

SNG-Justice Stark style-4-10-17

Justice Stark County style

By Jim Nowlan

There are saving graces in rural venues like Stark County, Illinois (pop. 5,900, 1,000th that of Cook County [Chicago]).

I am filling in at the courthouse for my ace reporter (my only reporter, for that matter), who is recovering from surgery.

Here is the scene at the stately Greek Revival courthouse, where Lincoln and Douglas spoke on back-to-back days in 1858:

A former federal prosecutor, Judge Thomas Keith presides, looking like your favorite uncle, twinkly blue eyes and a broad face looking for every opportunity to break out into a warm smile.

To Keith's right is circuit court clerk Julie Kenney. Her dark brown hair and matching eyes contribute to a professional presence. She handles the paperwork for the judge.

To his left is court reporter Samantha Brown, young and pretty as a picture. [Samantha stoically taps away on her tiny keyboard, catching every word, unperturbed when the lawyers go into flights of rapid rhetorical fancy.]

[Between the judge and me, seated in the small visitors' section, is a rectangular oak table, used by counsel for both the prosecution and the defense, as well as the latter's clients.]

Scurrying around like a busy bee is State's Attorney James Owens, the one Democrat among the courthouse gang. Thin as a wraith and relentlessly serious in his black suit, brow always furrowed, Jim looks like a character out of Bronte or Hawthorne.

While one case is being heard by the judge, waiting lawyers and their clients often huddle just outside the courtroom, along the window sill at the top of the stairs, at the north end of the second floor. Lawyer sits against the window; client stands.

Sheriff Steve Sloan is the gatekeeper to the courtroom. Straight from central casting, stout and with a don't-fool-with-me demeanor, Sloan sports a white mustache big as a street-sweeper brush. Think Wilfred Brimley with a flat top.

Along with a few lawyers, these are the cast of characters who process justice in Stark County. They do it with a personal, caring compassion to be admired.

This past week, as illustration, a young mother came to court to seek an order of protection for her teenage daughter.

When there was a lull in the action, as there often is, and few people in the visitors' section, Judge Keith invited the mother and the alleged stalker, a strapping 17-year-old, and his mother, to approach the bench.

The two mothers and the son stood before the judge (there were no lawyers involved).

“What evidence do you have (of stalking)?” Judge Keith asked the one mother.

Hand shaking a bit, the mother passed the judge her smartphone. The device apparently contained some incriminating text messages between the young man and the 16-year-old daughter of the mother.

[The judge then asked the mother to explain what else might have happened between the two teens.]

“He threatened to run over our mailbox (which did occur), and he kicked in our front door.

“My daughter is now living with her grandparents (in another town) and no longer attends high school here.”

The judge then asked the boy and his mother for their side of the story.

The boy admitted to some of the charges.

The boy's mother said her son was at fault, but that maybe there was some blame to be assigned to the girl as well, who at one time was in a girl/boyfriend relationship with the boy.

"And these problems are tearing our family apart as well," added the boy's mother.

At this point, Circuit Clerk Kenney pulled out some Kleenex, passing them along to the aggrieved mother, who was closest. She in turn passed another tissue on to the boy's mother.

The mothers dried their eyes in unison, while the boy looked down.

The judge then began his grandfatherly observations.

["You're causing a lot of pain," the judge said to the boy.]

"You can't un-ring a bell," Judge Keith admonished the boy, "but you come from a good, loving family. And you are young. A year from now you will see the world a lot differently from today.

This is a window of opportunity to move on with your life.

"But understand that this Order of Protection (directing the boy not to come within 300 feet of the residence in question nor have contact with the girl) has the authority of law."

[In other words, actions have consequences, young fellow, so don't screw up again.]

Then Judge Keith slowly, possibly with deliberate slowness, scribbled out his order, so the gravity of the situation could sink in.

As he did so, he asked the young fellow what he planned to do after high school?

"Study diesel mechanics at ICC," the youngster responded, meekly.

Still scribbling, Keith chatted with the boy's mother about life in general. He learned she had dogs, so the judge talked about his wife's love affair with raising dogs.

Then it was over. The boy slunk from the courtroom followed by the mothers, clutching their Kleenex.

My bet is the boy will never be back in court.

My heart aches that such personal attention is not afforded to errant youngsters in sprawling urban justice centers like that in Cook County.

Nowlan publishes The Stark County News, Toulon, Illinois.