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Judge William T. Lafferty, The Lawyer

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In this brief sketch of the life and career of the late Judge W. T. Lafferty, a distinguished and honored son of Harrison County, Kentucky, I shall relate only some of the things achieved by him in his earlier life, and before the call came for his services and talents in a larger sphere.

Judge Lafferty was born in Harrison County March first, 1856, and was a son of John A. and Frances Elizabeth (Henry) Lafferty, both natives of Harrison County. The father espoused the cause of the Confederacy and enlisted in Company K of the Ninth Kentucky Cavalry under the command of Colonel W. C. P. Breckenridge. He remained in the command throughout the war, and his services were distinctly marked for courage and gallantry.

Judge Lafferty was the oldest of twelve children and received his education in the Cynthiana Academy, Smith's Classical Institute, and the Kentucky Agricultural and Mechanical College, now the University of Kentucky. He was admitted to the practice of law at the Cynthiana Bar in 1879. In the summer of 1882 he was nominated by his party for the office of County Attorney, and the nomination being equivalent to an election, he was elected the following fall without opposition. He served with credit in that capacity until 1886, at which time he was nominated by his party for the office of County Judge, defeating, by a substantial majority, one of the leading, most popular and widely known democrats in the county. When elected County Attorney in 1882, he formed a partnership for the practice of law with Senator M. C. Swinford, who succeeded Judge Lafferty as County Attorney, and who later served his county in both branches of the Legislature. This partnership continued until Judge Lafferty was elected county judge. Judge Lafferty, at the instance of his many friends, made several political races and although many times pitted against strong opposition, was never defeated, a record never enjoyed by any other citizen of the county.

When Judge Lafferty took charge of the office of county judge the fiscal affairs of the county were in a most confused...
state, no fixed method or system whatever being followed in
the management of any of the departments of the county gov-
ernment, and its affairs generally were administered in a rather
crude and unbusinesslike manner; and Judge Lafferty set out
at once to put the house in order, as it were, and the result was
his administration of this important office was distinguish-
abled by more genuine, economical reforms and progress
than any previous administration of the office in the his-
tory of the county. Space will not permit a detailed account
of the many things accomplished by him, but only a few in-
tances are recounted to illustrate the great energy, thought
and labor put into this work, to perfect an economic system for
the administration of all of the affairs of the county, to correct
abuses, and to carry his county forward with the march of pro-
gress marking the times, without imposing additional taxes on
the people; and he actually accomplished these things, not only
without increased taxation; but instead by saving to the people
hundreds of dollars that were being spent without proper, or
due return therefor.

At that time the county had no poor house or infirmary for
the maintenance of the destitute of the county, except small
and crude quarters in the extreme northern end of the county
wholly inadequate for the purpose. The result was that these
unfortunate people were being maintained largely by special
allowance to each individual from the county funds made pay-
able to persons for their benefit, often who had no special in-
terest in them, and who would not infrequently forget to apply
the funds, or at least a part of same, for the purpose intended.
Consequently, the poor were being neglected, and the county’s
funds wasted, and misappropriated. Judge Lafferty saw this
situation and set about at once to correct it. He located a farm
admirably suited for a county infirmary consisting of two hun-
dred acres one mile south of Cynthiana on the Cynthiana and
Paris turnpike, then owned by Joseph McClintock. He secured
an option on the farm, placed the situation before his fiscal
court, and the court readily adopted his view and purchased
the farm.

The old residence was converted into quarters for the super-
intendent and servants, and a number of neat cottages erected
in orderly manner, ample to take care of the needs of that time,
and of many years to come. Some of the magistrates strongly opposed the cottage plan, and urged the erection of one large building. Judge Lafferty vigorously opposed this plan from the standpoint of economy, as it would incur a much larger expenditure, and because he preferred the cottage plan as a matter of choice. He induced the court to adopt his plan, and time has proven his vision was clear, as most all public institutions of this kind are now being established on this plan. It does not take argument to convince that this one reform has saved the county hundreds and perhaps thousands of dollars.

Judge Lafferty found the finances of the county in a somewhat chaotic state. The indebtedness was over $200,000.00, most of which was in the form of notes held by various citizens against the county bearing eight per cent interest. He immediately set out to get this debt in better shape, and especially, to reduce the cost of carrying same, and consequently took the necessary steps to procure a bond issue. After this was done the Fiscal Court appointed Judge Lafferty special commissioner to sell the bonds. These were the first bonds ever floated by the county, and conditions then prevailing were not calculated to make the sale easy, in fact the bankers here told the judge a sale would be impossible at that time, but notwithstanding these conditions he effected a sale of the entire issue. The bonds bore five per cent interest. So by this transaction alone there was saved for the county three per cent on $200,000.00 for a period of years. At the same time he provided a sinking fund to retire the bonds as they matured, and the result was that this indebtedness was gradually paid off without any perceptible increase in taxes.

The old county jail was insecure and had practically outlasted its usefulness, and was replaced by a modern structure at his instance and under his supervision, and which is still entirely adequate for the needs of today.

The next public improvement to which Judge Lafferty turned his attention was public roads and bridges. Then only the main thoroughfares and more important ways were macadamized, and very few bridges spanned the numerous streams of the county. He saw the inconvenience resulting to the people from this condition, and successfully urged upon the Fiscal Court a plan of general road and bridge building, using for
the success of his plan much of the sound argument we have heard repeated so often in recent years in behalf of good roads. This resulted in the construction of many miles of turnpike road and numerous bridges during his administration, a distinct asset to the county, as well as a great convenience to the people.

Besides these things during his administration as judge of the county, Judge Lafferty brought about many other reforms and beneficial, progressive changes in the management of the county’s affairs, demonstrating unusual executive ability, clear vision, and advanced ideas of progress and improvement.

At the close of his second term as county judge in 1893 he voluntarily retired from office to practice his profession, and formed a partnership with his father-in-law, Hon. A. H. Ward, a distinguished lawyer of state wide reputation, and for many years the nestor of the Cynthiana Bar. This partnership continued until 1896, when Mr. Ward retired from the active practice. The writer entered the office of Judge Lafferty in the summer of 1897 to read law under his guidance, and was admitted to the bar in 1898. He generously gave me space in his office while I was passing through the terrible season known to young lawyers as the “Starvation period,” and in 1899 he offered to share his practice with me in a partnership which was then formed, and continued until 1906, a friendly dissolution taking place then because of the election of the writer to the county judge’s office.

Judge Lafferty retired from political office because he preferred the independence and freedom in the practice of his profession to political preferment, and he quit office in 1893 with a fixed purpose not to again aspire, but in the fall of 1898 a genuine call was made on him by representative and leading democrats from all parts of the county to make the race for the democratic nomination for the office of representative to the Legislature from this county, the nomination, as already stated, being equivalent to election, on account of the large democratic majority in the county. He made this race very much against his personal inclination and desire, purely from a sense of duty, and out of gratitude for past favors conferred by his party. The contest was heated, and against a popular democrat, who was then a member of the Legislature and seeking endorsement of his course by way of re-election, but not with-
standing this, Judge Lafferty was nominated by a large majority, and in this office, as in others, he served with distinction, and with entire satisfaction to his constituents. It will be remembered that the session of the Legislature in which he served determined the memorable contest between Governor William Goebel and W. S. Taylor for the office of the governor of Kentucky. Judge Lafferty was not in accord with all of the principles of Governor Goebel, and especially was he opposed to the alleged methods practiced by some of his friends and followers in the election. However, after the cowardly assassination of Goebel, further consideration of the contest was precluded, and he voted with a majority of the Legislature to seat Governor Goebel. He felt that no other course would sufficiently resent the terrible thing that had happened, and to place a man in the office of chief magistrate of the State whose followers sought to place him there by assassinating his opponent would be a disgrace to the State from which it would never recover. At the expiration of his term he declined to stand for re-election, although importuned so to do, and he would never afterwards consider holding public office; yet he manifested the keenest interest in politics, as well as every other worthy movement or cause affecting the public weal, and actively used his influence at all times to eliminate corrupt practices in politics, and to bring about the selection of men best fitted for public office.

As previously stated, Judge Lafferty had no desire to hold public office, yet if he had chosen a political career, with his ability, courage, strong convictions, clean character, integrity and magnetic personality, he could have been a leader, and could have attained the highest rank in the political affairs of his State.

In 1906 Judge Lafferty formed a partnership with Judge Wade H. Lail, the son of Judge George W. Lail, who succeeded Judge Lafferty in the office of county judge. This partnership continued until Judge Lafferty moved to Lexington.

Another matter of public importance to this community was the fight against the saloon, and Judge Lafferty threw his energy and efforts into this contest without reserve, and as a result of his skill and leadership Harrison County was the first county in the bluegrass section, and one of the first in the State to
abolish this evil. There were several men engaged in the business who were very well thought of and had a host of friends, many of whom were influential. The contest, therefore, was heated and bitter, and friendships and ties were broken which had existed for years. Judge Lafferty was unanimously chosen by the temperance forces to take charge of and manage the campaign, a position which it took a great deal of courage to accept under the circumstances. As the liquor question had not been previously agitated, many of the liquor men had supported Judge Lafferty in his political campaigns, and he also had many clients among them and their friends, but when the question was put up to him he did not hesitate to take his stand on the side of right and temperance, although he knew well it would lose him many friends, and much professional business. Aside from the loss of friends and clients, due to his kind and gentle nature, and warm feeling for his fellowman, it was very painful to him to take a stand that would do apparent injury to any one, and especially those who had been his friends, but in this as in everything else, he eliminated self interest, regardless of cost, or personal feelings, and took a stand for the right.

At that time there was a statute preventing the holding of local option elections in any particular territory within three years of each other, and the county local option unit law did not apply to Harrison County only under certain conditions. No local option election having been held in Cynthiana within three years, it was entitled to a separate election on the question; the liquor forces believing that they could carry the town then, and thus secure an extension of three years for the saloon, filed petition for an election which was held in May, 1907. Many of the local option leaders urged an election in the entire county before this election was called by the liquor people, but Judge Lafferty advised against this course, because he knew the wets would petition for a separate election in the town at the same time, and he believed, as they did, that the town would go wet. If this had happened, the saloon would have prevailed for three more years, as another election could not be held in the county for three years. It was his idea to work to create sentiment sufficient to carry the town before calling the election, and if the liquor people called an election in the meantime in the town, to try to win in that election, and if unsuccessful, an election
could be held in sixty days in the entire county as the unit, and that the town would not be entitled to another separate election for three years, and that the town would be forced to abide by the result in the county as a whole, or as the unit. Several of the temperance leaders, among them some lawyers, did not agree with Judge Lafferty, but fortunately his views prevailed, and the whole matter worked out as he had planned. The temperance forces lost the election in the town called by the wets by 34 votes, and Judge Lafferty immediately organized the county, circulated petitions in every precinct in the county, and had them filed and an order made fixing the election for July 18th, 1907, with the county as the unit, and this was all done so quickly that the opposition was not aware of the movement. In this election the county voted overwhelmingly against the saloon, and the Court of Appeals held, as Judge Lafferty contended, that the county election was legal, and that the town was bound by the result. Thus the saloon was abolished from the town three years sooner than it would have been under less skillful leadership.

The eminent manner in which Judge Lafferty discharged the duties of public office won him the esteem and confidence of the people, which in time brought him a large and lucrative law practice. He gave of his energy and vitality without reserve, and without thought of self, to the discharge of official and professional duty, and to such an extent his strength was overtaxed, and a serious break in his health resulted in 1896. He was forced to make two trips to Colorado on account of his health, and for eighteen months on several occasions he was desperately ill, and his life almost despaired of, but he fought on with courage and fortitude seldom manifested; and it has been said by his friends and acquaintances that only his indomitable will and determination kept him alive. He never regained his health and strength, but notwithstanding this, he pursued his labors, unceasingly and without complaint, although frequently with much discomfort.

During Judge Lafferty's residence here, on account of his integrity, clean moral life, and keen interest in every movement for the welfare of the community, his life was inseparably linked and identified with the public life of the community. Every movement for good not only had his approval, but his active
support and influence as well. He never played politics for selfish ends, nor was he ever controlled in his position on any question through personal motives. Popularity or expediency never governed him in defining his position, and after determining the right, guided by his high ideals, he at once took a firm stand, and many times against what seemed to be the popular view. Difficulties or odds in his course against him did not deter or discourage him in the least, and through his strength of character, earnestness and sincerity of purpose, he frequently converted an unpopular cause in the beginning into one of popularity. Judge Lafferty was of the most gentle nature, kindly disposition and pleasing personality, but a relentless foe of immorality, or vice, especially such as resulted from criminal tendencies rather than weakness, yet he had the warmest sympathy and tenderest feelings for those who transgressed through human weakness instead of vicious inclination, and dealt gently and patiently with all such in an effort to lift them up, and rescue them from their faults and shortcomings.

It can be said as fittingly of Judge Lafferty as of any man I have ever known that he lived his life for the good of others, and his achievements here and beneficent influence are an enduring movement that will cause his memory to linger long and tenderly in the minds and hearts of the people of this county.