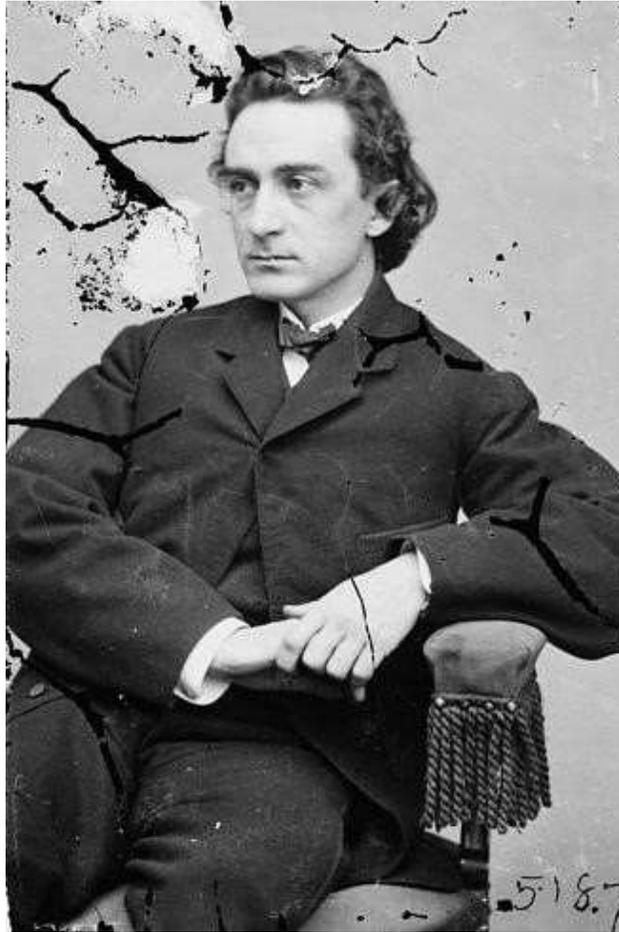


IOWA HISTORY



(Photo Courtesy Library of Congress)

Edwin Booth

In Search of a Father

Deranged, lunatic, crazy as a loon

Those were words used to describe Mark Gray in April 1879 after he unsuccessfully tried to murder, Edwin Booth, the brother of John Wilkes Booth who had assassinated President Abraham Lincoln in 1865. The murder attempt was not related to Lincoln's assassination; rather the incident revolved around a young man searching for his father.

On the night of April 23 Booth, a well-known actor, was on stage in Chicago when two gun shots rang out. They came from the first row of the balcony, where Mark Gray had fired his pistol at the stage, barely missing Booth's head. He was immediately apprehended and taken to a police station.

Gray had come to Chicago from St. Louis where he worked in a dry goods store. But the 26-year-old salesman had spent most of his life in Keokuk, Iowa. He moved there with his mother and stepfather, Patrick Gray, when he was 10 years old. He had worked for several years for the Younkens Brothers in their department store. However, Samuel Younkens admitted that Gray had been discharged twice for "too free use of intoxicating drinks." At some point Mark had taken Patrick Gray's surname, giving up his birth name, Lyons. However, Mark had lingering questions about his birth father.

When Mark Gray went before a judge the day after his alleged crime, he came face-to-face with Booth. The judge set bail at \$10,000; but Booth protested and bail was set at \$20,000. The actor said he didn't know his assailant.

A letter written by Gray to a woman named Katie in Keokuk had been found. In it he admitted he intended to kill Booth. Katie, a seamstress at a fashionable dressmaking establishment, claimed she was merely an acquaintance of Gray's and was baffled that he wrote to her.

Gray's St. Louis landlady said he was a "fast young man with a weakness for wine and women." She said he had told her his father had died before his birth. But other friends said Gray talked about spending time with his father. "I know he is alive, for I sat at the table with him some days ago, and he would not speak to me. But I will get even with him," Gray is reported to have said about his father. The landlady said Gray thought Booth was his father. And, he believed Katie to be his half-sister.

From cell number 62 in the county jail Gray told a reporter when asked about Booth, "Oh yes, we do look alike." The reporter described the "cold black glitter" in Gray's eyes as he spoke of the actor. And when asked about the rumor that he had spent time in the Keokuk "madhouse" Gray replied, "Half the papers have everything I said upside down."

People in Keokuk knew Mark Gray well. Some said he had a "disordered brain." His own mother said he had a habit of locking himself in his room for hours, reading aloud scripts from plays. One time when his mother tried to enter his room, he threatened to harm her. She described her son as "crazy."

Residents of Keokuk frequently saw him walking along the railroad tracks talking to himself and gesturing in a "dramatic" manner. Frank Loftis, who

worked with Gray at Younkers' Brothers, said he showed "unmistakable signs of insanity."

Early in May Gray was examined by a team of medical experts who spent an hour with him. They determined that his head were "diseased." The team concluded that the temperature of his head was "higher than it should be in normal conditions" and ruled he was insane.

In early May Gray's mom travelled to Chicago from Keokuk to visit him just before he was sent to the "insane asylum" at Elgin, Ill. She said he held no "ill will" toward the court that had found him guilty.

Three years later Gray was declared cured and released from the institution. He moved to Keokuk, where he took a job in a dry goods store. There were those who thought he shouldn't have been released. An Arizona newspaper said he should be sent back to the asylum and put in a "straight jacket." But that did not happen.

When Booth was asked about his possible fatherhood, he claimed he was in Australia the two years before Gray's birth. Gray lived the rest of his life in Keokuk, where he died in 1904.

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