

IOWA HISTORY

Bloodthirsty Adventuress or Modest Woman?

What was the truth about Gunda Martindale? Was she a “blood-thirsty adventuress” or a “modest, unassuming” woman?

Late in December 1921 in the basement of a one-room schoolhouse in Allamakee County a 23-year-old teacher was found dead. She was Inga Magnuson. She had died from a force to the head. The murder weapon was found near her body. Police said she died from a blow inflicted by someone who had used a log to crush her skull. It was a gruesome scene.

The story of the young teacher’s murder dazed residents of Waukon and the surrounding communities in northeast Iowa. She had been a beloved teacher. Adults and Inga’s students grieved for her.

A woman named Gunda Martindale was sheriff of Allamakee County at the time. She had been appointed to fill her husband’s term in office when he died. (It was a common practice in those days because sheriffs did not have pensions that transferred to survivors. Giving the job to the spouse helped ease financial burdens on the family of the dead officer.)

When a local “misfit” named Earl Throst was named the prime suspect in Inga Magnuson’s murder, it became the responsibility of the county sheriff to arrest him. But first he had to be found. It was up to Gunda to make sure that happened.

Bloodhounds were brought in from Waterloo to help with the search. Eventually Earl was apprehended in neighboring Postville where he was found—about to board a train.

Earl Throst admitted to killing Inga. He was considered a misfit by most everyone who knew him. Even his parents said he was a very troubled individual. Earl told authorities he and Inga were engaged, but that was not true. In fact, she was engaged to another man. Earl had wanted a relationship with Inga, but she had spurned him. He took out his disappointment on the object of his affections.

Newspapers all over the country ran stories about the events in Iowa. But the stories centered on the woman sheriff and her role in the apprehension, conviction, and punishment of the murderer.

The reports claimed that Gunda had rounded up a posse of deputies, unleashed the bloodhounds, and set out over the countryside to find the murderer. At one point she was said to have saved Earl from a lynch mob of angry farmers. And everywhere news reports surfaced about Gunda’s role in carrying out Earl’s punishment after his trial and sentencing—execution by hanging.

From the *New Ulm (Minnesota) Review*: “Mrs. Gunda Martindale says she will not flinch when she springs the trap under a murderer condemned to be hanged in Waukon.”

And this from an Oregon paper that ran a photo of Gunda along with this caption: “This Woman Will Hang a Man. She once saved him from lynching, now she must kill him.” From the *Seattle Star*: “Yours is not an enviable job.” And another described Gunda as a ““blood-thirsty adventuress.” With all the sensationalism surrounding the events, it was difficult for people to know what to believe.

Finally on March 2, 1922, the *Bismarck* (North Dakota) *Tribune* ran a headline: “Woman Sheriff is Getting Too Much Notoriety.” The accompanying story asked the question, “Is Gunda Martindale “a modest, unassuming women” or a “blood-thirsty adventuress?”

In order to get to the bottom of the story, they interviewed Gunda; and she had plenty to say. Gunda said she had not taken an active part in the capture of the criminal as so many papers had reported. She said it was the job of the deputies to carry out those duties. She denied stories that she had followed the bloodhounds “day and night” on the trail of Earl Throst. And she said she was not going to “spring the trap” at his execution.

Earl Throst was sent to the penitentiary at Fort Madison. On March 9, 1923, he was executed. Sheriff Gunda Martindale did *not* carry out the deed.

Gunda’s term of office as sheriff ended on January 1, 1923. She said she wouldn’t run for election to the post because, “the job of sheriff belongs to a man.”

[Calmar author Elaine Hegg has written about the murder in her book *Death in a One-Room Country School*.]

Sources

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