



Buried in Birchwood Cemetery, Pine City, MN

Published in the Pine County Pioneer, November 29, 1889

BROOKER'S BUTCHERY

A bad man with a gun spends the Sabbath in bloody deeds. Mr. and Mrs. William P. Coombs murdered at their home in Chengwatana. Pure devilry is the only cause that can be ascribed. Story of the deed.

Horrifying as murder is at any time and under any circumstances, it is doubly so when father and mother are shot down in their home and before the eyes of their family. Add to this the fact of the fatal shot being fired by a brother-in-law and imagination fails. Such diabolical plots have their origin only in hell. It is almost impossible to imagine a human being so given over to demonical possession, but we are sometimes forced to do so. Pine County was the scene of just such a dark deed last Sunday afternoon.

For the past year and a half Wm. P. Coombs, his wife and two children, a boy (Charlie) aged about thirteen and a girl of eight, have lived in the town of Chengwatana, where Mr. Coombs was opening up a farm. For some time past Mr. Coombs mother and brother have been living with them. Mrs. Coombs's sister, the wife of a man by the name of Brooker lived a short distance from them on another farm. These two families were the participants in the bloody tragedy we are called upon to narrate.

A number of years ago a man by the name of Henry Brooker, an Englishman, together with his wife and his brother lived in an isolated log house a few miles from this village. While the three were alone one day, Henry was shot. At the time it was thought to be accidental by some, while others have always expressed a belief that he was murdered by his brother. Others believed it to be suicide; nothing was done about it, and soon after the brother William married the widow and it seems to be this wedding that has caused the recent trouble. The household was not a happy one. The "green-eyed monster" made his appearance and the husband's suspicious and taunts have resulted in frequent quarrels. Last Saturday one of these parodied quarrels took place and the wife tiring of the abuse, went over to her sister's home and remained there over night. Sunday the husband went over, taking his gun with him. Upon his arrival he learned that Mr. Coombs had come

over to town and he came in the same direction. By going across Mr. Liebau's field Coombs shortened the distance to town materially. Knowing that this was the way he usually went home, the cowardly assassin laid in ambush for him, but Coombs took another route, and reaching home proceeded to catch a calf which he intended to kill. Hearing the noise at the house, Brooker returned and assisted Coombs in killing the calf. While the latter was engaged in dressing the calf Brooker went to the house, claiming to be thirsty.

He told Coombs that he was going to kill some rabbits. At the house he got a drink of water and as he was going out told his wife she would never see him again. She followed him out to the door and asked the meaning of his remarks. While they were engaged in a war of words, Brooker called her vile names, whereupon Mrs. Coombs interfered. Brooker told her she was no better. Mrs. Coombs threatened to have him arrested, whereupon he drew up his gun and as he discharged one barrel said "You will, will you? G----d---m you." The shot took effect in the neck and the wounded woman staggered and fell dead.

Hearing the noise, Coombs started for the house, followed by his son and brother, who had been assisting him. As they came near the house Brooker covered them with the gun. The three were in line and Coombs told the others to "scatter." They did so and Coombs took a circuitous route to avoid the shot, but as he was doing so Brooker shot him, the ball (two bullets were in the rifle barrel) striking him in the right side and passing entirely through, carrying with them a part of the diaphragm and a piece of one lung. Coombs fell near the prostrate body of his wife, but afterward staggered to the house falling inside and soon expired. Charlie Coombs, the thirteen year old boy, seeing his father and mother shot down by his uncle, got his father's gun for the purpose of avenging their death, but Mrs. Brooker caught hold of him. Charlie struck her and was about to shoot when his uncle caught him by the throat; a scuffle ensued in which Carley was successful, but before he got an opportunity to carry out his designs, Brooker had commenced reloading his gun, but hearing the report of a gun in the vicinity he started away, going to Christian Heisler's who lives about a mile from there. Here he told Mr. Heisler that he had killed two deer. Charlie Leonard was here and he had a grudge against him, he tried to get him to one side of the room, but for some reason he did not go. He then told that he had killed "Bill and Lill." Mr. Heisler did not believe it but Brooker told him to go and see. He was kept at Mr. Heisler's and an alarm was given. Brooker made an excuse to get out and Mr. Heisler followed him, but getting an advantage he took to the woods. From Heisler's he went to his own home and telling one of the children to watch and let him know if any one came, he commenced sharpening a knife. Sheriff McLaughlin, Deputy Sheriff Rath and M. H. Nason followed to his home, but the child reporting their approach, he fled to the woods. Thinking that he would be apt to come back they took the children and his dog and went away, waiting his return. They had but a short time to wait. Soon nature's curtain of darkness fell over the bloody scenes of the day and the blood thirsty demon returned to his liar like the best whose nature he imitated, but who would feel outraged could be comprehend this comparison. He lighted a lamp and thus attracted the attention of the officers who quietly went to the house. What a scene presented itself as they looked through the window. Standing in the

room, with hat and coat removed and his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows, stood the red handed villain, deliberately sharpening a butcher knife, a fitting occupation for the close of the day.

Thinking the doors were locked, Manly Nason took a few steps, and throwing himself against the door, it was broken down and the officers of the law stood face to face with the murderer. So complete was his surprise that for the moment his presence of mind left him, and he stood speechless. Recovering himself, he tore open his shirt and placed the point of the knife at his breast, he pretended that he intended suicide, but was finally induced to lay aside the knife. He was manacled and brought to this village and placed in Deputy Sheriff Rath's house for safe keeping. It was not deemed safe to keep him in the jail for fear of a mob meting out the justice of Judge Lynch, which he so richly deserved. Here he was kept until Monday when he was arraigned before Justice Veenhove, but he waived examination and was remanded to await the action of the grand jury which convenes next Tuesday. Had he been kept in the village, no jury would have been necessary, but the Sheriff prepared for such an emergency by struggling him over to the depot and there putting him on the limited, which stopped for the purpose and took him to Stillwater.

At the scene of the horror a most heart rending scene was presented. After having killed his victims he snapped his gun at Mr. Coombs aged mother who ran, never stopping until she fell in a dead faint in the road. There with their dead father and mother and their weeping aunt were the two children of the deceased. The neighbors soon arrived, but as life was excind, there was nothing to be done but sit and wait for the Coroner and keep the hogs from eating the dead bodies, but their waiting was in vain. Although notified, the deputy who fills the office refused to go, and at about ten o'clock, without the form of an inquest, the bodies were taken care of and prepared for burial. At about 11 o'clock Monday the corner summoned a jury consisting of John F. Stone, foreman, R. G. Robinson, Geo. Payne, Frank Bruckett, Frank Madden and J. J. Murray, who after listening to the facts related substantially as above returned the following verdict.

“That William P. Coombs and Lillian E. Coombs came to their death by reason of gunshot wounds feloniously inflicted with a gun in the hands of William Brooker.”

On Tuesday, the funeral was held under the auspices of B. F. Davis, Post G. A. R. of which Mr. Coombs was a member, and husband and wife now sleep in one grave.

It is useless for us to add any remarks.

Two citizens of our county have been taken off by a villain and if the gallow is cheated of its lawful prey, (horrible as capital punishment is) it will be a fact to be regretted, and a lasting disgrace to the country.

Published in the Pine County Pioneer May 16, 1890 (taken from St. Paul Globe)

BROOKER MUST SWING

The murders were brutal and the Governor will not interfere.

William Brooker, the Pine County murderer, must hang. Gov. Merriam decided yesterday that the counsel of the condemned man had presented no satisfactory reasons for a commutation of the sentence to one of imprisonment for life, and accordingly fixed upon Friday, June 27, as the date for the execution. It will take place before sunrise on that day at some place in Pine County, to be selected by the sheriff of the county. The indefinite location given as the place of the execution arises from the fact that Pine County does not possess a jail, Brooker now being in durance vile at Stillwater.

The crime which Brooker will expiate was a brutal one, and was nothing less that the murder of William Coombs and his wife, Lillian Coombs, on the 24th of December last year. Some years ago Brooker married a sister of William Coombs, but never was able to get along with his wife's family. The murder, or rather murders, occurred at the home of William Coombs, the wife being shot by Brooker on the outside of this house, after a wordy passage at arms between her and Brooker. The shot brought Coombs out of the house, where he was dispatched by the man who a moment before had killed Mrs. Coombs. The case was tried in Pine City in January last, Attorney General Clapp and County Attorney McKusick conducting the prosecution, while Attorney Deat, of Rush City, defended Brooker. The jury rendered a verdict of guilty and Judge Crosby sentenced him to hang. Since then the attorney for the defendant has exhausted every device known to the law, only last week making a last appeal for a commutation of the sentence to one of life imprisonment. This the governor has refused to do, and as provided by law, has at last set the day for the last act in the string of tragedies. (St. Paul Globe)

(* The murder took place in November not December as stated in the above article)

Published in the Pine County Pioneer May 16, 1890

One peaceful Sunday afternoon last November, while the people of Pine City were enjoying a rest from the toil and turmoil of the week, a mounted messenger dashed up the streets of our village and uttered the dreadful sentence---“William Brooker has shot and killed Bill Coombs and his wife.” Instantly, anxious throngs gathered around the horseman to hear the details of the most brutal and unprovoked murder that has ever occurred in this part of the state. After learning of the deed, a large number went over to the home of the murdered people about a mile and a half from here, where they found the two dead bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Coombs. The cold lead from the double-barreled gun in the hands of an ignorant and jealous minded assassin had sent the souls of two innocent and neighborly citizens to meet their maker. The story, printed in detail in the Pioneer last fall, of the chase and capture of the murder, is still fresh in the minds of our people. Thanks to the law abiding spirit which has always been shown here in times when angry passions were sorely tried, William Brooker was saved from an uncertimonious and unlawful death. Public indignation was at fever heat; groups of men, whose stern cast of countenance denoted trouble should the murdered be within their reach, could be seen standing on the street corners discussing in undertones the butcher which that afternoon had been enacted almost in their very midst.

At 11 o'clock that evening a wagon was quietly driven into town, and to those who had not yet retired, was related the story of the hunt and final capture of the man who had been the cause of all this indignation. The next morning, Brooker was arraigned before the court and pleaded “Not Guilty” to the charge of murder in the first degree. He was then given into the hands of the sheriff who had him taken to Stillwater to await trial.

Published in the Pine County Pioneer, June 27, 1890

PAID THE PENALTY

William Brooker pays the penalty of death for the murder of Mr. and Mrs. William P. Coombs last November.

The condemned man meets his fate with a nerve of steel. Not a murmur escapes his lips, nor does he offer any excuse for the crime.

William Brooker is no more.

The penalty is paid. The law has been fulfilled, and the third life is ended as the result of a mans insane jealousy.

The closing chapter in the awful drama, which commenced with the killing of William P. and Lillian Coombs last November, has been enacted in our midst during the past week. During the time the condemned man was incarcerated in the Washington County jail interest in the affair was not very intense in this village, but it was revived again by the erection of they enclosure and scaffold last week.

On Tuesday of this week the condemned man was brought from the Washington county jail on the "limited" and taken to Hinckley, from which place he was brought on a freight train. As the train pulled up to the station, quite a large party who knew of his coming were at the depot to watch his movements. He was immediately taken to the village jail which had been prepared for his reception. As he started for the jail no signs of emotion were perceptible. He walked with a firm step and manifested the same stoical indifference that has characterized his actions since the day on which he committed the crime for which he now pays the death penalty. As he entered the yard adjoining the jail he cast a glance up the stairway leading to the gallows, but without showing any signs of emotion. The death watch was immediately set. Manly Nason taking charge during the day, and Deputy Sheriff Rath and John Hotin keeping watch at night. There have been no events of importance characterizing his imprisonment here. He has spent most of the time in playing cards with the death watch or chatting as gaily as though he was not rapidly approaching his end. Many of the former friends of the doomed man visited the

jail, taking a look at him through the bars. With many he conversed in a light and flippant manner, always saying when asked how he felt that he never felt better and would meet his fate like a man. His appetite has been excellent and he has been furnished with everything that he could wish.

His last night on earth was spent as other nights are. He retired at the usual hour and slept well, arising at the usual hour Thursday morning and partaking of a hearty breakfast, after which he spent the forenoon chatting with friends who gathered at the window of the jail, and playing cards with the death watch. He expressed no anxiety, and when asked if he had anything to say, said, "No, I only hope that my neck will be broken. I want a good job done, and hope that everything will go off all right." The universal opinion is that he is either an insane man or that he has become so hardened by the scenes through which he has passed that he has lost all feelings of humanity. A hearty dinner was partaken of at noon, after which he spent a pleasant and apparently enjoyable afternoon. He was the most unconcerned man around the jail in the afternoon. The deep solemnity of the coming event was stamped on the face of the death watch, the sheriff and his deputies, and everyone who visited this scene came away with a solemn look, while inside the jail the prisoner laughed and chatted as pleasantly as though he was about to attend a wedding.

All day a crowd of citizens were standing around the jail looking at the gloomy walls which have been temporarily raised around the gallows. As the afternoon wore on the excitement of the throng seemed to increase. A bevy of reporters for the city dailies arrived during the day, as did also Dr. W. H. Caine, of Stillwater, who treated him during his sickness while confined in the Washington county jail, and Attorney L. D. Dent, of Rush City, his attorney, who had just returned from St. Paul where he had spent a few hours with Governor Merriam trying to obtain a respite of ten days. They called on the prisoner in his cell and had a conference with him, during which he made no demonstration. He was also visited by his wife and children at about half past four. His conference with them is said to have been quite reserved, and devoid of that deep feeling which one would naturally expect on such an occasion. The final parting came at about five o'clock when kissing his family he bade them a farewell.

Considerable interest was taken in his spiritual welfare by Mrs. Holcomb, of Stillwater, while he was there, but he expressed no desire to see a minister, nor has he since coming to Pine City, but on Thursday afternoon Rev. George S. Parker of the Methodist church went to the jail and engaged him in conversation relative to his spiritual welfare. The Prisoner listened attentively to what the reverend gentleman had to say, and finally asked him to return and be with him at the time of the execution. He also asked that Col. J. F. Stone and his attorney (L. D. Dent) be with him.

Late in the afternoon, the prisoner took a bath and arrayed himself in a new suit of navy blue clothes provided for him by the sheriff. When he returned to the corridor of the jail he remarked to the death watch that he was "dressed for the occasion" and asked how he looked in his new clothes.

Just before supper he was asked by the death watch what he wished for his supper, and he replied that he would like some wild rice, which was procured, and a large bowl was furnished and was eaten with a relish, together with some fish, potatoes and other viands furnished by the deputy sheriff. During the time he was eating, Dr. W. H. Caine sat talking to him and to the doctor he made a statement of his case which is herewith reproduced in full and is as follows:

I wish to state to the world that I die as the result of protecting the sanctity of my own home; that my wife was enticed away by this man Coombs and his wife, and that my wife would go to their house and stay for a week at a time, leaving no one to provide for my sick children; that while she was there it was the common practice of the Coombs family to have liquor and invite half breeds there and they would have drunken carousals to the neglect of her duty as a wife and mother.

I also want to say that my wife would go there to the Combs house, leaving my children with no food to eat, and that I would have to prepare whatever food they had, and that I frequently would hear them cry with hunger and find them naked with the flies torturing them until it made my heart ache to see the neglect they had to suffer all on account of this Coombs family coaxing and dragging her away. My sufferings have been of a character to dethrone my reason. I found the happiness of my home destroyed and the Coombs family even threatening to take my life should I interfere. I felt at the time this shooting occurred that my life was in danger; that if I had gone into their house I would have been killed. I want to go onto the scaffold and die as a man, having no ill feeling towards anyone, but hoping that those that have persecuted me will some day realize what mental torture I have suffered in my home being destroyed and my children neglected during sickness and want.

I desire to thank my attorney, Mr. Dent, for his effort to save my life, and all the sacrifice he has made and the expense he has gone to and hope that in future he may be rewarded. I also desire to thank Sheriff Holcombe and Deputy Sheriff Marty, of Stillwater for their kindness to me while in the Washington county jail. I want to express my gratitude to Dr. Caine, of Stillwater, who attended me while sick at the jail in Stillwater, for his professional care and kindness to me during the many lonely days and nights I was there suffering.

Realizing that I am about to take a plunge into an unknown world in a few moments, I desire to thank Sheriff McLaughlin and Deputy Sheriff Rath for their kindness and attention to me at all times.

I will now say good bye to this world of care and trouble, with the hope that I may have my case tried by the public who will give me a fair hearing after all that is mortal is laid away.

After supper the doctor told him he would like to get his picture on the gallows, to which he readily consented and with a firm step walked up the steps leading to the fatal spot and took his position near one of the upright beams while the doctor took his picture. Upon

being asked if it did not make him feel uneasy to look at the gallows he replied "No! If you will raise the drop I will dance a jig on it." He then made a critical examination of each part of the engine of death and tried the lever that would work the drop. When the latches which support the drop were out he threw back the lever, saying as he did so "get back there, where you belong." He was then returned to the jail and shortly after seven o'clock the death warrant was read by Sheriff McLaughlin, the prisoner sitting calmly smoking a cigar the while. During the reading, no sign of emotion was perceptible.

The shades of night closed over the city and shut out forever from the eyes of the condemned man, the light of day, but no murmur escaped his lips. The night-watch resumed their lonesome position within, while without a crowd of anxious spectators sat idly on the grass waiting for the fatal hour and watching to see if there was anything to be seen. At about 10:30 the prisoner laid down on the bed and soon fell into a quiet sleep, his snoring being plainly heard throughout the jail. Shortly after 12 o'clock he awoke and partook of a hearty breakfast. He was in good spirits, his voice being plainly heard outside of the jail as he laughed and talked with those within.

While the final examination of the gallows was being made he dictated the following, which is his last request.

"It is my last request that Henry Rath shall see that my children attend school and receive an education as good as the common schools of this place afford. It is my desire that they be kept together as long as possible with the hope that they will grow up to be good men and women" William Brooker. Witness: W. H. Caine.

Shortly after three o'clock a commotion inside the jail denoted that the end was approaching. At 25 minutes past three the forms of the sheriff and his deputies, the condemned man and the others composing the procession marched to the scaffold. In just five minutes later the dull thud of the drop told the spectators outside that William Brooker was in the throes of death. It was half an hour before life was pronounced extinct and the body was taken down and prepared for burial. The physicians found that the neck had not been broken and that death resulted from strangulation.

The funeral will be held this Friday afternoon at two o'clock, Rev. Parker officiating.

Sheriff McLaughlin has proved himself a man of iron nerve, and throughout has been firm and strict in the performance of his duty, still his generous nature has been apparent and he has won the commendation of all who have been in any way connected with the unpleasant affair.

Of William Brooker's past life but little is known. He was an unlettered man and by his actions during his trial, imprisonment and execution, has shown that he either was not in his right mind or was so low an order of humanity that even death had no terrors for him. He was of English parentage and lived during the early part of his life near Oskosh, Wisconsin. During the war he served in the 3rd Wisconsin Calvary.

