

# LEWIS PORTER

( May 2, 1829 – January 7, 1876 )

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In 1863, Lewis Porter and his family moved from New York to Minnesota. He bought a farm in Blue Earth County and entered the civic life of his new community with vigor. Three years later, he was elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives as a Republican, defeating James Wiswell.<sup>1</sup> During the Ninth Legislature, 1867-1868, he sponsored many bills to advance the interests of the county. Later, he became active in the Grange movement and served as president of the county chapter.<sup>2</sup>

Though farming was his occupation, he harbored dreams of the law. In New York, he had studied law briefly before taking charge of his father's farm. He moved to Minnesota to farm but did not lose interest in the law. In 1874, he leased his farm and resumed reading law in the office of Martin Severance, a prominent practitioner in Mankato and later district court judge.<sup>3</sup> On May 24, 1875, at age forty-six, he was admitted to the bar by the district court. The event was reported in the local paper:

On motion of W. B. (sic) Durkee, Esq., and upon filing the usual oaths and affidavits, Hon. Lewis Porter and John T. Graves, were admitted to practice as attorneys. <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James Wiswell (1828-1883), a Mankato lawyer, served three terms in the state House: 1862-1863, 1863-1864 and 1872-1873. He practiced law for two decades with "Judge" James Brown.

<sup>2</sup> *Mankato Weekly Review*, January 11, 1876, at 3 ("Mr. Porter was one of the best and most intelligent farmer[s] in this county. . . . When the grange movement started, it enlisted his earnest sympathy; he became prominently connected with the order, and was for a year president of the county council.").

Through the efforts of Oliver Hudson Kelley, a farmer in Itasca, Minnesota became a hotbed for the grange movement. D. Sven Nordin, *Rich Harvest: A History of the Grange, 1867-1900* 20 (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1974) ("Kelly's determination to make the Grange a popular part of rural society gradually began to produce results. A steady increase in the number of local chapters in the late 1860s was a good indication of growing popularity. By the end of the decade, forty-nine active subordinate granges were in operation. Forty of these were in Kelley's home state. . .").

<sup>3</sup> *Mankato Weekly Review*, supra note 2, at 3. ("In early life, Mr. Porter had given some attention to the study of law, and having leased his farm last year, he removed to this city, resuming his studies with Hon. M. J. Severance, and was afterwards admitted to the bar, passing a very creditable examination. He was a gentleman of fine abilities and extended general information, a concise and forcible writer, and a good speaker.").

<sup>4</sup> *The Mankato Union*, Friday, May 28, 1875, at 3. Durkee, a lawyer, was at this time the Clerk of the District Court. For his bar memorial, see "William C. Durkee (1842-1882)" (MLHP, 2014).

Interestingly, at the same session of the district court, Severance's motion that Louis Cray be admitted to practice was granted. *Id.* This suggests that there was a local custom

Though this ambition was fulfilled, he did not open an office and did not publish his business card in the local newspaper as did other lawyers. Instead, he returned to farming, probably because he knew that he could not support his family on the meager income of a fledging lawyer.

In the evening of December 31, 1875, after a full day of work and a light supper, he relaxed reading articles on agriculture by the stove. Thirsty, he took a swig from a bottle of what he thought was home-made wine but was instead rat poison which he had carelessly left out several days earlier. The *Mankato Record* reported his lingering death:

### Death of Hon. Lewis Porter

Lewis Porter was born in the town of Covert, Seneca County, N.Y., May 2nd 1829. His father, Lewis Porter, was a prominent man in the Baptist Church. He was a deacon for thirty years, and in his will gave largely to missionary purposes. The subject of our sketch attended Groton Academy and an academy at Ithica (sic), and finished his studies at Hamilton College. He then studied law at Farmerville, with a Mr. Hunting. At the age of nineteen he relinquished his law studies to take charge of his father's farm, which he managed to the time of his father's death, fourteen years afterward.

In the fall of 1857, he was married to Esther Burr, of Schuyler County. He was elected Justice of the Peace the spring after he was married and retained the office during his stay in New York. He also held various county offices and was very active in originating and supporting war measures during the rebellion. In 1863 he came to Minnesota and purchased a farm near Mills Lake, in the township of Garden City. Though he followed farming to the time of his death, he never abandoned the study of law. Last winter he was admitted to the bar in Mankato.

For several years after Mr. Porter became a resident of this county, he took a deep interest in politics. He was a Republican and wielded a strong influence in the councils of his party. In October, 1866, he was nominated for the State Senate in the 17th District, consisting of the counties of Blue Earth and Watonwan, and was elected by about 500 majority, over Hon. J. A. Wiswell, his Democrat opponent. His majority in this county was 384. He took his seat in the Legislature

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that the lawyer in whose office the applicant studied should not move for his admittance to the bar.

January 8th, 1867. A clear-headed thinker and a ready debater, he made his influence felt in that body and successfully shaped the course of legislation in which the people of Blue Earth County took a deep interest. He was conceded by his associates to be one of the ablest and most influential members of the Senate. Mr. Porter felt an intense interest in the establishment of a Normal School at Mankato. He carried through the Senate a bill to authorize Mankato to raise, by tax, the sum of \$5,000 which secured the location of the Normal School in this city. The bill appropriating \$150,000 to provide for the erection of three normal buildings, at Mankato, Winona, and St. Cloud, respectively, received his most cordial and enthusiastic support and was only defeated by the veto of Gov. Marshall. Other measures of importance to Blue Earth County passed at that session by Mr. Porter's aid, were, a law to authorize the County Board to issue bonds to build a County jail; a law so amending the city charter to extend the city limits; also a law authorizing the Minnesota Valley Railroad Company to build a road from Mankato to Blue Earth City. Having been elected for a short term, Mr. Porter served but a single session in the Senate. He continued an active Republican until 1872, when he voted for Mr. Greeley, and has since been a Liberal Republican. He early became a member of the Patrons of Husbandry, was made Master of the Garden City Grange and took a lively interest in the success of the order.

The circumstances attending his death are as follows: On the last day of the old year he had been out buying corn. About three o'clock in the afternoon he came home tired and cold. After eating something he did his chores. He then came in and sat by the stove. After a while he got a file of agricultural papers and spent the evening in reading. About nine o'clock he lit a candle and went to his room to retire. Feeling still chilly he took a draught from a bottle which he supposed contained home-made wine, an article which had been kept in the house for a number of years, but the bottle contained corrosive sublimate, which had been kept in the house for killing rats, and had been moved out of its usual place in the cupboard, by himself, a day or two before, while searching for papers. He immediately came to the kitchen, still holding the candle, and exclaimed:

"Wife what was in that bottle?"

"Did you drink from that bottle!" asked his wife in alarm.

**“Yes” he replied, “get me something quick to make me vomit.”**

**Mrs. Porter at once gave him warm water and salt, and put some lard on the stove to melt. Before the lard was melted he vomited violently. Dr. Case, of Garden City was immediately informed of the accident. In the meantime, Mrs. Porter gave lard, white of eggs, magnesia and other things recommended in cases of poisoning. As soon as possible Drs. Cummins and Davis were sent for. They informed Mrs. Porter that she had given the proper antidotes. Mr. Porter sat up until Dr. Cummins came. We cannot give all the details of his sickness. On Tuesday he thought he could eat a baked apple and a cracker, but these things, like everything else that he tried to eat seemed to nauseate him. He did not feel much pain, only a burning sensation in his throat and stomach, occasionally. He dressed himself every day till Thursday. Though he was not at all like himself, he recognized his neighbors and conversed with them. The last person he was known to address was Maj. Evans. That was at two o'clock on Friday afternoon. He gave Mr. Evans his hand and said: “I am glad to see you Major.” He sank into unconsciousness, and at thirty minute past eleven, on Friday night, he died. The funeral services were conducted by Rev. Joseph Rockwood in the Baptist church at Garden City. The church was densely packed with mourners, notwithstanding the inclemency of the weather. Messrs. Mendenhall, Fairchild, Bixby, Mills and others, officiated as pall-bearers.**

**The choir sang: “This place is holy ground.” Mr. Rockwood read the fourteenth chapter of Job and made an impressive prayer. The choir sang: “There is a joy for souls distressed.” Mr. Rockwood preached a discourse from Ecclesiastes, VII, 2. “It is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men, and the living will lay it to his heart.”**

**The sermon was exceedingly appropriate, and we heard only one opinion concerning it. The closing remarks in allusion to the virtues of the deceased, were spoken with great acceptance. Mr. Rockwood said: We were attracted to Mr. Porter from the first by his noble bearing and generous impulses. Magnanimity, generosity, purity of mind, a uniformly courteous demeanor; these were the prominent characteristics of the good man suddenly taken from us. During his acquaintance with Mr. Porter he had never heard**

him use a coarse or improper word. As a husband, a father, a neighbor, a citizen, a man, Mr. Porter was a model for our imitation. After a short prayer and the singing of the hymn, "Rest weary heart." The friends were permitted to view the dead. Many followed the remains to the cemetery on the hill, and saw all that was mortal of Lewis Porter committed to the grave.

A sorrowing widow and three children, two sons and a daughter, aged respectively 16, 12, and 9 years, are left to mourn the loss of their best friend. We mourn with them in their great affliction.<sup>5</sup>

On January 15, 1875, the Garden City Grange passed the following Memorial:

### MEMORIAL

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WHEREAS, It has pleased the master in the all wise, though inscrutable workings of His Divine Providence to take from the Grange on Earth, our esteemed and honored brother Lewis Porter, whose genial manners and kindness of heart in private and public life endeared him to all who knew him. Therefore, be it resolved that in his sudden departure, Garden City Grange No. 153 Patrons of Husbandry has lost not only one to its original founders and most earnest and persevering Husbandman, but our Fraternity a brother Cultivator and Laborer in the grange fields on earth.

*Resolved*, That in all positions of public trust and confidence to which he has been called and different times since he became a citizen of our county he has ever shown a desire and willingness to do right; in all things his words and deeds ever repeating, an honest husbandman is "the noblest work of God."

*Resolved*, That in all things pertaining to the good of our order he has ever been foremost, and to-day there is a place vacant in our social and business circle not to be tilled again here on earth.

*Resolved*, That while we bow in submission to the will of the Master who knoweth and doeth all things well, we

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<sup>5</sup> *Mankato Record*, January 15, 1876, at 3.

sincerely mourn his loss and tender to the afflicted family and friends our heartfelt sympathy, commending them in this sad hour of their bereavement to the care of Him who "takes away from us those we love as hostages of our faith," leading them into the beautiful golden fields of the heavenly grange. When the sunset of our days shall come, we may greet him where "the evening of life becomes more delightful than the morning, and the sunset offers brighter and lovelier visions than those we build up in the morning clouds, and which appear before the strength of day."

*Resolved*, That the secretary of this grange present to our bereaved sister a copy of these resolutions as a memorial to the memory of our departed neighbor and brother, that copies thereof be published in the RECORD and *Review* of Mankato, *Pioneer-Press* of St. Paul, *Farmer's Union* of Minneapolis, and entered upon the records of this grange.

HENRY E. GERRY,  
Chairman Committee.

Accepted and adopted at a special meeting at Garden City Grange No. 153 Patrons of Husband of Minnesota.

January 15th, 1875.  
HENRY E. GERRY, Secretary.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Mankato Record*, January 22, 1876, at 3 (italics in original). The county bar association does not appear to have passed a resolution in his memory. □

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