

The Good Old Days

Today we are constantly bombarded with news through the media. Radio, television, the internet, and newspapers are seemingly instantaneously available and filled with news, both good and bad. We may sometimes think that the events we learn about in this day and age are so distant and different from those happenings in what might be characterized as having taken place in “the good old days.” In earlier periods of our country, and of our county’s history, there couldn’t have been the crime and violence that we are so frequently reminded of today. Life moved at a slower pace, people were more respectful, violent crime didn’t happen around here. Or did it?

Let’s look back about 112 years when a shocking crime took place in Martin County. The date was January of 1895. The place was Rolling Green Township, Martin County, Minnesota. This was the date of perhaps one of the most vicious crimes to ever occur in Martin County. The headline in the January 25, 1895, edition of the *Martin County Sentinel* read: “Bloody Tragedy!” “Three People Atrociously Assassinated in their Own House.” The newspaper account of this event covered four full columns, and read like a detective novel.

This violent crime involved S. J Hotelling, 36, and his young wife, Flora Whitney, who were married February 5th, 1894. They were cousins, and the Whitney family was very much against their marriage. The newspaper account indicated that “their brief marriage was far from being happy.”

The events leading up to the tragedy involved Flora’s younger sister, Julia, coming to visit the Hotellings to babysit their infant child. Mr. Hotelling didn’t approve of Julia’s visit, and abruptly and rudely told her to leave. At that point, Julia left being closely followed by her sister, Mrs. Flora Hotelling, and the baby. The two sisters walked to their parent’s house, the home of Mr. & Mrs. Whitney. According to the newspaper account, “T. B. Whitney and wife were highly respected, quiet old people, the former aged 68 and the latter 61.” They were originally from New York, and moved to Martin County from Wisconsin in 1873.

S. J. Hotelling was said to be a very quiet person, but few in the area knew him well and he apparently had no close friends. Hotelling had recently traveled to many parts of the South and West, and upon his return to this area, his parents were dismayed at his behavior and language. The article stated that “he had a wild look and his talk was somewhat disconnected.”

The scene of the tragedy was the Whitney home where Mr. & Mrs. Whitney, Hotelling’s wife Flora, and her younger sister, Julia, age 18, were sitting around the fire. Mr. Whitney heard a knock on the door and went to answer it. Upon opening the door, he was immediately shot dead by Hotelling. He then entered the house and killed Mrs. Whitney as she tried to close the door. Flora and Julia fled to the pantry and tried to hold the door, but to no avail. Julia stepped back and accidentally dropped through a small opening in the floor, covered by loose boards and carpeting, into the cellar. Hotelling

finally forced his way into the pantry, killed his wife, and continued looking for Julia. Julia had since fled through an outside entrance to the cellar and ran nearly a mile to a neighboring house. Other neighbors soon became aware of the misfortune and went to the Whitney house and found the Whitneys, and their daughter, Mrs. Hotelling, all dead. The only survivor was the small infant and Julia, who had escaped through the cellar to a neighbor's home.

The news of the tragic event was brought to Fairmont by William Wherland. Deputy Sheriff Ward, Constable Miller, H. M. Serle, and S. Hill started immediately to the scene.

Hotelling had apparently left the scene and taken refuge at his own house about three-quarters of a mile away. Hotelling and his wife had lived there, the home of a neighbor, and had occupied the upstairs level of the house. When the police arrived, they notified members of the family to leave, which they did, and then they tried to determine a way to capture Hotelling.

Hotelling was ordered to come down and surrender. There was no reply. Finally, his response was as follows: "I'm fixed for you – have got a Winchester repeating rifle and a revolver – you can't take me alive!" At that point, he fired down the stairs through the door. The police determined there would very likely be many lives lost if they tried to enter the home. Instead, they sent a messenger to Fairmont to obtain a supply of militia rifles.

Before morning, reinforcements and a supply of twenty-five rifles arrived. Refusing to come down from the upstairs of the house, the order was given by the police to commence firing. Round after round of gunfire poured into the house. Finally, Hotelling gave a loud, defiant yell, followed by a single gunshot. There were no more shots fired from the house. Shortly thereafter, the police cautiously made their way up the stairs of the house to find that Hotelling had taken his own life.

About 300 shots struck the building during the standoff. It was estimated that it would cost about \$150.00 to make the necessary repairs to the house as a result of the gun shots.

Hotelling left a penciled letter in which he tried to excuse his conduct and place blame on members of the Whitney family.

The funeral for the three members of the Whitney family was held in the Methodist Church in Fairmont. Over 1,000 people attended, and hundreds were turned away as there was no more room in the church. The family was buried in Lakeside Cemetery.

This was, undoubtedly, one of the most tragic events to ever occur in Martin County. Were "the good old days" all that good? In some ways "the good old days" were perhaps better than today, and in others, perhaps not. As with any period of time in history, there was both good and bad. Times change, but history sometimes seems to have a way of repeating itself, whether locally or half way around the world.

For more information on this, and other local historical events, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.