



Durand Lynch Tree

Melba Baehr (1962)

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Pepin County

An old oak tree on the lawn of the Durand Courthouse in Pepin County figured in the lynching of Ed Williams back on November 19, 1881. Ed and his brother Lon, who specialized in stealing horses but dabbled in other crimes—such as bank robbery and murder—were sometimes compared to the James Brothers. The story was written up by Christine Klatt, an early Dunn County settler, and was published by the Dunn County Historical Society.

When two lawmen, ex-sheriff Charles Coleman of Pepin County and his brother Milton, who was under-sheriff of neighboring Dunn County, tried to arrest the two Williams brothers in Durand, the sheriffs were both shot dead on the spot before witnesses. The subsequent chase of Lon and Ed Williams ended in Nebraska with the capture of Ed. Lon escaped.

They brought Ed Williams back and jailed him in

Menomonie, then took him to Durand for preliminary examination. When they debarked from the ferry at Durand, they found about 50 people waiting. The crowd muttered a few threatening remarks but no real trouble ensued.

At two o'clock the next afternoon, Ed Williams appeared in court. Men, women and children from nearly all parts of Pepin and adjoining counties crowded the room, eager to get a view of the "notorious criminal." He gave his name as William E. Maxwell (Ed Williams was an alias), pleaded not guilty to the charges, waived an examination and was committed for trial. The officers started to lead him back to his cell. Then someone in the crowd yelled, "Hang the son of a bitch," and "a dozen or more determined men tackled the officers."

"The officers made a desperate resistance," and "Maxwell fought like a tiger," but to no avail. A noose with a hangman's knot was slipped over his head, and he was dragged out on the porch and across the lawn to the oak tree "and quickly suspended in the air, with his handcuffs still on and a heavy pair of shackles hanging from his left foot."

After about 15 minutes, the officers were able to get to the body. They cut it down, and it was later interred in the Potter's Field of the Durand Cemetery.

The community did a bit of soul-searching after the episode, debating the issue back and forth in the local newspapers. An item in the Eau Galle paper noted that "A more brutal affair never happened anywhere and ... it is a reflection upon the morality and civilization of Northwestern Wisconsin."

The lynching continued to be debated in the press as Durand took on a reputation as a "Hanging Town." It was also accused of not having borne its share of supplying men or provisions during the hunt for the Williams brothers. The Menomonie press smugly noted that while Ed Williams was in the Menomonie Courthouse, surrounded by a dense throng of people, nearly every one of whom was a personal friend of the murdered Coleman brothers, and with no guard but the two or three officers in charge, he "was yet unmolested and so far as personal violence was concerned, was in perfect safety."

The *Durand Courier* attempted to put the case in perspective. "Finally, we think we can truthfully assert that Ed Maxwell was hung, not in the spirit of revenge, for the crimes he had committed, not to

show the bravery of the community ... but on future protection to this place and other communities. A man who not only boasts of his past misdeeds but expresses determination to continue on his evil course, and asserts that he will not allow any number of lives to stand between him and his liberty, is too dangerous a citizen to let live, and any man or number of men who wipe such a dangerous desperado from the face of the earth should be commended instead of condemned.”

The *Knapp News* added a last word: “There is seldom an evil done but there can be some good traced from it. So in the hanging of Ed Williams, we believe that the effect will be salutary on all those who might have been ambitious of following in his footsteps. The boys who entertain a desire to become bank robbers will now hesitate lest they meet a similar fate.”

The hanging tree was cut down in 1977. It was dying and was considered a hazard to pedestrians.

Sources: Melba Baehr, Eau Claire
Christine Granger Klatt, Menomonie
Howard Mead, Madison