

# IOWA HISTORY



(Courtesy Library of Congress)

## Snake Charmer Charms Man

Ruth McCollough was paid to work her charms on snakes in a traveling carnival show. It's not known how successful she was at her job. But there's no doubt she worked her charms on Charles McCormick who came under her spell in the summer of 1914.

The two met when Ruth performed in a show near Charles' hometown of Lancaster, Missouri, where his dad operated a small fruit farm. Although Ruth was married, Charles fell head over heels in love and joined the carnival so he could be with Ruth. Together they traveled through Iowa during that summer. But money was tight for the two. Carnival work didn't pay well.

By October the pair was with the carnival in Hedrick, Iowa. They met a young man named I.W. Mellott. By some accounts he was a "wealthy farmer." At least he was known to carry large sums of money when he went to town. Charles and Ruth struck up a friendship with I.W. They learned he was interested in a local girl but hadn't gotten the nerve to go out with her.

Charles and Ruth invited I.W. to take an automobile ride into the country with them. They indicated that they would include the girl who I.W. pined for, but that never occurred.

The next day I.W.'s body was found in the abandoned car on a country road. He had been shot and killed by someone. Charles and Ruth didn't show up for work with the carnival show that night. There was little doubt in Hedrick as to who had killed I.W.

It didn't take long for law enforcement officers to hunt down the pair of suspects. They were found just as they were about to be evicted from a rooming house in Chicago for "nonpayment of rent." They had been traced through a letter Charles sent to a friend. Charles had not been able to find work, and Ruth was set to start a waitressing job on the very day they were arrested. The two were penniless; they had only gotten \$23 from I.W. Mellott.

When they were arrested both gave written statements. Charles admitted to murdering I.W. He said he and Ruth had jumped a freight train after shooting I.W. They rode it to Monmouth, Illinois, where they boarded a passenger train to Chicago.

"My sole object in killing Mr. Mellott was to get money as I had no money, no job, and very few clothes for myself or Mrs. McCollough. I thought Mr. Mellott had about \$100 on his person," Charles said in his confession. He said in addition to the money he took I.W.'s watch which he sold for \$5. He admitted he'd used four bullets to kill the farmer.

Ruth claimed she knew nothing about her lover's plans to kill I.W. She admitted being with him when he committed the crime, but said she had no part in the planning and shooting. Charles agreed that he acted alone in his crime. He said he had been "inspired by the charms of Mrs. McCollough."

Charles was tried and convicted. He was sentenced to eight years in Anamosa prison. Ruth McCollough was not charged. It's unclear if she returned to her position as a snake charmer.

#### Sources

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