

The Rainsbargers Revisited

County Crisis and Historical Mystery

by Raymond M. Tinnian

ON JUNE 5, 1885, Manse and Finley Rainsbarger were taken from the jail at Eldora, Iowa, and shot by a mob of about a hundred men, "much as an infuriated animal would destroy its enemy," according to one historian. Although lynchings (broadly defined as any mob violence and killings) were not particularly rare in nineteenth-century Iowa, there was probably never one perpetrated more cynically.

Many people in the Hardin County area today still consider the Rainsbargers a family of criminals who didn't do everything they were accused of. The truth is more complex and more interesting: with one exception, the Rainsbargers didn't do anything they were accused of. Yet before the affair was finished, two Rainsbargers had been killed by a mob, and two others would be imprisoned for thirty years. The story surrounding these events was misunderstood and misrepresented for so many years that it became a gloomy labyrinth, defying all honest attention.

In 1944, nearly sixty years after the lynching, an Iowa Falls journalist wrote: "It is too tangled a web for us to untangle and it has never been quite safe to try to untangle it, as I long ago

learned from personal experience. . . . All along the way from Eldora to Iowa Falls, the two towns included, there are persons whose parents or grandparents were mixed up in the troubles of the 1880s. . . . Where life, death, and imprisonment are involved in so many lives, it is not safe to delve too deeply. The truth will never be known except by those who played the cards and their lips have been sealed by fear and death."

About two years ago, while conducting routine historical research for the U.S. Highway 20 project in Hardin County, I came across this violent story that seemed to have no bottom. All available accounts were contradictory or ambivalent. After months of searching, I located Norma Poland of Marshalltown, great-granddaughter of William Rainsbarger. In her attic were hundreds of pages of previously unknown information that two of the Rainsbarger brothers had spent their lives accumulating: 256 newspaper clippings from 38 different Iowa newspapers; hundreds of pages of Nate Rainsbarger's writings; and 75 sworn statements and letters from guilt-ridden participants who had come forward years after the fact to tell their stories. The conclusions indicated by these documents were disturbing and inescapable. It's easy to see why journalist Ira Nichols in 1944 ran into a stone wall trying to investigate the Rainsbarger story, for as Nichols had observed, all along the way, from Eldora to Iowa Falls, there were persons

Opposite: 1883 map of Hardin County showing (from top) towns of Abbott, Cleves, Steamboat Rock, Eldora, and Gifford. Top inset: Site of ambush of Henry Johns, south of Abbott. Lower inset: Area of Enoch Johnson's murder, north of Gifford. (Map and 1991 photos, courtesy the author.)

© 1992 Raymond M. Tinnian

whose parents or grandparents had been deceived and manipulated into acts that they came to view with shame and sorrow.

THE RAINSBARGER family came from Ohio in 1853 and settled in a tiny log cabin near the Iowa River, a few miles northeast of what later became the town of Steamboat Rock. The Rainsbarger farm was situated on the flat prairie uplands overlooking the Iowa River greenbelt, with its steep slopes, dense woods, and inaccessible ravines. George and Catharine Rainsbarger raised a family of five sons and five daughters. The oldest son, William, eventually bought a farm nearby and raised a large family of his own. He was a good neighbor, a respected citizen, and a member of the school board. The second youngest of the Rainsbarger brothers, Emanuel (or "Manse"), became a blacksmith and ran a shop in Steamboat Rock where he let the local boys make sleds. At the time of his death in 1885, he had a young wife and a newborn son.

Frank, the youngest of the brothers, and Nathan (or "Nate"), who was nine years older, worked the family's original forty-acre farm after George and Catharine died. They also ran a threshing crew in the fall. They were known to drink, associate with riff-raff, and were

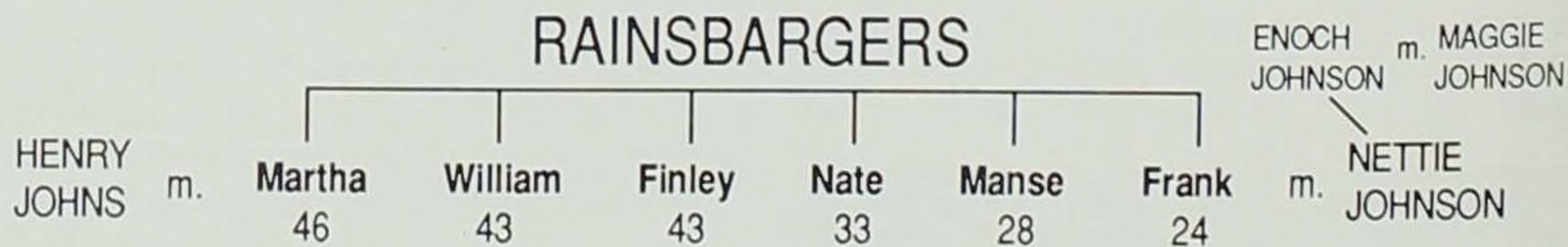
described by their greatest defender as "no Sunday school boys," but there is no evidence that Frank or Nate Rainsbarger ever committed a crime.

The second oldest brother, Finley, was considered a dangerous character because in 1866 he had killed a man with a knife during a drug-store scuffle. Finley Rainsbarger retained his ill reputation for the rest of his life, and may have been associated with a low order of Hardin County criminals.

In December of 1882, the youngest of the Rainsbarger brothers, Frank, eloped with Nettie Johnson, daughter of the well-known Enoch "Horsethief" Johnson. The couple set up housekeeping on Frank and Nate's forty-acre farm.

The following summer federal authorities at Goldfield, Iowa, arrested Nettie's father, Enoch Johnson, with a box of counterfeit coins in his possession. Johnson was a key member of an extensive criminal ring centered in Steamboat Rock, two and a half miles from Frank and Nate Rainsbarger's farm. A few years previous, this crime ring had shifted from simple stock and equipment theft into the riskier field of producing counterfeit money, and they had met with initial success. Counterfeit money was passed and accepted without question at several places, including the Farmer's Exchange Bank in Steamboat Rock. Some of the coins were made at William P. Hiserodt's

Rainsbarger siblings (ages in 1885) and relatives through marriage



The six Rainsbarger siblings most involved in the dramatic events in Hardin County. Martha was married to Henry Johns. Frank was married to Nettie Johnson, daughter of Enoch Johnson and his wife, Maggie. (There were also four other Rainsbargers: Charity, Delia, Levina, and Elizabeth.)



From left: Frank and Nate Rainsbarger

Frank and Nate Rainsbarger were described by their greatest defender as “no Sunday school boys,” but there is no evidence that either ever committed a crime.

hotel in Steamboat Rock; others were shipped in from Dubuque or Sioux City. Several sources confirm that the Hardin County counterfeit ring was connected to other criminal operations throughout the Midwest, but little is known about these confederates. An elaborate exchange network may have prevented federal agents from tracing the counterfeit coins to the casting dies, and it also served to distribute the guilt in such a way that each counterfeiter felt himself protected from arrest — except for Enoch Johnson.

Spending the winter months in federal prison, Johnson felt greatly betrayed as none of his criminal friends tried to help him. In Steamboat Rock the counterfeit ring was terrified of what Johnson might tell federal authorities, and dared not step forward to help him. As for the Rainsbarger family, they didn't much care about Enoch Johnson's troubles until the spring of 1884, when Nettie Rainsbarger begged her husband, Frank, to bail her father out of prison, and Frank mortgaged the farm to do so. This does not seem to have been a problem for Frank's brother Nate, since they thought they would get their money back when Enoch Johnson appeared for trial.

In April 1884, Johnson was released from prison, pending a trial. He returned to his home in Gifford, but immediately quarreled with his wife, Margaret, and she threw him out. Margaret Johnson, a trusted member of the counterfeit ring, was furious with her hus-

band for having gotten caught. With nowhere else to go, Enoch Johnson moved in with his daughter Nettie, at Frank and Nate Rainsbarger's farm.

During the summer of 1884, Enoch Johnson received visitors at the farm. One of these visitors was Henry Johns, husband of Martha Rainsbarger and a good friend to the Rainsbarger brothers. Henry Johns was a wealthy farmer who had been losing money through phony coins and bills and was determined to rid the county of counterfeit money. He had given some of the coins to federal agents and was now foreman of a grand jury to indict counterfeiters. During their meetings, Enoch Johnson told Johns the names of those in the counterfeit ring, where they met, and where the money was made. Henry Johns passed the information along to United States marshals. In return for the information, Enoch Johnson expected leniency when his trial came up.

ANOTHER VISITOR to Frank and Nate Rainsbarger's farm that summer was William P. Hiserodt, leader of the counterfeit ring. Hiserodt was a well-liked and perhaps even charismatic fellow. Born in Columbia County, New York, in 1840, he had been a Grange leader in Hardin County in the 1870s, then a blacksmith in Steamboat



Counterfeit coin and
Enoch Johnson



The counterfeit
ring clearly did not
intend to let Enoch
“Horsethief”
Johnson’s trial
take place.

Rock. During the 1880s Hiserodt ran a hotel and saloon in Steamboat Rock called the Western House. Hiserodt was “not of more than medium height” and “broad and stocky with an unusually dark complexion,” according to Nate Rainsbarger. “His eyes were black as were his hair and beard. ‘Black Hiserodt’ he was called, or ‘Black Bill’. Too, his voice had a peculiar and gruff quality, making it recognizable anywhere.”

Hiserodt told Enoch Johnson that “if he peached there wouldn’t be enough left of him to feed to the crows.” Johnson took the threat seriously. He tried to keep in public places and he stayed close to the Rainsbargers, much to their eventual misfortune. Henry Johns had for years warned Frank and Nate to stay away from Enoch Johnson, but Frank’s marriage to Nettie had drawn them all in. Now Henry Johns’s crusade against local crime propelled events in Hardin County. Nevertheless, Enoch Johnson’s trial date was postponed for several months, until January 1885.

The counterfeit ring clearly did not intend to let Johnson’s trial take place. Johnson’s wife, Margaret (or “Maggie”), was a central figure in the plot; she and stepdaughter Nettie had Johnson’s life insured for \$16,000. Although Nettie was angry and ashamed of her father, she was torn. According to testimony of Johnson’s hired boy, at one meeting down in Gifford with the counterfeit ring, Nettie “got up and walked across the room several times and stood in front of Mag and said ‘For God’s sake are you going to kill my father?’ and Mag said, in sub-

stance, ‘shut up you damned little fool.’”

On November 16, Margaret Johnson sent a note to her husband: “Come down and get me teusday night. Tell Net to send my shall.” Enoch Johnson took the bait. On Tuesday, November 18, he started on the thirteen-mile buggy ride from Frank and Nate Rainsbarger’s farm down to Gifford to see his wife.

It happened to be one of the liveliest nights in Hardin County history. Grover Cleveland had just been elected the first Democratic president since the Civil War. To many the ascent of the Democrats meant repeal of the recent state prohibition law — and free-flowing liquor again. There were huge bonfires at Steamboat Rock and Eldora where victorious Democrats whooped it up.

Given all the activity that night, Johnson probably felt it safe to venture out alone. He stopped at the bonfire in Eldora and drank a beer with four of his horsethief buddies. One of them asked him what he was planning to do when his trial came up, and he told them he was going to plead guilty and hope for a light sentence. Two of them saw Johnson get in his buggy and head south for Gifford sometime after ten o’clock.

Meanwhile at Gifford, Margaret Johnson got on a train with an acquaintance, Joshua West, and rode eighteen miles north to the Revere House at Ackley. She wanted to be far away from Gifford, and with a witness to prove it. Josh West thought they were going to “occupy the same room and bed,” but in this he was to be disappointed. He later said, “The purpose

we went for was not accomplished on account of her nervous condition."

In the morning Enoch Johnson's body was found lying in the road a quarter mile north of the Gifford Bridge. His horse was caught in a barbed wire fence nearby, and his broken buggy was at the top of the hill. The lines of the harness were wrapped around one of his boots, his face was cut up, and his skull was fractured. It looked as though his buggy had broken down and he had tried to ride his horse the rest of the way to Gifford, but had been thrown from it and dragged, the victim of a common accident. In Gifford there was talk of having another bonfire to celebrate the occasion.

That evening the *Eldora Herald* printed details about Johnson's "accident" and eulogized him as a "successful harness maker at Steamboat Rock years ago, but since the death of his [first] wife in 1868 or 69 has led a checkered life. Peace to his ashes."

A FEW DAYS LATER, Margaret Johnson and her stepdaughter Nettie came forward to collect \$16,000 insurance on Johnson's life from four separate policies.

Someone in authority decided that \$16,000 was too much life insurance for a penniless horsethief. Enoch Johnson's body was exhumed. After an autopsy, the coroner ruled his death a murder and empaneled a jury to investigate. Margaret Johnson was summoned before the coroner's jury. She brought her alibi, Josh West, along with her.

Did she have any idea who killed her husband, she was asked.

Why no, she said, she didn't have any idea who would want to kill her husband, then added, "He had bitter enemies at Goldfield. George Shinwood, William Eggleston, and Ed Whitney threatened to kill him."

Nettie Rainsbarger was also summoned. Two domestics swore that she had been home the night of the murder. When asked about Frank and Nate Rainsbarger's whereabouts, Nettie's answer was pivotal: they had gone to the town of Cleves for groceries at six and

gotten back before midnight. Nettie and Margaret were released until further notice.

In Gifford the word 'murder' was on everyone's lips, and Margaret Johnson was an obvious suspect. Fearing a mob, she packed her things and moved to the Ellsworth Hotel in Eldora. From that time on, she lived entirely in the service of the counterfeit ring.

Here began a period of white knuckles at the Ellsworth Hotel, for now the counterfeit ring had Enoch Johnson's murder as another reason to fear exposure and arrest, and this time the charges would be more serious than counterfeiting. According to one eyewitness, William P. Hiserodt "could see the doors of the penitentiary yawning for him." Sometime in late December 1884, over whiskey and cigars at the Ellsworth, the counterfeit ring hit upon



Nettie Rainsbarger

Nettie Rainsbarger charged Frank and Nate Rainsbarger with her father's murder. She sat at dinner but didn't eat much. Then she went into a closet to hide.

another elaborate plan. Always too complex, their schemes had consequences that they did not foresee.

During January 1885, Margaret Johnson rode out from Eldora several times to visit with her stepdaughter Nettie. The two women had long talks while Frank and Nate Rainsbarger were out doing farm work. On January 15, 1885, Nettie Rainsbarger grabbed a set of lead knuckles from Frank's dresser drawer and returned with Margaret to the Ellsworth Hotel. Once there, she handed over the lead knuckles to local attorneys Henry Huff and John Stevens, and signed an affidavit that had been written up in advance, charging Frank and Nate Rainsbarger with her father's

murder. She sat at dinner but didn't eat much. Then she went into a closet to hide. According to a cook at the hotel, she would not come out until Margaret assured her that Frank and Nate had been arrested.

According to the *Eldora Herald* — which now announced that the murderers had been caught — Margaret's and Nettie's affidavits "for thrilling interest are more sensational than the tale of Ali Baba and the forty thieves." Nettie's affidavit stated that Frank and Nate had come home on the night of the murder at 11:30 P.M. with blood on their coats. Their suspicious words and actions during the ensuing month had thoroughly convinced her that they had murdered her father.

A review of the circumstances suggests, however, that her tale was impossible. If Enoch Johnson and his broken buggy had been left in the main road from Eldora to Gifford before 11:30 P.M. that night, the people coming back from the election bonfires would have found him. His body was not found until the morning after. This seemingly obvious fact got lost in the drama of a young wife accusing her husband of murder.

A FEW DAYS after his arrest, Frank Rainsbarger wrote his wife a brief letter: "Well, Nettie, I used to call you my dear friend but I suppose I can't call you that anymore. I did not think you would do this way. . . ."

Her answer was a long, detailed accusation: ". . . What a sin would have rested on me for concealing the murder of my own father. . . . I suppose the louder he screamed the harder you beat him. You did not kill him decent. . . . Oh, I did not think I had such a man as that, till I had to know it. . . . My little sister comes crying around me like her little heart would break and says, 'Nettie, if you had not married Frank, you and I would have a papa.' How do you think I feel to hear talk such as that? . . . My Bible says the time shall come when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess. If you don't confess here on earth, the time will come when you will have to confess before God and all His Holy angels. Frank, you

know how I have often talked, begged, and cried of you to take my advice and do different, and you would not. . . ."

Further on, the four-page letter implicates the whole Rainsbarger family in the murder. The letter was printed and handed out publicly. The *Des Moines Daily News* printed it and called it "damning correspondence."

From one day to the next, Nettie went from being an ordinary farm woman and the

Editor Ross fed off the news he got from the vigilance meetings, and the vigilantes in turn fed off news they read in the *Eldora Herald*. All were neatly in the pocket of William P. Hiserodt.

daughter of a horsethief, to being comfortably settled at the Ellsworth, escorted from place to place under armed guard, clothed and protected by the eminent men of the community, flattered by the local press, and showered with dramatic attention. (According to an *Eldora Herald* pamphlet history, "The dashing and defiant Frank had captivated the innocent-minded maiden.") A few people in Eldora thought something fishy was going on, but they were afraid to speak up. Most people who read Nettie's letter believed it.

Still hot on the trial of the counterfeiters, the wealthy farmer Henry Johns believed otherwise. To him it was obvious who was behind the murder of Enoch Johnson — and it wasn't the Rainsbargers. Johns (as husband of Martha Rainsbarger and a good friend to his Rainsbarger brothers-in-law) felt a deep sense of personal responsibility for what was happening to Frank and Nate, since he had gotten Enoch Johnson to name the counterfeiters and had initiated the grand jury investigation. Now he saw to it that Frank and Nate were moved to the Marshalltown jail where they would be safe from mobs. He told them to "be of good cheer," that he would "clear them if it cost \$50,000 dollars." But the only way to clear

Frank and Nate of Johnson's murder was to expose the counterfeit ring, and this proved to be more dangerous than he realized.

William P. Hiserodt, the leader of the counterfeit ring, now drew a bead on Henry Johns. He formed a "vigilance committee" in Steamboat Rock. Anyone who would take the oath and become a 'deputy' received free whiskey at Hiserodt's hotel and saloon. Although an inner circle of ten or twenty men probably targeted the Rainsbargers early on, the one or two hundred men who attended the general meetings, according to one later remorseful man, had "joined said 'vigilant society' in good faith for what we then believed to be for the best interests of and the preservation of life and property."

Over the next several weeks, James S. Ross, editor of the *Eldora Herald*, seems to have slipped onto the growing payroll of the counterfeit ring. His newspaper became the mouthpiece of the Hardin County criminals. Whether he actually believed any of what he wrote is hard to tell. At first his paper spoke of an amorphous 'gang' up around Steamboat Rock. Then his rhetoric accelerated steadily throughout February. Finally he focused on specific individuals. On March 11 he wrote: "The Rainsbarger crowd are seeking a new location. . . . The people, with the co-operation of the county press, have them on the run and there should be no let up till all are in the penitentiary." Editor Ross fed off the news he got from the vigilance meetings, and the vigilantes in turn fed off news they read in the *Eldora Herald*. All were neatly in the pocket of William P. Hiserodt.

ON APRIL FOOL'S DAY someone shot Finley Rainsbarger's horse out from under him. On April 6 someone took a few shots at William Rainsbarger, the oldest Rainsbarger brother and a respected member of the school board. On April 8 they did the same to Henry Johns. Like William Rainsbarger, Henry Johns had never been suspected of any criminal activity. Now, all of a



William Rainsbarger

On April 6 someone took a few shots at William Rainsbarger, the oldest Rainsbarger brother and a respected member of the school board.

sudden, he was identified as part of the "gang." That week the *Eldora Herald* sneered, "The Rainsbargers, who have been running everything with a high hand and terrorizing everyone, find themselves confronted with a little of the same kind of sauce. We hope they enjoy it."

Henry Johns warned that the county was on the verge of a guerilla war "which might not end for twenty or thirty years." He bought rifles for his sons and hired men. Johns and the Rainsbarger brothers seem to have expected a long, ugly feud but they didn't know exactly who had thrown in their lot with the vigilantes, nor did they understand the connection between the counterfeit ring and the vigilantes. Henry Johns tried to find out what was going on at these vigilance meetings in Steamboat Rock, but the meetings were surrounded by armed guards. One of his detectives was "treated to the toe of a boot," according to the *Eldora Herald*.

By now, Hiserodt and others had somehow convinced the vigilantes that Henry Johns was not only part of the Rainsbarger gang but the actual leader. Hadn't he promised to spend \$50,000 to free two killers? Wasn't he buying guns for his boys? Sometime in early April, the men who met in secret at Hiserodt's saloon made a rash decision.

On the night of April 16, Henry Johns was returning by train from Eldora, where he had hired lawyers to defend Frank and Nate. He met his son and hired man at the Abbott Station. While they were in the depot someone



From left: Henry Huff and Ash Noyes

Lawyer Huff told Steamboat Rock banker Ash Noyes that he could not get a copy of Johnson's statement. Noyes replied, "Dam the statement we can break down all statements."

unhitched their horses, delaying Johns long enough for an ambush to be set up a quarter mile south of town. While the two men and the boy were riding home from Abbott, one of their horses was suddenly shot dead in front of them. The three jumped from the buggy and Henry Johns's son and hired man ran away into the cornfield. A bullet from the rear came through the buggy and struck Henry Johns in the side, and he took a load of buckshot in the left arm. He fell into the mud and lay motionless. Then he recognized Amos Bannigan and William P. Hiserodt standing over him with guns, and several other men skulking in the background. They decided they had killed him and left. Later, Johns managed to crawl to a nearby farmhouse for help. The next day he was brought home to his farm.

There must have been a small rift between editor Ross and the vigilantes. The following Wednesday Ross wrote in the paper, "Shooting at Abbott. A Cowardly Assault on Henry Johns. . . . Let the shooting stop, or some parties will find themselves in a tighter box than Frank and Nate Rainsbarger are in."

Members of the Johns and Rainsbarger families and their friends moved to the farm where Henry Johns lay wounded. Banding together for mutual protection, many of them camped in the woods. Tension grew. At the end of April the *Eldora Herald* wrote: "There are several hundred vigilantes thirsting for Rainsbarger blood."

About this same time, Frank and Nate Rains-

barger were brought back to Eldora from Marshalltown to be indicted and tried for the murder of Enoch Johnson. Henry Johns, still suffering from his wounds, hired four detectives to ride along and protect Frank and Nate from the vigilantes, and requested Justice L. P. Harrington of Marshalltown to come along with them to take Johns's sworn statement on who had shot him.

MEANWHILE a federal agent crept into town. Henry Martin was a specialist with the United States Treasury Department's Secret Service. A federal officer in Marshalltown had ordered him to go to Eldora during the April-May term of court, check in at the Ellsworth Hotel, and "report on all events and occurrences that might take place there." Martin had a list of names provided by the late Enoch Johnson, who, after his release from prison, had given Henry Johns and the U.S. marshals names and locations. Martin checked into the Ellsworth Hotel on April 21 under the name F. P. Suydam. He told people he was an insurance solicitor, curious about the circumstances of Johnson's death.

Unconcerned with what appeared to be a local blood feud, Martin was there to gather evidence to arrest and convict counterfeiters. He recorded what he heard in the hallways and

through doors, what he saw through holes in the wall, and what he picked up of local gossip. On April 25 Martin jotted in his notebook: "*Deyo Wilcox Swane Hiserodt Rittenour in a conference in a room known as the den. Lathrop and Palmer to be on the grand jury; cigars and whiskey in quantities; conversation low; the names of Johns and Rainsbargers often repeated.*"

During his first few days at the hotel, Martin was handed a copy of Nettie's letter. He heard that the county was being terrorized by the Rainsbargers, a gang of killers up around Steamboat Rock. He was given details about recent events — with the Rainsbargers blamed for it all. He also heard that the Rainsbargers had murdered Enoch Johnson to prevent him from exposing their counterfeit ring. And he was told that the Rainsbargers had shot Henry Johns for his money. Martin dutifully recorded all this in his notes, and seems to have believed it at first.

Then on April 27 he heard something strange. Lawyer Huff told Steamboat Rock banker Ash Noyes (also a leader of the counterfeit ring) that he could not get a copy of the statement that Enoch Johnson had made to federal officers. According to Martin's notes, Noyes replied, "*Dam the statement we can break down all statements.*"

Martin also recorded great consternation among the men at the Ellsworth upon the arrival of Justice Harrington and S. T. Waterman, one of the detectives. They and two other detectives checked in at the City Hotel, six doors down from the Ellsworth. About the same time, Finley Rainsbarger walked into town, heavily armed, to meet with them and attend his brothers' court proceedings.

Hiserodt threatened the owner of the City Hotel, demanding that he throw the detectives and the Rainsbargers out of his place if he wanted to stay in town and do business. Martin recorded Hiserodt's warning: "*If not, he would go down with them.*" The hotel owner protested that he had already agreed to board them; he did not see how he could get out of it now.

On the one hand, the counterfeit ring was afraid the detectives might expose them. On the other, they were afraid that Finley Rains-

barger might kill them. He had already threatened to kill Margaret and Nettie Johnson. One of Hiserodt's cronies was posted at the hotel door with orders to "shoot any strangers seen prowling around the Ellsworth at night."

On April 29, the *Eldora Herald* made light of the growing drama in town: "Eldora is just now being honored by the presence of two detectives. They are stopping at the City Hotel and register as Nos 1 and 2." He added, "You fellows who shot the horse which Fin Rainsbarger was riding better fess up and ask the leniency of

Editor Ross advised, "The boys about town will please not do any shooting near town or along the roads over which the gang may pass, for their nerves are not very strong."

the court. You who scared poor Bill [Rainsbarger] out of his boots better do like Judas and go hang yourselves; and you followers of Jesse James who filled poor Henry Johns' cuticle full of buckshot better deliver yourselves up at once, for there are two detectives on your track."

On the same page, Ross advised, "The boys about town will please not do any shooting near town or along the roads over which the gang may pass, for their nerves are not very strong."

AGENT MARTIN'S DIARY tells the story for the next few days: "*April 28th . . . Hiserodt said to Wisner while passing through the hall — we have got to get the god damned sons of bitches one way or another. Wisner said, We can't let this go on this way; money is no object if that will do it. If not we will take the law into our own hands.*"

On April 29, Martin carved a hole in his



Fin Rainsbarger

The *Herald* warned, "Early Monday morning Fin Rainsbarger was seen [carrying] a long-barreled revolver, while a huge dirk glistened at his side."

bedroom wall and saw Judge Henderson having sex with Margaret Johnson.

April 30: "The gang had a rousing time in the rooms of Net and Mag."

May 1: "Mrs. Deyo [hotel proprietor] said, 'My God Eva what will happen next, they have made this a den of murder and now they have turned it into a whore house. God deliver me from this,' and went crying to her room.

"May 1st, Miss Alice Finley the cook made the following statement. . . . 'I know Mag Johnson. I went to school with Net. She was an awful liar. She is the one that was in bed with Stevens last night. Mag was in the room with the Judge last night and broke down the bed. I and Eve has seen some awful things in this house in the past few months. I would not stay here an hour but for Mrs. Deyo, I am sorry for her; she can't help her self. I and Eve had lots of fun watching the Den. When the bunch would be there night after night drinking and smok-

If ever there was a time and place for federal intervention, this was it. Federal agent Henry Martin left town with a notebook full of confusing information, wrote his report for the Secret Service, and then disappeared from the scene for twenty-nine years.

ing; see them tip toe in and out of Mag's room. All big bugs of the town."

Somewhere in the town square, federal agent Martin ran into Nate Thompson, one of the late Enoch Johnson's horsethief buddies, who told Martin what *he* thought was going on in Eldora: "The vigilant gang is now trying to stick the Rainsbarger boys for murder," Thompson said. "We don't hear any more about Johnson turning states evidence and accusing of the leading businessmen here and Steamboat Rock of being in with him in that counterfeit deal at Goldfield." Martin made no comment in his notes about whether he believed Thompson or not, but merely recorded the statement.

IF EVER THERE WAS a time and place for federal intervention, this was it. Henry Martin left town with a notebook full of confusing information, wrote his report for the Secret Service, and then disappeared from the scene for twenty-nine years. Maybe the U.S. marshal's office couldn't make sense of the situation from Martin's notes, or surmised correctly that no more counterfeit money was being made. For whatever reason, the Johns and Rainsbarger families were now entirely at the mercy of Hiserodt, his lawyers, his sheriff, his newspaper, and his vigilantes.

Frank and Nate's legal team saw that this was neither the time nor the place for a trial. They arranged for Frank and Nate to be sent back to Marshalltown to await a change of venue.

On May 8 Henry Johns fell into a coma and died.

The *Eldora Herald* commented, "It is well known that he lived in constant fear of his life from his supposed friends." One week later the *Eldora Herald* was openly accusing the Rainsbargers of having shot Henry Johns. On May 13, the *Eldora Herald* warned, "Early Monday morning Fin Rainsbarger was seen coming south — cross lots — through Jackson Township. He carried a long-barreled revolver, while a huge dirk glistened at his side."

People in the Steamboat Rock area divided into two armed camps, with the minority on the side of the Rainsbargers. As Henry Johns had predicted, Hardin County was on the

brink of open warfare. One of the Rainsbarger detectives had an ear inside the counterfeit ring and he warned the county militia of a plot to murder some or all of the Rainsbarger brothers. On May 20 the *Eldora Herald* joked, "The Eldora Militia have been commanded to hold themselves in readiness in case an assault should be made upon the jail. The vigilantes will please take notice and not come during a rainstorm. Our militia is for dry weather." Significantly, there were no Rainsbargers in the Eldora jail; Frank and Nate were still in Marshalltown.

MEANWHILE an odd series of events continued. The men of Hiserodt's saloon stole their own horses, shot their own cows, burned their own haystacks — and made it appear as if the Rainsbarger brothers were the culprits. Irvine Liesure, of Abbott, had already cleared his store of stock, burned it down, collected insurance for his loss, and blamed the Rainsbargers. One fellow went so far as to shoot himself and blame it on the Rainsbargers.

On May 20 the *Eldora Herald* seethed, "The Rainsbargers are old offenders, and they have been a terrible curse to this county. They have lived almost exclusively by dishonesty, and when any attempt has been made to bring them to punishment, they would send out their

The men of Hiserodt's saloon stole their own horses, shot their own cows, burned their own haystacks — and made it appear as if the Rainsbarger brothers were the culprits.

incendiaries and thieves and intimidate persons into silence."

On page four, nestled among wedding notices and shoe advertisements, Ross printed a unique piece of lynch poetry: "The other



Myron Underwood

With a buggy full of bullet holes in tow, the men said they had been ambushed. Underwood thought he was creating a pretext merely to run the Rainsbargers out of the county — not to kill them.

night while some young fellows were returning with their girls late at night, they met a seining party, near the coal bank. When the girls saw the ropes they exclaimed:

O, the Rainsbargers they'll suspend
Until they are dead;
Oh, boys! us you'll defend,
And a girl you shall wed!"

Why didn't the Rainsbargers flee the county? The family had no public voice at this time, so we don't know for sure. They may have been stunned into disbelief by recent events. Perhaps they felt that running away would be a patent admission of guilt. Further, they would be sure to lose everything they had worked for all their lives. One local paper wrote: "It is the opinion of [those] who know them that they will never leave that section at command. Their blood is up and they are not cowards." It is certain that, like Hiserodt's other victims, the Rainsbargers underestimated the danger they were in.

The evening of June 3, Dr. Myron Underwood, Dr. Ben Rittenour, and William P. Hiserodt drove into Steamboat Rock with a buggy full of bullet holes in tow. They said they had been ambushed and narrowly escaped with their lives. They also said they had recognized their attackers.

The next day their bullet-ridden buggy was



William Rainsbarger in 1908: "When Fin, Manse, and I were arrested . . . we did not think of any mob violence, although there was a great deal of talk against our family."

Manse (?) Rainsbarger and wife, ca. 1884

paraded around the town square at Eldora. Someone noticed that all the bullets seemed to have been fired from the inside. Then the buggy was taken to Dr. Underwood's yard and burned. Like many others, Underwood thought he was creating a pretext merely to run the Rainsbargers out of the county — not to kill them.

Sheriff William Vance Wilcox arrested Finley, Manse, and William Rainsbarger for attempted murder. Assuring them that it was all a big mistake and would soon blow over, he herded them down to Eldora. According to William Rainsbarger in 1908, "When Fin, Manse, and I were arrested by Wilcox we did not think of any mob violence, although there was a great deal of talk against our family. We relied wholly upon the protection of the sheriff who expressed regrets about arresting us."

William Rainsbarger was allowed to post bail, but Manse and Finley were bound over at the jail. As the sun went down on June 4, the county militia, tipped off that a lynching was to occur, was mustered at the local skating rink. Sheriff Wilcox rode out and laughed at them, laughed at the idea of a lynching. He then ordered them to disperse, which they did with some muttering. At 10 P.M. Sheriff Wilcox got

on a train with his deputy and left town. According to sources later revealed, the vigilantes had asked him to leave the cell doors open, but this he would not do.

HISERODT and his mob rode into Eldora quietly, from the north, at 1:25 A.M., carrying a twenty-foot oak tree trunk to batter down the jailhouse door. The original plan to hang the two brothers went awry once the mob had knocked down the door. The few who could squeeze inside the narrow passageway could not get the cell door open. Manse and Finley, their backs to the wall, were bracing the iron door shut with their legs. Amos Bannigan stood on the shoulders of Dan Turner, the mayor of Steamboat Rock, and fired random bullets through an outside window or transom into the cell, killing Finley. Manse, although wounded, burst out the cell door and fought his way through the mob, yelling for Finley to follow him. No one could get a clear shot at Manse while he was struggling inside the jail, but once he had fought his way out onto the wooden sidewalk

he was grabbed, screaming for mercy, held up, and riddled with bullets.

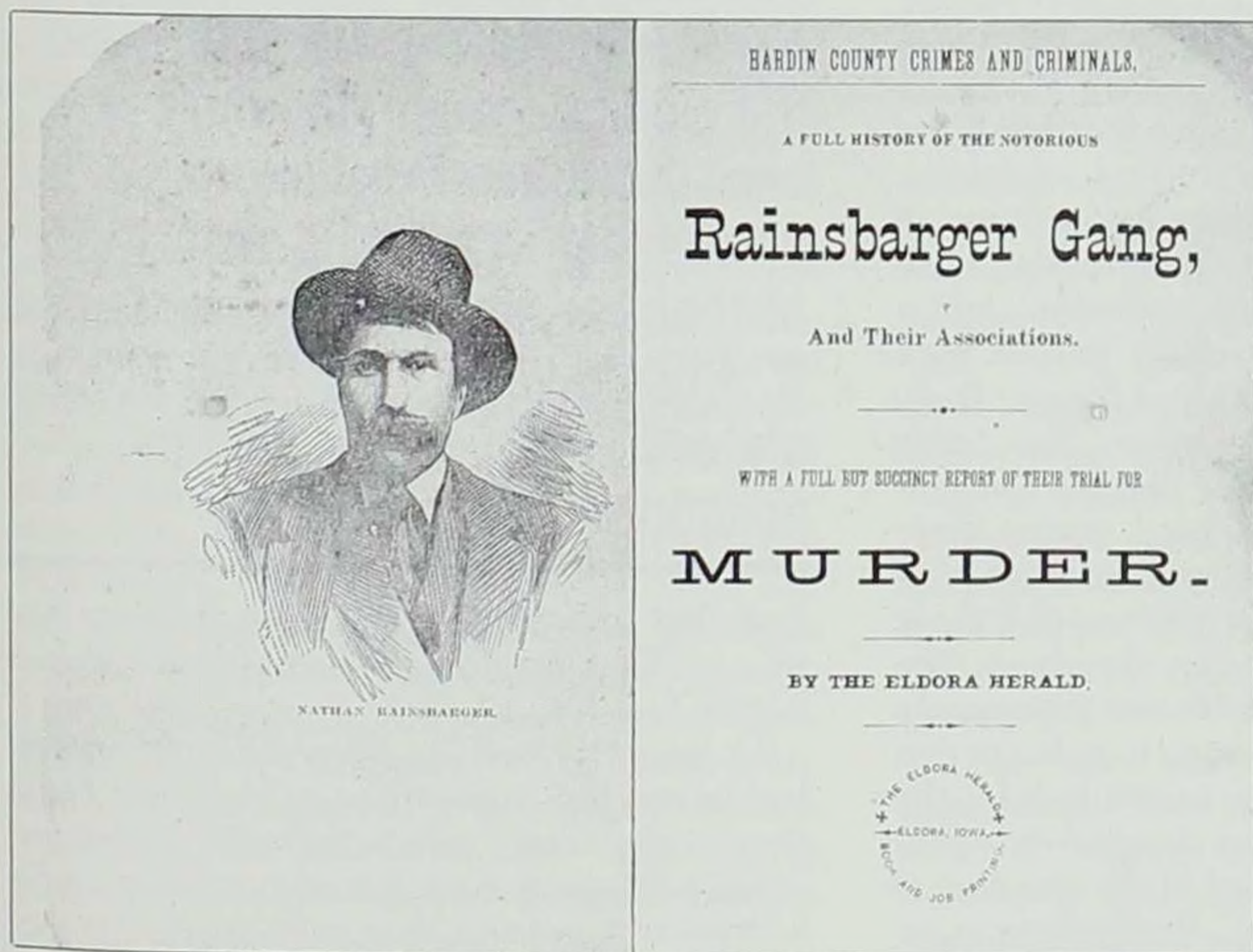
Finley's body was dragged out of the cell and laid in the road in front of the jail. One of the men lifted Finley's head by the hair, examined it, and let it drop. He shot two more bullets into the brain. Many people witnessed the scene from windows and rooftops. One woman claimed that Hiserodt blew a whistle to assemble the vigilantes. They gathered at the local wagon factory and rode out of town quietly, heading north.

The bodies lay in front of the jail for about half an hour, as hundreds of people gathered around to look at them in the light of the street lamp. Then the bodies were removed to the mayor's office.

IN THE MORNING, the *Eldora Herald* rushed to print an extra, titled "Swift Justice. . . . Long Series of Crimes and Misdeeds Avenged." Ross wrote, "The wild shrieks of the doomed prisoners was heart-rending in the extreme. They knew too well the meaning of that gathering of earnest and

determined men without, and the first blow upon the door sounded their death-knell. As the prospect of immediate death loomed up before them and their miserable, crime-stained lives were to pay the penalty for years of lawlessness, they gave expression to their terror in wild, despairing cries for help. . . . When the hammering was going on the prisoners realized what it was to die, and in their frenzy called upon the sheriff, the marshal, and the people of Eldora for protection."

On this one crowded page, and in a long pamphlet history published several months later, editor James S. Ross created an enduring myth about what had happened in Eldora. In addition to repeating the worst of what the paper had printed in the preceding months, he created a long history of crimes stretching all the way back to the 1850s, connecting the Rainsbarger family to long-extinct criminal gangs. "They came from the South and were what was known as 'poor white trash,'" he wrote. "They built a small cabin on the edge of the timber. . . . It is asserted that while there they lived principally by petty stealing. Many of the early settlers will attest to losing stock, farming utensils and small articles. . . . The



In a long pamphlet history, editor James S. Ross created an enduring myth about what had happened in Eldora, connecting the Rainsbarger family to long-extinct criminal gangs.

Ross's pamphlet history



Delia Rainsbarger Estabrook: "Little did we think . . . that some of us would have to be murdered to conceal other people's crimes."

Rainsbarger sisters: Delia Estabrook (standing) and Martha Johns, ca. 1890

mother . . . was known as a perfect Tartar. . . . Fin Rainsbarger. . . . was known by his companions as a tough nut and a sneak thief. . . . Manse Rainsbarger is next to the youngest and has only been identified with the gang since 1870. During the years 1873-74-75 he operated largely in stolen horses under the lead of the notorious Jack Reed."

THE TELEGRAPH office for the *Eldora Herald* must have worked round the clock because the story was sent out to nearly every newspaper in the Midwest. Most of them printed, verbatim, James S. Ross's version of "two crime stained lives finally called to account." The *Chicago Daily Tribune* printed an article titled "The Law's Delay Defied." The *Cedar Rapids Gazette* wrote a tough-minded editorial saying there ought to be no objections concerning the "dignity of the law," since it was obvious that these two men had gotten what they deserved. The *Iowa State Register* at Des Moines expressed a slight skepticism, which seems to indicate that they consulted some other source besides the *Eldora Herald*. "Very queer stories were circulated this morning in regard to the shooting at Underwood and Rittenour," the *Register* com-

mented. "It was stated by one authority that after the doctors had observed the bullets flying through their carriage Rittenour jumped out, pursued them into the brush and recognized them. This seemed a little too gauzy, however, for general belief."

On June 9 Delia Estabrook, distraught with grief for her brothers Finley and Manse, wrote an open letter to the *Eldora Herald*: "As I saw the piece in the Grundy County Republican taken from your wire June 5th, I was struck with horror and it seemed as though it would wrench my very heart from its resting place. . . . I will inform you that we did not come from the south and was not called poor white trash. . . . We came from the state of Ohio and was among the first settlers of Hardin co. But little did we think when we was battling through frontier life and years of sickness . . . that some of us would have to be murdered to conceal other people's crimes and our mother who was a christian hearted woman but must now be called a tartar.

"When them men was on their road that night to stain their hands with innocent blood," she continued, "if they would have been told [that] the first righteous man [should] fire the

The telegraph office for the *Eldora Herald* must have worked round the clock because the story was sent out to nearly every newspaper in the Midwest. Most of them printed, verbatim, James S. Ross's version of "two crime stained lives finally called to account."

first shot who would have been there to fire it? . . . They would have turned and sneaked home."

In August, when the *Eldora Herald* printed her letter, the paper titled it "A Letter From One of the Gang" and included a disclaimer: "While the gang think it is so terrible to make widows and orphans, they must remember that

other people are just as averse to having their families made widows and orphans as they are. The families of the three doctors the Rainsbargers fired on from ambush . . . are also averse to being deprived of husbands and fathers."

After the lynching, the detectives from Marshalltown stopped coming to Hardin County, probably because of the *Eldora Herald's* threat: "The next time one of the Marshalltown detectives visits Hardin county, we hope our

People in other parts of Hardin County and other midwestern cities seem to have looked with awe and disbelief at the news coming out of Eldora.

citizens will provide him a coat of tar and feathers and ride him out on a rail."

People in other parts of Hardin County and other midwestern cities seem to have looked with awe and disbelief at the news coming out of Eldora. The *Minneapolis Tribune* asked: "What Is The Matter With Hardin County? . . . Nature has done fairly by Hardin County, Iowa. The soil is rich and productive, the lay of the land is advantageous, and it is well watered. . . . And yet Hardin County is not flourishing. . . . The lynching of last week is not the first instance of the sort in Hardin County. That region has acquired an unpleasant notoriety for such affairs. It is the demoralized condition of society, as manifested in the barbaric outrages like the shooting affray of Wednesday and still more barbaric outrages like the lynching of Thursday, that makes land cheap in Hardin County and renders the region forlorn and thriftless and repelling."

Lynchings were bad for business, and there was never another one in Hardin County. Later, when a mob descended on the Eldora jail to kill Nate Thompson (one of Enoch Johnson's fellow horsethieves), Sheriff Wilcox stayed at the jail, and after some tense moments the vigilantes were persuaded to turn around and go home.

THROUGHOUT the furor surrounding the lynching of Manse and Fin, their brothers Frank and Nate awaited trial in Marshalltown for the murder of Enoch Johnson. On December 28, 1885, nearly a year after his arrest, the celebrated trial of Nathan "Nate" Rainsbarger began. (Since Nettie would not be able to testify against her husband Frank, he would be tried separately.) The courtroom was packed with people from Eldora who rode in on the daily "Rainsbarger Train." Nathan's defense attorneys — Charles Albrook of Eldora, S. M. Weaver of Iowa Falls, and P. M. Sutton of Marshalltown — relied entirely on an alibi that had been systematically broken down during the summer by state prosecutors (and local attorneys) Huff and Stevens.

The state presented a plausible scenario, with the carefully groomed testimony of Nettie Rainsbarger as their centerpiece. As defense, however, Nate Rainsbarger's attorneys squandered his trial and his life reacting to irrelevant points in the state's case. They hinted that Enoch Johnson's wife, Maggie, was the real culprit but could not explain why or how. The lawyers could not find witnesses and did not know who had actually killed Johnson.

Certain points in defense attorney Sutton's closing testimony seemed off the mark. "Now, there must be an unbroken chain, one end fastening itself upon the defendant and the other upon the dead body of Enoch Johnson," Sutton proposed. "And then the chain will only be as strong as its weakest link. It is an awful easy thing, up in Hardin County, to raise a whoop and a hurrah and hang men; yes, awful easy. But down here in Marshall County we don't hang men with a whoop and a hurrah, but we try men, and give them a chance to show their innocence."

The jury's verdict was guilty. Eight voted for life imprisonment and four for hanging. "Nate's head dropped when the verdict was read," the *Eldora Herald* reported, "and his face colored perceptibly."

Two years later, in March 1887, Frank Rainsbarger was tried. The trial had been delayed because his defense attorneys had repeatedly filed motions for continuance while they searched for witnesses willing to testify on

Frank's behalf. Perhaps to no one's surprise, he was found guilty. (Because of a technicality, Nate was retried in 1887 and reconvicted.)

In April 1887, Nathan Rainsbarger wrote an editorial that was printed in the *Marshalltown Times-Republican*. He criticized the legal system, referring to the Declaration of Independence and bitterly denouncing the "murdering mob in Hardin County." The *Ackley Enterprise* called his letter "disrespectful" and criticized his spelling.

DURING THE 1890s a whole different story began to emerge in Steamboat Rock and Eldora, through rumor and gossip. Lingering doubts, particularly about the 'attack' on Underwood and Rittenour, began to grow with time. When Underwood died in 1894, and William P. Hiserodt died a few weeks afterward, the *Ackley World* gave voice to the general uneasiness: "It is more noticeable that the death of William P. Hiserodt should follow so close upon that of Dr. Myron Underwood as they were the most prominent characters in the lynching of the Rainsbargers. Dr. Underwood as the party who was supposed to have been assaulted by the Rainsbargers and Mr. Hiserodt as the principle leader of the lynching party. There is no doubt that Dr. Underwood believed he had

In the 1890s, some of the minor players in the vigilance committee broke down and made confessions [about] inciting people against the Rainsbargers.

been shot at while returning from Steamboat Rock through the timber. But the curious part was the fact that there was no harm done to the doctor — not the least — although there was nothing to prevent the assaulting parties from



Nathan Morse

Morse had been entirely fooled by the counterfeit ring. By 1906 he had a good idea of what had actually happened in 1885 in Eldora, and he was outraged.

carrying out whatever design they may have had."

In the same decade, some of the minor players in the vigilance committee broke down and made confessions. For example, George Rush stated: "I was present when John Bunger confessed with tears and sobs that he had killed his horse, which was an old one, and shot himself in the leg as planned by parties in Steamboat Rock to incite people against members of the Rainsbarger family."

By 1897, when James S. Ross sold the *Eldora Herald* and moved to Missouri, he knew from a wide variety of sources that Nettie's letter had been a sham, and the attack on Underwood and Rittenour had been a fraud. He also knew that Enoch Johnson had been murdered by John and Milton Biggs (counterfeiters from Gifford), that the counterfeit ring had arranged it, and that he and the vigilantes had been used as a tool. Ross did not share this information, however, until Dr. Nathan Morse caught up with him ten years later.

SOON AFTER the turn of the century, Morse, of Eldora, began to fit together pieces of the puzzle from things that he kept hearing around town. Morse had been one of the coroners that examined Enoch Johnson's body. He had also been one of those who had been entirely fooled by the counterfeit ring. By 1906 he had a good idea of what had actually happened in 1885 in Eldora, and

he was outraged. In a long letter to Governor Albert Baird Cummins he outlined what he knew about Maggie Johnson and the counterfeit ring, and he asked that the Iowa State Board of Parole reopen Frank and Nate's case.

In 1907 Morse somehow secured two sheepish affidavits from James S. Ross, then living in Larussel, Missouri. One affidavit read: "I, James S. Ross, of Jasper County Missouri, having been assured that this Statement will not be made public property, it not being intended for publicity, or to be used in the prosecution of any person or persons . . . am fully satisfied that there was an inside circle to the vigilance committee that I was never able to penetrate . . . for that reason they were able to keep myself and the great body of the community in complete ignorance of many unlawful and unjustifiable acts of said organization until after they occurred."

In the second affidavit Ross went further: "[They] took advantage of the death of one Enoch Johnson . . . to inflame the people to such a fury that they were easily led to believe that the whole Rainsbarger family should be made a sacrifice . . . which hue and cry I am

After securing affidavits from Ross, Morse worked with singular zeal to try to free Frank and Nate Rainsbarger from prison.

free to admit I joined in through the columns of the Eldora, Iowa, Herald . . . believing that I was rendering the community a good service."

From that point on, Morse worked with singular zeal to try to free Frank and Nate Rainsbarger from prison. Many people came to him in private and made their confessions but would not sign an affidavit. Some people volunteered affidavits from far-off places, having heard the matter was being revived. Some were brought down to lawyers' offices with Morse leading them by the ear. In December 1908, just before the Iowa State Board of Parole

was scheduled to reopen the case, there was a flood of voluntary affidavits. Many had the flavor of stricken conscience, but none bore an outright tone of personal responsibility: "I was acting simply and solely as deputy or assistant to Sheriff Wilcox" or "Bill Hysroot [sic] was the captain of that vigilant committee." With most of the individuals who signed affidavits, their

"There are some things connected with this case that you do not understand," wrote a member of the parole board, "and I am not at liberty to tell you at this time. . . ."

only real sin had been not telling what they knew back when it mattered most. All of them had been afraid to step forward.

After a twenty-year sleep, the Rainsbarger affair was again front-page news. The Marshalltown *Times-Republican* ran a headline saying there was "Strong Proof of Innocence."

Former Sheriff Wilcox was still around, and was bitterly opposed to a pardon. He tried to get several people from Hardin County to recant their testimonies. Former prosecutor John Stevens, by then a judge in Boone County, managed to get hold of a newspaper reporter and a story was printed in the *Des Moines Register and Leader* making Morse appear a fool. Wilcox, Stevens, Nettie Rainsbarger, and others set up a meeting place at 840 North Sixth Street in Des Moines, and this became the center of a growing but mostly secret opposition to the Rainsbarger pardon. They succeeded in sowing some doubt among those who knew nothing of the evidence.

Yet, one member of the Iowa State Board of Parole wrote Morse on March 2, 1909: "I do not think those brothers killed Johnson and personally I would have been glad to have seen them given their liberty. There are some things connected with this case that you do not understand and I am not at liberty to tell you at this time. . . . There may not be a great number but there is a mighty influence just



G. W. Clarke

Governor Clarke's curiosity was piqued. Six months later he was busy re-examining those "great bundles of affidavits" and beginning to understand them.

now working against the Rainsbargers. How gladly would I let the burden rest where it belongs did I have the power. . . . Dr. Morse you are disappointed."

UNFORTUNATELY for Frank and Nathan Rainsbarger, that "mighty influence" was a stupendously wealthy land developer whom they did not even know and who wanted them to remain in prison. He had already been to the parole board in secret. In January 1909 the *Waterloo Times Tribune* put his picture on the front page next to the headline "Magnificent New Quarters — W. P. Soash Land Co. Ready For Business in New Location on East Fourth."

"The W. P. Soash Land Company," the article announced, was "a colossal concern, whose business lines cover, like a network, the states of the Mississippi Valley, extend to the furthest points of the eastern states and whose representatives cover the Coast and Mountain region and are active in all the commonwealth of the Southwest and the Gulf country."

In a letter of introduction dated July 30, 1909, to Governor B. F. Carroll, the editor of the *Waterloo Reporter* begins, "My dear Governor, this will introduce you to Mr. W. P. Soash, one of Waterloo's most prominent and respected citizens. He wishes to lay before you some facts as to the Rainsbarger parole or pardon case with which he is familiar."

What W. P. Soash told Governor Carroll is not known. Even though the parole board voted to free Frank and Nate, the pardon was blocked for six years. Soash was the nephew of William P. Hiserodt. Soash's mother was William P. Hiserodt's sister, and Soash's father had served with William P. Hiserodt in the 32nd Iowa Infantry.

In 1910 Nathan Morse gathered a thousand signatures on a petition from the people of Steamboat Rock and Eldora. He sent the petition to free the Rainsbargers to Governor Carroll along with a letter. "Could the matter receive your personal attention," he asked "and if familiar with the facts, you would no longer hesitate in granting executive clemency to these men."

In 1911 Governor Carroll announced publicly, "I do not believe that the case against the Rainsbargers as now presented to me is any more favorable to them [and] it is decidedly

"I shall always retain a vivid memory of what occurred there in those few days," wrote federal agent Martin, "of that whoring and conspiring gang."

less favorable. It is true that there has been some shifting of attitude . . . and affidavits of a few persons . . . but neither the board nor myself, after the most careful investigation, believe them worthy of much credence."

The same year Morse located detective S. T. Waterman, who had worked for the Rainsbargers before the mob's attack at the jail. For several months Morse and Waterman worked as a team, gathering evidence. After 1911 Morse left the case in Waterman's hands. In 1913, Waterman located federal agent Henry Martin who sent his notes from spying at the Ellsworth Hotel in Eldora, along with a letter saying, "I shall always retain a vivid memory of what occurred there in those few days, of that whoring and conspiring gang." With Martin's notes Waterman was able to locate hotel maid Eva Danforth and others who made affidavits

about the Ellsworth Hotel and what had transpired there in 1885. Many Iowa newspapers began to come out in favor of the Rainsbargers.

In October 1913, the mayor of Eldora wrote a letter to the editor of the *Des Moines Register and Leader*: "Almost nine out of every ten men at all acquainted with the facts insist the Rainsbarger brothers should be released. . . . It looks mightily like in the Rainsbarger case there was something more than a desire to punish these men for the alleged crime. If money has not passed hands and been used to persecute these men then a great many of the good citizens of this county don't know things when they see them."

It was not enough. The governor and the board of parole bounced the case back and forth, neither willing to touch it. By April 1914, the Johns and Rainsbarger families were losing all faith in detective Waterman. He had one more chance to try and explain his case to the governor (this time G. W. Clarke, Governor Carroll's successor).

"The last effort for the Rainsbarger brothers will soon be made before the Govenor [sic]," Waterman wrote to Ed Johns. "To remove the stain of murder from your family name and your children in the future generations. It is a duty that you owe to me for what I have done, that no other man living could have done for you, in this long and bitter struggle for these mens libertyes [sic] and your family character. You should stand by me and be loyal to the end."

But Waterman's efforts failed. In a letter to a friend in Marshalltown, dated April 30, 1914, Governor Clarke recounted his meeting with Waterman: "I may say to you confidentially that I do not think that Mr. Waterman has the remotest idea as to the materiality or competency of any matters that he has presented or may be desired to present in the future. He came in with great bundles of affidavits, nearly every one of which had no part in relevancy to the matter. I do not know if you are acquainted with him or not, but I think that a few minutes conversation with him will convince you that his mind is thoroughly confused about the whole matter, that his thought with reference to it is incoherent and disjointed and has little bearing on the real questions for consideration."

COURTESY NORMA POLAND AND SHIRLEY ISRIG



Frank Rainsbarger, ca. 1910

Around June 1915, Nettie went to the governor and begged him not to release Frank from prison.

NEVERTHELESS, Governor Clarke's curiosity was piqued. Six months later he was busy re-examining those "great bundles of affidavits" and beginning to understand them. He went to Hardin County and drove by automobile the route that Frank and Nate Rainsbarger would have had to travel to have killed Enoch Johnson.

Around June 1915, Nettie Rainsbarger (now Nettie Haley) went to the governor and begged him not to release Frank from prison. Clarke paid her no attention.

Governor Clarke was not able to figure out everything that had happened, and in fact was rather mystified by the role of the counterfeit ring. "I can not, on the whole, possibly divest myself of the feeling that there was an organized effort . . . to get rid of these men and others as well as Johnson," he wrote. But he went far enough into the case to become convinced that Frank and Nate Rainsbarger did not kill Enoch Johnson.

On August 24, 1915, he granted a parole to Frank and Nathan Rainsbarger that would become a pardon in three years conditioned on good behavior. Frank jumped at the offer. Nate did not. He said that he had killed no one, he

COURTESY NORMA POLAND
AND SHIRLEY ISRIG



Nate Rainsbarger, ca. 1906

Norma Poland still remembers her great-uncle Nate Rainsbarger as a gentle old man who made up nicknames for everyone.

had done nothing wrong, and he would walk out of prison a completely free man or not at all. The night before Frank's release, the warden sat up with Nate for hours, finally persuading him to take the parole and go.

THE TWO MEN — Frank was fifty-four and Nate sixty-three — lingered around Steamboat Rock for a few months. No one was afraid of them anymore, but everyone was curious. Frank eventually moved to Ackley and worked a few years at day labor. Nate went to Marshalltown and ran an elevator at a wholesale grocery store. For many years they declined to discuss their case publicly.

In 1923 an Iowa author, Herbert Quick, used the lynching of Manse and Finley Rainsbarger as the climax of his novel *The Hawkeye*. He called them the "Bushyagers" and painted them as a family of outlaws at last overtaken by civilization, and depicted Hiserodt as a crooked county commissioner who was nonetheless likeable.

When Frank died in 1926 the *Des Moines Register and Leader Sunday Magazine* printed "The Last of the Famous Rainsbarger Gang Tells Their Story." The reporter took the trouble to visit Nate and ask him what had happened. The reporter's story was, on the whole, sympathetic to the Rainsbargers, although it was delivered as an impenetrable mystery. The

last newspaper article Nate ever saw about the Rainsbargers was printed in the *Des Moines Sunday Register* in 1939, titled "Outlaws Iowa Can't Forget: The 'White Trash' of Steamboat Rock."

Nate spent his final years in Marshalltown, living near some of his nieces and nephews and their children. For years he struggled to write a book. At 397 pages, it was unfinished at his death. His belongings ended up in the attic of his brother's niece, Perle Poland. Perle's daughter Norma still remembers her great-uncle Nate Rainsbarger from the 1930s as a gentle old man who made up nicknames for everyone. "He always called my mother 'Doc'," she remembered. "He called me 'John L.,' from John L. Sullivan, the boxer, and he called Aunt Grace 'The Judge' which was about right for her."

When asked if she minded someone writing the Rainsbarger story again, Norma Poland said, "Go ahead, just don't tell any of them lies."

It seems strange to us now that something like this could have happened in Iowa, which appeared to be entirely 'settled' by 1885. At that time no county history was complete without several pages of "look how far we've come in thirty years." Victorian Iowans looked to the East for what they perceived as the model of order and progress, but they were geographically closer to the fear and uncertainty of the American West. The state of Iowa was brought to heel perhaps more quickly and more completely than many other states, yet in 1885 the whole system of law and order was more fragile than it appeared. In this one instance, in Steamboat Rock and Eldora, it was shattered by the shrill pitch of a county press, and the misdirected bullets of a terrified citizenry. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

This article is based on a variety of sources, including 75 sworn statements and letters; 344 newspaper articles (82 of which are from the State Historical Society's microfilm collection); 123 pages from an unfinished manuscript by Nate Rainsbarger; Governors Records in the State Archives; and standard local and state histories. The more distracting of spelling and typographical errors in many of the primary sources quoted have been corrected by the author for ease of reading. An annotated copy of the manuscript is in the *Palimpsest* production files.