

## PIONEER JUSTICE

While respect for law and order in Stevens Point is today a commonplace and the city a law abiding community, with occasional lapses characteristic of all communities, it was not always so. From the time of the appointment of the first constable in 1848 down to 1868, the city had its problems, chiefly with boisterous lumberjacks and river men, but in 1868 the first of a series of murders occurred which for the next 30 years or more was to give the city a reputation for lawlessness probably unmatched by any of equal size in Wisconsin. Carrying a gun appears to have been considered a necessity and the most popular weapon was a .38 caliber "bull-dog" type revolver. The most favored method of shooting a man was either from ambush or by walking up behind him unawares and emptying the revolver into his back. There were no heroics about giving the other man a chance to draw first, which was largely a myth even in Dodge City, nor was it in the nature of the times to give the other man the slightest advantage and especially in Stevens Point which lay at the heart of the booming lumber industry.

The reasons for this period of lawlessness are not easy to determine. The city was a frontier community and the spirit of the frontier, even as it was being applied in the West at the time, reserved justice to the individual first, the law second, and property rights were more important than human rights. It might be expected that the men on the river and in the logging woods would have been the most willing to take to themselves the execution of personal justice, but the facts belie this. Most of the shootings and murders were committed by citizens of the city, tradesmen and professional people. Nor can any one ethnic group be singled out. Even

more amazing is the fact that most of the crimes went unpunished, both through the leniency of jurors and the cleverness of local or out-of-county attorneys for the defense. The leniency of jurors who at one moment found a defendant not guilty by reason of insanity, and in the next moment, declared him sane, was in itself a reflection of an attitude difficult to reconcile with modern concepts of justice.

One of the contributing factors to the laxity of law enforcement in the early decades was probably the system, inaugurated when the city was incorporated, of electing a city marshal for a term of one year. While this reflected a healthy distrust of anyone holding police power too long, it also placed a severe handicap on law enforcement by the fact that what took place under one marshal might be considered of less importance to his successor. The records reveal that only five marshals succeeded themselves by one year.

The system of electing a city marshal was changed in 1883 by having the mayor appoint a chief of police and confirmed by the council. But the mayor naturally wielded considerable influence and these appointments, often patronage affairs based on political favors and party affiliation, were not always calculated to bring out the most qualified man for the job, nor to give any continuity to the detection of crime. Moreover, the records reveal that the office of mayor, too, was one of rather temporary nature. City politics in the early years were openly partisan and the major political parties, Republicans and Democrats, squared off like two prize fighters entering the ring where no holds were barred and the Marquis of Queensberry rules unheard of. There is considerable evidence to suggest that politics also influenced the decisions of jurors who were no doubt equally interested in party affiliation and loyalties.

It is not possible here to trace all the major crimes in the city down to the turn of the century, but the three most celebrated cases involved the murder in 1868 of Roswell C. Blanchard, a pioneer cabinet maker who owned a shop on Main Street; the hanging of the Courtwright Brothers in 1875; and the shootings that led to

the murder in 1888 of Willis W. Haseltine, a local attorney.

Blanchard had left in September to visit relatives in Vermont and was expected back in the city around Oct. 20. On his return trip he probably boarded a stage at Gills Landing which was scheduled to arrive in Stevens Point at midnight. When the stage arrived, Blanchard was not on it although his baggage was. There may have been two other passengers on the stage that night but if they were, they apparently had disappeared as nothing further is recorded about them. Apparently no one suspected foul play but as one day followed the next without the appearance of Blanchard, speculation arose and finally John ("Sailor Jack") Hawn was sent to Gills Landing to investigate on the theory that Blanchard may have fallen from the steamer into the river. No clues were found. The following spring, when the ice went out at Bloomer Rapids, the mutilated body of Blanchard was found floating under some willow trees.

The stage coach drivers and others associated with the stage lines were questioned, but no confessions were obtained. In the town of Lanark there is still a legend which holds that someone heard a crying out, as of a man being murdered, when the stage went by, but whether the crime was committed on the road or nearer the city is uncertain. A hitherto unpublished version of the incident appears in a record of the Old Settlers' Club kept by Sherman who, in noting the death of Mrs. Blanchard in 1902, made this additional comment:

"He (i.e. Blanchard) was murdered on the stage at McDill on the hill west of Big Plover River. The stage driver's name was Sharp (here Sherman leaves an empty space as he apparently was unaware of the driver's first name). . . He was attacked and struck with a wrench used to hold the eveners to the stage. He was then taken to the hog-hole and weighted down with stone & thrown in the Wis River & found below the Bloomer Rapids. . ."

The Hog-Hole referred to here was known in days of lumber rafting as a dangerous eddy which once existed near the modern site of the Whiting-Plover Paper Mill and legend says that some hogs were drowned here. But Sherman fails to explain the reasons for identifying the

hill at McDill with the Blanchard murder. It was commonly believed to have been a case of mistaken identity and that the intended victim was S. H. Karner, a local lumberman, who was rumored to carry considerable sums of money on his person. Karner had gone to Illinois and was expected back on the stage in question but had delayed his return a day and missed his earlier date with Death.

A reward of \$500 was offered by the Stevens Point Common Council for clues leading to the apprehension of the murderer or murderers, and the *Pinery* opined that "who committed the cowardly act and damnable is yet to appear."<sup>1</sup> No one ever came forward to claim the reward.

The second and also the most sensational tragedy in Stevens Point occurred with the double lynching on the night of Oct. 18, 1875 of the brothers Amos and Isaiah Courtwright who were hanged by a mob from a pine tree located on the northwest angle of modern Whiting Avenue and Water Street. An objective study of this case has yet to be written, nor can it be done here. But the background of the case up to this time has been largely influenced by a newspaper interview with J. O. Raymond, a Plover attorney, who prosecuted the case before the hanging. While there was ample time to interview the defendants when they were being held in the county jail at Stevens Point, there is no evidence that any attempt was ever made to get their version of the story.

The incident grew out of a mortgage lien. Amos Courtwright was a partner with Luther Hanchett in a saw mill situated on the Plover River at modern McDill in the early 1850s. Hanchett became involved in politics and probably in order to concentrate his attention on his new calling, sold his share of the mill property to his partner. As Courtwright did not have sufficient capital to cover the entire transaction, the unpaid balance was mortgaged to Hanchett. In 1862, Hanchett, then a member of Congress, died in Plover. The Hanchett estate then began action for satisfaction of unpaid

<sup>1</sup> *Pinery*, April 22, 1869.

mortgage liens. Meanwhile, in 1867, J. O. Raymond married the widow, Lucinda Hanchett, nee Alban, and naturally took a direct interest in the prosecution of the estate claims.

Amos Courtwright owned a farm in Sec 5 of Buena Vista (the Sigmund Stremkowski place) where he lived with his family. Raymond sought possession of part of this property as satisfaction of the claims, the circumstances of which are clouded in legal technicalities and alleged delinquent taxes, and whether Raymond was entirely justified in pressing suit for the Buena Vista property, is also beyond the scope of this narrative. Nevertheless, the case was finally bound over to Green Lake County Court in 1870 and the County Board proceedings reveal that Raymond was allowed \$36.25 as expense money in the case of "J. O. Raymond against Amos Courtwright."<sup>1</sup>

But the Courtwrights refused to be evicted and the case dragged on, becoming more bitter as time went on and finally in October 1875, County Sheriff Joseph H. Baker was forced to execute a writ of restitution against Amos and Isaiah Courtwright on the farm in Buena Vista, obviously a task distateful to him as both Baker and Amos Courtwright had been pioneer neighbors before the Civil War.

There is considerable evidence to suggest in connection with earlier attempts to evict the Courtwrights, as well as references to Amos Courtwright written by Sherman years before the event, that he was a man of intransigent nature, often at odds with his fellow man, while his brother Isaiah Courtwright and six other local characters in Stevens Point were cited by the Common Council in 1869 as being "Spendthrifts" who, through the use of intoxicating liquors, were "injuring their health and destroying the peace of their families and disturbing the quiet of the city. . ." All seven men were "posted," that is, licensed places in the city were for-

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings*, Board of Supervisors, Vol. III, p. 299.

<sup>2</sup> *Proceedings*, Stevens Point Common Council, Vol. A, p. 587.

bidden to sell them liquor.

Sheriff Baker had visited the Courtwright farm on more than one occasion and had advised the brothers of the impending action, to which they had allegedly warned him to stay away or get shot. But Baker, who rose to the rank of lieutenant, commanding a squad in the 1st Cavalry and wounded in action at Shiloh, was not only a popular man, as revealed by his re-election to the office of sheriff, but also a brave man. On the fatal day he approached the Courtwright farm with a posse and while the posse remained behind, Baker passed through the gate leading to the house when he was shot from a window by rifle fire in the hands of Isaiah Courtwright. He managed to stagger to the house and return the fire before deputies rushed in and surrounded the house. But Baker, mortally wounded, was carried to a granary on the farm while directing his deputies to set fire to the house. He died 12 hours later.

However, darkness was approaching and in the smoke of the fire and general confusion, the Courtwrights fled into a woods to the east and made their way to the farm of Justice of the Peace Leonidas Lombard in Sec 6 of Lanark where they surrendered. The posse learned of this and surrounded the Lombard house and attempted to set fire to it, but further violence was averted by the presence of John Eckels, under-sheriff and father-in-law of Baker, who insisted that the law take its course. The following day the Courtwrights were spirited through back roads to the county jail in Stevens Point, and it was from this jail, a few days later, that they were taken by a mob, variously estimated at 12 to 40, and hauled or dragged behind a wagon to the pine tree on Water Street. Both had been viciously beaten in the head and face before the hanging.

On the death of Baker, the *Plover Times* carried a story headed:

A Shocking Murder!  
DEATH OF SHERIFF BAKER!  
Intense Excitement!

In the account of the funeral of Baker, the *Times*

reported that "the congregation was the largest and the procession the longest, we have ever witnessed in Plover." But in the same issue, the *Times* also said that already there were rumors of a "jail delivery," i.e. mob action to seize the prisoners. H. G. Ingersoll courageously deplored any such action and expressed the hope that the law would be allowed to take its course.

The reference to "intense excitement" was apparently no overstatement. A grave wrong had been committed in a community which a decade earlier had sent the biggest contingent of volunteers into the Union Army of any in the county, whose relatives and friends in the New England states ("tempered in New England sleet") had been the leaders in the 1840s and 1850s of the abolitionist movement which led to the Civil War. And when one of their own people in Portage County was shot to death in the performance of duty, all the passions of puritanical justice came to the surface to demand an immediate rectification of righteousness, even as John Brown's body.

But the following week, when the Courtwrights were hanged, the *Plover Times* made no mention of it except to run the same story of the week before on the death of Baker which appeared this time in a supplement mostly filled with lands up for tax sale. Nor is there any mention of the incident in the proceedings of the Common Council of Stevens Point, or of the County Board, although on Nov. 14, 1875, a few days after the jail delivery, a committee of the board to examine public buildings found that damage had been caused to the county jail, reporting that:

"... there has been quite a breach made in the North Wall of said building which has not been fixed. Also there is two bolts in the hinges of the iron door in the Main Alley of the Jail that have been about half sawed off. Also one lock on one of the cells is in a bad condition as the inside plate is partly loosened."<sup>2</sup>

No explanation is given for these extraordinary circumstances.

<sup>1</sup> *Plover Times*, Oct. 29, 1875.

<sup>2</sup> *Proceedings*, Board of Supervisors, Vol. II, p. 511.

Officially, the only clue that Baker had been shot was a petition circulated in Plover and handed to the County Board for an appropriation "for the Benefit of the Widow & Children of J. H. Baker, deceased..." The matter was turned over to the committee on claims which appears to have taken no action, although a later entry reveals that Mrs. Ellen Baker was allowed \$414.89 for "boarding prisoners by Baker," obviously a bill Baker had coming before his death. The proceedings of the Masonic Lodge of Plover reveal that assistance was lent to the widow of Baker on several occasions.

Sophia Courtwright, widow of Amos Courtwright, and several members of the family and friends were placed under arrest and two charged with the murder of Baker, but all were later released. No efforts appear to have been made to assist the bereaved family although there is strong reason to suspect that friends in Amherst and Lanark helped them on a clandestine basis. The specter of fear rode the dirt roads and a form of mass hysteria gripped the population. The subject was apparently considered unspeakable, not only because of the guilt involved, but lest someone divulge the identity of the mob.

The editors of the *Stevens Point Journal*, on the other hand, described the raid on the jail and the hanging in considerable detail, but without mentioning any suspects. The jailer, Frank Wheelock, who was asleep when the mob overpowered him, may have recognized some of the men behind the masks or by their voices, but there is no evidence that he ever testified against them, and no arrests were made.

The Courtwright brothers were buried in a common grave at Plover Cemetery in Block 2, Lot 68. Two small, unmarked headstones stand on this lot today, and, as if a vast conspiracy were afoot to destroy all evidence of the crime, there is no entry on the Courtwrights in the official Register of Deaths in Portage County.

For many years after the hanging, the big pine tree continued to stand, unmindful of its own notoriety, and

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings*, Board of Supervisors, Vol. II, p. 564.



whenever a new arrival came to the city he was almost certain to have it pointed out to him. John Lowe of Pine Grove recalls the first time he visited Stevens Point as a boy in the mid-1880s; accompanied by his father and Samuel Manley, the trio drove up Water Street and Manley pointed to the tree and said, "That's where they hanged the Courtwrights."

In the decades that followed a legend developed that all those who took part in the hanging met violent deaths under one circumstance or another, even as a myth developed in the 1920s and still repeated by Egyptian tourist guides that the discoverers of King Tutenkhamon's tomb met untimely ends.

The third important tragedy in the history of the city was the shooting of A. E. Morse, a local bank cashier, by Willis W. Haseltine, an attorney, on June 19, 1886, and two years later on April 3, 1888 the shooting of Haseltine which was charged to the brothers John D. and Henry Curran. The circumstances which set the stage for the murder of Morse are old as time; the name of Morse became linked romantically with Mrs. Haseltine. Learning of the affair, Haseltine shot and killed Morse while the latter was driving horse and buggy down the 700 block of Main Street. The horse continued to the Public Square where the body of Morse fell into the street. Haseltine surrendered but pleaded not guilty when the trial came before Circuit Court on Oct. 3, 1886. Lengthy testimony was heard in the days that followed, but when the jury retired, it took only 13 minutes to find the defendant "innocent of the charges against him for reason that he was insane at the time of the commission of the act. We further find that said Willis W. Haseltine is now sane.<sup>1</sup> The verdict was received with wild demonstrations of approval and "large numbers had pressed forward to shake hands with the defendant and congratulate him, and the great trial was at an end."

After Haseltine was acquitted, he reputedly carried two revolvers, one in each coat pocket, with which he

<sup>1</sup> *Stevens Point Journal*, Oct. 30, 1886.

threatened to shoot John Curran, a close friend of Morse and linked to the Morse scandal by his friendship with Miss Anna Park, who in turn was a friend of Mrs. Haseltine, nee Eva Wadleigh. After the shooting of Morse, according to local legend, John Curran slipped out of the city and spent a year or more in Milwaukee. Apparently hoping that the affair had quieted down, he returned to Stevens Point and a short time later had gone to Alex and Henry Bergholt's Barber Shop, then probably located on the north side of Main Street near the Square, when Haseltine entered and was about to draw a gun on Curran. Patrons stepped between them while Curran retreated through a back door. The continued threats to the Currans, it is said, became common knowledge although never reported in the press, and probably went far to clearing them of the murder in the long trial that followed the shooting of Haseltine in 1888.

The shooting took place on North First Street. Haseltine was returning from a livery barn where he kept his horse and as he passed Curran House, on the opposite side of the street, he was cut down by a double-barreled shot gun fired from the direction of Curran House. The coroner's jury found that John D. Curran fired the fatal shots, although this was never proved. Both John and his brother Henry were indicted for the murder and pleaded innocent and each were freed on \$5,000 bail which they had no trouble raising among friends, and enemies of Haseltine.

The case attracted wide attention in the press and the two defendants found no lack of popular support as well as opposition occasioned largely by the circumstances of an election involving a Democrat sheriff who had allegedly sworn to see John Curran "in States Prison." Fearing an impartial trial, attorneys for the defense moved for a change of venue. This led to an imposing list of affidavits signed for and against a change of venue by those who favored the innocence of the Currans and by an equal number who did not. The court finally decided to remove the case to Waupaca County where trial was held in the early summer

of 1889. The defendants pleaded self-defense and in the conflicting testimony that followed, the jury appears to have come to the conclusion that some doubt existed in the prosecution's case and found the defendants "not guilty." And once again the "spectators arose in mass, and those most intimate with the Currans leaped over benches and railings in their rush for the inner circle."<sup>1</sup>

Curran House, near where the shooting of Haseltine occurred, stood on the northwest corner of Main & First Street (Copps Company site in 1958). An etching on the back cover of *Wisconsin Lumberman* for April 1873 reveals that it was a three-story building, facing Main Street, with a two-story annex to the west on Main (later raised to three stories) and a two-story annex to the rear believed used for kitchen and service quarters. It was one of the most popular hosteleries in the city in the 1870s to 1890s, and Mrs. Henry Curran, who served as *maitre d'hotel*, was highly regarded and respected.

But it was never proved that either of the Currans did the shooting on North First Street and rumor was that a "Bohemian from Milladore" was the hired gun.

The wave of crime which placed Stevens Point in the news actually began in the early 1880s. This situation in 1882 was summed up by the *Journal* editors who, under a caption "Rowdyism Run Rampant" had this to say:

"When peaceable citizens get knocked down and pounded by roughs; when inoffensive by-standers are pounded on the head by the keeper of a house of ill fame; when two-fisted roughs, pimps and prostitutes ride up and down the streets at breakneck speed; . . . when big-fisted bullies parade the streets, flanked by armed blacklegs seeking after someone to pummel; when brawling rowdies openly defy the officers of the law and loudly proclaim that they can whip any man in the city; when a man mounts a horse and rides up and down the main street of our city in imitation of the Younger brothers; when these things occur, as they all have occurred in the city of Stevens Point within the past few weeks. . . . it is high time that all good citizens stop and enquire whither are we drifting?"<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Stevens Point Journal*, July 6, 1889.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Sept. 2, 1882.

Aside from the Morse-Haseltine murders, several other murders and attempted murders were committed in Stevens Point in the 1880s and 1890s and around the turn of the century, but most of these were linked to domestic troubles and business feuds. Two involved local brawlers, Pat McHugh, a one-time prize-fighter, and Jack A. Riley, better known as "Buckskin" Riley. Pat McHugh operated a saloon on the south side of Main Street west of the square in the early 1880s and had more than once been arrested as a result of rowdyism. In April 1883, while sweeping the board walk in front of his saloon, McHugh was shot at several times and wounded by a .44 caliber rifle fired from the direction of Curran House on the opposite side of the street. He was removed to a hospital in Fond du Lac where he eventually recovered and to his dying day wore a watch chain with the ball of lead that nearly ended his life, but he never returned to Stevens Point.

One of the suspects in the McHugh shooting was "Buckskin" Riley, a man with a long police record before he came to Stevens Point in 1880 and one that kept up with him after he arrived. In this instance, however, Riley had an alibi furnished by some girls he employed in a brothel on the South Side and the crime went unpunished. A short time later Riley was in trouble with the police again and after a hot pursuit, was captured and lodged in the city jail which stood on North 2nd Street. There were rumors afloat that certain elements, who feared Riley would be released again, were planning a lynching party. Instead, one night when the jailer had gone down the street to Curran House for a midnight lunch, what is believed to have been a small party of men broke into the jail and riddled Riley with .32 caliber bullets. The Common Council appointed a special committee of three to consider the matter of offering a reward for the killers, but the committee, in returning its report, felt that since Riley's arrival in the city, he had "by his disorderly conduct put said city to great expense [and] we believe and report that no reward should be offered by said city for the apprehen-

sion and conviction of the person or persons who killed said Riley.”<sup>1</sup>

Strong exception was taken to this report by Edward McGlachlin, editor of the *Journal*, who apparently realized what the Council did not, namely, that “the cheapest way to deal with crime is to punish it.” The attitude of the committee was no doubt a reflection of the callousness which had become entrenched in the community since the hanging of the Courtwrights. Three years after Alderman Henry Curran participated in the committee report mentioned above he was himself to be charged with murder. It was a dangerous era for anyone to have an enemy.

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In the latter part of 1957, the world was shocked by the criminal depredations of Edward Gein, a part-time farmer near Plainfield in Waushara County, who murdered Mrs. Mary Hogan, a tavern keeper in the town of Pine Grove in Portage County on Dec. 8, 1954, and went unsuspected until the murder of Mrs. Bernice Worden of Plainfield on Nov. 16, 1957. In addition to murdering two women, Gein had molested a number of women's graves in nearby cemeteries, one probably in Spirit Land Cemetery in the town of Almond. After he was committed to the Central State Hospital for the Criminal Insane, angered citizens secretly burned the Gein home (“house of horrors”) to the ground. His case was considered “unparalleled in modern history.”<sup>2</sup>

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The first mention of law enforcement in Portage County occurs in April 1848 when the county commissioners appointed Samuel D. Rollins a constable “in and for the Stevens Point Precinct for the year A.D. 1848. . .”<sup>3</sup> While the area covered by this precinct is not described, it no doubt took in the early settlement of the village then known variously as Stevens or Stephens Point.

Rollins probably served until the spring of 1849 when the first election of officers for the newly-elected township of Middletown was held at which time Rollins (the pro-

<sup>1</sup> *Stevens Point Journal*, Sept. 8, 1883

<sup>2</sup> *Time*, Dec. 2, 1957, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> *Proceedings*, County Commissioners Sessions, Vol. I, p. 128.

ceedings use the initials L. D. instead of Samuel D.), George Kollock and A. McKellep were elected constables.

With the incorporation of the city of Stevens Point in 1858, the elective office of city marshal was established, and continued until 1883 when the office of chief of police was established by appointment of the mayor. City marshals from the beginning were A. E. Aldrich, 1858-59; J. O. Wiswall, 1860-61; F. G. Houston, 1862; William Collins, 1863; David Fitch, 1864; William B. Gilchrist, 1865; William Walton, 1866; John Herron, 1867; John O. Johnson, 1868; F. R. Houston, 1869-70; James P. Dunn, 1871; John Gardner, 1872; Fred Ford, 1873-74; J. H. Whitney, 1875; Frank Wheelock, 1876; Paul Lukaszewicz, 1877; Charles Gottery, 1878; A. J. Empey, 1879-80; Count Sigmund Bielski, 1881; A. J. Empey, 1882; and James Bellinger, 1883.

Police chiefs were Bellinger, 1883; John A. McDonald, 1884-85; John Finch, 1886-87; John Knauf, 1888; John Finch, 1889-91; Thomas J. Coan, 1892; William Zorn, 1893-94; Forest W. Kingsbury, 1895-96; John McGivern, 1897; Christ Geisler, 1898; John McGivern, 1899-1900; Thomas J. Coan, 1901-03; John Leahy 1904-07; Patrick O'Connor, 1908; John F. Hofsoos, 1909-26; Harry Hewett, 1926; Leo Frymark, 1926-35; A. W. Risch, 1935-43; and E. L. Zeaman, 1943-. Supporting Chief Zeaman on the police force of 1958 were Capt. Emmett Komassa, Lt. George Anderson, Sergeants Ben Sankey and Frank Barbers, and Patrolmen Steve Konieczki, Floyd Pautz, Frank Helminski, Joe Kutella, James Cholewinski, Ray Hintz, Howard Craig, Gary Mrozinski, Alex Landowski, George Kuplic, Leonard Hucke, Gordon Daniels, Ray Kulas, and Anthony Glodowski.