

# Lebanon's First Hanging

By Gary Knehans

Law enforcement people in Laclede County were in the hanging mood in 1880, readying nooses to tighten around two murderers. But only one of the hangings took place, as one of the men escaped from the shadow of the gallows in a very enterprising manner.

The lucky one, however, was not Joseph Core, whose death proved that taking the law into your own hands doesn't pay. A year or so earlier, Core had accused another man, George E. King, of torching some wheat stacks. Law authorities arrested King and filed charges against him. In the ensuing trial, however, King was acquitted of the charge.

The verdict so enraged Core that when King later turned up dead, authorities naturally suspected the aggrieved man of this most atrocious crime. The victim had been shot twice on a lonesome stretch of road. His head had been "beaten almost to a jelly."

Core repeatedly professed his innocence, but to no avail. A charge

of murder was brought against him by Laclede County authorities. Circumstantial evidence presented at his trial convinced a jury to return a verdict of guilty. Core was sentenced to be hanged for the crime.

Because of sensational aspects of the case, as well as the novelty of the punishment, hundreds of people poured into Lebanon to view Core's hanging. On Friday, March 5th, 1880, before a gaping crowd of onlookers, the convicted murderer swung from gallows erected under a big tree in a hollow below the well near the old jail that is still standing in Lebanon.

He was the first man known to be hanged in Laclede County.

The second was to be Billy Martin, a "swinger" scheduled to be "swung." But the special skill that set Martin on the path to the gallows was the very attribute that rescue him.

Martin had been confronted by his uncle, George Mizer, with having "improper relations" with the older man's wife. A heated argument

quickly ensued. And in the midst of it, Martin either accidentally or willfully murdered his uncle.

At the February term of Laclede County Circuit Court, 1880, he was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to be hanged.

But sometime in the intervening period before the scheduled execution date, Martin "made love to, and won the heart of Maggie Wilson, a niece of the jailer."

The seduction was consummated either in Martin's cell, or perhaps somewhere in the visiting area upstairs in the old county jail in Lebanon.

With no time to waste, Maggie stole the jailer's keys on November 16th, 1880, went to Martin's cell, unlocked the door, and "set her lover at liberty and fled with him."

The couple correctly assumed that hopping aboard a Frisco train would be too dangerous for them. Instead, Billy and Maggie mounted a mule and rode away, eventually travelling as far as North Carolina before they

were located.

The law officers who apprehended Martin greatly underestimated his cunning and prowess. The lover was also a fighter, and thoroughly thrashed the lawmen and escaped to Tennessee, where he was captured for a second time. Laclede County Sheriff Goodall personally went there to bring Martin and his femme fatale back to Lebanon by train. While the Frisco train was chugging up the long Dixon hill, Martin broke loose from his captors and jumped the train while still weighted down with heavy shackles. He had escaped again.

Maggie finished the trip back to Lebanon, where "a short time later twin babies were born."

Her lover's freedom, however, was not to be forever. Martin eventually was captured and brought to trial in Dallas County on a charge of venue. Despite all that had transpired, the verdict this time was not guilty. But Martin later served time in the state penitentiary for stealing a horse. He eventually became a preacher.

# Lebanon's Old Jail Museum

A site steeped in history, Laclede County's old jailhouse is still standing at 262 North Adams Street in Lebanon. It is now the Laclede County Historical Society Museum, an attraction that rewards history buffs and tourists alike.

Members of the Laclede County Historical Society have adorned the interiors of the old jail's two-story structure with many donated items of interest. Visitors to the museum can step into the sheriff's quarters, where past county sheriffs and their wives not only resided, but also prepared meals for prisoners who were confined either in the men's cells on the second floor or in the women's single cell on the first floor.

A steep wooden staircase at the north interior of the building leads to the stark view of the strongly fortified, heavy metallic cells. In these, hundreds of men spent days, weeks, even months of confinement while serving time or awaiting their fate. A couple of them were hanged from a tree that at one time was located a distance north of the jailhouse. Visitors can read about Joe Core, the

first man ever hanged in Laclede County.

And there are many interesting pictures of Lebanon and portraits of a legion of that community's most famous people, including legendary Congressman R. P. Bland. Harold Bell Wright's picture is there, too. The famous writer, who authored "Shepherd of the Hills", pastored a church flock in Lebanon at one time, and gathered real life facts for "The Calling of Dan Matthews." Wright became very unpopular when the book was published and people began realizing that the novel was about them and their shortcomings.

Visitors to the museum also will happily discover that several Laclede County Historical Society publications are available for purchasing.

The museum is open Mondays through Fridays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. from May through October. A 50-cent donation is suggested for admission.

While there, you can enroll as a member of the Laclede County Historical Society for just \$3.50 a year. Lifetime membership is



LEBANON'S Old Jail.

available at \$50 per person.

As the museum is a popular attraction for school, church, and scout groups, historical society

members are happy to schedule group tours. Call the museum during regular hours at (417) 588-2441.