

IOWA HISTORY



(Courtesy Library of Congress)

Tramp and Club-footed Horse Lead Sheriff to Hog Thieves

Al and Emmet Burton thought they had a thriving little business going—illegal but profitable. But a German tramp who couldn't speak English and a club-footed horse put them out of business and into the county jail.

In January 1911 farmers around Ottumwa were reporting thefts of hogs in the middle of the night from their hog pens. The thieves were very bold and followed a pattern at each farm they visited. The hogs were stabbed with a knife in the farmer's pen, rolled under the fence, and loaded into a buggy or wagon. It was presumed the hogs were taken to another location to be butchered and eventually sold to innocent pork lovers.

The T.P. Box farm near the ice house operated by W.W. Cummings was hit one night when one of their two pigs was taken. The Hagen farm southwest of the city was hit. Tom Van Winkle's pig pen was visited too—twice in one week. Although the Van Winkle family failed to hear the thieves, neighbor Jerome Cundiff said his rest was disturbed about 1 a.m. when he heard a great deal of "unusual squealing of hogs." He jumped out of bed, grabbed his shot gun, and fired at the two indistinct forms he saw in the Van Winkle pig sty. But the thieves escaped in their buggy (without the pig they had killed). G. Krumbolt saw the horse and buggy on Asbury Avenue headed toward the Blackhawk Bridge. He didn't feel up to the task of taking on the thieves single-handedly, so they got away.

Every one of the farmers reported a very distinct similarity at each of the crime scenes. The tracks left by the retreating thieves' horse were very "peculiar." Although the sheriff considered the strange hoof prints valuable clues, the unusual prints were lost when they reached the well-traveled roads—which were thick with other horses' hoof prints.

A break came in the mysterious case when a tramp came into town and visited the sheriff's office. He had a story to tell, but he spoke only German. A bilingual German-English speaking Ottumwa resident was brought in to interpret. His story turned out to be very interesting to the authorities.

The tramp said he had helped two men butcher a hog at a country schoolhouse where he had taken up lodging for the night. In exchange they gave him a couple of shots of whiskey. Sheriff John Morrissey held the tramp in the jail until he could check out the story.

Sheriff Morrissey and Constable Warren Criswell headed out to the Bear Creek schoolhouse where they found the school and the coal shed had indeed been broken into. There was a bit of a mess in the coal shed—possibly blood from a butchering.

The two had also learned that Al and Emmet Burton, two employees of the Cummings Ice House, had sold a portion of a freshly butchered hog to Fred Bargeman. It was time for a visit to the Burton house. At the Burton's the sheriff and constable found a large supply of fresh pork and lard. In the outhouse they discovered pig entrails. And they found blood stains on the buggy floor. They believed things looked very suspicious.

The Burton's had an explanation. They had rented the buggy out to some people for the weekend. Maybe they were responsible for the unusual situation.

Maybe... but when the sheriff and constable spotted the horse in the Burton's barn, they knew they had their hog thieves. The horse had a club foot and was blind. That would explain the peculiar hoof prints at the crime scenes—odd shaped and veering off in crooked directions. Mystery solved!

The Burtons were headed to the county jail.

Source

"Fourth Attempt at Hog Stealing," *Ottumwa Tri-weekly Courier*, Jan 26, 1911.

"The Mystery of the Club-foot Horse," *Ottumwa Tri-weekly Courier*, Jan 17, 1911.

"Southern Iowa Items," *Times-Republican*, Jan 21, 1911.

"Two Arrested for Hog Theft," *Ottumwa Tri-weekly Courier*, Jan 21, 1911.

©Cheryl Mullenbach