

Mysterious Deaths on English Prairie

The McHenry County Historical Society is in possession of a wonderful mid-1800s diary of Harvey Wilson. Wilson moved to Spring Grove from Solon Mills in 1849 and left the area in 1861. He steadfastly jotted down the specifics of his life and those of his neighbors. He noted weather statistics, who was sick with what sickness, deaths, and other day-to-day tidbits. But the entries from October 21st to the 23rd, 1854, are what piqued museum director Nancy Fike's interest enough to cause her do further research.

The story starts in 1840 when a William Horton, son of David and Lucinda Horton, married a young girl named Caroline who according to later census records was probably only 14 years old at the time. Five years later, they and their 2-year old son Clinton, along with William's father came west and took up land in section 5 and 17 in Burton Township. In 1847, their daughter Adelaide was born.

Townsend Carpenter was one of their neighbors. He donated the land for English Prairie Cemetery. Another neighbor, A.J. (Andrew) Dunning, was a schoolteacher and also worked a portion of the Horton property. Both men would have a role in this bizarre tale.

According to a divorce petition that William filed in 1850, Caroline was having an adulterous affair with Townsend Carpenter with whom she moved in with about that time. William tried to serve divorce papers in September 1850 but the couple were by that time living in Jo Davis County. Presumably the children stayed with their father. Mysteriously, one month later on October 10, 1850, William died without a will and his sought-after divorce never took place.

At first William's father was appointed administrator of his estate, but a few months later Caroline took over the title. Her lawyer, Derrick C. Bush persuaded the court to give Caroline her own personal property out of the estate which amounted to \$384.50. Caroline also petitioned to be guardian over the persons and property of her two young children who had inherited a considerable amount of real estate from their father.

The next time her name appears in public record is January 14, 1854 when the court issued a citation against her as Caroline Horton Dunning, who as administratrix of Williams' estate had not made any reports. Caroline had left Townsend Carpenter and married Andrew Dunning in Kenosha, Wisconsin on April 6, 1852. In 1853 another child, Ellen, was born to Caroline and Andrew.

It was one year later that the diary entries appeared that makes this story so compelling. The entries state to wit: "Horton children died sudden. September 30, disinterred (disinterred) by coroner. Inquest verdict: death by poisonous drug or drugs given by A.J. Dunning ...Dunning arrested. Cleared for want of evidence."

The Horton children died within two days of each other, Clinton on October 23, 1854 at age 11 years, 5 months, and Adelaide on October 21st at age 7 years, 8 months and were

buried in the English Prairie Cemetery. There is no record of where their father, who died four years earlier, is buried. Caroline and Ellen inherited the real estate once owned by William Horton.

Further research by Nancy turned up another bill of divorce. This time it was Caroline versus Andrew J. Dunning. Her written testimony was quite lengthy and detailed her increasingly miserable life with Dunning. The marriage had broken down and, according to Caroline, Dunning became guilty of habitual drunkenness and extreme and repeated cruelty toward her and Ellen. She also charged that he threatened to destroy all her property. She pleaded with Judge J.M. Strode to grant the divorce and prevent Dunning from gaining custody of Ellen. Sometime during the proceedings it also became apparent that Caroline had one more child, a girl, with Dunning.

On June 25, 1855, the judge issued an injunction ordering Dunning to desist and refrain from seeking custody of Ellen and from disposing of and destroying property. On November 29, 1855 one year and one month after the deaths of Clinton and Adelaide, the divorce became final.

At that point Andrew J. Dunning disappeared from local records. Caroline was to marry at least once more before she slips off the pages of local records. On December 5, 1858 at age 32, she married an Englishman name Joseph P. Emmus age 26. The 1860 Census has them listed in Dorr Township where Joseph claimed to be a baker. Also listed in the household is Ellen age 7, Clara age 4, and James age 7 months. Two years later the 1862 McHenry County Plat Map lists an Emnis in the SE corner of Section 5 Burton Township on the original Horton property.