

Way We Were
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He Loved Them (Nearly) To Death

"I ought to kill them to keep them out of the asylum where I must go but... the minute I look into one of their eyes and see the love in them, I couldn't harm them but... I don't want them to suffer."
William Trotman

Early on the morning of Monday, September 1, 1902, Snyderville resident Orlando Johnson was awoken by Laura, the 10-year-old daughter of neighbors William and Laura Trotman. She told him that her father was at that moment murdering her mother and sisters. Johnson ran as fast as possible to the Trotman farm to prevent his friend from doing any further harm. When he arrived, he found William had halted his attack and the women were badly injured but alive and conscious. However, William was holding a rifle and pacing anxiously.

William arose around 5am, when his wife and daughters were still asleep. He went to the tool shed to get a monkey wrench, which he brought into the bedroom. After giving his two older daughters, Pearl and Emilie kisses, he used the wrench to strike each of them several times on the head. When Mrs. Trotman approached to stop him, he hit her on the head. At this time, Laura ran to get Johnson. Upon Laura's return, ahead of Johnson, William had already retrieved a rifle and threatened to shoot her with it.

William would not surrender his weapon to Johnson, claiming it was not loaded. He stepped out of the house and, moments later, Johnson and the Trotman family heard a gunshot. William had shot himself in the chest. He lingered wordlessly for about 45 minutes before dying.

Mrs. Trotman and the injured daughters were all treated by Dr. LeCompte at the scene. Despite having suffered deep gashes and fractured skulls, they all recovered and lived for many years after.

What would drive a man to try to murder his own innocent family? Mrs. Trotman stated that William was loving and generous. There is earlier evidence of mental and emotional instability in his family. In April 1892, William's brother Milton was the instigator of a similarly horrific event, when he shot his 17-year-old female cousin and himself to death, perhaps over jealousy and unrequited love. But what likely pushed William over the edge was the natural death of his 13-year-old daughter in early March 1902.

In April 1902, William was committed to the asylum at the urging of Orlando Johnson. William was released from the asylum only a week before the attack on his family. It is believed that William, in his unbalanced state, felt the murder of his family would protect them from being placed in the asylum, about which he stated he would rather die than return to it. Though the outcome could have been worse, it is tragic that William Trotman's love for his wife and daughters, distorted by mental instability and intolerable grief, led him to violence and suicide.

This concludes our October spooky series. We hope these past few articles have sent a chill up your spine and put you in the Halloween spirit.

The Park City Historical Society & Museum is celebrating 30 years of preserving, protecting, and promoting Park City's history and heritage.



Image# 2009.36.103

Credit: Park City Historical Society & Museum, Ella P. Sorensen Estate

Caption: Photo believed to be of sisters Laura and Pearl Trotman, circa 1910. They appear to be happy and healthy eight years after their father's attack and suicide.