Roane County Lynching of 1875 Described

History

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(Editor's Note: A Roane county lynching of 1875 is described in detail in the following report by C. E. Douglas, of Vienna, a Wood county resident since 1922 and one time officer of the U.S. Treasury Department. A Roane county native, he has been interested in early history of West Virginia since he was a boy and this is the first in a series of columns he will write for The Sunday News.)

About the year 1875 a band of lawless men began terrorizing Roane and adjoining counties. Stores, homes and it has been said that even a train was robbed by them. Silas "Si" Counts who owned a store in Harper district, Roane county and for whom the post office of Countsville was named had been robbed on more than one occasion, his brother Wade Counts it was alleged killed a Jackson county man whom rumor said was connected with the robberies. Upon being arrested Counts furnished an alibi but this was nothing new.

Several men had been questioned and some arrested in connection with the robberies but their families and friends always furnished alibis.

No one was convicted and the robbers grew bolder. Complaint was made to the government that it was believed that ex-Confederate soldiers were carrying on their own private war..

The government sent a detective from Chicago to investigate. He opened a grocery store but soon fell in love with a local girl, married her and went back to Chicago.

No further action was taken by the government. Conditions failed to improve. In fact the robbers grew bolder and on the night of Oct.. 13, 1887 they attempted the robbery of the Rev. Thomas P. Ryan of Harper district in Roane county. The Rev. Ryan was pastor of the Mt. Union Circuit of The Methodist Episcopal church, a fearless preacher, a hater of crime and disorder and well liked by all who knew him.

Minister Shot

The Rev. Ryan and his family consisting of his wife and five or six children had retired for the night when the robbers knocked at his door and demanded admittance. Some conversation ensured between the Rev. Ryan and the different members of the robber band which numbered six or more persons. They were refused admittance and the Rev. Ryan took his rifle down from the all and told them he knew them everyone. Before his death he is said to have given their name to his family.

One of the robbers shot through the wall. He afterward claimed it was done only to scare the victim but the bullet passed entirely through the body of the Rev Ryan and lodged in a wall of the room.

The family carried the badly wounded man upstairs and the robbers shortly thereafter forced an entrance and ate what food was in the kitchen the proceeded to ransack the first floor rooms.

It was thought that the Rev. Ryan kept a considerable amount of cash about his home. There were no banks in Roane county at that time, the first bank being organize two years later.

Although the robbers made a thorough search and even the Rev. Ryan's bed was cit to pieces they failed to find the money they sought.

Suffering from loss of blood the Rev. Ryan called for water. His children begged the robbers to be allowed to come down stairs and get water but their request was refused. The robbers talked freely during their search and it was claimed that the voices of some of them were recognized by the family. The Rev. Ryan died during the night as the result of the gunshot wound.

Posse Organized

The next morning, Oct. 14, officers raised a posse and attempted the arrest of those whom it had been claimed participated , in the crime.

They first went to the home of Robert and George Duff. Robert Dufff submitted to arrest , but George fired at the officers who fired back and Duff was mortally wounded. Other shots were fired from the Duff home so the officers fell back and lay siege to the house.

By 5 p. m. they had three men wounded. About that time a relative of the Duffs came by and was prevailed upon by the officers to have those in the Duff home surrender.

Besides the badly wounded George Duff the officers arrested Chester Coon, Robert Duff and one other person. Owing to the extent of George Duff's wounds he was left in the home. The others were marched away. By this time it was almost dark.

The prisoners were guarded until Saturday morning and then taken, still under guard to the burial of Rev. Ryan. It was reported that the prisoners remained in high spirits until after the burial was over when they expected to be taken to jail at Spencer and if tried, to go free by the alibi route. But this was not to be. They were told that they would be guarded one more night.

Then all was different. Coon yelled so he could be heard a mile. He said "I know now what you are going to do. You are going to hang us!" He was entirely correct as himself.

"Justice"

Saturday, Oct. 15th men gathered about the little school house where the prisoners were confined--grim men. They were all armed. Many were strangers to each other. They came not only from Roane county; but from Jackson and Kanawha as well. "The news had traveled fast."

After the prisoners were told that they would remain guarded in the school house another night they were taken to a nearby home and fed. After dark they were separately given hearings.

Owing to the large number of men gathered there and their emotions at the time it was utterly impossible for the officers of the law to conduct a hearing in a legal manner.

The posse that had had a legal beginning was now but an angry mob. At the close of the hearings

one man who shall remain nameless was released.

Robert Duff and Chester Coon were taken down the road to a place where the road crossed a creek. A fence was hastily thrown across the road in two places in opposite directions and some distance from the mob so that they could not be surprised by people coming from either directions.

They took Coon first. He was not quite 17 years of age, at the time. It has been said by witnesses that his own uncle placed the rope around his neck. He was hanged to a green limb and when cut down the limb had sprung until his feet were upon the ground. Just at the time Coon was being hanged a horse got loose and started to go home. When he came to the fence across the road be started to trot up the creek. There was a long water hole about four inches deep, one horse trotting in that water sounded like a lot of riders. Some members of the mob became frightened and hid.

Robert Duff thought he had a chance to escape and started to fight those who were holding him but the two men hung onto his arms. An old man ran up behind him and grabbed his hair, pulled his head back and cut his throat.

Coon was left hanging and Duff was left on the ground near the road. There they were found the next morning when people came by going to church. George Duff died from his wounds the same night that his brother was lynched.

(Source Unknown)

Note: *There appears to be an error in the title of this article. Rev. Ryan passed away on Oct. 14, 1887. The lynching apparently took place on Oct. 15, 1887.*