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Murder on Brushy Creek

By Paul C. Juhl

On hot summer days when I was a youth, my friends and I swam in Brushy Creek and played in the timber. In the filtered light of late afternoon, we listened to the squirrels scramble through the trees. And when nightfall came, the Jameson mystery was sure to come up.

The details were a little sketchy, even to those of us who had always lived in Washington Township, in southeastern Webster County. A middle-aged farm woman, Adelaide Jameson, had been approached by a robber. He demanded money, and when he thought she was going for a pistol, he shot her in the back. The murder was never solved, so in the minds of my buddies and me, the murderer might still be out there somewhere near Brushy Creek. If not the murderer, then surely the ghost of Adelaide Jameson.

For most of my 60-some years, I had stored this mystery in the back of my mind. Iowa history has always interested me, and in the summer of 2002, I attended an original play at the Old Creamery Theatre in Amana, Iowa. Titled *Lost and Found*, the play was about a small boy who had been abducted from a Marengo family in the 1890s. It started me thinking about the Jameson murder. If details were still available, could they be woven into a story? I had little to go on. Descendants of the Jameson family had come and gone in our township. I had never met a Jameson in the area during my growing-up years in the 1940s and '50s. The generations that knew the details of the story had long been dead. I didn't even know the date of the crime.

In the 1970s the State of Iowa determined that Brushy Creek valley would make a wonderful state park. The Jameson farmstead

was purchased by the state along with an additional 6,000 acres. In the 1990s the state constructed a dam and flooded most of Brushy Creek to create a 690-acre lake. The remaining buildings on the farmstead—an old barn sided with native black walnut and the house—had been torn down. But the actual site of the murder was on a hill above the lake, just off one of the equestrian trails in the eastern part of the park.

Determined to find out the whole story of the Jameson murder, I first gave some thought to where the victim might have been buried. The closest rural cemetery was Blanchard Cemetery, now surrounded by state-owned property on the west side of Brushy Creek Lake. A wagon carrying Jameson's coffin would only have had to travel down the east creek hill and up the west one to reach the cemetery. Seldom used in the 20th century, the cemetery is certainly an old one. It is a quiet place with only a hundred or so graves; a few date to the late 1850s. Although most of the grave markers had deteriorated, it didn't take long before I found Jameson's gravestone and the family plot. Now I knew the date of her death—September 15, 1884. She was only 41 years old.

On and off during the next year I searched for more. When I needed someone in Webster County to help with local research, I turned to my cousin Polly Doolittle, who lives outside Webster City. She, too, remembered growing up with the Jameson story. We talked with neighbors and prowled through dusty files in the Webster County Courthouse. The best resources, however, were the *Fort Dodge Messenger* and the *Fort Dodge Chronicle*. I followed the story through two

years of newspapers, winding my way through yards of microfilm at the State Historical Society of Iowa library in Iowa City. I was truly amazed at what I found. For starters, a reporter for the *Chronicle* had visited the crime scene on the evening of the murder. The article was bursting with details. A diagram of the Jameson house showed where the murderer had stood and the path of the bullet. Jameson's 18-year-old daughter, Abbie, described the murderer as wearing a slouch hat, a heavy beard, and a rubber coat. A possible motive was proposed: Adelaide's husband was treasurer of the school board; perhaps the murderer assumed that Jameson had several hundred dollars at home in preparation for the next day's school board meeting.

In the weeks after, the newspapers published leads in the case and comments by local citizens. One paper cautioned, "To all we say keep cool if you can, for be sure 'murder will out.'" Pieces of the mystery continued to tumble off the pages as I followed the story over the months. Then I came across the climax: in 1886, two years after the crime, a local man named Johnnie Porter had been arrested and charged with the murder. Porter's trial took place in the spring of 1887, involving the law firms of two local heavyweights in the legal profession, Jonathan Dolliver and John Duncombe. A reporter's coverage of the trial paraphrased the attorneys' questions to 32 witnesses and the essence of each testimony.

Every township in Iowa has a story—many stories, for that matter. It just takes someone to rediscover them, and then to remind others that local history can be fascinating. Perhaps the

A TERRIBLE CRIME.

A Woman Shot Dead in Her Own Home,

In the Presence of Her Two Little Daughters,

By a Cowardly Brute Who Demands Her Husband's Money.

A Heroic Daughter Picks Up Her Mother's Revolver and Attempts to Avenge Her Death,

But She Misses Her Aim and the Villain Escapes.

A Large Force of Armed Men Scouring the Country.

The Husband at Work in a Corn Field at the Time of the Murder.

Mrs. William Jameson Dies Without a Struggle or Moan.

The Supposition is that Death Was Instantaneous.

There Will be at Least Five Hundred Men Out in Search of the Murderer Today.

A Chronicle Reporter Visits the Scene of a Dreadful Crime.

He Finds the House Filled With Sympathizing Friends and Neighbors.

A Correct Diagram Showing the Residence of Mr. Jameson,

Which is Located on Brushy Creek, Fifteen Miles Southeast of this City.

Jameson murder still held interest for others in the township, as it did for me. I decided to re-stage Johnnie Porter's trial as best I could from the story I had uncovered.

Polly and I scheduled the event for Sunday, September 14, 2003, exactly 119 years and one day from the date of the murder. Because the site of the murder is part of Brushy Creek State Park, we had first contacted the park manager for his okay, and he helped arrange transportation for some of our elderly guests. The basement of the historic Methodist Church in the nearby ghost town of Homer was a bad-weather backup.

We sent invitations in somber, black envelopes to relatives and neighbors who we knew were interested in local history and encouraged them to dress in 1880s garb to set the mood—and to bring a folding chair, to rest the body. I had fashioned the witnesses' testimony into scripts for several speakers, and enclosed one into 32 of the invitations, hoping that these guests would read them at the trial. For instance, one would read the part of the local shoemaker, testifying that the cast of a footprint taken in the Jameson garden was from a size 7 boot. Another would play the part of the defendant's wife, testifying that Porter and she had spent the evening before the murder in her parlor and had plans to attend an entertainment of Swiss bell ringers in Fort Dodge the next day. One would take the role of the victim's husband, testifying that he had recently paid the premium for a joint life insurance policy. All of these rich details had come from newspapers published 12 decades ago!

The day dawned beautifully, a gorgeous early autumn day in Iowa. My aunt and uncle hosted a huge potluck at their home a few miles from the park and then we all proceeded to the state park grounds. Nearly 60 people wove their way back through the trees and underbrush, following the well-used horse trail. The seven-minute walk and quiet conversation added a certain curiosity and suspense. Brushy Creek Lake was just a few yards west of our path and filled the valley beyond. At the top of the hill we entered an opening in the trees.

The only thing left from the Jameson farmstead was a storm cellar, which had helped me establish the location of the house. The trial would take place at the exact site of the murder, the parlor. After giving some brief background, I announced the start of the trial. For over two and a half hours I called witnesses for the prosecution and defense, many of them costumed

Tricia Bird and Curt Lemon play the roles of witnesses in the murder trial.





Judy Ellerman reads her scripted testimony. The author is in the background.

in bonnets and aprons, or suspenders and hats. The "witnesses" read their scripts in character, and Sandy Mickelson, staff writer for the *Fort Dodge Messenger*, read the newspaper account of the reporter who had traveled 15 miles on the dark night after the murder.

At the end of the witnesses' testimony, those assembled acted as a jury. They were given a choice of four verdicts for Johnnie Porter: guilty of first-degree murder, second-degree murder, or manslaughter, or not guilty. Their verdict was nearly unanimous: Johnnie Porter was not guilty.

I then disclosed the actual results of the real trial in 1887. The jury had been out from 5 p.m. on

Saturday until 6 p.m. on Sunday. They found Johnnie Porter guilty of manslaughter. The case proceeded to the Iowa Supreme Court, where it was thrown out based on a procedural error.

We ended the day where we had begun—under the century-old oaks on my aunt and uncle's farm. While we enjoyed dessert and coffee, my cousin Carey Dubbert, a nationally known musician, played the dulcimer. The day had been a success. Donald and Cheryl Christopherson, farmers near the Brushy Creek area, agreed: "Our families have lived in Washington Township for over 100 years. Taking part in the re-enactment made local history come alive. Everyone at the enactment had a special interest in the place the murder occurred. Sharing the experience at the site with friends and neighbors was an enlightening afternoon of history."

Webster County historian Roger Natte also enjoyed the event: "I had a wonderful time and loved the presentation. I liked the use of local people who were asked to read the parts. I am sure that it made it much more fun for everyone there, including the participants. Obviously this was not a professional performance but that

wasn't the purpose. The 'actors' just rose to the occasion. The location of the site of the murder in a beautiful wooded area on a beautiful early fall day just added to the event. This approach may have a lot of merit for other communities and events, although it might be most successful when dealing with a trial situation."

As I drove away from Brushy Creek and my boyhood home, I was smiling and felt pleased with the way everything had turned out. Polly and I had brought together family and friends for a different perspective on a place we all knew well. Even though the murder of Adelaide Jameson was a tragic event, the trial re-enactment had given us all a chance to briefly stand in the shoes of actual individuals from the past. Perhaps we now had a better understanding of how our ancestors had confronted misfortune and defined justice. I left Brushy Creek hopeful that I, and others, would create more living-history experiences for Iowans and the communities they call home. ❖

The author enjoys researching and writing about Iowa history. His work has appeared in The Palimpsest and Iowa Heritage Illustrated. Special thanks to Julie Krusemark for the use of photos and other materials.

Many of the guests to the trial came dressed in 19th-century costumes to add to the ambience. From left: Libby Doolittle; Shirley and Don Doolittle, hosts of the potluck; Louise Juhl; and Polly Doolittle.

