

The Souvenir Hanging Tree

Vernon County

Andrew Grandstaff, who murdered four people, two of them children, was hanged from a tree on the Vernon County Courthouse lawn before he could be brought to trial. It happened on the night of Viroqua High School's graduation—June 28, 1888.

Afterwards the tree, virtually destroyed by souvenir hunters, had to be taken down. A portion of it, as well as the victim's clothing, is still on display at the Vernon County Historical Society in Viroqua.

A lifelong Kickapooogan, Grandstaff had worked for numerous people in the area, including Mr. and Mrs. Reuben Drake. When he heard that the Drakes had come into some money, he broke into their home and killed them and their two grandchildren. Discovered, he ran away on foot but was caught near Liberty, between Viola and Viroqua. Apparently he hadn't found any money, but he claimed to have an accomplice—who never turned up.

So incensed was the community by the crime that a mob broke into the jail and seized Grandstaff. People hearing about the affair came quickly from all over the area to witness the summary execution. The ringleaders of the lynching asked Grandstaff if he had a last request. He replied, "A chaw of terbaccer." Reportedly it was granted before they strung him up.

The Drakes and their grandchildren lie in the Sugar Grove Cemetery on Highway 14 between Readstown and Bosstown. As for the murderer, a very old-timer remembered that as a small boy, he stood on his front porch and watched as the wagon carrying Grandstaff's body in a wood coffin went by his house, en route to the paupers' section of the old County Home burial plot. There are, however, no official records of the interment.

Sources: Carol A. Oliver, Viola
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Mrs. Phil Tate, Viroqua
Rhoda White, Viroqua