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History Happened Here: Christmas murder in Greenport

By Andrew Amelinckx

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GREENPORT — Willis Van Wormer calmly read through the letter just handed to him by Warden George Deyo. The message sent by former judge J. Ryder Cady, who had represented Willis and his two brothers — Burton and Frederick — at trial, reported that all attempts at a stay of execution had failed. It would be the chair for the Van Wormer boys.

The night of Christmas eve 1901 was cool, but not exceptionally cold. There was still snow on the ground from a recent storm.

Peter Hallenbeck sat reading while his wife, Margaret, sewed nearby in their farm house in Greenport. Peter's mother Almina was also home that night while Peter and Margaret's son and his family attended church down the road.

Margaret, looking up from her handiwork, saw a wagon with two men walking behind pass by the window heading towards the church.

"They must be chicken thieves," said Peter, watching them pass out of view. A few moments later there was a knock at the door and Peter got up to see who was there.

That's when the shooting started.

Four men, two wearing devil masks, the others false whiskers, their coats turned inside out, rushed into the room. The sharp report of pistols rang out mixed with the screams of the two women. Margaret rushed to her husband's side, but Peter yelled at his wife and mother to run to the attic. As Margaret fled a shot was fired over her head.

As the men continued to fire, Peter stumbled toward the stairs where his shotgun hung.

"For God's sake get out of here. He is after his shotgun," yelled one of the men, as they turned to flee.

Neighbors who heard the commission ran over and soon the alarm was given that Peter Hallenbeck had been murdered.

By the next evening, Christmas Day, four men — the Van Wormer brothers and their cousin Harvey Bruce — had been rounded up by Sheriff Harry J. Best and his deputies and thrown in the Hudson jail, charged with murder.

Dec. 29 saw the start of an inquest in the case by County Coroner Edward Lisk and by this time the story had become a national sensation, with extensive coverage by the New York Times and the Associated Press, along with local media, including the Hudson Republican newspaper.

Judge D. Cady Herrick came down from Albany to preside over the grand jury proceedings on Jan.18, 1902.

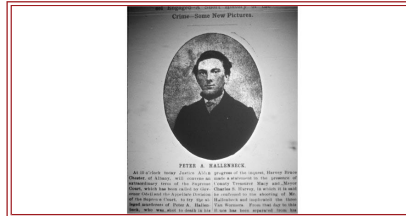


Photo of Peter Hallenbeck. (Photo from 1902 edition of the Hudson Republican)

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Cady, the former judge from Hudson, was named as counsel to Willis and Burton Van Wormer, and to act as general counsel in the case. Alonzo H. Farrar was assigned as counsel for Fred Van Wormer and George M. Daly was appointed as counsel for Harvey Bruce.

According to the Hudson Republican, at the reading of the grand jury indictment for first-degree murder, the accused "appeared indifferent."

They were arraigned and pleaded not guilty.

District Attorney Alfred B. Chace asked New York state Gov. Benjamin B. Odell Jr., to call an Extraordinary Session of the Supreme Court to try the case. The governor agreed.

It wasn't long before Bruce turned state's evidence, admitting to the killing and laying the blame with his cousins.

According to Bruce, who was 21 at the time, his cousins Fred, 26, Burton, 23, and 20-year-old Willis had made plans for that night, buying masks, renting a horse, and in Burton's case borrowing a gun from a friend. He went on to say that on the way to Hallenbeck's they had stopped by the Greenport Church to make sure that their cousin Charles wouldn't be home when they went to the farmhouse.

Once there Bruce told of how the three brothers immediately began shooting when their uncle opened the door. Bruce said he had only shot into the air.

Afterwards when he asked his cousins why they had shot Hallenbeck they told him to "shut up."

This, paired with the circumstantial evidence — shoes that matched the footprints in the snow around the house, testimony that masks had been bought prior to the murder by the Van Wormers in Kinderhook, wagon wheel tracks matching the get away vehicle and the unpersuasive testimony of the Van Wormer boys themselves — led to a guilty verdict in the case.

The testimony of the Van Wormer boys rang hollow with the jury.

Burton Van Wormer testified that they had gone there that night "to have a little fun" and never intended to hurt their uncle.

According to him, when Peter Hallenbeck opened the door he hit Burton in the face several times, a struggle ensued and the gun accidentally discharged.

The sheriff later testified that there were no bruises on Burton Van Wormer's face. There were also 11 bullets recovered from the victim's body.

The efforts taken by the defendants to hide their tracks didn't help their case either. They allegedly drove to Valatie so they could be seen, cleaned their guns and later burned the masks once they got home to Kinderhook.

According to several newspapers, there had been bad blood between the two families for some time before the incident.

While Peter Hallenbeck had prospered, his brother-in-law, John Van Wormer, barely scraped by as a river boatman. He was able to finally buy a small cottage not far from Hallenbeck, who held the mortgage.

After John Van Wormer's death, Hallenbeck allegedly foreclosed on the property. The remaining Van Wormers, including the three boys, were put out and moved to Kinderhook.

Their attorneys tried their best to persuade the jury it was an accidental shooting.

"They went to their uncle's house for fun," Farrar, special counsel for Frederick Van Wormer, told the jury. "They were probably foolish, but they never intended to injure his person."

He said that "the tables were unexpectedly turned on them" when Hallenbeck pummeled Burton and "a desperate struggle began." He called the resulting death "a tragedy that no one had anticipated."

During his summation the defendants openly wept, the first time they had shown any emotion, reported a Syracuse newspaper.

Cady followed on Farrar's heels, echoing his sentiment saying that in his 30-year career at the bar he had never seen such a tragic, heart-wrenching, soul-wracking case.

He argued that there couldn't have been any premeditation in the case based on his clients' actions.

Cady pointed out that they had rented a horse, traveled on public roads and had brought their cousin as a witness.

The jury was unmoved finding them all guilty of first-degree murder.

Judge Alden Chester, who presided over the trial, passed sentence a few minutes later.

"It is the saddest act of my judicial career to be compelled to sentence three young men, three brothers, under a verdict of murder in the first degree," he said from the bench, sentencing them to death by electrocution.

On Oct. 1, 1903 the brothers went to the electric chair at the Clinton State Prison in Dannemora. Willis was first, followed by Frederick and Burton. Their bodies were taken back to Kinderhook and interred in the Kinderhook Cemetery.

Strangely, the memory of the assassination of U.S. President William McKinley in 1901 seemed to float through the case. The judge who presided over the grand jury proceedings went to

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Albany Law School with McKinley; Bruce alleged that Burton Van Wormer had bragged that he had "gotten a Czolgosz shot. I shot (Hallenbeck) in the stomach," referring to McKinley's assassin Leon Frank Czolgosz who shot McKinley in the stomach during the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo; and the doctor who performed the autopsy on the mens' remains after they were executed had also performed the autopsy on McKinley's killer.

Bruce was later found guilty of manslaughter and received an 18-year sentence in prison.

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