

The Laura C. Jensen Slander Suit

(1897)

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In the 1880s and 1890s newspapers frequently complained that plaintiffs in libel lawsuits just aimed to win money not to restore or clear their reputations (they were sometimes sued even after publishing a correction). This question about the real goals of a defamation claimant arises in Laura C. Jensen's slander suit against the owners of a candy store in West St. Paul who accused her of theft. Because she was only 14 years old her mother initiated the suit on her behalf. Of course her lawyer easily proved that her character and reputation were irreproachable, leaving the question of how much damage to a 14-year-old child's name could possibly be inflicted by accusations of a minor crime thrice repeated to a few neighbors? As the story unfolded in the St. Paul press, readers must have wondered: Was the Laura C. Jensen slander suit motivated by her mother's genuine desire to protect her daughter or her wish to win a pot of money?

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In August 1896 the *St. Paul Dispatch* described the beginning:

BIG DAMAGES FOR SLANDER.

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CLAIMED BY A LITTLE GIRL.

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Plaintiffs (sic) are Mrs. Hendrickson and
her Husband Andrew, and
They Reside on the West Side.

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Laura Christina Jensen, 14 years old, has begun suit, through her guardian, against Sophie Hendrickson and her husband, Andrew Hendrickson, to recover \$5,000 for slander.

The alleged facts which led to the bringing of the action at law have created considerable excitement in West St. Paul, where the parties are well known and where the defendant, Mrs. Hendrickson, keeps a candy store.

The complaint sets out at considerable length the good character which the girl plaintiff has always borne in the neighborhood in which she lives. She has been respected by all other children and appreciated by the older folks, and at school with the teachers and scholars has been known as a good girl until the finger of scorn and suspicion was pointed at her by Mrs. Sophie Hendrickson.

Mrs. Hendrickson, as the complaint sets out, charges that Laura Christina stole ten dollars from the money drawer in her store. She formulated and enunciated the charge in a public manner, saying in the presence of a number of the good people of the West side, when addressing herself to Laura Christina:

"You are a thief, you are a smart thief, you are a snake - faced thief; you stole money from my drawer; you have stolen money from me. I found two drops of milk spilt on my counter. I know you stole my money."

Mrs. Hendrickson again repeated or charged to Mrs. Annie Jensen, the mother of Laura Christina, and still once more, for the third time, she repeated the words in the presence of the neighbors, alleging that while ten dollars had been taken from the drawer, she would compromise the matter with Mrs. Jensen for five dollars.

But Mrs. Jensen, so far from compromising, brings the suit for \$5,000 for the injury to her daughter.¹

The *Globe* also reported the filing of the lawsuit:

LAURA WANTS DAMAGES.

Says Mrs. Hendrickson Accused Her
of Larceny.

Laura Christina Jensen, a 14 year old girl who resides with her mother in West St. Paul, has sued Mrs. Sophie Hendrickson and her husband, Andrew, for \$5,000 damages, for alleged slander. Laura brings the action through her mother, Annie Jensen.

According to the allegations of the complaint, Mrs. Hendrickson keeps a candy store. Behind the counter there is a money drawer, and the complaint alleges that Mrs. Hendrickson publicly charged Laura with stealing \$10 from her money drawer. The complaint states that Mrs. Hendrickson had offered to compromise the matter with Mrs. Jensen for \$6. Mrs. Jensen met the proposition with a suit for \$5,000 damages for the injury done her daughter.²

Four months later, the case came to trial, as the *Globe* reported:

The suit of Laura Christina Jensen, aged 14, by her guardian ad litem, Christ (sic) Jensen, against Sophie and Andrew Hendrickson, is on trial before Judge Willis and a jury.

The action is for \$10,000 damages for alleged slander. Laura Jensen used to deliver milk at the store

¹ *St. Paul Dispatch*, August 14, 1896 at 5.

² *St. Paul Globe*, August 15, 1896, at 4.

of the defendants, and one day last summer she says that Mrs. Hendrickson called her a thief both in the Danish and the English languages.³

During the trial the defendants' lawyer incurred the judge's ire:

REBUKED THE COUNSEL.

Attorney Haese Arouses Judge Willis' Indignation.

A sensational incident occurred yesterday during the trial before Judge Willis and a jury of the slander suit of Laura Jensen against Sophie Hendrickson and Andrew Hendrickson.

One of the plaintiff's witnesses was a young, unmarried woman who lives with her parents. The attorney for the defendant, Otto L. Haese, seeking to impeach her testimony, put questions to her that if answered as he seemed to hope they would be, would have impressed the jury that the witness had no moral character. But the witness responded to all of the cross examiner's questions with a series of indignant "noes" that squelched the attorney. At the end of his rope the attorney said, "That is all."

But it was not all. Judge Willis had something to say:

"It is unfortunate and much to be regretted," commented the court, "that the attorney should have seen fit to adopt such a line of questioning with out prior investigation that would warrant it."

The jury scowled at Haese, while the plaintiff's attorney smiled. The evidence in the case is all in, and

³ *St. Paul Globe*, January 13, 1897, at 2.

the court will charge the jury this forenoon, after the plaintiff's attorney has summed up.⁴

The jury's verdict was reported in the *Globe*:

SLANDER SUIT VERDICT.

Laura C. Jensen, According to the Jury,
Entitled to \$1,000.

The jury returned a verdict yesterday forenoon in the slander suit of Laura C. Jensen against Sophie and Andrew Hendrickson, in favor of the plaintiff for \$1,000. Laura is only fourteen years old. She brought the action by her guardian to recover damages against the defendants for calling her a thief. The defendants keep a candy store on the West side, where Laura used to deliver milk. One day they missed some money out of the till and accused Laura of taking it. The defendants were granted a stay of 20 days.⁵

And also in the *Pioneer Press*:

LIKE THE PARROT.

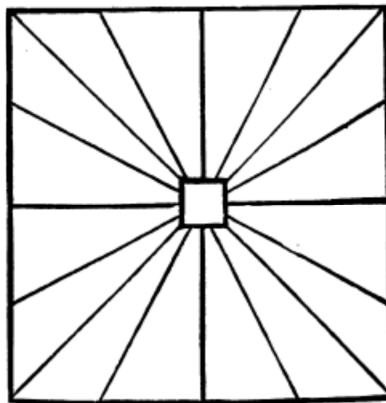
Laura Jensen Gets \$1,000 verdict for
Slander.

The jury in the case of Laura Christine Jensen, by guardian, against Sophie and Andrew Hendrickson yesterday returned a verdict for the plaintiff awarding her \$1,000 damages. Laura is a young girl and delivered milk to the store of the defendants. The

⁴ *St. Paul Globe*, January 14, 1897, at 8.

⁵ *St. Paul Globe*, January 15, 1897, at 8.

defendants said that Laura had robbed the money drawer in the store and she sued for slander. Defendants pleaded justification and attempted proved that she had taken money from the drawer. This was not done to the satisfaction of the jury.⁶



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⁶ *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, January 15, 1897, at 5.