Income Tax–Basis for Determination of Gain (James Richardson et al. v. William J. Conway et al. (W.D. Wis. 1930))

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However, in Long v. Rockwood, the Supreme Court denied the state of Massachusetts the right to tax income received from one of her residents as royalties for the use of patents issued to him by the United States, as it was a direct tax on an instrumentality of the Federal Government. Mr. Justice Holmes dissented in a strong opinion in which Mr. Justice Stone, Mr. Justice Brandeis, and Mr. Justice Sutherland concurred. The learned justices (excepting Mr. Justice Sutherland) also dissented from the prevailing opinion in Macallen v. Massachusetts where the decision would seem to make no distinction between direct and excise taxes when levied on Government instrumentalities, thus departing from the rule as stated in Flint v. The Stone Tracy Company.

As shown from the study of the strong dissenting opinions in past decisions on the point involved the sound rule from a legal, economic and political view would be that advanced in the instant case which follows the dissenting opinion of Mr. Justice Stone in Macallen v. Massachusetts. Once the income from the copyright has become the personal property of the owner and intermingled with his assets, it is difficult to ascertain how an indirect state tax thereon is an interference with an "instrumentality of the Federal Government." A substantial distinction between gross returns and net receipts clearly shows that the tax is in effect imposed upon the franchise and not directly upon exempt property. The present decision, it is clear, is supported by the weight of authority and should be upheld.

C. A. B.

Income Tax—Basis for Determination of Gain.—Prior to November 19, 1925, the plaintiff, Jessie P. Richardson, owned all the issued capital stock of the Waupaca Electric Service and Railway Company, consisting of 501 shares, and on the date last mentioned sold the same to Wisconsin Valley Electric Company; 101 shares to be delivered and paid for immediately, $36,791.25 being paid therefor, and 400 shares to be paid for and delivered in eight installments, in lots of fifty shares each, over a period of four years, $18,213.50

277 U. S. 142, 48 Sup. Ct. 463 (1928).

Supra Note 19. Mr. Justice Holmes dissenting: "The fact that the franchise came from a grant by the United States is no more reason for exemption standing by itself, than is the derivation of the title of a lot of land from the same source. Baltimore Shipping and Drydock Company v. Baltimore, 195 U. S. 375, 25 Sup. Ct. 50 (1904). Why cannot a state tax a patent by a tax that in no way discriminates against it? Obviously it is not true that patents are instrumentalities of the government—they are used by the patentees for their private advantage alone."

Supra Notes 1, 9.

Supra Notes 10, 11.

Supra Note 9; see (1930) 4 St. John's L. Rev. 314.
being paid for each lot; the 400 shares to be held in escrow by the
Minnesota Loan and Trust Company. Purchaser was to have voting
power on all the shares, and pay interest on the unpaid portion of the
purchase price. This was an isolated transaction, and not in the usual
course of business.¹ Plaintiff now seeks to enjoin the defendants, who
constitute the Tax Commission of Wisconsin, from assessing the
entire purchase price as 1925 income. The taxpayer did not reside
in Wisconsin after 1925. For that reason the gain from the sale of
stock to be delivered during 1926 to 1929, inclusive, could not be
taxed in Wisconsin unless it was 1925 income. Jurisdiction is predi-
cated on the residence of plaintiffs in Minnesota, and the amount in
controversy being more than $3,000. Held, that the full beneficial
interest in the stock passed to the vendee in 1925, and its liability to
pay therefor and to pay interest then became absolute, and the gain
thereof was taxable as income. James Richardson et al. v. William
J. Conway et al.; District Court for the Western District of Wis-
consin (1930).

Every method or system of taxation is based upon a definite and
clearly understood method of accounting. There are several such
methods, the ones in which we are presently interested being the cash
receipts and disbursements method,² the accrual method,³ and the
installment method.⁴ These are the recognized accounting methods,
on one of which the Tax Commission must have based its assessment.
The question now arises on what basis is one to be taxed who, because
a transaction was merely casual, has kept no books, as in the instant
case. Section 71.02 (3) (a) of the Wisconsin statutes⁵ gives the
Tax Commission the right to determine upon what accounting basis
an assessment shall be made where no books are kept, or when the

¹ An isolated or casual sale means "a chance transaction and one not regu-
larly occurring in the business." Installment Sales Pamphlet, Bureau of
Internal Revenue, p. 13. Also G. M. C. 1162. C. B. VI-1, 22.
² In order to keep books on the basis of actual receipts and disbursements,
credits yet to become due or obligations yet to be paid, would have to be
³ The books are kept on an accrual basis whenever entries are made of
credits and debits as the liability arises, whether then received or disbursed.
Aluminum Castings Co. v. Routzahn, supra Note 2.
⁴ "Under regulations prescribed by the Commissioner with the approval of
the Secretary, a person who regularly sells or otherwise disposes of personal
property on the installment plan, may return as income therefrom in any tax-
able year that proportion of the installment payments actually received in that
year which the total profit realized or to be realized when the payment is
completed, bears to the total contract price." Rev. Act of. 1928, sec. 44.
⁵ Persons who customarily estimate their incomes or profits on a basis other
than cash receipts and disbursements may, with the consent and approval of the
tax commission, return for assessment and taxation the income or profits earned
during the income year, in accordance with the method of accounting regularly
employed in keeping their books, except as hereinafter provided; but if no such
method of accounting has been employed, or if the method used does not clearly
reflect the taxable income, the computation shall be made upon such basis and
in such manner as in the opinion of the Tax Commission will clearly reflect
such income.
method used does not clearly reflect the taxable income. Under this provision the Commission's determination, which the Court sustained, was that the accrual method should be the basis of the assessment, since the instant the plaintiff received the contract she surrendered the benefits of her stock and possessed the unqualified obligation of a vendee fully able to meet it, which was assignable and undoubtedly convertible into money, and therefore taxable as present income. This rule of the Wisconsin court is diametrically opposed to the Federal rule. The Board of Tax Appeals has held that most taxpayers are not compelled to keep books, but unless they do, they cannot report on any other basis than the cash receipts and disbursements basis. On the basis of this holding, therefore, the plaintiff was taxable in 1925 only on the money she actually received during that year, since she kept no books she is taxable on the cash receipts and disbursements basis. However, the Federal Income Tax Law makes further provision for the accounting of sales made on the installment plan: "In the case (1) of a casual disposition of personal property * * * for a price exceeding $1,000, or (2) of a sale or other disposition of real property if in either case the initial payments do not exceed forty per centum of the selling price, the income may, under regulations prescribed by the Commissioner with the approval of the Secretary, be returned on the basis and in the manner above prescribed in this subdivision." In a conflict between the decision of a court and statutory provision, the statute must prevail so that under the Federal rule the plaintiff would be taxable under section 44. It is submitted that the Federal rule seems both more reasonable and equitable, since the primary reason for such regulation as provided by section 71.02 (3) (a) is to regulate accounting by merchants of their business gains rather than individual transactions by people not engaged in business.

V. B.

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6 "An accrual method without accounting records is an anomaly." Brander, 3 B. T. A. 231, 235 (1926); Thompson, 7 B. T. A. 391 (1927).
7 Supra Note 4.
8 "(1) The sale or other disposition must be of personal property; (2) It must be a casual sale or other casual disposition; (3) The selling price must be more than $1,000; (4) The initial payment must not exceed forty per cent. of the selling price." (Klein, Federal Income Taxation, 814.) Clearly, on the basis of this test, the case falls directly within the provisions of the statute. The contract was a casual one for the sale of personal property for more than $1,000 on the installment plan, the initial payment being less than forty per cent. of the selling price.
9 Supra Note 5.
10 State ex rel. Waldheim Co. v. Tax Commission, 187 Wis. 539, 204 N. W. 481 (1925).