

# IOWA HISTORY



(Photo Library of Congress)

Fort Madison, Iowa, 1907

## Man Wants *in* Penitentiary

“I am here to be locked up,” E.P. Hassenius proclaimed as he walked into the warden’s office at the Iowa State Penitentiary at Fort Madison in October 1914.

The warden was taken aback by his visitor. He certainly had heard of the man standing in front of him, but he was not prepared to welcome him into the prison just yet.

Hassenius had been convicted of manslaughter in the 1912 death of his wife in Cherokee. According to Hassenius, he was at work in the barn when he heard a scream and went to the house to check on his wife. She was lying on a concrete sidewalk having fallen from a second story porch. She was still breathing when he carried her into the house and cleaned the blood from her face. She died soon after.

When a cream hauler named Harvey Geive stopped at the farm later that morning Hassenius asked him to call a neighbor for help. In the meantime, Geive entered the Hassenius house and saw a disturbing scene. It looked as though a struggle had occurred. The stove door was broken, and there was blood in several areas of the house.

The coroner’s investigation returned a verdict: “Death by accident, slipping and falling from a porch.” But on the day of Mrs. Hassenius’ funeral her husband was indicted for the death of his wife. A trial took place; and Hassenius was convicted of manslaughter, sentenced to eight years in the penitentiary, and fined \$800.

After a failed attempt at an appeal, Hassenius had resigned himself to the fact that he would be doing time in the state pen. So in October 1914 when he presented himself at the warden’s

office, he was prepared to spend a few years there. However, he had not yet received his papers requesting his commitment to the penitentiary.

“I expected a letter in the mail, but it hasn’t come. How are we going to manage it?” Hessianus asked the warden.

“I am unable to accommodate you without a paper,” the warden replied. “Where are you staying?”

Hessianus explained he was staying at a local hotel and would return to the prison as soon as he had received his commitment papers. But as long as he was there....he wondered if he could “get a glimpse of the place.”

The warden agreed to let Hessianus take a tour of his soon-to-be new home. In fact, the warden gave him a personal tour. After the walk-through, the two men returned to the gate. As Hessianus stepped outside the prison, he and the warden shook hands. He promised as soon as he had his papers, he would return.

The warden had this to say about his unusual day, “Can you beat it?”

#### Sources

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