

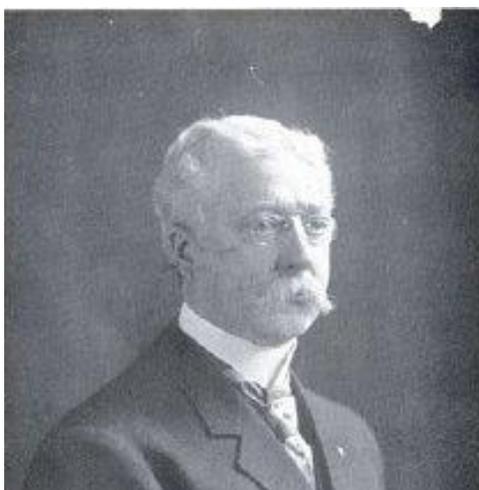
# **This Week in Saratoga County History**

## **George Herrick West**

### **& the (not so) *Secret Law and Order League***

**Submitted by Dave Waite September 30, 2021**

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*George Herrick West 1854-1936*

*Source: Saratoga County History Center*

George Herrick West died 85 years ago this month. While not nearly as well known as the “Paper Bag King” George West, GHW was a representative of the progressive era in local politics.

When in the 1870’s the realization of the need for social reform swept across the nation, Law and Order Leagues, as well as other similar organizations, sprang up to address evils as varied as social disorder, drink, and gambling. Forty years later, concerned members of the Ballston Spa community formed The Secret Law and Order League to address these same evil influences on society. The leader of this organization was G. H. West, the son of Galway farmer Matthew West. George West had been elected to the New York Assembly where he served from 1899 to 1900.

The first evil that the Law and Order League addressed was white slave trafficking, with West drafting a bill that was introduced in the 1909 New York State Legislative session. That bill was not acted upon, but when George West again introduced his anti-white slave trafficking bill in 1910, he had the added advantage of support from Senator Edward T. Brackett of Saratoga

Springs and Assemblyman George H. Whitney of Mechanicville. The Brackett-Whitney bill passed in both branches of the legislature and in 1910 it was signed into law.

That same year the league attempted to stamp out gambling in the Saratoga County village of Mechanicville. Represented by Ballston Spa attorney Hugh Whalen, the group filed a citizen's complaint requesting that an investigation be made to determine if the crime of keeping a gambling establishment was being committed in Mechanicville. In their complaint, they alleged that gambling houses were "running full blast" on both Railroad Street and Park Avenue.

By December of 1910 indictments had been brought against Mechanicville residents William O'Rourke, Barney Patrick, and Edward O'Neil. When the question of whether "keeping a gambling house" was in the penal code, the cases were put over to the next court term. In response to this setback, Mr. West continued to press his case for social reform in Mechanicville, this time to the village trustees. It was his view that local police were failing in their duty to prevent the sale of liquor to minors, gambling, and "profanity on the streets."

In the March 1911 term of the Saratoga County Court, the cases against O'Rourke, Patrick & O'Neil for keeping a gambling house finally came before a judge. As the trial proceeded, witness after witness was called, but when none could recall when they played poker at these establishments, all the cases were quickly dismissed.

That same year, efforts to halt gambling across the state were in full swing, with one of the most sweeping changes when the New York State Legislature outlawed the placing and recording of bets, effectively shutting down all horse racing in the state.

Possibly due to the strong anti-gambling push across the state, the Secret Law and Order League again started investigations into gambling in Mechanicville. This time the League focused on Deputy Sheriff Albert B. Houseworth, bringing a charge of "repeated neglect of duty" against the officer in January of 1914. When interviewed by the *Mechanicville Mercury*, Houseworth stated that the charges against him were for allowing violations of the Sunday laws forbidding the sale of liquor & the playing of baseball, as well as allowing gambling establishments to flourish in the village. In his response, he said he was no longer the "goat for the glided reformer and never supposed that a Deputy Sheriff of Saratoga County had to act as a private detective for the Secret Law and Order League."

The Law and Order League responded by reminding everyone that they had written Deputy Sheriff Houseworth on numerous occasions over the previous year informing him of the business places in Mechanicville with gambling machines, and two active gambling places in the village. Once they saw that Houseworth was not willing to enforce the anti-gambling laws, they notified the County Sheriff of the existing situation and asked for him to intervene.

On January 3, 1914, the *Mechanicville Mercury* reported that Deputy Sheriff Houseworth was at risk of being removed from his position as Deputy Sheriff. At risk also was his \$65 a month job as a patrolman for the village of Mechanicville. A week after the charges were brought against Houseworth, Saratoga Sheriff Clarence L. Grippin sent deputies to Mechanicville to shut down

the places that were alleged to be involved in gambling. Though no charges were filed against these establishments, their doors were closed to business and the gambling machines removed.

The Secret Law and Order League's successful campaign against gambling in Mechanicville was the last time any of their activities were reported in local newspapers. George Herrick West continued to work on social reform as superintendent of the New York Civil League's Law and Order Department in Albany, New York. He passed away in 1936 at the age of 81 and is buried in Ballston Spa Cemetery.

Sources: online newspaper archives of the Library of Congress and [nyshistoricnewspapers.org](http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org); web sites: [politicalgraveyard.com](http://politicalgraveyard.com) and [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com); *The Reform Bulletin*, vol. 1, no. 5, February 4, 1910, concerning the Brackett-Whitney bill.