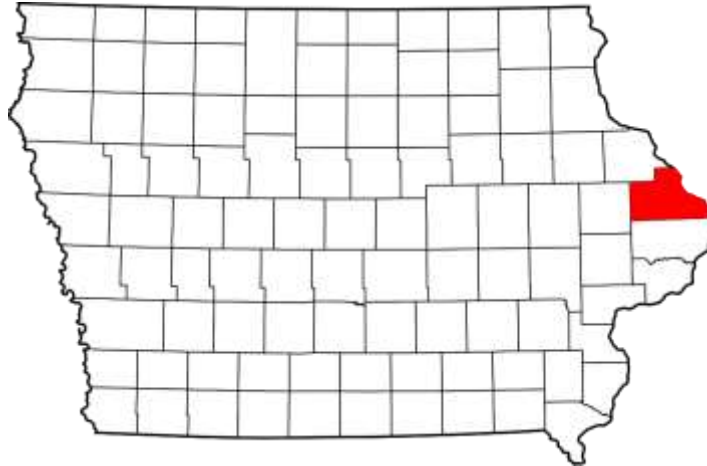


IOWA HISTORY



Jackson County is in the eastern part of the state

Thief Takes \$20,000 from Jackson County

It was called “a robbery as mysterious as any that has happened anywhere.”

Every morning at 5 a.m. a young boy entered the two-story stone Jackson County Courthouse in Andrew to sweep the floors and do a little cleaning. The courthouse was on the upper floor, and county offices filled the first floor. On a Monday morning in late October 1873, the boy entered the front door as usual. But something was unusual. The door of the county treasurer’s office was open. As he lifted his lantern up to look into the office, the boy discovered the safe door was wide open. He ran to the front entrance and yelled for help. A lawyer named Seth Baker was in the building preparing for a trip into nearby Maquoketa and came to the boy’s aid.

Soon other citizens of the tiny village appeared at the courthouse to see what all the commotion was about. Papers were scattered on the floor. A few books remained in the safe. But the cash box was empty. A brass plate engraved with the name of the safe manufacturer was on the counter. Someone had unscrewed it from the safe door. It had to be someone who knew the combination was written on the back of the plate.

The county treasurer, James A. Bryan, was sent for. He appeared to be “in an agony of nervousness and anxiety.” He confirmed that 15 to \$20,000 was missing from the safe. Because there was no bank in Andrew, he was in the habit of letting county funds accumulate in the safe until he took them to a nearby bank for safekeeping Bryan explained.

There was a twist to the story. Only the week before voters in the county had voted to move the county seat to Maquoketa, 10 miles away, and a town on a railroad, a key factor in the vote. The robbery in Andrew was the talk of the town in Maquoketa. A newspaper reported that there were “a thousand surmises and many suspicions uttered” in reference to the incident.

Plenty of jokes were tossed about as people gathered in hotels, stores and other local businesses to discuss the activities up in Andrew.

The county board of supervisors met all week to examine the treasurer's records and to consider the situation. They were beginning to think there was no robbery, rather a shortage of funds. Yet, they knew James Bryan to be a man of "irreproachable character." It was indeed a mystery.

In time the mystery was cleared up. There *was* a deficit of \$51,000. James Bryan was convicted of embezzling. He was sentenced to three years in prison and fined \$41,000. For some reason, the fine was forgiven and the prison term was shortened by executive clemency.

The mystery was solved, but some may have believed justice was not done.

Sources

"A \$20,000 Steal," *Davenport Daily Gazette*, Oct 21, 1873.

"The Jackson County Robbery," *Davenport Daily Gazette*, Oct 26, 1873.

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