

# The Outlaw Wils Howard

and other 1891 Maries County stories

by Gary Knehans

Peering into the past through the minute portals of limited source material is much like "looking through a glass darkly." Only a few copies of the "Vienna Gazette" from 1891 are still in existence. Fortunately, some additional information is available from reprinted dispatches in existing hundred year old newspapers from Rolla.

With such limitations, any historical account written today cannot be regarded as complete. Still, our restricted view into the Maries County of 1891 offers fascinating, if not substantial, insights into the past. The thoughtful reader of yesteryear's events realizes that, despite the lack of today's technological advances, Maries County residents one hundred years ago were interested in many of the same things that interest us today.

Very likely the most dramatic and dominant event of the year was the extradition from California and anticipated trial of Wilson Howard, a notorious outlaw. Howard was charged with murdering a Maries County deaf mute, Thomas Mc Michaels, on April 27, 1889.

In this were many elements of what we today would consider a major news story. Indeed, a fascinating novel could be written, if all the facts could be uncovered. Howard had already earned the reputation of being a bloodthirsty outlaw, even before the killing of Mc Michaels. In fact, he readily bragged about killing several men in his home state of Kentucky during a bitter two-family feud there. Public passions were so inflamed against Howard that, upon learning in 1891 the outlaw was imprisoned in California, the governor of Missouri was compelled to appoint an agent, T. V. Imboden of Dixon, for the purpose of travelling west to bring the prisoner back to stand trial on the murder charge. Maries County law enforcement officials even staged a bit of deception to secure possession of Howard from St. Louis officials, because they feared friends of the outlaw would set him free before he could stand trial in Maries County.

From various newspaper accounts, we learn of the interesting twists and turns of this case that undoubtedly had many tongues wagging in 1891.

(Rolla New Era, Jan. 31st, reprinted with a Jan. 25th San Francisco date-line)—Wilson Howard of Harlan County, Kentucky, whose reputation as a desperado is second only to that of Jesse James and Craig Tolliver, has been discovered in the San Quentin Penitentiary under the alias of Charles Brown. In August, 1890, he was sent from Calaveras County, this State, for robbing a man. In addition to five or six murders in Kentucky, Wilson Howard is under indictment in Maries County Missouri, for the murder of an inoffensive deaf mute, Thomas Mc Michaels.

After committing this last murder he escaped and came to California only to find his way into State prison. When his whereabouts were definitely ascertained Gov. Francis of Missouri appointed T. V. Imboden of Pulaski County, the agent of the State to go to California and return with Howard, to be tried for murder.

J. S. Bailey of Harlan County, Kentucky, who is intimately acquainted with the desperado and his family, accompanied Imboden to this State for the purpose of identifying Howard. When Howard was brought into their presence in the reception room at San Quentin the other day, Bailey spoke up and said to the convict: "How are you Wils?"

The desperado, surprised, answered "I am your man. I am just as game as I ever was in Harlan County, and I never was sorry for killing any man except your mute."

Was this an expression of remorse for killing Mc Michaels, or was it a statement by Howard that he did not kill the deaf mute? If interpreted as a statement of remorse, the fugitive from justice contradicted his words the next day.

(Rolla New Era, Jan. 31st, excerpted from a reprinted article from San Francisco, datelined Jan. 26th)—The desperado declares that he can prove an alibi in the Missouri case, for he has not been in that State for four years. He spent last night in our city prison and discoursed in a happy vein on the Howard-Turner feud and his prowess as a man-killer.

In order to obtain the extradition of Howard back to Missouri, Imboden had to present the governor of California with the formal requisition of the Missouri governor and file an affidavit stating that "the probabilities of Howard's conviction for the killing of the deaf mute are beyond doubt." After a short deliberation, the extradition was granted; and Howard was turned over to Imboden's custody, setting the stage for a long train ride home and a tense unboarding of the prisoner onto the train platform in Dixon.



(Rolla Herald, Feb. 12th, reprinted from the Vienna Gazette)—We are told that when Wils Howard arrived at Dixon last Friday and saw the large crowd assembled at the depot to see him, he was as near being scared as he ever was in his life, and it was evident that he expected to be lynched. There were numerous expressions from the crowd of what he deserved, but no one offered to molest him. Two or three of the deaf mutes, companions of the one Howard is charged with the killing, were on the platform, and it is said that he was immediately recognized by them, as was shown by their excited motions and gestures, explaining little details of the deed.

For safe keeping until a trial scheduled for later in the year in Maries County, Howard was taken to St. Louis and kept in the city jail there. There he remained until April when a Maries County posse used some deception to take custody of the outlaw. That event was vividly, but perhaps not accurately, described by a St. Louis newspaper.

(St. Louis Republic article, reprinted in the Rolla Herald April 16th)—Wils Howard, the notorious Kentucky out-

law, was taken from the St. Louis Jail last night by Sheriff Mc Keever and five Deputy Sheriffs of Maries County. The circumstances under which the prisoner was hustled from the Four Courts under a strong guard hurried to the train, handcuffed and chained to the seat, indicate that an attempt at rescue was feared.

The extraordinary precautions taken to secure the prisoner may or may not mean a great deal. It may be that Sheriff Mc Keever and his posse had received definite information that a rescue was to be attempted, or it may possibly be that the officers were needlessly alarmed. At all events they were dealing with a desperado who would stop at nothing to regain his liberty.

Howard's trial, charged with the murder of a deaf mute named Miller in 1889, is set for Monday, and the Jail authorities have been expecting him to be removed for some time, he having been brought here direct from San Quentin, Cal., and placed in the St. Louis Jail for safe keeping. Sheriff Mc Keever and five deputies, all heavily armed, arrived in the city yesterday morning. They went to the Four Courts about 2 o'clock in the afternoon and held a conference with Jailer Callahan. They finally said that they did not intend to take their prisoner until today or to-morrow, and left Mr. Callahan with that understanding.

But about 8 o'clock last night, after Mr. Callahan had gone home, the Sheriff and his posse suddenly presented themselves before Deputy Jailer Wm. Hodnett and demanded their prisoner. Mr. Hodnett knew that Sheriff Mc Keever had the right to call for Howard at any time, and consequently did not think their request out of the ordinary course, and besides he did not know of their agreement with Jailer Callahan. The prisoner was manacled and hurried off to the Union Depot and into a Frisco train. He was chained to the seat, the chain being fifty 3 feet long,





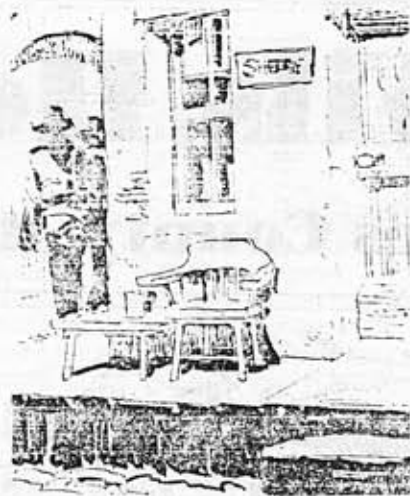


and it was around his feet and under and over the seat in such a manner as to almost prevent him from moving in any direction. The handcuffs were left upon him, and the keys were carefully hidden away.

Just before the train pulled out at 8:15 o'clock a party of men wearing white slouch hats and presenting a general cowboy appearance boarded the train and took seats in the rear of the car occupied by Howard and his guards.

As is required, Detectives Allender and Smith passed through the train at this juncture, and, seeing a man heavily ironed and his captors evidently laboring under a great nervous strain, they attempted to engage Howard in conversation.

Sheriff Mc Keever interrupted them and demanded to know who they were. Having satisfied him on this score by showing their badges, the Sheriff then said that they did not want a soul to know that they were taking the notorious outlaw out last night. They said that Howard had plenty of friends in St. Louis. They related a most peculiar story, and one which shed light upon their mysterious actions and intense desire to remove their prisoner secretly. The Sheriff said that late in the afternoon he and his deputies had met a party of Howard's friends, who wished to make arrangements to give the outlaw a comfortable trip to Maries County. The Sheriff apparently acquiesced and appointed a meeting with these friends at the Laclede Hotel at 8:30 o'clock last night. This was done as a blind, and the party then lost no time in returning to the Four Courts for their prisoner. The



Sheriff told the detectives that he did not like the looks of the white-hatted crowd that had boarded their car, and said that he anticipated trouble with them before they had made the run of 150 miles with their prisoner. He said that he feared a rescue, and that Howard had had friends in St. Louis for some time, but he would not give the detectives any more particular information, nor would he give the names of the persons he had agreed to meet at the Laclede.

Jailer Callahan was astonished when he learned how the transfer of the prisoner had been effected, and said that he could not understand what grounds the Sheriff and his party had for anticipating an attempt at a rescue.

This scoffing article did not sit well with the populace in Maries County.

D. Rainey, the editor of the "Vienna Gazette," wasted no time in writing a fiery editorial, titled "Lies, Pure and Simple." It read in part as follows:

The St. Louis Republic and Sunday Mirror have succeeded in making themselves very ridiculous in the eyes of the people of this section by their exaggerated reports of the manner in which the Maries county officials have managed the Wils Howard affair. These papers have some reporters who possess most excellent imaginations, and every line they have written in regard to the bringing away of Howard from St. Louis last week has been evolved from their own fertile brains.

As to their being frightened, we beg to inform those sensational writers that the gentlemen who had charge of Howard are not made of the stuff that is easily intimidated. They have informed the editor of this paper that they saw no party of cowboys, that they made no appointment to meet Howard's friends and counsel at any hotel—in fact, that in no particular was the truth told by these enterprising reporters.

The statement in Monday's Republic to the effect that "great excitement prevailed here for several days previous to Howard's arrival," that "a great crowd of people from all the surrounding country had virtual possession of our town, awaiting with ill-concealed impatience the arrival of the prisoner," and that the ominous silence of the people made a lynching likely, etc., was a fabrication from the mind of writer which had not the least sem-



blance of truth.

Despite the controversial action of Sheriff Mc Keever and his men in bringing Howard to Vienna, the outlaw did not have to go on trial before a Maries County jury. A reprinted "Vienna Gazette" article tells us what happened.

(Rolla Herald, June 25th)—The special term of circuit court called to try the above named case convened here Monday and Howard's attorney, Marshall Mc Donald, the noted criminal lawyer of St. Louis, made application for a change of venue, as was general-

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ly anticipated, which was granted after a vigorous fight and the case was sent to Lebanon, where it will come up before Judge Wallace next November.

The methods employed to obtain a change of venue MAY have been straight and legal, but it is safe to say that at least one man whom the defense used as a tool will be tabooed for all time to come by our intelligent and respectable citizens, and that Judge Hitzell has also fallen a notch or two in popular esteem. The call for an indignation meeting, which appears in this issue, pretty well indicates a feeling which is general.

It is hoped that the people of Laclede county who will be called upon to sit in judgment of Howard's guilt or innocence, according to the evidence, will give him as fair a trial as he would have got here—and that is all he could ask.



The indignation meeting that Editor Rainey scheduled was a complete disappointment to him. In a later dispatch, he reported that only a couple of people attended the meeting, which was designed to protest the change of venue in the Howard case to Laclede county.

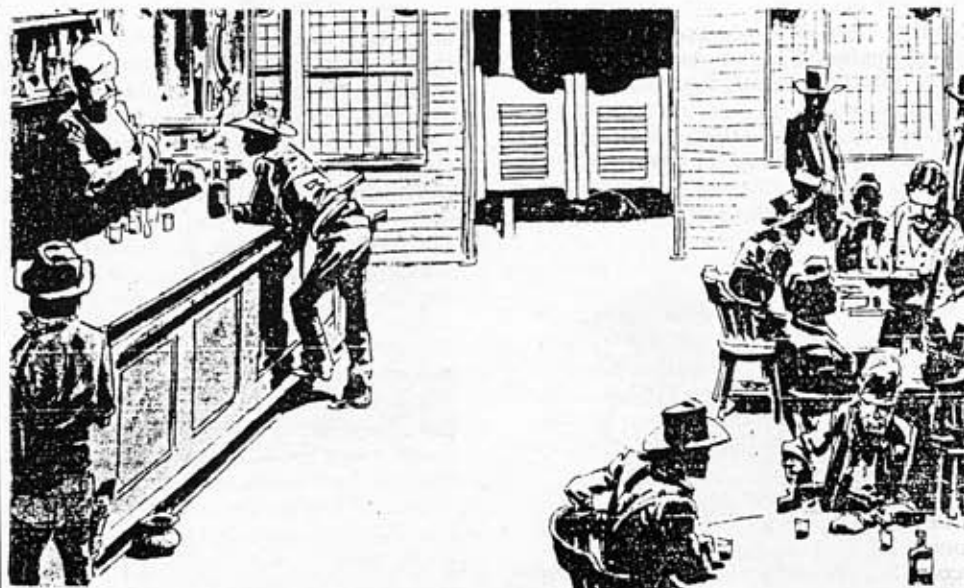
Howard was turned over to Laclede County authorities. But the outlaw didn't stay in Lebanon long. Maries County officials must have been astonished to learn that the outlaw was soon on his way back to St. Louis, an ironic development in light of the dramatic incident a few weeks earlier involving the Maries County sheriff and his posse.

(Rolla Herald, Jul. 23rd)—Wils. Howard, the Kentucky outlaw and murderer, has been taken to the St. Louis jail for safe keeping, the jail at Lebanon not being deemed secure enough to hold such a desperate prisoner.

Howard's trial in Lebanon was scheduled for November 23rd, according to records currently on file at the Maries County Courthouse in Vienna. For some unknown reason, it did not take place according to schedule, although a newspaper article reveals that the outlaw did make the round trip to Lebanon and back the following month.



(Rolla Herald, Dec. 17th)—Wils.



Howard, handcuffed to Wm. Beck, the youthful Hickory county murderer, passed east over the Frisco Monday afternoon, in charge of Sheriff Goodall of Lebanon, and constable Imboden of Dixon. Howard was placed in the St. Louis jail for safe keeping, and Beck will go to the penitentiary for a term of ten years.

As a point of fact, the long awaited trial did not take place in 1891 at all, despite the year's dramatic developments in the case. Howard languished in the St. Louis jail until the middle part of the following year when his day in court finally arrived.

(Lebanon Republican, Jun. 9th, 1892)—The Wils Howard murder case was called in the circuit court Wednesday morning, and the panel of forty jurors sworn and examined. After examination the jurors and all witnesses were excused until this (Friday) morning, at 10 o'clock. Attorney Scott Pope, of Jefferson City; Prosecuting Attorney Barr, of Maries county; and Prosecuting Attorney Farris, of Laclede county, represent the state and J. T. Moore and R. A. Holt are attorneys for defendant. A large number of witnesses are present from Maries county and other portions of the state, and relatives of Howard from Kentucky.

Howard seems to be taking things

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easy, and looks contented and well fed, evidently having been taken good care of at the state's expense.

This case has occupied the attention of courts at intervals for the last three years, and it is to be hoped that the thing may be finished up at this trial and further trouble and expense over a worthless brute stopped.



One sad feature of the trial is the presence of Howard's mother, who is in attendance, and for whom a strong feeling of pity is entertained in her trouble. It is a deeper agony to her mother's heart than to the principal himself.

(Lebanon Republican, Jun. 16th, 1892)—After four days' trial, during which time scores of witnesses were examined and the most positive and damaging evidence given against Wils Howard, accused of the murder of Thomas Mc Michaels, in Maries county, the case went to the jury at 11 o'clock, Tuesday night, and yesterday the jury reported that it could not agree, ten, we understand, being for acquittal and two for conviction.

A brief recapitulation of the case is as follows:

On Saturday evening, April 27, 1889 a man appeared at the home of Edward Hoard and wife, two deaf mutes, in Maries county, and took supper with them. After supper he informed them that he was an officer and had come to arrest Thomas Mc Michaels, another deaf mute who boarded with the Hoards, alleging that Mc Michaels had robbed some woman. At 9 o'clock that night this alleged officer left Hoard's house, taking with him Mc Michaels, who went under protest, wishing to wait until the next morning. That was the last seen of the mute until his dead body was found the next day, a short distance from the house with a bullet hole in the head and another in his side. By the side or near the body lay a pocketbook, containing papers evidently having been dropped by the murderer during a struggle with his victim.

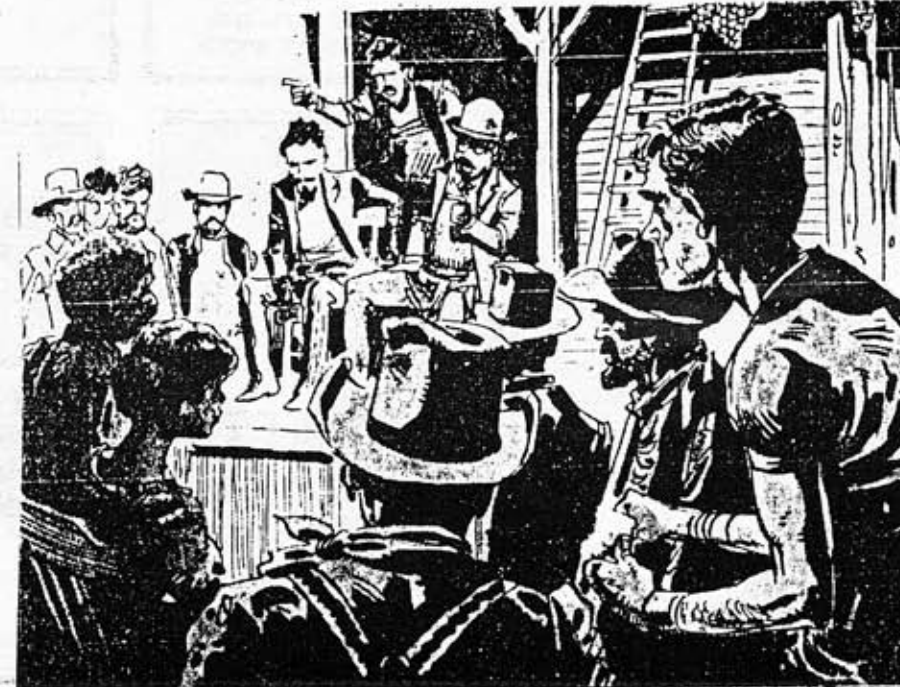
Last Saturday Edward Hoard and his wife positively identified Howard as the man who came to their house and took Mc Michaels away, each of them on request, pointing the murderer out amidst the crowd surrounding him. The family of Martins, who live near the deaf mutes, identified Howard as the man who stayed at their house the night before the murder. Peter Peter-

son, clerk in a store near the scene of the murder, identified Howard as the man who inquired of him where the deaf and dumb people lived. Mrs. John Duncan, who lived near, identified the prisoner as the man who inquired at her house, on April 27, for the mutes. The pocketbook found near Mc Michaels' dead body contained some doggeral rhymes of characters living in Harlan county, Ky., and other papers, which were proven to be Howard's. Witnesses from Howell county, Mo., swore that these articles were in Howard's possession a few days before the murder, and no evidence was given that threw any doubt on the fact that he had them on April 27. Green Ward, of Harlan county, Ky., testified that Howard killed an uncle of his. G. R. Turner, another Kentucky witness, had a son who was also a victim of the bloody brute.

The evidence in this case was so straight-forward and plain that not one person who heard it doubts that Howard deliberately and brutally murdered the defenseless deaf mute. That he was not convicted is probably owing to some technicality of law by which the jury was agreed to take the action it did. The thing to be regretted now is that it was not an acquittal, so that Howard could have been taken to Kentucky, where six counts for murder in the first degree stand against him. Another trial in this state means a big addition to the costs, which, it is understood, already aggregate \$15,000 to \$18,000.

(Lebanon, Republican, Jun. 22nd, 1892, reprinted from the St. Louis Globe Democrat)—Wils Howard was brought back from Lebanon, Mo., bodily ironed, yesterday afternoon and lodged in jail for safe keeping. Howard was as smilingly courteous as ever. He seemed pleased, and declared that he was physically able to stay six months longer, as he put it, ere his second trial commenced.

With this unexpected turn of events in the Howard case, we bring readers back to 1891. Left unanswered are several questions. Did Howard face another trial? If so, what was the result of it? And what was his motive for killing Mc Michaels in the first place? Records currently in the Maries Coun-



ty Courthouse suggest that Howard may have been hired by four other men to kill Mc Michaels to prevent him from testifying against them. A month before the killing, the men had

been charged with "arresting and searching the body and person of Thomas Mc Michaels" and detaining him against his will. Further research is needed to answer these compelling questions.

Apart from the Howard drama, Maries Countians were involved in other pursuits of community, business, and personal nature. The following newspaper articles present small windows through which we can peer into the past.

(Vienna Gazette, Jan. 1st)—Last Thursday night T. V. Imboden brought here and placed in jail a young man named Thompson, charged with the murder of the negro Lawson, which occurred in the northwestern part of the county several months since. His father, who is a respected citizen, claims that his son is innocent, and has no doubt that the fact can be established. A preliminary hearing of the case will be had Saturday.

Mrs. Luebbert, an old lady living on the Maries several miles from town, has been affected in a peculiar manner since the first of last week. She has during all this time been sound asleep.



and all efforts to awaken her have proven unavailing. She is apparently in good health, and the case is puzzling the physicians and others who have visited her.

We understand that Western Maries will soon have a new town, the location being near Weldon. The town has already been laid out, and work will soon be commenced on several buildings, among them being a handsome Catholic church. It is likely that the place will be christened "Brinkville" in honor of Mrs. Anna Brink, who we learn has donated the neat sum of \$500.

(Vienna Gazette, Jan. 22nd)—The band boys tendered J. D. Bishop, who recently became a Viennaiter, a serene Friday night, and on Monday night did likewise by T. F. Branson, another of our new citizens. A very nice and acceptable way of extending newcomers a welcome.

The Richfountain and Vienna mail and hack line has been discontinued, and hereafter the mail will be carried from the former place to Frankburg twice a week. All mail matter from Vienna to those two places will now have to be sent around by Dixon, Pacific, Dauphine, and Linn. This will be a cause of inconvenience, as will also the loss of the hack line, though it is a fact that the business was not enough to justify its continuance.

Rabbits are very fat this year, and make fine eating. But they are not at all plentiful, on account, it is said, of



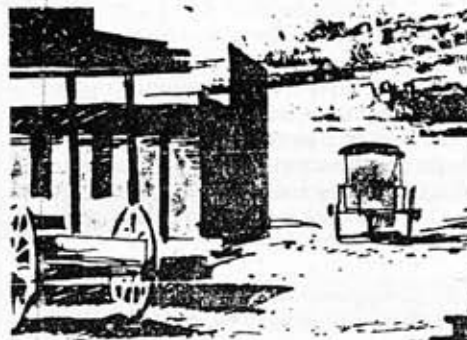
the depredations of red foxes, which are much more numerous than usual in this section. Jack Copeland has killed four or five in the vicinity of town during the past two weeks.

(Rolla Herald, Feb. 19th, reprinted from the Vienna Gazette)—The convenience of a telephone line connecting us with railroads south and north of us could not be estimated. But it is hardly likely that our citizens would contribute the amount necessary to build the proposed line, and so the project will have to slide.

The hog cholera is playing sad havoc among the swine in this locality. I. J. Love is three days behind in dragging them off, having lost about 45 head. J. P. Tynes is also a heavy loser.

(Rolla Herald, Feb. 26th, reprinted from the Vienna Gazette)—At a dance

at Pat Doyle's, a few miles northeast of town, last Friday night, some of the boys got "gloriously full" and concluded to have a little fun. They tied some of Doyle's geese to the tails of some of the horses and turned them loose, while to the tails of others they fastened the saddle. We understand some of the geese were killed and thrown in the well, and altogether they



had a high old time.

(Rolla Herald, Apr. 9th, reprinted from the Vienna Gazette)—Mrs. B. F. Branson, wife of our ex-Assessor, died at her home near Weldon Monday morning from pneumonia, superinduced by the measles. Mrs. Branson was just in the meridian of life, and was one of Maries county's best educated women, loved and respected by a host of friends and acquaintances who all join in expressions of deep and heartfelt sorrow at her demise.

(Vienna Gazette, Apr. 16th)—We regret to state that Irving Edwards, who had his skull crushed by a flying piece of lumber at Albertson's saw-mill a couple of months since, has taken a relapse and is again confined to his bed. He had so nearly recovered that he was able to go about and even make a



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trip to town, but last week was again prostrated. We hope that he will soon be around again and he may ultimately recover entirely.

A large vein of silver was struck during mining operations near Vichy a few days since, we are told, and the usual "great excitement" prevails. We truly hope the report is true, and that big fortunes await the lucky finders.

(Vienna Gazette, Apr. 30th)—Miss Lee Ready returned to Steelville Sunday to take up her studies for another term. She was accompanied as far as Dixon by Misses Hattie Felker and Ida Barr.

T. J. Tynes, of near Pay Down, was in town Monday and cheered the printers heart with some of the "coin of the realm." Mr. T. recently shipped a hogshead of fine tobacco to St. Louis, for which we hope he will get a good price.

The citizens of the East Side have recently organized a Farmers Mutual Fire and Storm Insurance Association, and have applied to the Secretary of State for a charter. Dr. W. H. Bowles is president, Hon. J. A. Love is vice-president, and, we believe, J. F. Lindner is secretary. The Association starts out with most encouraging prospects, having already received application for membership representing property to the amount of \$46,000. It will do business on the assessment plan, each member paying in proportion to the amount represented by the policy he holds. It is not only the cheapest but the safest way for our farmers and



others to insure their property against loss by fire or storm, and the money paid out is thereby kept at home. We hope the Association will prove a success in every way, and believe it will be to the interest of every citizen, especially the farmers, to join it.

(Rolla New Era, May 21st, reprinted

from the Vienna Gazette)—Irwin Edwards, whose condition has recently been so serious, the fracture in his skull having again commenced to press on the brain, last week had an operation performed by Dr. Johnson, of Rolla, which it is hoped will give the young man a chance to recover. The family being in rather straitened circumstances, a subscription was taken

up this week among our people by T. B. Anderson to raise money with which to pay the surgeon's fee of \$50, (which, by the way, seems a little exorbitant for a country doctor to charge) and nearly everyone applied to contribute something, though we have not learned the amount raised.

(Vienna Gazette, Jun. 4th)—One more of Maries county's pioneer citizens has passed way, in the person of Mr. A. B. Vanderpool, who was called to that other and brighter, better world last Saturday afternoon without the least warning.

He has been somewhat indisposed for several days previous, but on Saturday was feeling considerably better, ate a hearty dinner, and in the afternoon took his chair out in the yard to sit in the shade, as was his custom when the weather was pleasant. The women of the household, who were busy indoors, heard him call once or twice, but thinking he was calling to the children paid no attention. Shortly after this someone had occasion to go out in the yard and noticed the old gentleman sitting as though asleep in his chair, but upon calling to him and receiving no reply, they tried to arouse him, and found that he was unconscious. Aid was summoned, but he died only a few minutes later. The cause, it is presumed, was heart trouble or apoplexy.

Mr. Vanderpool was almost 76 years of age, and had long been a resident of the county and one of its very best citizens. No man was more respected or held in greater esteem by everyone, and the sorrow at his sudden demise is universal and genuine.

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