THE LAW APPLIED IN THE FEDERAL COURTS
FRANK W. SNEPP*

I

When the First Congress met, the national struggle between the Federalists and the anti-Federalists was reflected in the debates over the jurisdiction to be conferred upon the federal courts. One group of anti-Federalists wanted no system of lower federal courts at all, and would have left the enforcement of federal laws to the tribunals of the states. Others favored the establishment of federal district courts, but with jurisdiction limited to admiralty and maritime causes. The Federalists, on the other hand, favored the establishment of a system of federal courts clothed with all the powers granted by the Constitution.

It was finally determined that there was to be a system of district courts, but their jurisdiction was hotly argued. Specifically, were these courts to be clothed with the power to hear and determine controversies "between citizens of different states"? The followers of Hamilton argued, against bitter opposition, that it was desirable to afford for out-of-state litigants tribunals which would be free of the local prejudices likely to be encountered in state courts—an important consideration in the young nation of thirteen provincial and mutually suspicious states. There was also the hope that by staying out of state courts the commercial and trading classes could avoid some of the growing antagonism of the debtor class.

The Federalists carried the day, and jurisdiction in diversity cases was conferred upon the federal district courts.

What law was to be applied by the federal courts? The Congress enacted, in Section 34 of the Judiciary Act of 1789, that "the laws of the several States, except where the Constitution, treaties, or statutes of the United States shall otherwise require or provide, shall be regarded as rules of decision in trials at common law, in the courts of the United States, in cases where they apply." Perhaps no other single word in American law has evoked as much controversy among lawyers and legal scholars as has the word "laws" in this act. Did the drafters intend that it include state decisional law as well as state statutory law? Professor Warren, as a result of his study of the original papers of the First Congress, concluded that they did so intend. Other scholars have argued that they did not.

*Member of the third-year class, Duke University Law School.
3Warren, supra, note 1, at 82, 83.
6Warren, supra note 1, 81-88.
Whatever may have been in the minds of the committee that wrote it, the word was sent forth into the world ambiguous and undefined.

There are strong indications that the early federal judges believed that “laws” included the decisions of state courts, but the picture is not entirely clear. It was early held that state rules affecting property rights and decisions interpreting statutes would be followed. The Supreme Court in 1834 said that “there can be no common law of the United States.” State law was in at least one case expressly followed on a non-property question, but Justice Chase noted that he concurred only because the general common law was the same.

In 1842 the famous case of Swift v. Tyson settled the question—though not the argument—for the next ninety-six years. Justice Story, who wrote the opinion, held that the New York law of negotiable instruments need not be followed by a federal court, because that law was not founded upon statute or local usage, but was deduced from the general common law. The word “laws” in Section 34 did not include state decisions. “They are, at most,” he wrote, “only evidence of what the laws are, and are not of themselves laws.” In the fields of contracts and commercial instruments the federal courts were free to discover the law “in the general principles and doctrines of commercial jurisprudence.” Thus was born a doctrine which during its long career was to evoke a host of learned articles, impassioned dissents, and as impassioned judicial apologiae.

The doctrine of general law was extended far beyond contracts and commercial paper. It became settled that the only cases in which a federal court was bound to follow state decisions were those in which a state statute, a settled local rule of property, or a “local custom” was involved.

Even in these three categories there were broad exceptions. In 1863, in Gelpcke v. Dubuque, the Supreme Court held that, where rights had accrued under a state decision sustaining the validity of a state statute, federal courts were free to ignore a subsequent state decision overruling the first. This doctrine, in its implications inconsistent with the judicial philosophy which underlay Swift v. Tyson, in prac-

10 Brown v. Van Braam, 3 Dall. 344 (U. S. 1797); but see Teton, supra note 7, at 527-530.
12 Id. at 18.
13 Id. at 19.
15 See the extensive annotation of general law subjects following 28 U. S. C. A. §725 (1940).
17 1 Wall. 175 (U. S. 1863).
tice became intermingled with the theory of "general law." State law might also be disregarded where a state court had construed a statute after judgment in the federal court but pending appeal, or when the state court spoke only after the rights of the parties had accrued but before the action was begun, or if there had been but one state decision on the point.

In diversity cases, the inevitable result of the doctrine of *Swift v. Tyson* and its progeny was widespread "forum shopping," especially by corporations. Merely because of diversity of citizenship a party could, by suing in federal court, or by removal of an action against him, obtain a result different from that ordained by the law of the state in which the cause of action arose. In non-diversity cases also, state-created rights had one set of consequences in state courts, another in federal courts.

There was powerful judicial dissent from the doctrine. Justice Field expressed the fervent hope that it, "like other errors, will, in the end 'die among its worshipers.'" Justice Holmes vigorously attacked its extension and particular applications, denying that "there is one august corpus, to understand which clearly is the only task of any Court concerned.

The merits of the doctrine were hotly debated by legal writers. It was attacked as allowing federal courts to control a field over which Congress had no power to legislate, as failing to promote the promised uniformity, and as historically inaccurate. It was defended as promoting uniformity and as giving lawyers a nation-wide basis of prediction, as the rightful exercise of an equal and independent judicial power, and as the means for the enforcement of rights which had an existence independent of those enforced by state courts.

By 1930 there seemed to be some tendency away from *Swift v. Tyson*. The
Supreme Court began to show a disposition to restrict its operation, and to give more deference to the views of state courts. On April 25, 1938, the Court, in a rare departure from accepted appellate practice, struck down *Swift v. Tyson*. Justice Brandeis startled the legal world with the opening sentence of his opinion in *Erie Railroad v. Tompkins*:

The question for decision is whether the oft-challenged doctrine of *Swift v. Tyson* shall now be disapproved. Neither party had raised such a question, either before the Supreme Court or below. Justice Brandeis reviewed the entire history of the doctrine of *Swift v. Tyson*, and, after the funeral oration, lowered the corpse into the grave:

There is no federal general common law. Congress has no power to declare substantive rules of common law applicable in a State whether they be local in their nature or “general,” be they commercial law or a part of the law of torts. And no clause in the Constitution purports to confer such a power upon the federal courts.

Justice Reed would not go so far as to agree that in applying *Swift v. Tyson* the federal courts had been guilty of almost a century of unconstitutional conduct.

The constitutional holding was not necessary to the decision; it was perhaps advanced to overcome the objection that Congress had by long acquiescence adopted Story’s interpretation of Section 34.

Thus did the era of “general law” come to an end. One method of meeting the fundamental problem posed by the existence in our federal system of two systems of courts with concurrent jurisdiction had been tried and rejected. The basis of the new approach was laid down, but it still remained for the courts to define its full implications and extent.

Although it was in suits between citizens of different states that the doctrines of both *Swift v. Tyson* and *Erie Railroad v. Tompkins* have received their greatest emphasis, neither of these decisions was by its terms limited solely to diversity cases. Prior to 1938, federal courts held themselves free to make an independent determination of the law applicable to state-created rights whenever the question was one of “general law,” regardless of the manner in which jurisdiction was acquired.

---

34 304 U. S. 64 (1938).
35 Id. at 69.
36 Id., arguments of counsel, and dissenting opinion of Mr. Justice Butler, at 78.
37 Id. at 78.
39 Willing v. Binenstock, 312 U. S. 272 (1937) (suit against receiver of national bank—question of set-off one of general law but state rule followed because same as federal rule and question balanced with doubt); In re Leterman, Becker, & Co., 260 Fed. 543 (C. C. A. 2d 1919) (question of priority of assignments in bankruptcy case one of general law); Bryant v. Williams, 16 F. 2d 159 (E. D. N. C. 1926) (jurisdiction under National Banking Act, question of ownership of notes held one of general law).
Since the *Erie* case, state decisional law must be followed by federal courts whenever a state-created right is involved, whatever may be the basis of jurisdiction. The occasional statement that the rule of *Erie Railroad v. Tompkins* applies only to cases of diversity is not accurate. The error arises from confusing those cases in which the right is a federal one with those in which the right is a state one. See *Shackelford v. Latchum*, 52 F. Supp. 205 (1943), where the court assigned this reason for not following state rule as to parol evidence in suit to recover federal income taxes.

The district court had jurisdiction by reason of the fact that the case was concerned with winding up the affairs of a national bank. The Court held, on the authority of *Erie Railroad v. Tompkins*, that a state decision on the right to fasten a special trust upon a fund in the hands of a receiver must be followed by the federal court. Before the *Erie* case, this question had been held to be one of "general law." In the final analysis, of course, the federal courts still determine when state decisional law will be followed, since the characterization of a right as "state-created" or "federally created" is itself a federal question. But once it has been determined that the right is one created by a state, and not by the federal government, a federal court must follow state decisional law, regardless of how it acquired jurisdiction.

All the courts agree that the courts of the United States are bound by the decisions of the highest state courts, even as to matters of "general law." The rule is that "general law" is pervasive and not subject to any exception. Because state decisional law is to be adhered to religiously by federal courts, the courts of the United States are bound by the decisions of state courts, even in cases involving federal law, as long as state decisional law is a necessary predicate to such federal rights and liabilities. For this reason, the federal courts are said to be "bound by general law." The concept is not without foundation, for state decisional law is an essential part of the system of general law, and it is part of the federal judicial system to follow state decisional law in the way provided by the Constitution and the statutes of Congress. The federal courts are bound to follow all state law, even that part which is inferior to "general law."
which the *Tompkins* decision is based. Whatever lack of uniformity this may produce between federal courts in different states is attributable to our federal system which leaves to a state, within the limits permitted by the Constitution, the right to pursue local policies diverging from those of its neighbors.\footnote{313 U.S. at 496 (1941).}

On the same day the Court further emphasized the application of the *Erie* doctrine to conflicts cases in *Griffin v. McCoach*,\footnote{Id. at 498. For criticism of the *Klaxon* and *McCoach* cases, see Walter Wheeler Cook, *The Logical and Legal Bases of the Conflict of Laws* c. V. (1940).} in which it held that the district court is bound by the public policy of the state in which it sits.

One important question in the field of conflicts which is suggested by the *Erie* case has as yet had no answer from the courts. Does the doctrine of the *Klaxon* case govern conflicts cases where one of the contacts is with a foreign nation? New York,\footnote{159 U.S. 113 (1895).} for example, has held that it will not follow *Hilton v. Guyot*\footnote{See Cheatham, *Sources of Rules for Conflict of Laws*, 89 U. of Pa. L. Rev. 430, 447 (1941).} on the recognition of foreign judgments. Does the *Erie* doctrine require a federal court sitting in New York to follow the state rule? Or is this, because of its close relation to foreign policy, a "federal field," in which state courts not only cannot bind the federal courts, but are themselves bound to follow federal decisional law?\footnote{302 U.S. 783 (1937). The Federal Rules of Civil Procedure are set out at 308 U.S. 663 (1940), and at 28 U.S.C. following §723(c) (1940).}

IV

While the substantive law applied by federal courts to state-created rights prior to 1938 was governed by *Swift v. Tyson*, "procedure" in federal courts was prescribed by the Conformity Act,\footnote{Rev. Stat. §914 (1875), 28 U.S.C. §724 (1940).} which provided that practice and procedure in the federal district courts should conform, "as near as may be," to that of the courts of the state in which the federal tribunal sat.

On June 19, 1934, Congress gave the Supreme Court power to prescribe general rules of procedure for the district courts in civil actions.\footnote{48 STAT. 2064 (1937), 28 U.S.C. §723(b) (1940).} A distinguished committee of legal scholars and practitioners was appointed by the Court to draft the new rules, which were adopted by the Court on December 30, 1937.\footnote{302 U.S. 663 (1940).}

The Supreme Court was forbidden by Congress to affect any "substantive" rights by adoption of the Rules of Civil Procedure.\footnote{48 STAT. 1064 (1937), 28 U.S.C. §723(b) (1940).} The inclusion of certain matters in the Rules apparently indicated that in the opinion of the Supreme Court they were "procedural." Four months later the *Erie* case declared that in certain types of cases the federal courts must determine the "substantive" rights of the parties according to state law. This posed the question, What is to happen if a rule of state law is so closely bound up with the question of recovery or non-recovery that...
under the *Erie* doctrine it might well be labeled "substantive," and yet the matter is one of those provided for by the Rules.\(^{28}\) 

There are two possible solutions to the problem. First, it may be concluded that provision for a matter in the Rules is a determination by the Supreme Court that the matter is "procedural" and state law is not binding. Second, it may be recognized that since the decision in *Erie Railroad v. Tompkins* the prior determination by the Supreme Court is no longer conclusive in situations governed by the doctrine of that case.

At bottom the question is one of policy. It is necessary to balance the *Erie* doctrine against the policy underlying the Federal Rules. The line between "substance" and "procedure" must be drawn at a point which will carry out the policy chosen, and classifications perhaps valid for other purposes must be rejected\(^{29}\)—the same process for which Professor Cook has so cogently argued in the field of conflict of laws.\(^{30}\) In an increasing number of cases the federal courts have taken the second course suggested above, and have found the policy of the *Erie* case to be the weightier, as indicated by the cases considered below.

The rule which first raised the problem was 8(c), which provides for affirmative defenses, including contributory negligence. Prior to 1938, when the *Erie* case was decided and the rules were adopted, the federal rule was that the burden of proof of contributory negligence was "substantive" and a question of "general law" under *Swift v. Tyson*.\(^{31}\)

In 1939 the Supreme Court indicated the effect of the *Erie* case upon this doctrine when it held in an equity case that the burden of proof of bona fide purchase in an action to quiet title was a matter of "substance," governed by the *Erie* case, and therefore that state law must be followed.\(^{32}\) Four years later, the question was settled by the decision in *Palmer v. Hoffman*,\(^{33}\) which held that federal courts in cases where the *Erie* doctrine applies must follow state law as to the burden of proof of contributory negligence. The Court said that Rule 8(c) governed only the manner of pleading, and not the burden of proof.

The same type of problem is raised by Rule 23(b), which provides that, in order to maintain a shareholder's derivative suit, the plaintiff must have been a shareholder at the time of the transaction complained of, or have acquired his shares since that time by operation of law.

---


\(^{29}\) In a conflict-of-laws case, two separate characterizations may be necessary: first, to determine whether the *Erie* doctrine requires that the law of the state be applied, and second, to determine the characterization which the state of the forum would make for conflict-of-laws purposes. See Sampson v. Channell, 116 F. 2d 754 (C. C. A. 1st 1940).


\(^{32}\) Cities Service Oil Co. v. Dunlap, 308 U. S. 208 (1939).

\(^{33}\) 318 U. S. 109 (1943).
Among the states there is a wide split of authority on this requirement. The federal rule is a continuation of Equity Rule 27, the history of which leaves in doubt whether it was regarded as "substantive" or "procedural." The Supreme Court had held in 1908, however, that the lack of such a showing deprived the plaintiff of standing in a court of equity.

The question has been raised in a number of lower federal courts. Most of them have noted apparent conflict with the Erie doctrine, but have deferred to the authority of the Rules, have avoided deciding because the state rule was the same, or have merely commented upon the fact, without considering it. At least one court has held the matter to be "substantive," and governed by state law, and another has as flatly rejected this view.

The Advisory Committee on the Federal Rules recently considered the advisability of amending Rule 23(b), but concluded that the question should be left to be determined by the Supreme Court when and if a case comes before it.

It would seem that the requirement of Rule 23(b) does affect "substantive" rights for the purposes of the Erie doctrine, and state law should govern. Otherwise a plaintiff who cannot qualify under the federal rule, but who could maintain the suit under the state rule, could be defeated by removal, merely because of diversity of citizenship.

Rule 43 makes admissible all evidence which is admissible under any federal statute, or which was admissible under the old equity practice, or which is admissible in the courts of the state in which the federal court sits. That rule which favors admissibility is to be preferred.

Prior to 1938, matters of evidence depended upon the Competency of Witnesses Act, the Rules of Decision Act, and the Conformity Act. There was some conflict as to which governed particular matters, and there was disagreement as to whether or not state decisional law of evidence was binding upon federal courts.
THE LAW APPLIED IN THE FEDERAL COURTS 173

Under the *Erie* case the courts have concluded that some evidentiary matters are so intimately tied up with the result of the action that state law must be followed regardless of any choice offered by Rule 43. This has been held in regard to the parol evidence rule, res ipsa loquitur, the presumption of death after an absence of seven years, privileged communications, sufficiency of evidence, and the burden of proof on the issue of suicide or accident. There have been cases holding that the state rule as to judicial notice of foreign law will govern, but it would seem that the better view is to the contrary, since judicial notice of foreign law merely relieves one of the parties from the burden of proving it, and does not necessarily change the result.

Outside the area covered by the Federal Rules, questions of “substance” and “procedure” are encountered in applying the doctrines of forum non conveniens and “internal affairs.” These doctrines have become so intertwined and present so many features in common that they may be considered together for purposes of discussion of their application under the *Erie* case.

The Supreme Court has three times avoided ruling whether or not the *Erie* case requires a federal court exercising diversity jurisdiction to follow the state law in these cases. But the Court did decide, in 1947, that federal venue statutes do not preclude federal courts from applying the doctrine of forum non conveniens, thus removing one possible objection to the application of state law. If statutory venue provisions can be made to yield at all to judicial concepts of convenience, there is no apparent reason, in the light of the *Erie* policy, why they should not yield when the concepts are those of state judges.

Judge Learned Hand, in *Weiss v. Routh*, held that state law should govern the application of forum non conveniens, and clearly stated the reasons for that conclusion. He pointed out that a purpose of the *Erie* doctrine was to avoid a different result because of diversity, and that this “extends as much to determining whether the court shall act at all, as to how it shall decide, if it does.”

---

66 Gulf Oil Corp. v. Gilbert, supra, note 85.
67 149 F. 2d 193 (C. C. A. 2d 1945).
68 Id. at 195.
The results in the lower courts are inconclusive, but at least show an awareness of the problem. Judge Hand's position would seem to be in accord with the policy of the *Erie* case.

V

Until 1947, it was not generally supposed that the doctrine of *Erie Railroad v. Tompkins* had any effect upon the extent of the jurisdiction of federal courts. Since 1938 lower federal courts had continued to apply the doctrine of the *Lupton* case, that a state statute limiting the jurisdiction of state courts did not operate to limit the jurisdiction of federal courts in diversity cases.

In 1947 the Supreme Court, in *Angel v. Bullington*, declared that the *Lupton* case is "obsolete," and held that when a state denies to its courts jurisdiction to hear certain causes of action, a federal district court sitting in that state cannot entertain them. Justice Frankfurter wrote:

The essence of diversity jurisdiction is that a federal court enforces State law and State policy. If North Carolina has authoritatively announced that deficiency judgments cannot be secured within its borders, it contradicts the presuppositions of diversity jurisdiction for a federal court in that State to give such a deficiency judgment. . . . A federal court in North Carolina, when invoked on grounds of diversity of citizenship, cannot give that which North Carolina has withheld.

While there was another ground of decision—that the judgment in a prior suit between the same parties in the state courts, in which the highest state court held that the state courts lacked jurisdiction to hear the cause of action, was res judicata—Justice Frankfurter for the majority placed great stress upon denial of jurisdiction through the operation of the *Erie* doctrine.

It had already been pointed out by the Court that the *Erie* case did more than overrule *Swift v. Tyson*—that it also overruled "a particular way of looking at law which dominated the judicial process long after its inadequacies had been laid bare." *Angel v. Bullington* would seem to follow logically from this major premise. If the federal court in diversity cases is able to entertain a cause of action which cannot be heard by the courts of the state in which it sits, then suit in a federal court would produce a different result, merely because of the "accident of diversity."

---

81 David Lupton's Sons v. Automobile Club of America, 225 U. S. 489 (1912).
84 Id. at 191.
The federal equity jurisdiction is said to be identical in extent with that of the English Court of Chancery at the time of the Revolution. It has been repeatedly held that state laws cannot increase or diminish this jurisdiction by creating or abolishing remedies. A state may, however, create new “substantive” rights which may be enforced in federal courts of equity. If the state at the same time prescribes a remedy to enforce the right, and the remedy is substantially consistent with ordinary modes of procedure, then federal courts may give such remedy. All of the foregoing is subject to the statutory requirement that suits in equity shall not be sustained where a plain, adequate, and complete remedy may be had at law. The remedy at law must be one available in the federal court, and not merely in the state courts. Federal equity jurisdiction is further circumscribed by the constitutional requirement of trial by jury in actions traditionally legal.

Although the Rules of Decision Act by its terms applied only to “trials at common law,” the Supreme Court had declared that the enactment was merely declaratory of existing law, and did not by implication exclude equity cases; and, by reasoning analogous to that in Swift v. Tyson, federal courts were freed from dependence on the pronouncements of state courts as rules of decision in equity cases as well. Prior to 1938 federal courts were as free to disregard state decisional law in equity as in cases at law.

In the Ruhlin case, decided within a week after Erie v. Tompkins, the Supreme Court applied the new doctrine to a question arising in an equity case. It did not hold, however, that equitable questions were governed by the Erie doctrine, but only that when in an equity case a question arose which would have been one of “general” law prior to the Erie case, state law must now be followed. The same cautious approach was used in the next equity case decided, Cities Service Oil v. Dunlap, in which the Court held that the burden of proof of bona fide purchase in an action to quiet title was “substantive,” and not merely a matter of equity practice, and state law must be followed.

Having once avoided the problem of the application of the Erie doctrine to an exclusively equitable question, the Court in 1945 met the issue squarely in Guaranty Trust Company v. York. It held that the state statute of limitations should be

---

66 Henrietta Mills v. Rutherford County, 281 U. S. 121 (1930); Pusey and Jones Co. v. Hansen, 261 U. S. 491 (1923).
72 Mason v. United States, 260 U. S. 545 (1923).
73 Neves v. Scott, 13 How. 268 (U. S. 1851).
75 308 U. S. 208 (1939).
76 Russell v. Todd, 309 U. S. 280 (1940).
77 326 U. S. 99 (1945).
applied in a class suit for breach of trust. Justice Frankfurter, who wrote the
opinion, first reiterated traditional ideas of equity jurisdiction, and said that state
law cannot define the remedies which a federal equity court may afford in diversity
jurisdiction. But, he continued, it was immaterial whether statutes of limitation be
classified as "substantive" or "procedural":

_Erie R. Co. v. Tompkins_ was not an endeavor to formulate scientific legal terminology.
It expressed a policy that touches vitally the proper distribution of judicial power between
state and federal courts. In essence the intent of that decision was to insure that, in all
cases where a federal court is exercising jurisdiction solely because of the diversity of
citizenship of the parties, the outcome of the litigation in the federal court should be
substantially the same, so far as legal rules determine the outcome of a litigation, as it
would be if tried in a State court.108

Is the import of this language consistent with traditional ideas of federal equity
jurisdiction? Justice Frankfurter decried an exception to the _Erie_ doctrine in
equity cases109 and closed his opinion by saying, "Dicta [which] may be cited character-
ing equity as an independent body of law . . . merely reflect notions that
have been replaced by a sharper analysis of what federal courts do when they enforce
rights that have no federal origin."110 If the policy underlying the _Erie_ doctrine is
as compelling as this language implies, must not equitable remedies which are avail-
able in state courts be available in federal courts sitting in diversity jurisdiction if
the lack of such remedies would lead to a different result in the federal courts?

The scope of the _York_ decision is not clear, especially since the decision in _Angel v.
Bullington_, which established that, in some measure at least, the jurisdiction of
federal courts in diversity jurisdiction is dependent upon state law. It would seem
at least arguable that the traditional statements of federal equity jurisdiction in
diversity cases are no longer entirely valid.111

VII

Before _Erie Railroad v. Tompkins_, federal courts were free to disregard state
decisions under certain circumstances although the case was not one which fell into
the category of "general law." When a state decision had been rendered subsequent
to the judgment of a lower federal court, but pending appeal, federal judges were not
bound to follow the latest decision,112 although they sometimes did so.113 When a
state decision invalidated contract rights previously held to be valid, federal courts
were free to ignore the subsequent decision.114 The decisions of intermediate state

---

108 Id. at 109.
109 Id. at 111.
110 Id. at 112.
111 It has been pointed out that some lower federal courts avoid application of the _Erie_ doctrine in
equity cases. Note, _The Equitable Remedial Rights Doctrine_, 55 Yale L. J. 401 (1946). See Purcell
v. Summers, 145 F. 2d 979 (C. C. A. 4th 1944); Black and Yates, Inc. v. Mahogany Ass'n, 129 F.
2d 227 (C. C. A. 3rd 1941).
114 Gelpcke v. Dubuque, 1 Wall. 175 (U. S. 1863). This case has never been overruled, but it is
doubtful that it will ever again be followed, as it is wholly inconsistent with the _Erie_ doctrine.
courts were not binding on federal tribunals, although they were sometimes followed.116

There were basic conflicts between these doctrines and the Erie case.117 Within a period of about thirty days at the end of 1940 and the beginning of 1941, the Supreme Court in a series of cases overthrew the old doctrines.118 It held that federal courts are bound to follow decisions of intermediate state courts in the absence of decisions of the highest state court, and of more convincing evidence of the law of the state.119 The Court also laid down, in West v. American Telephone & Telegraph Company,120 guides for the ascertainment of state law. Justice Stone declared that:

A state is not without law save as its highest court has declared it. There are many rules of decision commonly accepted and acted upon by the bar and inferior courts which are nevertheless laws of the state although the highest court of the state has never passed upon them. In those circumstances a federal court is not free to reject the state rule merely because it has not received the sanction of the highest state court, even though it thinks the rule is unsound in principle or another is preferable.121

And he continued:

Where an intermediate appellate state court rests its considered judgment upon the rule of law which it announces, that is a datum for ascertaining state law which is not to be disregarded by a federal court unless it is convinced by other persuasive data that the highest court of the state would decide otherwise.122

In Vandenbark v. Owens-Illinois Glass Company,123 the Court held that where a decision of the highest state court was delivered after judgment in the district court, but before decision in the Circuit Court of Appeals, the Circuit Court of Appeals was bound to follow the state decision.

In Meredith v. Winter Haven,124 the Supreme Court made it plain that federal courts may not avoid decision of disputed questions of state law upon which there is no authority merely because of the difficulty of ascertaining the law.125

119 See supra, note 118.
120 Fidelity Union Trust Co. v. Field, 311 U. S. 169 (1940); Six Companies of California v. Joint Highway Dist., 311 U. S. 180 (1940); West v. American Telephone and Telegraph Co., 311 U. S. 223 (1940).
121 Id. at 236, 237.
122 Id. at 237. See also Stoner v. New York Life Ins. Co., 311 U. S. 464 (1940).
123 306 U. S. 103 (1939).
124 320 U. S. 228 (1943); see Note, Recent Supreme Court Limitations on Federal Jurisdiction, 53 Yale L. J. 788 (1944).
125 Cases in which it is held that a federal court should not decide questions of state law because an important state policy is involved, or because a state statute has not been construed by state courts, represent a special doctrine, and must be distinguished from the Winter Haven case. See American Federation of Labor v. Watson, 327 U. S. 582 (1947); Burford v. Sun Oil Co., 319 U. S. 315 (1943); Chicago v. Fieldcrest Dairies, 316 U. S. 168 (1942); Railroad Commission of Texas v. Pullman Co., 312 U. S. 496 (1941); Note, Recent Supreme Court Limitations on Federal Jurisdiction, 53 Yale L. J. 788 (1944).
Although the rules laid down by the Supreme Court for the determination of state law have been sharply attacked as unduly circumscribing the judicial discretion of federal judges, lower federal courts have shown a great deal of flexibility in their search for state law. Since the Supreme Court has indicated that it will, if possible, defer to the judgment of lower federal judges on disputed matters of state law, district and circuit judges have a high degree of freedom in this matter.

There are three possible situations confronting the federal judge when he undertakes to ascertain state law. First, the highest state court may have spoken on the point. Second, in the absence of decision by the highest state court, there may be decisions by intermediate state courts. Third, there may be an entire absence of state authority upon the point.

In the first situation the duty of the federal court is clear. It must follow the state decision. But even here the federal court may disregard the decision if it concludes from an examination of later state decisions that the highest state court would no longer follow its earlier opinion.

When there are only intermediate state court decisions, federal courts must then turn to them. Although some courts have followed intermediate state decisions even though they rather obviously disagreed with them, federal courts are not required to follow blindly. They are free to examine other pertinent data, as did the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals in a recent case, and find that the state law is not as the intermediate state court says. Some federal judges have noted that they followed these decisions only in the absence of other convincing evidence, or because the highest state court had refused to review the decision.

It is in the third type of case, where there is an absence of state authority, that the...
federal courts have freest rein. Judges have stated that under such circumstances they will rely upon "a general statement of the law," upon authorities from other jurisdictions, or will proceed by analogy to other state decisions. One Circuit Court of Appeals, in the absence of state authority, has in the finest common law tradition created a new cause of action.

The policy underlying *Erie Railroad v. Tompkins* does not require that in the absence of state authority federal courts achieve mathematical identity with what a state court may in the future declare to be the law of the state. To achieve such a result would require the services of clairvoyants rather than judges. Any incongruity in the individual case arising from the fact that a federal court decides the rights of the parties upon the assumption that the state law is one way, and the state courts later, and in another case, decide that the principle is to the contrary, is inherent in a federal system providing for dual courts with concurrent jurisdiction. When the state court does speak, the federal court must follow. Until that time, the most that a federal judge can do is, as Judge Parker puts it:

... to consider that question in the light of the common law of the state, with a view of reaching the decision which reason dictates, and with the faith that the local court will reach the same decision when the question comes before it.

VIII

On the same day that *Erie Railroad v. Tompkins* was decided, Justice Brandeis also delivered the opinion of the Court in *Hinderlider v. LaPlata River and Cherry Creek Ditch Company*, in which he said that the apportionment of the water of an interstate stream "is a question of 'federal common law,' upon which neither the statutes nor the decisions of either State can be conclusive."

This case served to emphasize the fact that, as before *Erie*, there are "federal fields," governed by "federal common law." There are cases to which, because an interest of the United States is involved, because of the sweep of a federal

---

139 Versluis v. Town of Haskell, 154 F. 2d 935 (C. C. A. 10th 1946).
142 United States v. Standard Oil of California, 332 U. S. 301 (1947) (right of United States to recover medical expenses incurred in caring for soldier injured through negligence of defendant, although Court held that there was no such cause of action); Clearfield Trust Co. v. United States, 318 U. S. 365 (1943) (right of United States to recover payment made on forged government check); Board of
statute, or because Congress has "occupied the field," state law has no application. They are not "exceptions" to *Erie Railroad v. Tompkins*, but are outside the rationale of the case. They concern rights created by the Federal Government, and not rights created by the states. The Rules of Decision Act by its terms did not apply to cases "where the Constitution, treaties, or statutes of the United States otherwise require or provide. . . ." On the contrary, in these fields state courts are bound to follow the decisions of federal courts.

It is impossible to predict the eventual extent of the "federal fields" doctrine. There are strong reasons of policy for uniformity of decision in certain areas of activity over which the Federal Government has extended its regulatory powers. There seems to be some tendency for federal courts to extend the concept of exclusively federal questions. A degree of the uniformity desired by the defenders of *Swift v. Tyson* may some day be achieved in reverse, by state courts' following federal decisional law in greatly expanded "federal fields."

IX

During the ten years which have passed since they were required to make two basic readjustments in their operating procedures, lower federal courts have been almost surprisingly conscientious in the application of *Erie Railroad v. Tompkins* and its offspring. It has no doubt been difficult for many federal judges, traditionally among the ablest of our jurists, at times to subordinate their own ideas to the pronouncements of state courts.


146 Vanston Bondholders Protective Comm. v. Green, 329 U. S. 156 (1946) (whether bondholder may be paid interest on interest after default is a federal question when presented in bankruptcy case); Heiser v. Woodruff, 327 U. S. 716 (1946) (provability of claim in bankruptcy governed by federal law); United States v. Waddill, Holland and Flinn, 323 U. S. 353 (1945) (whether another lien was so far perfected before bankruptcy as to be superior to federal tax lien is federal question); Holmberg v. Ambrecht, 327 U. S. 392 (1946) (liability of shareholders of joint stock land bank is not governed by state law); D'Oench, Duham, and Co. v. FDIC, 315 U. S. 447 (1942) (liability of note given bank is federal question under Federal Reserve Act, when bank was insured by FDIC); American Surety Co. v. Bethlehem National Bank, 314 U. S. 314 (1941) (effect of illegal pledge of assets of national bank is federal question); Districk v. Greaney, 309 U. S. 190 (1940) (defense of a note given national bank in contravention of policy of National Banking Act is question of federal law).

147 Sola Electric Co. v. Jefferson Electric Co., 317 U. S. 173 (1942) (in field of patents, federal policy covers the field, and state rules do not govern estoppel of licensee of patent to challenge its validity); O'Brien v. Western Union, 113 F. 2d 539 (C. C. A. 1st 1940) (action against telegraph company for libel governed by federal law because telegraph companies subject to extensive federal regulation); accord, Vaigneur v. Western Union, 34 F. Supp. 92 (E. D. Tenn. 1940) (action for negligence); Francis v. Southern Pacific R. R., 162 F. 2d 813 (C. C. A. 9th 1947) (effect of stipulations in pass issued to railroad employee pursuant to Hepburn Act is matter of federal law).

148 The term "federally created right" is not an entirely satisfactory one. In at least one situation federal decisional law may be applied although Congress has no power to legislate in the field. See Kansas v. Colorado, 206 U. S. 46 (1907).

149 Second Employers Liability Case, 223 U. S. 1 (1912).
In spite of an occasional departure from strict application, the *Erie* doctrine has largely accomplished its purpose. In diversity jurisdiction, federal district courts now administer, as nearly as it is practically possible to do so, the same law as do the courts of the state in which they sit. Forum-shopping for substantive law has been eliminated. In non-diversity cases, state-created rights no longer have one set of consequences in the courts of the sovereign which created them and another in the courts of the Federal Government. While some of its ramifications are still unsettled, *Erie Railroad v. Tompkins* is a firmly established doctrine of our federal system of government.

---

150 See Purcell v. Summers, 145 F. 2d 979 (C. C. A. 4th 1944), where the court characterized a previous denial of an injunction by a state supreme court as only a finding of fact, and declared that the state law was to the contrary.

151 Professor Cook points out that under the Federal Interpleader Act some degree of forum-shopping is possible. *Cook, Logical and Legal Bases of the Conflict of Laws*, at 129, 130.