

IOWA HISTORY



(Courtesy Library of Congress)

Horse Thief Looks Forward to Prison

In the summer of 1913 a gang of horse thieves was operating from Boone to Belle Plaine and points in between all spring and summer. At Boone farmer Ollie Rocho had horses taken from his barn, near Tama Fred Sanborn had a gray draft horse and a couple of harnesses stolen, and several farmers near Grinnell had teams stolen. In Dallas county S.W. Mullins had a “fine team” taken from his barn. In Randall W.S. Olson, who ran a dray line, lost a team of bays weighing about 1100 pounds each.

Finally, in August there was a breakthrough. A citizens’ posse spotted a man driving a team of horses that had been stolen from a Brooklyn farmer. With the posse in hot pursuit the horse thief ran by foot into a cornfield near Malcolm. As one posse chased the first thief, another man came along in an automobile and refused to stop for a second posse to question him. He was chased and overtaken by men on motorcycles, but he also managed to escape into the field of tall corn. Bloodhounds were brought in to aid in the search. The hounds took searchers to the railroad yards at Belle Plaine where the trail seemed to end.

Meanwhile the ringleader of the horse thieves, a man named Thomas Dickerson, had jumped off the train he had boarded in Belle Plaine. Finding himself near a farmstead he was greeted by a

young boy who was well aware that a gang of horse thieves was on the loose. As the two approached the farmhouse, Dickerson noticed the boy seemed uneasy. When they reached the house, Dickerson asked the boy's mother for directions to a town that he had no intention of visiting. He set out in the direction the mother indicated. The boy quickly climbed the windmill to watch the thief. Just as suspected, Dickerson backtracked and headed in the opposite direction. He was trying to "throw" anyone who might try to follow. The mother telephoned the sheriff.

It didn't take long for authorities to pick up Dickerson. When he was apprehended at Victor he was taken to the county jail where he provided a confession detailing his escapades. He explained that his age had prevented him from doing most of the actual thieving himself. He scouted areas in advance for horses that he thought would have good resale value and then lined up younger men to do the stealing. He refused to implicate the others in his gang.

Dickerson had more than one headquarters for his operation. For two years he leased a barn from an Iowa City blacksmith where he stored horses, buggies, and bridles until he found buyers. In Ames he rented a barn near Iowa State College. The owner, E.A. Musgrove, said Dickerson didn't try to keep his presence secret. He said he led the horses "in broad daylight" a block down the street to water. But Dickerson explained his activities by claiming to be a telephone lineman who had to "change teams often." He also admitted that he maintained a barn for months in Grinnell—just 2 blocks from the police station. And in Marengo Dickerson's barn was just across the street from the county sheriff's house!

The 70-year-old Civil War veteran admitted that his conscience had begun to bother him. He said he had been a dispatch bearer in the war and the chase at Malcolm through the cornfield with the posse "reminded me of my services for the government during the Civil War." Was he ashamed of what he had become, or was the comment a ploy to get a little leniency from his captors? If so, it didn't work.

Dickerson was no novice to criminal activity. He had used several aliases in his career and had served time in penitentiaries in four states. Justice was swift. In October Thomas Dickerson was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison. He would serve his time at Fort Madison.

Authorities said the notorious horse thief didn't appear especially distraught about his future. They reported that he was "cheerful and optimistic" as he moved into his new home.

Sources

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