The Court Archive:
Charles Guiteau, Illinois Lawyer

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The recent Netflix miniseries *Death by Lightning* provides a dramatic account of the 1881 assassination of President James A. Garfield by Charles J. Guiteau, an Illinois lawyer. Guiteau was often described as a disgruntled office seeker, but he shot Garfield believing that it would unite the two factions of the Republican Party. Guiteau had delusions of grandeur and likely suffered from mental health issues. Matthew McFadyen's portrayal of Guiteau in *Death by Lightning* was well-received and captured Guiteau's manic personality, but the miniseries did not delve deeply into his brief legal career. What was the extent of his law practice?

Guiteau was born in 1841 in Freeport, Illinois, but spent much of his formative years in Wisconsin. His mother died when he was seven, and his father was abusive. In 1860, Guiteau attended college briefly at the University of Michigan but was too restless to concentrate on his studies. Instead, he joined the Oneida community in 1860 in upstate New York, known for its religious fervor but salaciously known for "free love." He remained there for 5 years. Because this was a religious commune, Guiteau was exempt from Civil War service.

After a falling out with the commune but still believing in its message, Guiteau moved to New York City briefly and falsely passed himself as an agent of the *New York Tribune*. He then moved to Chicago and studied law at the new Chicago law firm of Joseph S. Reynolds and Simon D. Phelps, working specifically with Reynolds. In July 1868, Guiteau obtained a certificate of good moral character from Cook County Judge James Bradwell, who was Myra Bradwell's husband. Documents must have been misplaced because Guiteau needed to send duplicate copies to the Illinois Supreme Court clerk Woodbury Taylor, who then sent Guiteau his law license in August 1868.

Initially, Guiteau tried to be a trial lawyer, but his first case in the courtroom was allegedly a disaster with the jury finding against his client so quickly that they did not even leave the courtroom to deliberate. In 1871, the Cook County circuit court fined him for removing case files from the courthouse. Incensed that this was reported in the *Chicago Tribune*, Guiteau sued the newspaper for libel, requesting $20,000 in damages. The case was likely dismissed.

Eschewing trial work, Guiteau became a debt collector, which must have allowed him to support himself and his wife (she divorced him in 1874 after a 5-year marriage). A New York business sued Guiteau in 1874 for not paying over $175 that he collected on a $300 debt. Guiteau responded that "all respectable lawyers retain one-half for collection. I have collected my half, and therefore nothing is due you." Traveling to New York for his defense, Guiteau was upset that the newspapers carried the story, and he sued the *New York Herald* for $100,000 for libel but was willing to settle for $25,000. The court dismissed the case. He was later arrested in New York for staying at several hotels and either writing bad checks for payment or leaving without paying at all.

Sometime in 1875, he arrived in Toulon, Illinois, to begin practicing law there. He rented an office and hired a painter to make a sign. After two weeks, Guiteau left town, paid none of his bills, and allegedly stole a "valuable gold pen and fancy holder" from the boardinghouse.

Returning to Chicago, Guiteau continued debt collection. He was arrested for embezzlement of nearly $3,000 for collecting debts but not paying them over. After being put in jail, he sued for a writ of habeas corpus, believing he was detained illegally. Guiteau claimed that he would charge 10 percent for collecting the various debts, but once he discovered the debts were difficult to obtain, he raised his price to 50 percent. The judge referred the case to a jury. A newspaper reported that "Guiteau's eccentricities are somewhat well known." At some point, Guiteau must have been released because he was in New Jersey three months later giving religious speeches.

Guiteau likely stopped the practice of law late in 1877. Newspaper reports after this time noted speeches in New York, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Illinois, and elsewhere in which he claims that the second coming of Jesus Christ occurred in 70 AD, mirroring the beliefs of the Oneida community. He eventually published a book on that topic called *The Truth: A Companion to the Bible*, which was reviewed by a New York newspaper, describing it as rambling "facts, faucies, and falsities," and the "magnificent confidence [of Guiteau] is the leading feature of the work."

In addition to his legal and theological work, Guiteau always had an interest in politics but became more interested in 1880, which led him down his fateful path of assassinating President Garfield in July 1881. After Garfield died two months later, Guiteau was found guilty of murder and executed in 1882. It's ironic that Guiteau probably could have been a successful collections attorney given his penchant for eluding debts himself. It's more unfortunate that Guiteau was unable to receive adequate treatment for his mental health disorders.