

Way We Were

October 5, 2016

Bridget Sweeney...Poisoner!

Diane Knispel, Director of Education

In November 1887, citizens of Park City were shocked to learn of the attempted poisoning murder of Terrence Sweeney. Mr. Sweeney was a miner by profession and known in town as a kind father and provider for his family. Who was the perpetrator of this horrible crime? Unbelievably, none other than his wife of ten years, Bridget.

Mr. Sweeney was reportedly ill for months before the plot became known by a family servant, Annie Martin. Martin warned him of the danger. Mrs. Sweeney, upon learning that her plot had been detected, tried to flee to Canada with her two young daughters. She was arrested just in time by Sherriff E.M. Allison who brought her back to Park City to be arraigned. Though Terrence Sweeney refused to file a formal complaint, the case proceeded and Mrs. Sweeney pled not guilty in court.

According to reports, Mrs. Sweeney gave her husband a large dose of Rough on Rats poison on November 4, intending to kill him. She had been poisoning him for months before being observed and confronted by Annie Martin who claimed under oath that Mrs. Sweeney had been putting the powder in Terrence's tea, coffee, and mush. Mr. Sweeney fell ill and sought Dr. LeCompte's care. Acting upon Annie Martin's information, Dr. LeCompte tried some of the food that Mrs. Sweeney had left for her husband, and it tasted bitter. Poisoning explained Mr. Sweeney's stomach pains and his swollen eyes. Dr. LeCompte gave Mr. Sweeney medication and the man fortunately recovered.

The prosecution suggested that the motive for killing Terrence Sweeney was a \$2000 insurance policy from the Ancient Order of United Workmen (AOUW), the fraternal organization of which he was a member. Mrs. Sweeney's past also came back to haunt her. Prosecution claimed that she had been tried (but acquitted) in

Vermont for poisoning her first husband. Was this a case of a Black Widow seeking her revenge on a husband a second time?

For the defense, Ms. Sweeney testified that she had not poisoned her first husband and that his death was caused by liver failure. She did receive a large insurance payment upon his death. To many people in town and in the courtroom, “liver failure” sounded awfully suspicious. Bridget also claimed not to have had rat poison in her Park City home until a mice problem had prompted Annie Martin to suggest purchasing the Rough on Rats powder, thus attempting to invalidate the accusation that she’d been poisoning Terrence Sweeney for months.

The jury did not find Mrs. Sweeney’s explanations compelling. She was found guilty of poisoning her husband and sentenced to two and a half years in prison. Reports noted that she was grief-stricken over the prospect of imprisonment. But was this because she was wrongly convicted or because she’d failed in her murderous plot? We will never know.



Image ID: digi.2.6009

Credit: Park City Historical Society and Museum, Himes-Buck Digital Collection

Caption: James Ivers, pictured, owned a local livery in the 1880s. He testified that when Bridget Sweeney had tried to skip town, he was the one who’d driven her to Wanship

