

VIGILANTES IN IOWA

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Hanging a man by the neck until he is dead would be regarded as pretty drastic penalty for stealing an automobile nowadays.

But in early Iowa plenty of men died at the end of a rope because they rode away on somebody else's transportation.

The penalty for stealing a horse was sudden death if an irate vigilance committee caught the thief.

These vigilance groups had little patience with the slow methods of the early courts. Usually the self-appointed law enforcers hanged the culprit to the nearest tree.

Sometimes they went through a kangaroo trial with a "jury" selected from among their number. The trial often was held in a grove of trees, perhaps by firelight, with a grave already dug and a rope thrown over a tree limb.

There is no question that they hanged some innocent men in their haste for vengeance.

Horse theft wasn't the only crime that called for a hanging party. The committees also executed men for such things as murder and counterfeiting. Nor was hanging the only type of execution used. Sometimes the victims were shot. Once a bound man was thrown into a river.

Historical records show that vigilance groups and mobs have been much more active in executing men in Iowa than the law ever has been.

Thirty-four men have died on legal gallows in Iowa since 1834. At least double that number have died in executions performed outside the law.

Men's lives have been taken by vigilance or mob action (if there is any difference) in Des Moines, Ottumwa, Council Bluffs, Tipton, and Montezuma. Others have died in the counties of Clinton, Fremont, Jackson, Monroe, Taylor, Dallas,

Shelby, Lucas, Audubon, Mahaska, Hardin, Decatur, Bremer, Washington, Jones, Johnson, Adams, Benton, Appanoose and Mills.

As recently as 1907, one James Cullen was hanged from a bridge in Floyd county by a mob. He had been arrested for the murder of his wife and stepson.

Nor were the officers themselves always in the clear on these illegal executions. Take the case of Constable Seaman of Polk county, for example.

Seaman was constable for Lee township (East Des Moines) back in 1860. He and another man went to Tama county to arrest William and Charley Bunker who were members of a gang. On the way back to Des Moines the party stopped at a place called Buckingham Grove in Polk county.

Seaman and his associate stretched the neck of one Bunker in an effort to make him confess. (Hanging a man for a minute or two was a favorite "third degree" method in those days). While the one Bunker was hanging, the other one ran away.

Seaman and the other man pursued and caught the fugitive. But when they returned they found that the Bunker they had left hanging was dead. To protect themselves, they hanged the other Bunker, too. Although they were arrested, neither Seaman nor his associate ever was punished.

All this hanging business started in eastern Iowa much earlier, when horse stealing was the frontier's big problem. In some ways the horse was more important 75 or 100 years ago than a car is today.

The pioneer farmer had to have horses or he couldn't till the soil. And when he wanted to go anywhere quickly, he was likely to travel on horseback. Then, horses were terrifically valuable. They cost as much as \$150 each, a major sum to the pioneer. Each dollar looked as big around as a barrel top to him.

About 1840 a horse thief ring which operated over much of the present midwest had headquarters in the town of Bellevue in Jackson county. The gang operated from a hotel run by a W. W. Brown.

Nearby was a forest called "The Big Woods." There the gang hid stolen horses. The ring also circulated counterfeit

money. The thieves probably were responsible for a good many of the 14 unsolved murders committed in Jackson and Clinton counties over a 10-year period.

It took 40 men, led by a sheriff, to rout the gang from the hotel. The only way the citizens could dislodge the final remnant of the gang was by setting fire to the building. Four citizens and three members of the gang were killed in the battle.

It was during this period of Iowa history that the Regulators, famed eastern Iowa Vigilance organization was formed. This secret organization sent a notice to the *Jackson County Sentinel* (a newspaper still published), saying:

We will spare no pains either of time, life or property to secure the punishment of all guilty of horse stealing, counterfeiting or murder, and we will be governed by the penal laws of the state
SO FAR AS IT IS CONVENIENT.

The Regulators had at least 700 members in Jackson, Jones, Clinton, Scott, Cedar and Johnson counties. Their deeds, especially in the year 1857, are legends now.

In March, 1857, one Alexander Gifford murdered a Clinton county man named John Ingle. It was sort of a "Murder, Inc." deal. Gifford was paid for the deed by parties who wanted Ingle out of the way.

Three weeks after the murder 100 armed men battered their way into the jail at Andrew, Iowa. They took Gifford and hanged him. Before he died, Gifford confessed that he had been paid \$150 for killing Ingle.

About three years before, one Mr. Barger shot and killed his former wife with a rifle. The case stayed in the courts until the patience of the Iron Hill Vigilantes became exhausted. On May 29, 1857, an "armed mob of 40 men" dragged Barger from the jail in De Witt and took him to Andrew.

"No time was lost in useless preliminaries," says one current account. "A black handkerchief was tied over Barger's face, the rope adjusted by Captain Landis, a young lad climbed the tree (the same tree where Gifford swung) and threw it over the consecrated limb.

"About 20 men laid down their guns, manned the rope and Barger swung between the heavens and the earth; a few short heavings of the chest, a spasm of the feet and Barger hung

a quivering corpse. Men, women and children looked on the spectacle and winced not."

The Vigilantes warned law enforcement officers against prosecuting the executioners of Gifford and Barger "as we believe they should have been hung long before they were."

Vigilance committees became a terror in eastern Iowa. A mob broke into the jail at Tipton July 3, 1857, took Alonzo Gleason and Edwin Soper and hanged them near Lowden. Gleason and Soper had stolen a horse from one Charles Penningroth.

The records are sprinkled with such entries as these:

"A horse thief was hanged outside of Tipton on Sunday night, July 5, 1857. The name of the victim is not known."

A man named Kelso was captured, tried in a lynch court and hanged in Cedar county the following July 14. A young farmer named Finch voted for the hanging. When he got home his mother rebuked him so severely that he went out and hanged himself.

Near a place called Red Oak Grove in that same county lived one Hiram Roberts, suspected of being a thief and a dealer in counterfeit money. A mob of 400 caught him and promised him a fair trial in the courts.

Roberts was left under guard in the barn of George Saum in Jones county while the main part of the mob withdrew to decide what to do. The prisoner confessed to his guards that he had distributed \$300,000 in counterfeit money.

Fearful lest he escape without punishment, the guards hanged him in the barn before the others returned.

Another time the Regulators hanged a 60-year-old man, Bennett Warren, who was suspected of associating with horse thieves and counterfeiters. Asked before he died if he had anything to say, he replied: "I am an old man and you can't cheat me out of many years."

On July 10, 1857, two men were hanged on the road between Anamosa and Monticello. Eleven days later a mob of 400 at Mechanicsville hanged a man named Keith for "counterfeiting and horse stealing."

Sometimes the Regulators were guilty of bad miscarriages of justice. For example, William Corry didn't like Alonzo Page who lived near Lowden. Corry reported that Page was

connected with horse thieves. The Regulators ordered Page, who seems to have been a worthwhile individual, to leave the country.

Having nothing on his conscience, Page refused to go. On June 18, 1857, the Regulators came to his house where Mrs. Page lay critically ill. The windows and doors were broken in and Page was wounded fatally.

Another probably innocent victim of mob action was Pleasant Anderson, who was hanged to a cotton wood tree in Wapello county much later, on Dec. 29, 1884. Anderson was suspected of many crimes but he never had been convicted.

A man was murdered in an attempted robbery. Suspicion pointed to Anderson. A mob took him from his home, drove him to a schoolhouse, convicted him in a lynch court and executed him. 'Tis said that another man on his deathbed confessed the murder and attempted robbery.

Incidentally, the records are meticulous in reporting the kind of tree from which the victims were hanged. Mention always is made of "maple tree," "willow," "oak," and so on.

Nor were these hangings always strictly masculine affairs. In 1877 a young farmer from Indianapolis, Iowa, in Mahaska county, was charged with attempted rape. Upon the advice of the women in the community, he left. But he came back. A mob of women seized him on July 30, 1877, and hanged him.

Occasionally the prisoner was saved in the nick of time, in dime novel fashion. In 1846 one Mr. Walsworth and a Melancthon Knight were operating a wharf boat at Montrose. Knight was missing one morning after a disagreement between the two.

There was a trail of blood. Then came a report that Knight's body was seen floating down the Mississippi.

While a mob was building up its anger to hang Walsworth, two other men went down the river looking for Knight. They found him alive and unharmed in Jefferson Barracks, Mo.

They hurried back and arrived just in time to save Walsworth's life. The mob had him out under a tree with a rope around his neck and over a tree limb.

Then a Mr. Teedles was hanged at Bear Creek in Jones county July 8, 1857, by a vigilance group. The committee

said Teedles' friends could take charge of the body. They immediately cut him down, found he was still alive. He soon was restored to consciousness.

The committee prepared to hang him again. He was spared, however, when he agreed to give the names of "other horse thieves and counterfeiters."

Late in 1859 a man was given a neck-stretching at Twelfth and Walker streets in Des Moines in order to obtain a confession of gang activities. They let him choke a while and then from the De Witt jail Oct. 18, 1865, and hanged him "until they let him down. He confessed.

The record of other mob executions and punishments in Iowa goes on and on in the last century. On July 5, 1860, John Kephart was taken from jail and hanged by a mob of 1,000 at Batavia, Iowa, for slaying a woman and her daughter. He was shown his grave before he was executed.

"The Abolitionists of Mills county," says a June, 1865, report reprinted in the *Daily Iowa State Register*, "hanged a Democrat and alleged horse thief at Glenwood."

The Regulators took an alleged horse thief, James Hiner, dead."

In 1868 a "Horse Alliance" was formed in Bremer county to cope with increased horse stealing. John McRoberts, a returned Civil war soldier, and a companion decided to visit some girls in Cedar Falls.

They stole two horses on the way, turned them loose after riding them for some distance. The Horse Alliance pursued them, caught McRoberts and hanged him to a tree in a pasture two miles south of Waverly.

There were occasions when the Vigilantes turned their prisoners over to the legal authorities. More often were jails and courts invaded and men taken to be executed by mobs. An example of court invasion was the case of William (Come-quick) Thomas, who lived on Camp creek in Polk county.

In September, 1856, he met a young couple near Oskaloosa. They had \$1,000 and they wanted to buy a good farm. He promised to show them where they could get one. Two weeks later their bodies were found in cornshocks in Poweshiek county.

To Be Continued

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