

Alonzo K. Vickers 1906-1915

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An Illinois native, Alonzo Knox Vickers was born in Massac County on September 25, 1853. Grandfather Thomas Vickers brought his family to Illinois from Warren County, Tennessee, and began farming. James, one of Thomas's nine children, married Celia Smith, born near Tuscumbia, Alabama, and the widow of his uncle Jacob Vickers. "Both she and her husband," wrote a local historian, "entered a small tract of Government land and then built a log house, of which the boards that covered the roof were rived by hand, and the rude chimney was made of earth and sticks."¹ James farmed in the area and operated a mercantile business in the county seat of Metropolis. Alonzo was the youngest of the couple's three sons.



Attending the district school in winter, Alonzo spent the rest of the year working on the family farm. His father died in 1861, and when the Civil War broke out that year, both of his brothers enlisted in the Union army. After high school in Metropolis, he earned a teaching certificate and taught for six years in area schools, while also studying for the bar in the office of Judge R. W. McCartney. In 1877, he began practicing law in Metropolis, then two years later purchased and became editor of the *Weekly Times* in Vienna, in adjacent Johnson County. Selling the newspaper in 1878, he returned to the law practice.

Vickers married Leora E. Armstrong in 1880, daughter of William and Anna Armstrong of Metropolis. They became the parents of two daughters and a son. The family moved to the Johnson County seat of Vienna, where Vickers associated in a law practice with William A. Spann, under the firm name of Spann & Vickers, and later with George B. Gillespie in Vickers & Gillespie.²

A Republican, he was elected to the Illinois legislature in 1886, serving one term, then won election in 1891 as judge of the First Judicial Circuit, a position he held for eleven years. “His rulings are sensible, practical & to the point;” wrote an acquaintance, “his decisions bear evidence of his familiarity with the last detail of the case under consideration.”

In 1903, Vickers joined the Appellate Court of the Second District, then in 1906, sought the Supreme Court nomination from the First District. He lost to Charles Thomas of Belleville, but when Thomas died a few days after the nominating convention, the delegates selected Vickers. In the general election, he defeated the incumbent justice Carroll C. Boggs of Fairfield. At that time, the Vickers family moved from Vienna to a home he purchased in East St. Louis, “so as to be more convenient to Springfield where he was to spend so much of his time with his judicial duties.”³

In 1907, he delivered the opinion affirming a Cook County Circuit Court decision regarding negligence, *Pauckner v. Wakem*. J. Wallace Wakem and his partners operated a general warehouse business in Chicago. Employees of the Chicago Tribune Company, including George Pauckner, went to the warehouse to retrieve stored machinery. After removing the items, Pauckner, “desiring to attend to a call of nature,” received permission to use the toilet room. Walking through a dimly lighted passway, he fell into an unprotected elevator shaft and suffered severe injuries.

After the Appellate Court of the First District affirmed a \$5,000 judgment for Pauckner, the warehouse owners appealed to the Supreme Court. In delivering the verdict, Vickers wrote, “If appellee was on the premises at the time and place of the accident by the invitation, either express or implied, of appellants, they owed him the duty to exercise ordinary care for his safety while upon said premises.” When Pauckner went to the warehouse “for the purpose of removing the goods of the Chicago Tribune Company, the appellants owed these servants the same duty that would have been due to the president or general manager of the Chicago Tribune Company had he called in person for the goods.”⁴

In *Dyrenforth v. Palmer Tire Company*, the issue involved a sales commission. Palmer Tire owners employed attorney Douglas Dyrenforth to seek a buyer for the firm, and he negotiated a sale to the B. F. Goodrich Company. After the sale, however, Dyrenforth and Palmer Tire disagreed as to Dyrenforth’s compensation. He contended that they agreed on ten percent of the amount for which the property sold, while the Palmer Tire owners argued that the agreement was for five percent. Letters between the two parties further confused the issue, and upon the death of a Palmer owner, the successors refused to make further payments. Dyrenforth won a Cook County Circuit Court judgment, affirmed on appeal to the First District Appellate Court. Justice Vickers upheld the verdict: “In view of the acquiescence of appellant for a period of seven years in this contract, during which time some thirty different payments were made to appellees under it, we think the decree of the circuit court below requiring appellant to complete the execution of this contract in good faith is equitable and just.”⁵

Vickers owned a 300-acre farm northeast of Vienna and was involved in several business interests. He had organized Drovers’ State Bank in Vienna and served as president of the St. Louis, Paducah & Southeastern Railroad Company.⁶ Active in the Illinois State Bar Association,

he also held memberships in several fraternal organizations, including the Masons, Knights of Pythias, Independent Order of Odd Fellows, and Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks.

By 1915, his eighth year on the Supreme Court, Vickers suffered from a combination of asthma and pneumonia. He died at age sixty-two at his East St. Louis home, 512 Brighton Place, on January 21, 1915. Following Methodist services there, he was buried in the family lot at the Fraternal Cemetery, north of Vienna.⁷

During his Supreme Court tenure, Vickers authored 514 written opinions and nineteen dissents. “His death was untimely,” wrote Justice George A. Cooke, “but his work will remain as a perpetual monument to his ability and his unswerving devotion to duty.”⁸

¹ *Biographical Review of Johnson, Massac, Pope and Hardin Counties* (Chicago: Biographical Pub. Co., 1893), pp. 578-79.

² 269 Ill. 15.

³ *Vienna Times*, 28 January 1915, p. 4; Frederic B. Crossley, *Courts and Lawyers of Illinois*, 3 Vols. (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1916), Vol. 3, p. 447.

⁴ *Pauckner v. Wakem*, 231 Ill. 276 (1907).

⁵ *Dyrenforth v. Palmer Pneumatic Tire Company*, 240 Ill. 25 (1909).

⁶ O. J. Page, *History of Massac County, Illinois*, 1900; rpt. (Salem, Mass.: Higginson Book Co., [ca. 1998]), pp. 355-56.

⁷ *Daily Journal* (East St. Louis), 22 January 1915, p. 1; *Chicago Legal News*, 15 January 1915, p. 197.

⁸ 269 Ill. 25.