

Halsell Vs. Renfrow

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Court : US Supreme Court

Decided On : May-14-1906

Appeal No. : 202 U.S. 287

Appellant : Halsell

Respondent : Renfrow

Judgement :

Halsell v. Renfrow - 202 U.S. 287 (1906)

U.S. Supreme Court Halsell v. Renfrow, 202 U.S. 287 (1906)

Halsell v. Renfrow

No. 251

Submitted April 20, 1906

Decided May 14, 1906

202 U.S. 287

APPEAL FROM THE SUPREME COURT

OF THE TERRITORY OF OKLAHOMA

SYLLABUS

Where the court of first instance in a territory sees the witnesses, the full court deals with its findings as it would with the verdict of a jury, and does not go beyond questions of admissibility of evidence and whether there was any evidence to sustain the conclusion reached, and this Court goes no further unless in an unusual case.

A judgment for defendant in an action for specific performance based on a finding of fact, among others, that defendant has conveyed the property to an innocent purchaser for value cannot be reversed, as specific performance is impossible where the party to the contract has conveyed the property to one who is free from equities.

Under the Oklahoma statute in regard to conveyance of real estate, the contract, to be valid, must be in writing and subscribed by the parties thereto, and this is not met by a payment of a would-be purchaser to one claiming to be the agent of the owner but not authorized as such under the Oklahoma statute, nor in this case can such payment or a deposit of the deed in bank to be taken up under certain conditions be regarded as part performance on the part of the owner.

The facts are stated in the opinion.

Page 202 U. S. 291

MR. JUSTICE HOLMES delivered the opinion of the Court.

This is an action for the specific performance of an alleged agreement to convey land, brought by the appellants against the appellees. The case was tried before a judge of the supreme court, and all the issues were found for the defendants. It then was taken before the full court, upon a transcript of the evidence and proceedings, and the judgment for the defendants was affirmed. 14 Okl. 674. Thereupon it was brought here by appeal.

It is assumed by the parties that the statement of facts prefixed to the opinion in the record is not the finding required by the Act of April 7, 1874, c. 80, 2, 18 Stat. 27, and we assume, for purposes of decision, that, under the Act of May 2, 1890, c. 182, 9, 26 Stat. 81, 86, no such finding of facts was necessary. See *Oklahoma City v. McMaster*, [196 U. S. 529](#) ;; *De la Rama v. De La Rama*, [201 U. S. 303](#) . But when, as here, the court of first instance saw the witnesses, the full court of

Page 202 U. S. 292

the territory would deal with its finding as it would with the verdict of a jury, and would not go beyond questions of the admissibility of evidence, and whether there was any evidence to sustain the conclusion reached. *Ellison v. Beannabia*, 4 Okl. 347, 352. This Court naturally would go no further unless in an unusual case. See *Sanford v. Sanford*, [139 U. S. 642](#) .

In view of these preliminaries, if any statement is necessary here when the judgment sets forth that the court "finds the issues in said cause in favor of the defendants," a single matter would be enough. It appears from the petition that, after the defendant Renfrow, who was the owner of the land, had broken off his dealings with the plaintiffs, he conveyed the premises to the defendant Edwards. In Edwards' answer, it is alleged that he purchased for value and without notice. The answer of Renfrow, though less specific, is to like effect. This was one of the issues in the cause which was found for the defendants, as, upon the evidence, it well might be. Therefore it is not necessary to go further in order to show that the judgment cannot be reversed. For, of course, specific performance is impossible where the party to the contract has sold the property to one who is free from all equities. However, as the full court put its affirmation of the judgment upon other grounds, we will not stop at this point.

The full court sustained the single judge on the ground that, under the Oklahoma statute in force at the time, no contract relating to real estate, other than for a lease for not over one year, "shall be valid until reduced to writing and subscribed by the parties thereto," Laws of 1897, c. 8, 4, and that the statute had not been satisfied, or the case taken out of it by part performance. This statute, if taken

literally and naturally, goes further than its English prototype. It is not satisfied by a memorandum made with a different intent, but requires an instrument drawn for the purpose of embodying the contract, and, in the case of an agreement to buy and sell, the subscription of both the buyer and seller, not merely that of "the party to be charged therewith." *McCormick v. Bonfils*,

Page 202 U. S. 293

9 Okl. 605, 618. There was no such instrument. We rather infer that the court below inclined toward the foregoing construction, but its discussion suggests that possibly a memorandum to be gathered from connected documents might be enough, and therefore again, we do not stop here.

The case for the plaintiffs is this: Shields, an agent without authority in writing, as required by the Oklahoma statute, made an agreement to sell the land for \$10,000, and received a check for \$500. Material additions were made to this check afterwards by the plaintiffs, so that it is a question, at least, whether it was admissible in evidence. Wilson's Stat.Okl. 1903, 831. See *Bacon v. Hooker*, 177 Mass. 335, 337. The agent telegraphed to Renfrow that he had sold "the forty acres, ten thousand cash, five hundred forfeit," and Renfrow telegraphed back confirming the sale. Later it turned out that a parcel of fifty by one hundred feet had been conveyed to a third person. The parties met and it was agreed orally that two hundred dollars should be taken from the price for this. It was found further that one Springstine had or claimed possession of a part of the land under a lease. Renfrow was willing to convey and to take proceedings to turn Springstine out, but the plaintiffs refused to take a conveyance or to pay unless they were put into possession in thirty days. While matters stood thus, Renfrow signed a deed of the land, excepting the conveyed parcel, expressed to be in consideration of ten thousand dollars, sent it to a bank, and wrote to the plaintiff Halsell that he had done so, and had instructed the bank to deliver the deed upon his depositing \$9,500 to Renfrow's credit and \$500 to the credit of Shields within two days. This is the nearest approach to a memorandum that was made. Halsell replied to Renfrow that he had made a tender of \$9,300, and that this with the \$200 agreed to be allowed for the strip conveyed and the \$500 held by Shields would make the

\$10,000. He further stated that he had requested delivery of possession, which had been refused, and that Renfrow could not expect the money without

Page 202 U. S. 294

giving possession. Renfrow replied, stating that he had been willing to give such possession as he could, suggesting that he would have arranged in another way as to the \$200, and that he regretted the termination of the matter. That was the end of the dealings, and directly afterwards the sale to Edwards took place.

As the plaintiffs were unwilling to accept the deed unless a fuller and more undisputed possession were given than could be given at the time, Renfrow was justified in selling to another who would take the risk or rely upon his covenants. In fact, Edwards paid \$500 to get possession, in addition to Renfrow's price of \$10,000. Moreover, the plaintiffs' unwillingness shows that, apart from the differences as to consideration, there was no agreement with regard to an essential term of the conveyance when the deed was sent to the bank. There may have been a previous oral agreement, such as is suggested by the letter and deed, but before any memorandum was made, and while Renfrow still was free, the plaintiffs were informed that Renfrow would undertake to do only what he could, and what we have stated. So far, therefore, as the writings convey the notion of an absolute undertaking to convey a present clear possession, they do not express the modified bargain to which Renfrow was willing to assent. The delivery of the deed was authorized only upon payment of the price, and acceptance of it would have been an assent to Renfrow's terms. But there was no such assent. The plaintiffs say now that the differences were only trifles, not going to the essence of the contract, but they were enough at the time to make them unwilling to accept the deed.

In view of the findings of the trial judge, it is difficult to see what is open as to part performance. As there was no agreement at the last stage, there can have been no part performance then. The few steps, if any, that were taken, while everything rested in parol, before the modification as to the amount of land and the price, and the arising of the difficulty as to possession, were disputed and obliterated by

Springstine under his adverse

Page 202 U. S. 295

claim as a lessee. We think that this matter does not deserve discussion at greater length.

It is said that the defendant Renfrow is estopped by the payment of \$500 to Shields by force of the act of 1897, c. 8, 7, to the effect that any person

"having knowingly received and accepted the benefits, or any part thereof, of any conveyance, mortgage, or contract relating to real estate shall be concluded thereby, and estopped to deny the validity of such conveyance, mortgage, or contract, or the power or authority to make and execute the same, except on the ground of fraud."

But here again we are met by the findings and the facts. The check given to Shields was not a payment to Renfrow. Shields had not even oral authority to convey or to receive the purchase money. The terms of Renfrow's letter to Halsell about the deed show that he had not accepted the delivery of the check as a payment then, and since then it would seem that neither party to the litigation has been willing to accept the money.

It appears to us unnecessary to amplify further the reasons for affirming the judgment below.

Judgment affirmed.

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