

CHARLOTTE M. WRIGHT

Henry's Story

This is not history, I'll tell you right now. Everything I'm about to say is made up, except for one fact. That doesn't mean I don't want you to believe it. I've spent more time thinking of that one event than anyone alive, and maybe even anyone dead. I think that qualifies me as an expert on what happened to Henry Johnson.

My name is Fredericka Reuter, and I'm a retired school teacher. But that is not important to this story. What is important is a certain week in August, in 1976, when I was at the historical library in Madison doing some research on the small town of Fair City, a Mississippi River town in northwest Wisconsin. I was trying to trace the life of my immigrant ancestor, who had uprooted his wife and children from their home in what was then called Prussia, to seek freedom in a land where people did not understand a word he said. Men like this are easy to find in census reports. Although their names are invariably misspelled, one recognizes the proper number of children, the proper names and ages for the time period—giving one a legitimate reason to claim the family as one's own. I had found my Reuter family in Chicago in the 1850 census; by 1860 they were in Fair City; by 1870 they were gone and I had no idea where. I thought if I searched old newspaper records for 1860–1870, I might find a clue as to where they had moved, and why. I had gone through all the land records for Buffalo County and could find only the name of the man who bought their homestead after they left. The church records I searched only told me of the two young family members who had remained behind in the graveyard.

But all that is beside the point. My ancestor, August Frederick Reuter, is not the subject of this story. Henry Johnson is. In a way, though, August led me to Henry, because without my ancestor's disappearance from Fair City, I would never have been reading microfilmed copies of *The Fair City Gazette* for the years 1860–1870. As I scrolled through roll after roll of microfilm, I began to notice a pattern of short reports that disturbed me. One would read, for instance, that "a deranged German was found wandering in the woods on Friday"; another would blandly state that "a German man killed his

newborn baby with an axe after his wife died of complications from her confinement.” There would be no further explanations.

I was fascinated by the tragedy of these reports, not only because I could not imagine how a poor German-speaking immigrant would be able to defend himself or identify himself to the satisfaction of a news reporter, but also because now, a hundred years after the events, the victims—the men, women, and children—were still unnamed. I knew that any descendant from my era, trying as desperately as I was to find his ancestor, could only stare helplessly at the page and wonder if these people were his. I started forcing myself to skip over these brief news notes, both so that my mind did not dwell on the little mysteries and so that I would be more efficient at the task in hand: finding August Frederick Reuter.

This, then, is what I was doing when I discovered Henry Johnson. His name meant nothing to me then, and I do not know why I let my eyes stop on the small paragraph, for by now I was an expert at skimming for the words “August,” “Frederick,” “Reuter,” and “German,”—not allowing my eyes to stop for matters which did not concern me, no matter how interesting. But perhaps the reason I stopped is not so important. I admit that I did, and when I share with you the circumstances of Henry Johnson’s death, you will agree that even you would have allowed your eyes to rest on this meager obituary had you run across it under the same circumstances.

But I have kept you in suspense long enough, and that is not my intention. I do not mean to sensationalize Henry’s story, for I believe it will speak to you, as it did to me, in all of its simplicity. Here it is, then. This is what I saw in the newspaper, dated April 3, 1868:

Henry Johnson, an old bachelor of Grand Dyke, cut off the heads of all his hens recently, made a bonfire of his best clothes, and killed himself with arsenic.

My first thought was how lucky for this man’s descendants that he had been given a name in this report—for he was obviously a Swede or Norwegian, and they usually fared no better in the papers than did the Germans: nameless, no matter how noteworthy their actions. But almost immediately I recognized my mistake. “An old bachelor” was not likely to have had children whose progeny could claim descendancy. I felt angry for a moment. For the reporter to

have been so meticulous when no one in the future stood to benefit! What a cruel waste, with so many of us out here and performing tedious searches for one more, then just one more name to fit the right place and time on our family history charts.

I think perhaps the arsenic may have thrown me off at first. I was used to suicide reports, and arsenic was second only to hanging as the immigrants' choice for ending their lives in the golden country that had promised them so much. I was just about to advance the knob on the microfilm machine when the full impact of the report finally struck me: Henry had "cut off the heads of his hens." Not his chickens, which might imply the roosters also, but merely his hens. *How wonderfully Freudian*, I thought, and smiled at the idea, for Freud had not even published his *Interpretation of Dreams* when Henry made his life's final choices, much less the more controversial *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* or *The Ego and the Id*.

Then the next detail struck me. He had made a bonfire of his clothes. His *best* clothes. So he had probably died in his work clothes, for seldom did the immigrants have more than two sets of clothing. Often they had only one, but if Henry had died in the nude, surely the reporter would have mentioned it. Custom would have dictated that Henry be buried in his best clothing, but that would have been impossible in his case, of course. Did he mean to be laid in his coffin in whatever sweat-stained, blood-spattered shirt and overalls he had worn during his hen-killing spree? *Certainly Henry was deranged*, I thought, *and likely a victim of Victorian morality. An old bachelor full of sexual frustration finally snaps, destroys all his female fowls and other possessions, then kills himself.*

Over the next few weeks I thought off and on about Henry Johnson, but I would hardly call myself obsessed. I added his name to my mental list of words to skim for during my microfilm-reading times, and looked closely for a more formal obituary in the month's worth of newspapers published after his death date. But I found nothing. I forced myself to concentrate again on the plight of my own immigrant ancestor, August Frederick Reuter. Each day I went to the library, chose a film from my list, and stood before the microfilm machine. Always there was that sharp sense of anticipation as I threaded the end of the film onto the large plastic spool marked "Do Not Remove." I never allowed it to overpower me, though. I know how long the hours are when all you can see are the names of

other peoples' kin. The weeks went by, and I found nothing about August, nothing about Henry. Somehow, because I had stumbled so inadvertently upon Henry's final life-event while my own ancestor's life secrets continued to elude me, I began to feel closer to Henry Johnson than I did to my own ancestor. I felt I was the only living soul who even knew of Henry's existence; I was certainly the only one who knew of the peculiar, self-appointed manner of his death. August Reuter had fathered several children, who in turn had more children, who in turn had more, so it seemed likely that, elusive as it was for me, his story would eventually be known even if I was not the one to find it.

And so the presence of Henry Johnson, or rather the mystery of his death, began to haunt my spare hours. The more I considered, the more questions formed in my mind. I invented various scenarios of what happened to him on that morning he awoke to the decision never to wake again. I imagined him as the type of man who would want to follow the same rituals he had every other morning. He did not seem to me like someone who would be comfortable doing anything out of the ordinary. Even the killing of the first hen must have been an ordinary act, for certainly he had, like all farmers, killed chickens before. The hens themselves likely took no note of it whatever. They must have gone on clucking, pecking at the ground. Chickens are not smart. How many would Henry Johnson have killed before they began to notice something different, before they smelled enough blood to sense something awry?

I began to imagine how ordinary a morning it might have been. I liked to think of him first shaving his chin and then eating his breakfast before looking out toward his hen house. A man who would commit such final acts, it seemed to me, would not want it any other way. A clean, smooth face. His eggs eaten. His dishes put away.

I did not for a moment believe that he hated chickens. To this day I believe that he loved them, especially his hens, and his act was a mercy killing. My favorite image of Henry Johnson was of a man who each morning would slide one worn hand underneath each hen, clucking her name softly, ignoring the slight peck of the beak on his arm. Slowly his hand would slip back out, cupping a smooth brown egg. This man would not have been able bear the thought of his chickens being alone and uncared for when he died. He was smart enough to know that it could be days before his own body

was discovered, and the chances were not good that his hens would survive without someone to feed them. He could not have borne the thought that they would slowly starve.

It occurred to me one day that I could have been wrong about Henry wearing his work clothes that final day. I began to think that perhaps he had worn his best suit while beheading his beloved chickens, and afterward could not bear the sight of their blood on it. He would have changed into his work clothes before burning the bloodied suit, taking arsenic, and then dying. I was more and more frustrated with all that the article did not mention. Time, for instance. Henry Johnson could have killed the chickens one day, and burned his suit the next. Or burned the suit the first day, then beheaded the chickens the next. I simply could not decide. The only surety was that soon after taking the arsenic, death followed.

I must have gone on in this manner for several months, assigning to Henry Johnson a noble if somewhat eccentric character, replaying all the various scenarios in my mind. Surely his suicide and its accompanying rituals were unselfish acts; his motivations honorable and tragic. Perhaps the old bachelor had finally fallen in love, but the woman scorned him. Or she belonged to another man, so Henry was unable to make his desires known. I felt he had taken, not the coward's way out, but the hero's, causing as little commotion as possible. I began to wish Henry Johnson had been my ancestor, for surely such a purposeful and dignified death was preferable to whatever way August Frederick Reuter died. The latter had left a wife to cry and suffer in poverty, and many children whose lives were undoubtedly scarred at his untimely passing. I, of all people, was familiar with the psychic burden caused by a father's death. But an old bachelor's? It all seemed so orderly, so clean, so painless.

Then one night I had a dream. I will not claim that Henry Johnson came back from the dead to speak to me, but I will tell you I saw him quite clearly in this dream, and felt after I awoke that I understood some deeper and more vital part of him. I was most surprised at how ugly he was. A tall man, with knees and elbows that seemed to bend too far backward. A large head, squared at the top under yellow hair, sloping off to a surprisingly delicate chin just above his dark suit. His coat was too small for him; the thick hair on his hands and wrists was clearly visible. From the way he held the axe, I could tell that he did not love his chickens at all. As he

reached down to pick up the first one, a seam ripped on his sleeve. His mouth twitched at the corners as he brought the dull axe head down on that first neck. He watched the fat body flop, then looked at the small head in his hand before throwing it against the fence. The hens seemed to trust him, to come to him. They lined up next to the killing stump, and he had but to reach out his hand for another one, another one, another one. Behind him, a small family group gathered. A man with black hair. A woman in a plain dress, holding by the hand two children, whose mouths were open and whose feet were bare. I could see that Henry Johnson killed his hens because he hated them; he had hated them for years.

Perhaps, I thought after a time, it was not the hens themselves, but what they represented. All those feathers. All those eggs. All that life.

I tell you, the dream was not a nightmare. I was not upset when I awoke, but relieved that I finally knew the whole story. I was not sorry to have been given the facts. I have always been proud of the amount of truth I can bear.