

IOWA HISTORY

Vigilance Committee Captures Gang Family

In the fall of 1867 residents of Warren County were in an uproar over a series of burglaries that had occurred in Carlisle and Hartford. Everyone suspected a local family with the last name of Lee who lived near Carlisle. It's all the Vigilance Committee needed to take action. The burglaries had taken place on Friday and Monday nights and by Tuesday the committee, comprised of 80 farmers, was headed to the Lee homestead to make their arrests.

The committee surprised the family just before dark, arresting three brothers—William, Willis, and James, two sisters, a niece, and an “old gentleman.” Upon searching the Lee premises the Vigilance Committee found all the articles that had been reported stolen. Most were in the upper story of the family home; the remainder were stashed in the milk house. They also found cash that the family had stolen.

In addition to the stolen merchandise the committee members found all sorts of tools of the burglary trade—pistols, knives, keys, files, and saws. Most telling was the “burglars’ saw” that was found. It was described as “a keen-tempered” instrument that “will cut a bar of iron very readily and speedily.” All were proof to the Vigilance Committee that they had caught the culprits who had terrorized the county.

The family was new to the area so little was known about their past. The family members gave conflicting stories about where they had originated. Some said Iowa County was their home; while others said Hardin, Delaware, or Jasper counties. The three women were said to be “defiant” when it came to answering questions posed by the Vigilance Committee. The three brothers, described as “stalwart and burly fellows,” were more forthcoming. They “let their tongues tell their guilt without reserve.”

The Lee males were taken to Carlisle and placed in the school house where a guard secured them. During the night the prisoners were “gently persuaded” to confess to their crimes. They readily acknowledged their guilt and admitted to having been involved in a burglary in Newton in addition to the Warren County break-ins. The three Lee brothers all swore that the “old gentleman” who had been arrested with them had not been involved in the crime spree. He was turned loose and the younger Lee men were turned over to county law officers. The justice of peace at Carlisle sent them to jail in Indianola.

With the three Lee brothers securely tucked away in jail the citizens of Warren County thought they were safe. But within a few days the citizens of Carlisle heard that there were more members of the Lee gang continuing the crime spree and heading toward Carlisle. A vigilance committee of about 25 armed men guarded the entrances to town and soon a small band of outlaws approached the town. Immediately they were met with “25 or 30 guns leveled at them.” The committee demanded their surrender, and they complied without a fight.

Turned out the gang was made up of another Lee brother, an unrelated man named Peniker, and—the “old gentleman” who the authorities had turned loose earlier. This time he and his accomplices were taken into custody at Hartford where they remained in jail.

Source

“Crime in Iowa,” *New York Times*, Nov 5, 1867.

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