

Henry “Teddy” Frank (1840/1841-1881)

Henry “Teddy” Frank was born in Pennsylvania sometime in 1840 or 1841 and remained there until the outbreak of the Civil War. He served in Company A of the Pennsylvania Volunteer Reserve Corps, where he fought in the battles of Manassas, Fredericksburg, and Second Bull Run. Despite all of his combat experience, he was never seriously injured. He served with this unit until 1864. During this time Frank married his first wife and had a daughter with her. His wife died around 1865.

At the end of the war he moved to Bloomington with his family. He was the eldest of seven children all of whom survived except for one brother who was killed during the Civil War. Frank remarried after he moved to Bloomington but no children were born to this union. Upon his arrival in Bloomington, he got a job as a “turnkey,” or jailer, at the McLean County Jail located at 420 North Center Street.

October 1, 1881 seemed like another regular day for Frank. Around 6:30 p.m., he arrived at work to get the 22 prisoners ready for dinner. By 1881 Bloomington was no longer a tiny frontier town and had already seen the rise of great professionals like David Davis and Jesse Fell (among others). The town of almost 20,000 people had its share of criminals, especially murderers and horse thieves. As the town grew exponentially, the jail, which had originally been intended to hold only ten prisoners, was now filled to twice its capacity.

As the prisoners were preparing to eat their evening meal, a horse thief named Charles Pierce (a.k.a. Charles Howlett), claimed that he was ill and needed to get out of his cell. Because Pierce had been known to suffer from epileptic fits during his trial, Frank took him seriously and led him to the “debtor’s room,” which was normally reserved for female prisoners. When Pierce was still feeling ill, Frank returned him to his cell. As Frank bent over to undo the last lock at the bottom of the door, Pierce grabbed the revolver from Frank’s shallow pocket and shot him in the shoulder. Frank and Pierce struggled over the gun and in the end, Pierce then shot Frank two more times during the struggle. Sheriff Joseph Ator, who was eating in a nearby room, heard the gunshots and ran to the scene. Upon Ator’s arrival, Pierce immediately surrendered under the impression that Ator had a gun though in reality, he did not. Sheriff Ator then proceeded to lock up Pierce in his cell and moved Pierce’s cellmate to a different cell.

Teddy Frank died ten minutes later, in a pool of his own blood. Ironically, the day before the terrible incident occurred, as Frank was transferring Pierce from one room to another in the same way, Pierce had remarked “how easily he could take his revolver from him and kill him and make his escape.”¹ At this time, he was carrying his revolver in his hip pocket with no coat on. Frank had great faith in his prisoners and laughed off Pierce’s comment.

An hour later a mob of about 5,000 people, inflamed by news of the kindhearted jailor’s death, came to the jail and began beating at it with sledgehammers, crowbars, and possibly even a telephone pole. It is also suspected that they were angry with a recent state Supreme Court ruling which allowed Pierce’s cellmate, Patsy Devine, to receive a new trial for the murder of Aaron Goodfellow based on a technicality. Meanwhile, the state’s attorney arrived on the scene and tried to talk some sense to the mob. Even the fire

¹ *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 31, 1881. McLean County Historical Society Archives.

department came with the intention of spraying water on the mob but they found that their hoses had been cut.

The mob participants were not the only ones angered by Frank's death. The twenty-one other prisoners in the jail, who Frank had treated kindly, all signed a form stating that "We, the Prisoners of the McLean County Jail, bid to put on record our appreciation of the murdered jailor Teddy Frank. He was generous and kind, and treated us as well as any man could. He was a true-hearted man and we regret his death and regard his uncalled-for murder as a heartless, fiendish crime. We never expect to have his superior in his office. For the family so horribly bereaved, we feel sympathy²."

When the mob finally managed to break into the jail and find Pierce (helped along by the other prisoners, who, out of self defense, called out his cell number), they dragged him out of the jail. The sight of Frank's body "lying there weltering in his blood only added fury to the mob..."³ Pierce begged "Give me five minutes to pray" to which someone in the mob replied "This is not the time for praying." He then cried out "I have a mother," but the mob continued to beat him, saying "So did the man you murdered!"⁴ The mob then lifted Pierce up and hung him from an elm tree directly across the street from the jail. It was later revealed that the mob had originally planned to hang Devine as well, but the jail authorities had managed to covertly transport him to Peoria in the interest of his own safety.

Afterward, *The Daily Pantagraph* and other newspapers sensationalized the murder of Teddy Frank calling it the "Crimson Crime" and painting Frank as a martyr cut down by a cold-blooded assassin. Headlines read "A Dastardly Deed: The series of bloody and diabolical crimes committed in this vicinity in the past years culminated Saturday evening in the most shocking double tragedy ever known in the history of McLean County⁵." The article called the murder "entirely unprovoked, while it is a strong evidence of the humane character of the man (Frank)⁶." In the official investigation of Frank's death, the prisoners and law officials cooperated willingly while in the investigation of Pierce's death, no one would speak up, not even to identify the rioters.

Later accounts speculated that when Pierce and Devine were cellmates, Devine encouraged Pierce to escape and helped him plot a way to eliminate the only major obstacle—Frank, whom Devine thought had new evidence against him that would convict him again. Devine brought some of this suspicion upon himself for on the way to Peoria he spoke about how he had nothing to do with Frank's murder. This then made him seem even more suspicious.

However, several subsequent *Daily Pantagraph* opinion columns voiced a sentiment that, despite Bloomington's reputation as the cradle for honest lawyers, there is still something lacking in the justice system. One writer believed that there were more lawyers in Bloomington than cases which left them with copious amounts of free time which they could devote to watertight defenses and constant appeals, even for defendants who were undeniably guilty. There was also a belief that these lawyers chose "the most

² "Crimson Crime" report, *Daily Pantagraph*, October 3, 1881.

³ "Crimson Crime."

⁴ "The Ballad of Teddy Frank." McLean County Historical Society Archives.

⁵ *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 3, 1881.

⁶ *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 3, 1881.

ignorant, vicious, and wicked-minded men they can for jurors.⁷ Overall, these columns reflected the image that the citizens were becoming disillusioned with the justice system and that if the system had not been flawed in these ways, this horrible murder of an upright citizen may have never happened.

Teddy Frank was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. The whole town seemed to lament the murder of Frank. Many members of the community spoke about how honest and forthright Frank was and “how nearly everybody knew Ted Frank and knew some good in him⁸.” The Sheriff’s wife, Mrs. Ator, was deeply saddened by Frank’s murder. “He had always eaten at the family table,” and she and her family had come to think of him almost as a member of the family⁹. His funeral was held at his home located at 309 S. West Street and the yard was overflowing with mourners. The bell of Number One Engine Company, which he had long been a member of, also tolled during his funeral service.

By: Laurie Peterson, 2008

⁷ *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 5, 1881.

⁸ *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 3, 1881.

⁹ *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 3, 1881.