

The Outlaw Wils Howard: Part Two

by Gary Knehans

Charged with the murder of a Maries County deaf mute, Thomas Mc Michaels, in 1889, the outlaw Wilson Howard fled Missouri to escape prosecution. He later was located in a prison in California, extradited, and successfully returned to Missouri by Thomas Imboden of Dixon in 1891. For a variety of reasons, Howard's trial did not take place until June, 1892, in Lebanon, on a change of venue. After hearing the testimony and deliberating, the jury failed to reach agreement over Howard's guilt or innocence in the case. So, a new trial was ordered and Howard remained behind bars.

If law officials planned to keep the outlaw in Lebanon until another trial, they soon had to change that plan when some prisoners successfully broke out of the county jail in which Howard was staying. Surprisingly, Wils did not join the escapees.

(Lebanon Republican, July 2nd, 1892, reprinted from the Kansas City Star)—John Crisp, a Wright county murderer; Robert Ernest of Hickory county, charged with abduction; and Grant Vickers of Camden county, charged with carrying concealed weapons, lately escaped from the jail at Lebanon. Wils Howard, the versatile and all round murderer, did not attempt to escape with them.

A new trial was ordered for late in the year, December 12th, but a continuance was granted in the case. The trial was moved to January, 1893. The further delay did not please the residents of Maries county, who found themselves facing ever higher costs in a drawn out pursuit of justice.

(Rolla Herald, Dec. 22nd, reprinted from the Maries County Gazette)—The costs in the Howard case continue to pile up, and yet again the case is postponed. Witnesses from Kentucky came to Lebanon last week thinking the case would surely be tried on the 12th inst. It's a shame and an injustice. Maries county, just now is illy able to bear her share of the burden of costs, and every citizen of this county will join this paper in hoping that Judge Bland, before whom the case is now to be tried, will be firm in refusing the defense a further continuance.

After a slight delay in January, the trial finally was held in the last part of the month. This time, there was an entirely different result.

(Lebanon Republican, January 27th, 1893)—On Wednesday afternoon at 2:10 the culminating point in that long drawn out agony, the Wils. Howard murder case, was reached finally, when the jury brought in a verdict of guilty in the first degree and affirmed the almost unanimous opinion of those who have followed the case from the

beginning.

Every reader of the "Republican" is probably familiar with the general features of this now notorious case, and its review in detail is unnecessary. Everyone who has heard of the case knows that the crime with which Howard is charged is the murder of a deaf mute, Thomas Mc Michaels, in Maries county, on April 27, 1889. On that day appeared at the home of Edward Hoard, and wife near Vienna, with whom Tom Mc Michaels lived, a man who, after lingering for some time, informed Tom that he (the man) was an officer and had come to arrest the mute for some crime and had to take him to Osage Bluff. The mute was willing to go with the alleged officer, but wanted to wait until the next morning. This the man would not agree to, and proceeded from the house with Mc Michaels in the night. This was the last seen of poor Tom Mc Michaels alive. Three days later his dead body was found not far from his former home, off the road some distance, with several bullet holes in it. The evidences were that the victim had made a struggle for his life and was shot down like a dog.

But a mute witness was found near the body of the murdered man, a witness that gave a clue and led to the capture of the murderer. This was a pocketbook, which had evidently been dropped during the struggle. The pocketbook contained papers which, after

investigation, proved to have been in the possession of Wils. Howard.

The general reader is familiar with the further proceedings in the case—how and where Howard was found, how his prosecution has been delayed from time to time on various technicalities, up to last May, when he was tried in the Laclede county circuit court, the trial resulting in a hung jury, instead of a hung Howard as it should have been.

The second trial here was called last Tuesday but was not proceeded with until Friday morning, when the jury was selected from the special venire of forty men impaneled on Wednesday.

The prosecution was conducted by Prosecuting Attorney Bowles, of Maries county, assisted by W. M. Barr, his predecessor, and Prosecuting Attorney Newhouse, of Laclede county. The defense was represented by Messrs. R. A. and E. C. Holt. Attorney Bowles opened the case Friday morning with a comprehensive statement of the case, and was followed by R. A. Holt, who outlined the position of the defense.

Following this, the examination of the witnesses was gone on with, which was substantially the same as that of last May. All the principal witnesses testified identically with the evidence adduced at the former trial. Fate Biggs, the Duncans, the Martin family, Mrs. Brown and Peter Peterson

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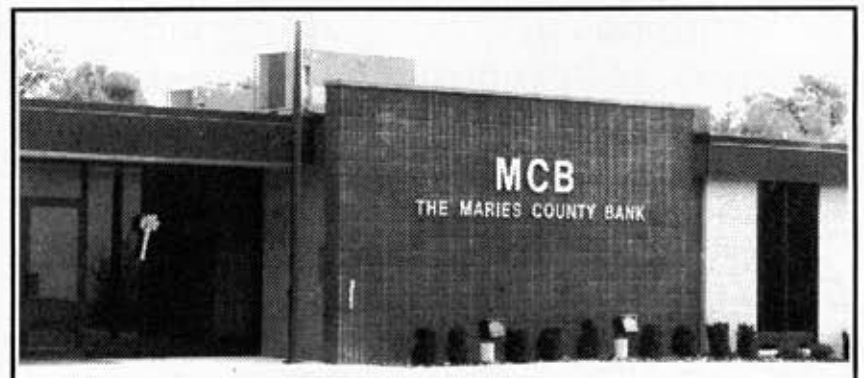
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The Outlaw Wils Howard

identified Howard, positively, as at the former trial, as the person who inquired the way to the home of the deaf mute on the day of the murder.

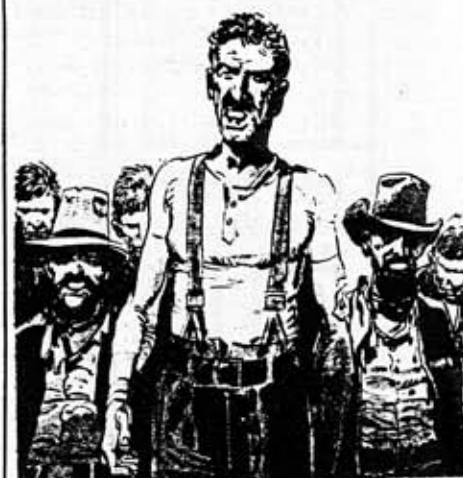
The Cordell family, living in Howell county, whose house Howard left on April 23, a few days before the murder, and who are relatives of the murderer, identified the pocketbook found and its contents as belonging to Howard, and testified that it was in his possession when he left their house.



A number of other witnesses gave testimony strongly pointing to the guilt of the accused, but the strongest evidence, which in itself left no doubt as to the fact that Howard deliberately and brutally murdered the defenseless deaf mute was given by Edward Hoard and wife. They both positively identified Howard as the miscreant who, on April 27, arrived at their house, and, after partaking of their hospitality, led their companion and friend forth like a lamb to slaughter. After taking the testimony of these two witnesses, alone, even if there had been no other, no evidence could have been produced which would have proven Howard innocent.

The defense introduced a number of depositions to prove Howard's absence from the state at the time the murder was committed, but the proof of his presence was overwhelming.

The case, for the present, is ended, and the community is glad of it. The defense will file a motion for an appeal, and has until February 10 to prepare its exceptions. Whether the appeal will be granted cannot now be determined. If it is refused, the next thing



will be the sentencing of the man who was declared on Wednesday guilty of murder, and then the preparations for the removal and final riddance to the world of a brute in human form who, from his history, has lived a life of crime and has been the source of more trouble, many times over, than a legion of such animals are worth.

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Louis this morning for safe keeping, and will bring him back again when the court reconvenes next month. Until then the matter will rest.

As a fitting conclusion it may be well to give the names of the men who com-



posed the intelligent and clear headed jury which convicted the murderer. The names are as follows: R. M. Randles, foreman; T. B. Cotton; W. H. David; Peter B. Breech; Samuel Roper; John Gallion; James Mc Galligan; J. B. Phipps; B. W. Barnhart; Michael Hill; William Rippey; Ira B. Heard.

The murder conviction apparently caused Howard to seriously regret not having participated in the successful June jail break the year earlier. Even though at least one of the escapees, John Crisp, was captured, Wils' more intrepid nature may have allowed him to elude authorities. How ironic then it was that in late January, 1893, both men found themselves confined together again in the Lebanon jail. This time, freshly convicted of murder, Howard actively sought freedom.

(Lebanon Republican, Jan. 27th)—A sensation was caused in the city yesterday by the discovery of a deep laid plot to murder and break jail, conducted by the prisoners at the county jail, led by Crisp, the Wright county murderer, and Wilson Howard. The attempt at carrying out the plan was prevented by Dolph Bowman, a prisoner sent up last week for thirty days, who divulged the plan and put Deputy Sheriff Thad Johnson, who was to have been the victim, on his guard. The plot had been thoroughly planned, and had it been successful another murder would have been added to the beastly Howard's long list.

The scheme as told by Bowman was thus: In some way a file and saw were smuggled into the cell and Crisp used them on the rear window of the east cell, making a big cut. The intention was to saw all the way around the iron window, leaving a small place, just enough to hold it up until the time came to knock it out. When this was all

in readiness, Deputy Johnson was to be caught "napping". Howard was to knock him on the head with a stick of wood or something, and the whole gang would escape.

As soon as informed of the plot, Sheriff Jones made an immediate search and found the file and saw with which the cut on the window had been made.

In the details of this arrangement is shown the cunning of Howard as well as his unscrupulousness. Crisp, who, while mean and brutish, is not highly intelligent, was to make the first advance on Deputy Johnson, with the chance that he would get shot, and while he was thus occupying the jail-



er's attention, Howard was to sneak up behind and do his work.

The fact that Deputy Johnson frequently fixes the fire in the cell and is probably sometimes off his guard made the attempt to murder to these desperate brutes seem easy of accomplishment.

Thad says, however, that if the attempt had been made, he would have filled both of them full of lead. Which fact leads one almost to regret that the thing was not carried out, in view of the public benefit their removal would have been.

The murder conviction, and the resulting death sentence, surely deepened the outlaw's hatred of whom he perceived as his chief nemesis, Thomas Imboden, who was now sheriff of Pulaski County. It was Imboden who successfully brought Wils back to Missouri from California to face trial for the murder of Mc Michaels. It was Imboden who insisted on being on the same train as Howard, whether in an official capacity or not, on his many journeys between the jails in St. Louis and Lebanon. And, it was Imboden who profited the most by the outlaw's capture and conviction. Not only did the lawman receive payment for Howard's return, Imboden was rewarded further by his successful election in 1892 as Pulaski County sheriff.

With plenty of time behind bars to ponder these things, and to stoke the fires of burning hatred, it isn't surprising that the convicted murderer made plans to add Imboden to his long list of victims.

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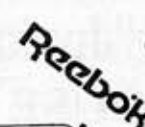
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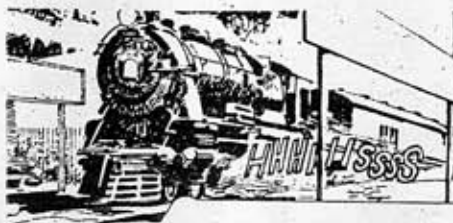
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(Lebanon Republican, Feb. 10th, 1893, reprinted from the Richland Cyclone)—Howard has repeatedly threatened the life of Mr. Imboden, and but for the "squealing" of an accomplice, who took fright, would have succeeded, no doubt, in killing him. A decoy note was written to Mr. Imboden, telling him where to find Howard. Had Mr. Imboden not been warned he would have been killed by Howard, who was awaiting his coming in ambush.

Thwarted at attempts of jail break and revenge, the convicted murderer languished in confinement in St. Louis while attorneys and friends attempted to save him from the gallows. Some stays of execution apparently were granted, the last being a three week reprieve granted in late 1893.

(Lebanon Republican, Jan. 5th, 1894, reprinted from the Richland Cyclone)—Wilson Howard, who was to have been hanged at Lebanon tomorrow, has been granted a three weeks respite by Governor Stone. The law's delay has permitted Howard to live some years longer than his career would have permitted had he got his just deserts. The petition of Kentucky sympathizers with so deeply-dyed a criminal as Howard should not sway Missouri's governor from having an outraged law vindicated, even though that governor were born in Kentucky. The time of Wilson Howard's respite ends on Friday next unless some further move on the part of his friends is made.



Last minute appeals were made on Howard's behalf. But, as the execution day approached, it finally became apparent to most parties that the notorious outlaw's seemingly charmed existence was about to end.

As the time approached for the trip back to Lebanon for the hanging, Howard hatched a final plan for revenge against Sheriff Imboden. Knowing the lawman was also on the train, Wils anxiously awaited an opportunity to make good on his threat against Imboden., he anxiously awaited an opportunity to make good on his death threat against Imboden, but that opportunity never came.

(Rolla Herald, Jan. 25th, 1894)—Upon his arrival at the (Lebanon) jail from St. Louis, and when his shackles were removed, he drew a case knife, sharpened to a point, from his clothing, bent the knife and threw it on the floor, saying he had that to kill Sheriff Imboden, of Dixon, but did not, and now was glad he did not. "I would have killed him," said he, "if he had entered my cell at St. Louis. I wanted to kill him on the train, but he did not come near enough, and at Newburg when Sheriff Jones released my hand to allow me to eat and I arose, stretched myself and shook hands with some ladies, I intended to kill Imboden then, but had no chance."

He hated Imboden because he captured him, and every time he had been taken to or from St. Louis, Imboden had made it a point to be on the same train.

On January 18th, 1894, Howard spent the last night of his life in the jail in Lebanon. He was at this point a tormented soul, admitting having killed several other men, but denying having killed the Maries County deaf mute. Wils had maintained a persona of devil-may-care unflappability during the long time of his captivity, but on this last night the convicted man's long-maintained image began to come apart.

Details of this, and events of the following day, were painstakingly detailed by several newspaper reporters who were on the scene.

(Rolla Herald, Jan. 25th, 1894, with a Jan. 19th Lebanon dateline)—Wils Howard met his death on the gallows in this city at 9:15 o'clock this morning. He died protesting his innocence of the murder of Thos. Mc Michaels. Every effort to get him to talk about the killing of Mc Michaels was fruitless. The pleadings of the ministers to get him to confess all his crimes in the last moments before going to the gallows were unavailing. He said, when pressed for an answer in regard to that crime: "I am not guilty of the crime of which I am charged, and for which I must now pay the death penalty."

But he did not want to talk about that murder. There was something he would not tell. His mental anguish all during the night and this morning indicated that there was a heavy burden on his heart which he would not reveal even in the face of the gallows.

He was baptized in his cell at midnight last night by Rev. B. F. Thomas of the M. E. Church. Three ministers were with him most of the night and this morning. At times, he seemed happy and at peace with his God, but at intervals during the night, and as the hour approached this morning he broke down completely and cried and moaned most piteously.

To his spiritual attendants he spoke frequently of Sister Lee, who had visited him often in the St. Louis Jail and gave him much comfort. He was much attached to her. He said he had confessed all to God, and he believed his sins were pardoned. He said he had no fear of death. "I hate to be hanged," said he, "on account of my poor heart broken mother and little sister. For my own part I prefer death to the penitentiary for life."

The condemned man did not close his eyes in sleep last night. It was a nervous, restless, half unconscious dream of his awful fate on the morrow.

At daylight this morning he again broke down and cried out: "Oh, Lord, have mercy on me." In these moments of despair, he would talk incoherently of his past; that he had lived a wicked life and committed crimes and ought to die for what he had done.

About 8 o'clock breakfast was brought in to the condemned man. He had no appetite, and his last meal was hardly touched. At 9 o'clock when Sheriff Jones came into the cell the prisoner realized that the hour had arrived and he must prepare for the gallows.

He gave way in agonizing cries and moaned for mercy from God. He sank down on the bed in deep emotion. It was a most affecting scene. The mental anguish of the man was indescribable. He recovered quickly, however, and was calm to the last moments. As

his hands were pinioned to his side he said:

"Please, Mr. Sheriff, spare me the reading of the death warrant. I waive that. I now have a confession to make; I have taken 21 grains of morphine, but it has had no effect. I am sorry I did it. It was wrong, but I would suffer any death rather than to be hanged, to save my poor mother and sister pain."



The Sheriff and prisoner passed from the cell through the narrow hallway to the scaffold, which stood in an inclosure on the north side of the jail, followed by the few persons who witnessed the execution. With firm step Wils Howard ascended the steps of the scaffold. Bravely he faced the death structure and bore up wonderfully under the fearful ordeal. On the scaffold he stood erect, with steady nerve, as the Sheriff adjusted the rope and placed the black cap over his face. Rev. B. F. Thomas, who stood with Rev. C. H. White on the top step to the scaffold, then offered a short, fervent prayer.

The Sheriff asked Howard if he had anything to say. Howard's last words were: "I do not desire to say anything; only that I hope to meet you all in heaven." The next second the body shot through the trap. The fall was seven feet, but his neck was not broken, and he died from strangulation in 13 minutes and 30 seconds. The trap fell at 9:15 and at 9:28:30 the doctor pronounced life extinct. Relatives requested that the remains be sent to Pineville, Ky., to be turned over to the family for burial.

The "Lebanon Republican's" account, though not as lengthy, echoed the details contained in the "Rolla Herald". It did add the account of a meeting between Howard and his attorneys the night before the hanging. For several hours the lawyers and Howard conferred, during which the convicted man apparently confessed of having killed Will Turner, George Turner, Bob Craig, George Hall, and John S. Bailey back in Kentucky. Both papers said that Howard denied to the end of having killed the deaf mute.

While he certainly had good reason to deny killing Mc Michaels during the time leading up to his trials and during the appeal process, the outlaw had little reason, except perhaps for pride, to profess his innocence up to the very end of his life.

Several days before the hanging, Howard wrote a letter to some relatives, whom he said knew that he was not guilty of the crime for which he was hanged. That letter was published in its entirety in a Lebanon newspaper shortly after the execution.

(Lebanon Republican, Jan. 26th, 1894, with a Jan. 21st Louisville, Kentucky, dateline)—Wils Howard, the Kentucky desperado, hanged in Missouri Friday, sent the following letter to his brother, John D. Howard, and his uncle, William Jennings, now in the penitentiary at Eddyville, Ky.:

Four Courts Jail, St. Louis, Mo., Wednesday night, January 17, 1894—Jennings and Howard, Eddyville, Ky.: DEAR UNCLE AND BROTHER:—This will be the last letter. I have not been taken away yet, but I expect the sheriff in the morning. I have not had any death watch set on me yet, as the law requires forty-eight hours before hanging. Berry went to Jefferson City. I have not heard from him yet, but I have seen in the papers to night where the governor refused to commute my sentence, and says I hang Friday. So by the time you get this I will be no more. I will make those affidavits for you to-morrow, and send you in due time. Boys, it is hard to die for a crime one did not commit, as you know I am certainly innocent of this murder, but if you live to get out, which I think you will, I don't want you, boys, to go to getting into more trouble looking for revenge. It is useless, and it would not bring me back. Go some place where you can live a quiet life and be at peace with all. Most fellows will soon look up new enemies to fight with; so for God's sake keep away from them and lead an honest and upright life. Well, a long letter is useless, and nothing I could say would be of any benefit to either of us, so I will close forever, wishing and hoping to meet you both in the happy land of rest where all is peace. Farewell forever. WILSON R. HOWARD.



The reader is left to decide whether this last letter represents posturing on Howard's part. Or, could it be that Wils, who readily admitted responsibility for several killings in Kentucky, was actually innocent of Mc Michaels' death? After all, why would he have felt compelled to continue professing his innocence, especially to two relatives to whom murder obviously was not a deep moral issue, unless he was truly not guilty of the deaf mute's slaying? As he wrote the letter, he knew that, whether he professed guilt or innocence, he was going to die on the gallows in Lebanon in a very short time. Nothing he could write in that letter, which would reach its destination after the hanging, could affect that.

If Howard then truly was innocent in this case, the irony couldn't be more dramatic. Having escaped justice for several murders he committed in Kentucky, the Outlaw Wils Howard met his fate in Missouri in 1894 for a killing he did not commit. The truth of the story most likely will never be known. If Howard did not kill Mc Michaels, who did? History, like its victims, sometimes can be mute.