthouse square and marched to the St. Charles, a bawdy house, in the northern section of the city. They raided the establishment, driving its inmates into the street by smashing furniture, tearing out doors and windows, and finally setting it on fire.²

Not all of the "respectable" residents of La Crosse approved of the use of extra-legal measures to rid the city of its social evils. Many people felt that it was the duty of duly elected officials to enforce the law, so the city marshal and the constables in each ward constituted the entire police force for fourteen years.

In 1870, the city charter was amended to provide for the establishment of a police force consisting of a chief of police, three detectives, and a number of patrolmen not exceeding one for every 2,000

¹Benjamin F. Bryant, Memoirs of La Crosse County (Madison, Wisconsin: Western Historical Association, 1907), p. 97.

²Gregory, West Central Wisconsin, p. 602.

residents. After ten years the police force numbered the chief and six patrolmen.³ Small in number, the force was kept busy trying to enforce the law and to send violators to the police court.

³History of La Crosse County, Wisconsin (Chicago: Western Historical Association, 1881), p. 501.

CHAPTER III

THE LA CROSSE POLICE COURT

Wisconsin statutes provided for the establishment of a police court and the election of a police justice to handle minor infractions. "In every city under general law, except those having a court or judge possessing the jurisdiction of the police court, a police justice shall be elected every fourth year as other city officers are elected."¹

The four men served as police justice for the city of La Crosse from 1862 to 1882 and among them they handled over 8300 cases. The police court had the civil and criminal jurisdiction of a justice of the peace within the city limits of La Crosse and exclusive jurisdiction of offenses against city ordinances. Wisconsin law provided that a police justice could punish violations of the city ordinances by fine and imprisonment, or both, and sentence the prisoner, if he were able-bodied, to hard labor.

The law also required that the police justice keep a court docket that contained the substance of every complaint, the date the warrant was issued and returned, the plea of the accused, the names of the witnesses, the names and verdict of the jury, if any, and the judgment of the court.² In the records of the La Crosse Police Court from 1862 to 1882, there are 149 cases entered in which a specific charge was not listed.

¹Edwin E. Bryant, Bryant's Wisconsin Justice, A Treatise of Justices of The Peace in Wisconsin (9th edition by Francis A. Darnieder, Chicago: Callaghan & Co., 1924), p. 1717.

²Ibid., pp. 1717-1718.

This appeared, at first, to be a courtesy granted to women, but in actuality the defendant's sex had little or no bearing on whether the charge was listed in the docket.

The records of the court provided the statistics compiled in the appendix of this paper. The frequency of such offenses described as "larceny," "drunk and disorderly" and "morals charges" help to substantiate the picture of La Crosse as a rough and tumble river town.

The dispensation of justice in the La Crosse Police Court was handled by four men of diverse backgrounds. In 1851, William A. Fuller came to La Crosse and by 1856 he was serving as a member of the Vigilance Committee of the 1st Ward. In 1862 he became Police Justice and served in this capacity until his death a year later.³

Harvey E. Hubbard preceded and succeeded Fuller as Police Justice. Justice Hubbard was born March 17, 1830, at Pompey, New York. He studied law, was admitted to the bar in May of 1851, and came to La Crosse two months later. The following winter he became one of the clerks of the State Senate. In the spring of 1852 he was appointed Clerk of Circuit Court. A year later, he became Postmaster, and then won an election for Justice of the Peace. In 1856 he was elected First Police Justice, holding the office from 1856-1858, 1864-1874 and 1878-1882.

Cyrus K. Lord interrupted Hubbard's years as Police Justice by serving in that capacity from 1874 to 1878. Judge Lord was born on June 10, 1811 at East Parsonsfield, Maine. He moved to Platteville in 1838 to work as a lead smelter. He then studied law and was admitted to the bar in 1842. He opened an office at Potosi, Wisconsin, and remained there until 1853. Lord won the election for County Judge of Grant County in

³La Crosse Daily Democrat, December 7, 1863.

1849, and served in that office until his appointment as Register of the land office at La Crosse in April, 1853. He resumed his law practice in July, 1856 and engaged in the lumber business from 1867 to 1871. He served as Police Justice from 1874 to 1878.

William E. Howe was Police Justice from 1882 to 1884. Born on January 17, 1851 at Monona, Iowa, he came to Wisconsin in 1869 to enter the State University at Madison. After graduating from law school in 1874, Howe left for St. Louis, where he practiced law until his return to La Crosse in 1876.

In 1891, Augustas Steinlein became Police Justice after serving as an acting Police Justice since 1864. He was born in Treves, Prussia on September 26, 1823, and came to La Crosse in 1856 from New York City where he had learned the printing trade. Steinlein helped found the Nord Stern (North Star) where he worked for a year before he returned to farming. In 1862, Steinlein rejoined the staff of the Nord Stern and remained until his election as Register of Deeds in 1864. He also held the office of Justice of the Peace, Notary Public, Commissioner of the Poor, and Commissioner of Schools.⁴

These men served as Police Justices in La Crosse while the city grew from a frontier river town full of vice and violence in 1862 to an orderly community of 21,740 by 1885.

⁴History of La Crosse County, Wisconsin (Chicago: Western Historical Association, 1881), pp. 462-473.

CHAPTER IV

THE POLICE COURT AND THE PROSTITUTE

Each of the men serving as Police Justice of La Crosse was, at some time or another, called upon to deal with prostitutes, pimps, and frequenters of bawdy houses. The newspapers in La Crosse frequently urged purging the city of its whores and their procurers; the police department, however, responded with infrequent raids on the houses of ill repute. Though the raids were infrequent, the newspapers usually praised the police for their activities. After a raid on May 6, 1870 on the notorious house known as the "Red Light" the Evening Democrat commented, "let the good work go on and our police force may rest assured that our city will back them in their efforts to drive back the tidal waves of sin that have so nearly engulfed our city."¹

From 1862 through 1882, thirty persons were arrested a total of eighty-six times for keeping a house of prostitution. The La Crosse city directories of the period list the occupation and residence of only seven of those arrested. Edward Pratt, whose name appears frequently in the court records, was a carpenter whose address in 1882 was the northwest corner of Second and Jay. Before then, he resided on Division Street between Second and Third, Division between Seventh and Eighth, and at 66 S. Fifth. Mrs. Kate Champion is listed as living at the northeast corner of Second and Jay in 1881. The 1880 city directory lists Frank La Selle

¹La Crosse Evening Democrat, May 7, 1870.

living at 9 Division Street. James Bigelow lived at Prairie at the end of Eighth Street in 1870, but moved to Third Street between La Crosse and Grove Street in 1873. His last known address was 100 N. Third in 1881. Mike Connolly, a plasterer, moved from the southwest corner of Fifth and Pearl in 1869 to the southwest corner at Fifth and Jay in 1871. In 1873 he lived on Division Street between Sixth and Seventh, and his last known occupation and address were as saloon keeper at Front and Main Street. J. E. Drake, carpenter, is listed as residing at Fifteenth and Main in 1879.

Not all of the city's ladies of accommodating virtue were found in the houses run by city residents. On June 28, 1870 William Wilson pleaded not guilty to the charge of keeping a house of ill fame known as the "gunboat." After a two day trial he was found guilty and fined \$100. He paid the fine and left the city on his boat.²

On March 28, 1871 the Police Court was filled to capacity with an eager crowd listening to the testimony in the Case of the City vs. Mrs. Knoblack, who was charged with keeping a house of prostitution. The defendant declared that she had lived in La Crosse for fifteen years and earned her living by fortunetelling and did not keep a house of ill fame. The next day Mrs. Knoblack was found guilty and fined \$100. The Evening Democrat declared, "let the hands of the police and the law be upheld--let the foul carcass of prostitution be driven from our city--let the tempter be ferreted out and prosecuted, that ladies may walk our streets after night-fall without being insulted, or in danger of their lives."³

There were also houses of ill repute on what was then known as

²Ibid., June 30, 1870.

³Ibid., March 29, 1871.

Barron's Island generally regarded as a dangerous place to visit. On the night of August 12, 1873 three men from the Tiber, a raft boat, visited Barron's Island and roamed from one house of ill fame to another until midnight. On their way home a party of pimps attacked them and almost beat them to death. The La Crosse Daily Liberal Democrat reported the story without any sympathy for the injured parties but demanded that, "that sink of hell, the Island - be at once cleansed of its present incumbents."⁴

The city newspapers continued their campaign against vice and the police kept arresting the keepers and their inmates. Although the fines had increased over the years, this action appears to have had little effect. The gentlemen and ladies of La Crosse who earned their living by engaging in the world's oldest profession continued to appear in the Police Court, to pay their fines and then to go back to practicing their trade. Keepers of places of prostitution paid fines of \$50 each while their employees paid fines of \$10 and costs.

From 1862 through 1882, 131 women were arrested a total of 237 times for being prostitutes, streetwalkers, or inmates of houses of ill fame. Regardless of how often they were arrested, some of the women continually claimed they were innocent. Jessie White appeared in Police Court charged with being an inmate of a house of ill fame nine times from 1877 to 1881. She continually pleaded her innocence and on one occasion claimed to be a married woman and "pure as the driven snow."⁵ Six months later she was back in court charged with the same offense.

On March 11, 1880, the La Crosse Chronicle published virtually a

⁴La Crosse Daily Liberal Democrat, August 13, 1873.

⁵La Crosse Chronicle, March 10, 1880.

register of the city's houses of ill fame.

A detail of police court business for yesterday must of necessity bear the aspect of a directory for a class of business which the Chronicle does not propose to advertize; at all events not while the accepted organ of that line of trade is yet on earth. It became evident to the police and to observant people generally, that the town's quota of females of accommodating virtue was getting a trifle oversized, and an inspection was undertaken. The first haul was made Tuesday and consisted of the miscellaneous riff-raff from the bad end of Jay Street, and numbered five. Yesterday morning the grand rounds were made, and the whole professional mob scooped in. At Jim Bigelo's a keeper and four inmates were found; at J. E. Drake's, a keeper and two inmates; at M. V. La Selle's a keeper and five inmates. For all these the fines were the usual thing, \$50 for the boss and \$10 each for the inmates. Frank La Selle of Pearl Street, Jessie White of Front Street and Mrs. E. J. Rundell in particular pleaded not guilty. This makes a total of nineteen professionals not counting the Smithian ranche [sic] on the island, which is a showing we are not particularly proud of.

The problem of prostitution in La Crosse did not diminish despite the campaign of the newspapers or increased raids by the police. The fines that were imposed were not enough of a deterrent to drive the prostitutes and their employers from the city. The records of the Police Court in the 1890's reveal that prostitution continued to be a problem long after the eighties had come to an end.

CHAPTER V

THE POLICE COURT AND OTHER OFFENSES

One of the duties of the police justice was to conduct inquests in cases of accidental deaths or suicides. The court held five inquests from 1862 through 1882, four of which involved accidental deaths and the other a suicide. One such instance occurred on November 10, 1869. Parker Bliss and Charles Wild came to La Crosse from Winona to sell brooms. Wild left for North La Crosse the next morning leaving Bliss in their room in the St. Charles. That afternoon a hotel maid discovered Bliss' body on the bed with three bullet holes in his chest, one having pierced his heart. An apparent farewell letter he had written was found burned to ashes and lying on the spittoon.¹

Juvenile offenders often appeared before the bench, and their sentences seem harsh compared to contemporary standards. From 1862 to 1882 the Police Justices sent twenty-five youngsters to the Wisconsin Industrial School for Boys at Waukesha after judging them to be vagrants or vicious and incorrigible youth. Not all of the juveniles appearing in police court were sent to reform school, but they were nevertheless punished. On May 23, 1874, Albert Fische, age ten, was found guilty of cutting shade trees at the Third Ward School. He was fined \$100 with Justice Lord suspending ninety dollars of the fine.

In the decade of the seventies the citizens' concern over the closing hours of saloons could have been the result of the increasing

¹La Crosse Evening Democrat, November 11, 1869.

number of arrests for intoxication or drunkenness. More people appeared in police court charged with being drunk and disorderly or intoxicated than for any other reason. In some cases, however, the court made a mistake and acted quickly to correct the error. An article in the Evening Democrat on May 13, 1871 reported the case of John Hamstock who had been fined \$5 for being intoxicated. Actually Hamstock was sick and, not being able to speak English, he could not explain his situation. Upon learning the facts, the court refunded the money.²

Although the police court was quick to correct this injustice, it did not hesitate to fine or imprison those persons found guilty of misdemeanors.

The harvest of petty offenders was unusually large yesterday morning, and justice was served out with a liberal hand. John Cory was requested to serve out \$3 worth of plain drunk on the stone pile, to which he consented with very bad grace. Thomas Brady, his companion on the drunk, continues to be his companion on the rock heap. Robert Coleman completed the trio, and joins the pebble pelters, but not for the first time. Ole Vick got drunk and committed an assault, for the pleasure of which he paid \$5.00 and costs. Jerry Brown, who frequently has business with his honor, came around and paid in his regular \$10.00 for his regular drunk and disorderly.³

Some people in La Crosse felt that the city's hospitality was being abused by many of the residents in the city jail and asked the police department to try to remedy the situation. The police department reacted by buying a dozen new stone hammers which were for use at the stone pile at the corner of Fourth and State streets. The police felt this would cause some of the city's notorious loafers to get out of town.⁴

Occasionally the Police Justice faced an unusual case, such as

²Ibid., May 13, 1871.

³La Crosse Chronicle, September 6, 1878.

⁴La Crosse Morning Chronicle, July 20, 1882.

that of Jessie Allen. Miss Allen was charged with gross, lewd and lascivious conduct stemming from her arrest for violating an ordinance prohibiting a person from appearing in public in clothes not belonging to his or her sex. After an investigation the facts revealed that she had left home to escape marrying a man she did not love. Upon reaching La Crosse, misfortune required her to sell not only her clothes, but to cut off her hair and sell it as well. The La Crosse Chronicle appealed to the community to help her find an honest way to make a living. She soon had a job and new clothing, and the charges against her were dropped.⁵

Not all of the defendants in the police court were charged with misdemeanors; very often the charge was a felony. In those cases beyond the jurisdiction of the police justice, he had to decide whether the evidence presented warranted the accused being transferred to a higher court. If the circumstances required it, a defendant could be sent to another city for his trial or safety. Such was the case of Oscar Wissen-ger who, in the 1870's, had his trial for murder transferred to Viroqua to assure him a fair trial. In another case John Rothbauer, charged with murder in 1865, was taken to Milwaukee by a sheriff determined to keep his prisoner from vigilante justice.

After a murder in 1867, Marcus Pomeroy, publisher of the La Crosse Daily Democrat, took advantage of the event by not only describing the crime but also by denouncing the Davidson steamship line.

This morning Bill Burke, mate of the white collar monopoly steamer 'Diamond Joe' killed one of the deck hands of the boat by shooting him with a revolver. The deck hand had been in the barber-shop of the boat, at the time at the Depot landing in this city, to

⁵La Crosse Chronicle, October 28, 1879.

be shaved. The mate ordered him out, and words ensued. The mate called the deckhand a son of a ----- something, when the man picked up a piece of scantling, as if to strike Burke, who fired at him with a revolver. The first fire wounded the man who fell. . .Burke fired the second time, the ball passing through the heart of the victim, killing him almost instantly. Burke is now in jail in this city.

Between boiler explosions, bed bugs, rotten meat, poor fare, reckless running and a killing scrape every little while, the white collar line controlled by prime swindler Davidson is a rather interesting institution to travel on.⁶

The charge against Burke was amended to manslaughter and he was bound over to circuit court for trial.

On February 5, 1882 two boys found the body of Dennis Donnelly floating in the river. Donnelly was a deaf and dumb wood sawyer who had mysteriously disappeared on November 12, 1881. The old man had been paid the day of his disappearance. He was killed by a blow to the head before he was thrown in the river. On March 1, 1882 the police arrested Thomas Kelly, Donnelly's nephew, along with Ras Williams and Thomas May, charging them with murder. After a hearing Justice Hubbard released May and bound the other two men over for trial.⁷

On May 17, 1882 Kelly and Williams were tried for murder in circuit court. The trial lasted the entire day with the jury being sent out at four o'clock. The spectators expected a verdict of not guilty but were surprised when the jury returned to the courtroom only minutes later. The foreman of the jury read the verdict and upon hearing the not guilty, both men rose, waved their arms and made a break for the door. The Chronicle reported the verdict and added "both are enjoying their liberty in their usual haunts."⁸

⁶La Crosse Daily Democrat, June 18, 1867.

⁷La Crosse Chronicle, March 1, 1882.

⁸Ibid., May 17, 1882.

Seven men were charged with murder in the city's police court between 1862 and 1882. All of the defendants except Thomas May were bound over for trial in a superior court.

CHAPTER VI

THE NEWSPAPERS AND THE POLICE COURT

The newspapers in La Crosse frequently carried on a campaign for law and order, and occasionally printed information designed to aid the people of the city in combatting crime.

On October 26, 1863 the Daily Democrat cautioned its readers against burglars. The paper urged the residents of La Crosse to spread newspapers on the floor, near the entrance to the room. The lightest step would rustle the papers and wake the soundest sleeper. The editor asserted that this method had saved him twice and could be beneficial to all who followed his suggestion.¹

During the Civil War, everyone's attention was focused on the news from the battlefield, but the Daily Democrat kept the people of La Crosse informed as to what was occurring in the city as well. In 1863 it printed an article describing the inmates of the jail as horse thieves and house breakers, but assured the townspeople that they were all strangers in the city.²

Although the Daily Democrat printed advice to deter criminal activity, accused the Northern Union Steamship Line of importing unsavory characters to the city and continually advocated ridding La Crosse of its lawbreakers, it also asked the citizenry to provide some excitement for the town. "Won't somebody due [sic] us a kindness by having a fight, a

¹La Crosse Daily Democrat, October 26, 1863.

²Ibid., August 26, 1863.

foot race, a runaway and grand smashup, an elopement, a marriage among the big wigs. Somebody run off with another man's wife, or some man's wife go with 'any other,' shoot an Indian or raise the devil generally, just to relieve the outrageous monotony which just now exists."³

Marcus Pomeroy, editor and publisher of the Daily Democrat, often used local news to express his bigotry. In reporting the murder of one Tom, a Negro, by Phillip Hardin, Pomeroy referred to Hardin as a "nigger." The accused pushed Tom into the Mississippi from the deck of the steamer Chippewa. Tom drowned and Hardin was lodged in jail awaiting a hearing before Justice Hubbard.⁴

The population of the city jail in January, 1868 provided Pomeroy with another opportunity to express his feelings towards Negroes. "There are eighteen prisoners in jail in this city -- 10 niggers and 8 whites. The colored population seem to be well represented in proportion to the colored population here. How about these good citizens and 'brothers,' friendly 'Abes?'"⁵

The Daily Democrat reported the cases in the police court in such a manner as to discredit the Negro.

The cases about the Police Court this morning were highly colored. The first case was that of Mrs. Campbell (colored) who had gently chastised Mr. Campbell, (colored) her husband with an axe. It took three officers to arrest her. She was sent up for a week. She told her husband that he must pay her fine or she would make it warm for him, and the poor cuss is sawing wood today to get money enough to pay her fine, that she may come back to him. The case of Oleson and Toleffson against Tom Powell (colored) who stole a lot of groceries, and an overcoat from the plaintiffs store, on the 26th of last month, came up for trial, the thief having been caught on Saturday. He has been up before on similar charges. Another darkey was implicated in

³Ibid., August 28, 1863.

⁴Ibid., July 2, 1867.

⁵Ibid., January 8, 1868.

having hid the stolen goods. The two were held in the sum of \$1000 to appear at the spring term of the circuit court.⁶

The La Crosse Chronicle tended to report the news from police court in a humorous vein as compared to the style of the Daily Democrat.

Tom Mulcare was mulcted in a fine of ten dollars in the Police Court yesterday morning for fighting, and having no money to pay, he was remanded to jail. Last evening his better half came up to police headquarters to pay up and get Tom out, accompanied by a steamboat fireman from whom she had doubtless borrowed the money. Her escort was decidedly drunk, so drunk that when he attempted to sit down in a chair to talk the matter over with Chief Hatch he missed the chair and sat down on the sidewalk, the chief graciously helped him up, received the money for Tom's fine and invited Mrs. Mulcare and her friend over to jail to see Tom released. 'They came and saw.' Tom is out, but the fireman languishes in his place to sober off and reflect upon the mutability of mundane affairs.⁷

An increasing number of arrests for being intoxicated led the La Crosse Chronicle to report that many of those arrested were well supplied with whisky. The arrested gave up their valuables without complaining but pleaded that they be allowed to take their whisky to jail with them, "to solace the lonely hours of forced confinement."⁸

On other occasions, the Chronicle discussed the same offense with fewer words. "James Coyle, the same old James with the same old drunk. Twenty days labor at the lime stone ledge."⁹ A similar case was reported, "Andy Howard will pursue geological studies on the rock pile for eight days, not having sufficient wealth to pay his fine for being drunk and disorderly."¹⁰

The inebriated provided the source for most of the barbed humor

⁶Ibid., March 14, 1870.

⁷La Crosse Chronicle, August 1, 1878.

⁸Ibid., August 4, 1878.

⁹Ibid., August 20, 1878.

¹⁰La Crosse Morning Chronicle, August 12, 1882.

of the Chronicle. The religious spirit of Christmas helped provide the December 24, 1882 Morning Chronicle with the inspiration for the following article:

Edward Kuehn was picked up by the police, barefooted, bareheaded, shirtless, drunk as a lord and pious as a priest when brought into court. He went on his knees in adoration at the shrine of justice. The presiding deity yanked him to his feet in two seconds by the power of an emphatic word spoken in due season and sent him to his secluded cloister six days.

The newspapers of the period, regardless of how they presented the news, did warn the community of the dangers they faced from lawbreakers and urged the residents and police to take action against them. Although their articles were sometimes filled with contradiction and bigotry, the newspapers influenced the establishment of law and order in the community.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The rough and tumble years of La Crosse were drawing to a close in the 1880's. The violence of the frontier river town was shifting to a new frontier where the process of establishing law and order would be repeated. La Crosse passed through an era in which vice and disorder were commonplace, and the accumulation of money by less than honorable means was a tolerated, if not an accepted, way of life. The location of the city attracted a multitude of diverse elements, including a segment of American society that thrived on lawlessness. Prostitutes, pimps, gamblers and desperadoes converged on the city in its early years. The activities of these social misfits caused the respectable citizenry of La Crosse to demand effective and efficient law enforcement.

By 1885, the city had grown to 21,740 and had become a more law-abiding community. Law enforcement had progressed from the days of the vigilance committee to the formation and modernization of the police force. In the sixties and seventies, while felons practiced their trade virtually unmolested, the police force busied itself arresting drunks, vagrants and other petty offenders. It appears that concern for law and order and the "Puritan conscience" of the East had little influence in La Crosse until the frontier moved further west.

This lack of concern for law and order was noticed by the newspapers of the community and they tried to create a desire for an orderly, law-abiding city by reporting the numerous crimes and urging the residents

to purge La Crosse of its vice and violence. Although the newspapers initiated several campaigns to drive the prostitutes and their keepers from the city, they showed little anxiety over the increasing number of arrests for drunkenness, which was a major problem. The police force responded to the outcry from the press by conducting infrequent raids on the numerous houses of prostitution in the city. As the years passed the police department arrested thousands of lawbreakers and sent them to the Police Court for justice.

The La Crosse Police Court dealt with over 8,000 cases and administered justice to those guilty of breaking the law. It appears that in some cases the administration of justice was nothing more than punishment--such as the case of John Hamstock, who being unable to speak English, could not tell the judge he was ill and was fined \$5 for drunkenness.

Whether the men serving as Police Justice of La Crosse administered justice or merely punished the accused, without them the community may not have made the transition from a "wide-open town" to a respectable midwestern city. The police, the newspapers and men such as Fuller, Hubbard, Lord, Howe and Steinlein all played an important role in shaping the history of La Crosse from 1862 to 1882.

APPENDIX

Alphabetical list of the type and frequency of offenses in the La Crosse Police Court gathered from the Police Court Dockets, 1862-1882

Offense	Frequency
1. Abandonment of children	4
2. Abusing a dumb animal	1
3. Abusing a horse	2
4. Abusing family	1
5. Accessory to larceny	2
6. Adultery	13
7. Aiding and abetting a larceny	1
8. Altering and destroying marks on saw logs	1
9. Appearing in men's clothes	1
10. Armed with a dangerous weapon	7
11. Arson	7
12. Assault	45
13. Assault and battery	255
14. Assault with a deadly weapon	10
15. Assault with intent to do great bodily harm	17
16. Assault with intent to kill	51
17. Assault with intent to maim	1
18. Assault with intent to ravish	3
19. Assault with intent to rob	7
20. Assault with threat of violence	1
21. Attempt to commit rape	6
22. Attempted arson	1
23. Avoiding revenue laws	1
24. Bastardy	25
25. Bathing in the river	3
26. Beating with a poker	1
27. Begging	7
28. Bigamy	4
29. Breach of the peace	11
30. Breaking a street lamp	1
31. Breaking and entering	2
32. Breaking and throwing a fence	1
33. Breaking glass of the city lockup	1
34. Breaking jail	1
35. Building a fire on a macadamized street	1
36. Burglary	54
37. Buying and receiving stolen property	1
38. Carrying concealed weapons	22
39. Catching fish with a seine net	1
40. Cattle and horses running at large	3

41.	Committing a misdemeanor	4
42.	Committing a nuisance	7
43.	Common drunkard	13
44.	Common prostitute	5
45.	Contempt of court	1
46.	Counterfeiting	2
47.	Crime against nature	1
48.	Cruelly beating a mule	1
49.	Cruelty to a horse	1
50.	Cruelty to animals	5
51.	Cutting anchor line to a steam boat	1
52.	Cutting shade trees	1
53.	Depositing the body of a dead horse near a resident's home	1
54.	Discharging firearms in the city	4
55.	Disorderly	785
56.	Disorderly conduct	429
57.	Disorderly house	4
58.	Disorderly wife beating	1
59.	Disturbing public school	1
60.	Disturbing wedding party	1
61.	Dogs running at large	2
62.	Driving horse on sidewalk	2
63.	Driving over street railway bridge	3
64.	Dropping slabs on street	2
65.	Drunk	90
66.	Drunk and disorderly	1,448
67.	Drunk and driving	3
68.	Drunkenness	109
69.	Embezzlement	19
70.	Employing hotel runners without a license	8
71.	False fire alarm	1
72.	Fast driving	13
73.	Fast riding	3
74.	Felonious assault	3
75.	Fighting	226
76.	Forgery	30
77.	Fornication	4
78.	Frequenting a house of ill fame	18
79.	Fugitive from justice	1
80.	Gambling	62
81.	Grand larceny	3
82.	Gross lewdness	1
83.	Having quails in possession	1
84.	Horses running at large	10
85.	House breaking	4
86.	Illegal voting	2
87.	Immorality	2
88.	Impersonating a police officer	1
89.	Improper conduct	191
90.	Incorrigible and vicious conduct	20
91.	Indecent assault	1
92.	Indecent conduct	1
93.	Indecent exhibition of person	1
94.	Indecent exposure	6

95.	Inhumanly injuring and abusing a horse	1
96.	Inhumanly injuring and abusing two horses	1
97.	Injury to a horse	2
98.	Injury to building	1
99.	Injury to personal property	1
100.	Injury to plants	1
101.	Inmate of a house of ill fame	210
102.	Inquest into an accidental death	4
103.	Inquest into a suicide	1
104.	Intoxicated	1,302
105.	Intoxicated and disorderly	447
106.	Keeping a disorderly house	6
107.	Keeping a gambling house	21
108.	Keeping a gambling room	11
109.	Keeping a gaming house	1
110.	Keeping a house of ill fame	79
111.	Keeping a house of prostitution	5
112.	Keeping a place of prostitution	1
113.	Keeping a saloon open after midnight	41
114.	Keeping an assignation house	1
115.	Kidnapping	1
116.	Killing animals	1
117.	Killing, butchering or slaughtering within the city	5
118.	Larceny	693
119.	Lascivious cohabitation	11
120.	Leaving a horse and wagon on the sidewalk	1
121.	Lewd and indecent behavior	2
122.	Lewd and lascivious behavior	1
123.	Lewd and lascivious cohabitation	6
124.	Lewd and lascivious conduct	3
125.	Lewd and lascivious in speech	6
126.	Lewd and lascivious in speech and behavior	3
127.	Lewd conduct	2
128.	Making a fire in the street	1
129.	Making threats against a person and property	8
130.	Malicious injury to animals	2
131.	Malicious injury to house and property	1
132.	Malicious injury to property	6
133.	Malicious injury to public property	2
134.	Malicious mischief	1
135.	Manslaughter	1
136.	Murder	7
137.	Obstructing building of sidewalks	3
138.	Obstructing pounding of cattle	1
139.	Obstructing sidewalks	3
140.	Obstructing streets	2
141.	Obtaining goods under false pretenses	1
142.	Obtaining money or property under false pretenses	2
143.	Obtaining money under false pretenses	13
144.	Obtaining one (1) keg of beer under false pretenses	1
145.	Obtaining property under false pretenses	5
146.	Overdriving	1
147.	Peace bond	11
148.	Peace warrant	31

149.	Peddling without a license	1
150.	Perjury	3
151.	Permitting a billiard table to be used for larceny	1
152.	Permitting a gambling room	1
153.	Permitting a nuisance on the premises	1
154.	Petition for discharge from jail	4
155.	Petty larceny	14
156.	Polygamy	1
157.	Procuring miscarriage	3
158.	Prostitution	26
159.	Rape	3
160.	Receiving stolen goods	1
161.	Receiving stolen money	3
162.	Receiving stolen property	2
163.	Refusing to aid an officer	1
164.	Refusing to assist the city marshal	2
165.	Refusing to work on stone piles	1
166.	Releasing cattle from the pound	1
167.	Removing ice from the Mississippi river	1
168.	Resisting an officer	13
169.	Riot and assault	1
170.	Robbery	7
171.	Rowdy	1
172.	Running a horse in the streets	1
173.	Search warrant	73
174.	Seduction	11
175.	Selling beer to minors	1
176.	Selling beer while intoxicated	1
177.	Selling beer without a license	1
178.	Selling bogus bonds	2
179.	Selling goods place to place without a license	1
180.	Selling intoxicating liquor on Sunday	3
181.	Selling intoxicants to minors	1
182.	Selling liquor to Indians	2
183.	Selling liquor to minors	9
184.	Selling liquor without a license	15
185.	Selling prize packages	2
186.	Selling putrid or tainted meat	2
187.	Selling unmeasured wood	10
188.	Selling unweighed meat	1
189.	Selling wood without it being inspected	2
190.	Shooting firearms in the city	25
191.	Shooting or maiming a horse	1
192.	Slander	1
193.	Slaughtering within the city	10
194.	Stealing from the person	2
195.	Street walkers	1
196.	Theft	4
197.	Threatening to do bodily harm	24
198.	Threatening to wound, kill or murder	2
199.	Threatening with a revolver	1
200.	Threats of personal violence	19
201.	Threats to destroy property	1
202.	Threats to do bodily injury	2

203.	Threats to kill	6
204.	Throwing offal in alley	3
205.	Tramps	7
206.	Transporting a pauper to the city of La Crosse	1
207.	Trespassing	2
208.	Unknown charges (charge not specified in records)	149
209.	Unlawfully procuring, counseling and advising illegal voting	1
210.	Using abusive language	19
211.	Using insulting language	2
212.	Using loud, boisterous and insulting language	35
213.	Using obscene language	4
214.	Using profane and obscene language	5
215.	Using tires less than three (3) inches wide	2
216.	Using vulgar and obscene language	26
217.	Vagrancy	503
218.	Vagrant youth	14
219.	Vicious and disorderly conduct	1
220.	Vicious and incorrigible conduct	1
221.	Vicious conduct	2
222.	Violating bridge ordinance	18
223.	Violating cemetary ordinance	1
224.	Violating city license law	1
225.	Violating dog laws	32
226.	Violating fire ordinance	4
227.	Violating game laws	3
228.	Violating ordinance concerning offenses in the nature of misdemeanors	3
229.	Violating ordinance providing for the good order and government of the city of La Crosse and for the suppression of vice and misconduct	3
230.	Violating ordinance relating to imposing fines and penalties for miscellaneous purposes	24
231.	Violating peace bond	1
232.	Violating state revenue laws	1
233.	Violating wood ordinance	1
234.	Visiting a house of prostitution	2
235.	Willful and malicious destruction of property	1
236.	Willful injury to personal property	1
237.	Willful injury to property	1
238.	Willful and maliciously killing a dog	1
239.	Wrongful taking and use of sixty (60) lbs. of wheat	1

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