Charles Bellinger (1839-1905)

Charles Byron Bellinger was an Oregon newspaper editor, politician, and lawyer. He served on the federal bench as Oregon's U.S. district judge from 1893 until his death in 1905.

Born on November 21, 1839, Bellinger was among three generations of his family who traveled to Oregon from Illinois in 1847. After his father died three years later, he lived with his grandfather in Marion County and attended classes at the nearby public school. His teacher was Orange Jacobs, who later became a Seattle judge and lawyer. His father had wished him to become a lawyer, and Bellinger enrolled at Willamette University, where he studied law under Benjamin F. Bonham, later an Oregon Supreme Court justice.

Bellinger moved to Portland in 1870 and served briefly as a district prosecutor. He was clerk of the Oregon Supreme Court from 1874 until 1878, when he became a circuit court judge. Returning to private practice in 1880, he partnered first with John M. Gearin and then with Joseph Dolph and Joseph Simon. Over the next thirty years, Dolph, Simon, and Gearin would all become U.S. senators.

Bellinger's career was not limited to the practice of law. He was also a newspaper editor for the *Salem Arena (1863-1866)*, the *Albany State's Rights Democrat* (1869-1870), and the *Portland News (1870-1872)*. He taught law at the University of Oregon (1895-1905), was president of the Oregon Historical Society (1901-1905), and founded the Portland Cremation Association in 1900. When hostilities broke out with the Modoc Indians in 1873, he volunteered as an aide to General John F. Miller in the Oregon militia.

Bellinger was elected to the state legislature for a single term in 1866 and was the chair of the Democratic state central committee during the 1876 election. Although an active Democrat, he worked closely with men in both parties. In 1895, he helped Republicans John Waldo and William Steel urge President Grover Cleveland to preserve the Cascade Forest Reserve, and in 1899 he co-wrote the Annotated Laws of Oregon with Republican William W. Cotton. Bellinger broke with the Democratic Party during the 1896 election over the issue of silver coinage.

In the spring of 1893, U.S. District Judge Matthew Deady died, and President Cleveland appointed Bellinger to replace him. He was only the second man to serve as district judge in Oregon.

Bellinger presided over several sensational trials during his tenure on the federal bench. In December 1893, James Lotan, the U.S. customs collector in Portland, was indicted for conspiring with an opium smuggling ring. An ally of Senator John H. Mitchell, Lotan wielded enormous power in state politics, and he was defended by Charles W. Fulton. Several of Lotan's co-conspirators were defended by Bellinger's former partners, Simon and Gearin. Lotan—along with Bellinger, Mitchell, Fulton, Simon, and Gearin, as well as the jury foreman, Charles E. Ladd—was a member of the Arlington Club. The jury deadlocked and prosecutors did not pursue a second trial.

Twelve years later, political scandal engulfed the Portland political establishment again with the Oregon Land Fraud Trials. Following Stephen Puter's conviction in Bellinger's court, Puter became a government witness and his testimony led to indictments against several prominent politicians, including Senator Mitchell. Before Mitchell's case came to trial, however, Bellinger fell ill and died. His body was cremated in accordance with his belief that cremation was a "great benefit to every large community."

Written by Oliver Tatom

Further Reading:

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