

# IOWA HISTORY



*Courtesy Library of Congress*  
Wells was sentenced to life in prison

## A Desperado's Greatest Sorrow

"Aside from the overt criminal acts described and a too liberal use of profanity, my life has been approximately pure and correct," Polk Wells said from his prison cell at Anamosa, Iowa. And he swore he never used liquor or tobacco.

However, during his lifetime the words "desperado," "bandit," and "wanted: dead or alive" were frequently seen in connection with Polk Wells. And according to an 1895 article in the *New York Times*, he was the "greatest of Iowa desperadoes."

Wells blamed his early life of crime on a mean stepmother. Running away from his Missouri home at the age of 12, he won a pot of money in a poker game, bought a "cowboy's outfit," and headed west. After spending several years roaming throughout the western territories, Wells returned to Missouri in 1872 and married Nora Wilson. He went into the grocery and liquor business, but wasn't successful as an entrepreneur. He left his wife and baby but promised to return.

When Wells returned to Nora two years later, she had married a man named Al Warnica. According to Wells, "Warnica was a hard-working young fellow, and I determined not to

interfere, for there had been no intentional wrongdoing. I gave him \$300 to buy a team, kissed Nora good-bye, mounted my horse, and rode away to the West.”

Wells quickly fell into a life of crime—committing highway robberies and robbing banks throughout several states. He killed a Mormon bishop in Utah in 1876. And in July 1881 he stole a couple of horses from a farmer near Sidney in southwest Iowa and rode to neighboring Riverton where he robbed the bank of \$4,600.

Fremont County Sheriff Dan Farrell put together a posse of local citizens, and they took off over the prairie in pursuit of Wells. The sheriff followed Wells all the way to Randolph, Wis., where a shoot-out occurred. Carrying at least three bullets in his body from Sheriff Farrell’s gun, Wells was taken back to Iowa. (Wells once claimed his body housed 27 bullets from various encounters over his career.)

Back in Iowa, Sheriff Farrell collected a \$1,000 reward; and Wells pleaded guilty to highway robbery and was sentenced to 10 years at Fort Madison Penitentiary. Only a month into his sentence, Wells escaped by overpowering a prison guard with chloroform; and the guard, John Elder, died.

While on the run, Wells hid out in a haystack in the barn of a family named Winterbottom. Word of the prisoner’s escape had traveled fast, and Mrs. Winterbottom convinced her husband to check out the barn. Taking his pitchfork along as a precaution, the farmer plunged the fork into the hay pile, striking Wells in the head, neck and breast. But the prisoner managed to wrestle the weapon from Winterbottom and took off across the countryside.

Wells hid out for several days but was recaptured and sentenced to life in prison for the murder of the guard. He passed time by studying, practicing Christianity and giving talks at the prison Sunday school. He became a skilled leather tooler. Officials said he was a model prisoner. He wrote a book about his life of crime and had received an offer from a publisher but was holding out for more money according to an interview he gave to the *New York Times* in 1895.

Polk Wells died of consumption at Anamosa prison in September 1896. Before he died, Wells said his greatest sorrow was hearing a mother threaten her kids, saying she would give them to Polk Wells if they didn’t behave. “I floundered in the lowest depths of shame and remorse at having my name used as a cudgel to coerce little children into submission and obedience,” Wells said.

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