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# MAD KILLER of the PRAIRIE

***COULD THIS FRAIL YOUTH BE  
THE MAD KILLER OF THE PRAIRIES?***

***THIS QUESTION HAS STIRRED  
THE OLD WEST FOR MANY YEARS.***

***BY BOB PEARMAN***

THERE was a bright moonlight on the Kansas prairie near the small town of Erie, on that cold night of March 7, 1886. Snow covered the prairie, and a few isolated farm houses were silhouetted like black ghosts in a sea of white.

Somewhere a coyote howled mournfully and then another coyote answered in the distance. After that only the eerie silence of a prairie night remained. Then suddenly this silence was broken with the wild barking of Robert Mendall's dog in the farmyard of his cabin. A small figure in a huge sheepskin coat was knocking frantically at the Mendall front door.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" Mendall shouted, as he picked his way through the darkened kitchen, pulling his trousers on over his long underwear.

An icy blast of air struck him as he opened the door, and standing there was **Willie Sell**, a 16-year-old neighbor. He looked as white as the snow-covered landscape and was shaking more from fright than from the cold.

The collar of his sheepskin coat was turned away.

He was hysterical and incoherent. But in the sobs and babble the farmer caught just enough to understand the boy. He dressed hurriedly and set out for the Sell home. For in the rambling, grief-choked story he had caught the words, "blood, murder and hatchet"

Back across the eerie countryside ran Mendall and Willie Sell. The small frame 2-room house was bathed in moonlight. A hound dog ran up and sniffed them and then whined in a low frightened manner.

Inside the house, following Willie's directions, Mendall found the table where, hours before, the family had taken their supper. He lighted a kerosene lamp.

The wick caught and fluttered, adding new soot to the already smoke-blackened chimney. Then the flame steadied and the room was reflected in the dim soft light.

But there was enough illumination to cause a hardened frontiersman like Mendall to draw back in horror. On the floor lay the bodies of **J.W. Sell**, schoolteacher and farmer, and his wife Susan. In the corner still in her bed, was their teen-age daughter, Ina. Each skull had been beaten in with a hatchet and the throats had been cut. The floor was slick with fresh blood.

In the other room of the house, where Willie had been sleeping moments before, Mendall found the eldest son, **Watta Sell**, 19. He had been killed in the same manner. The corn-shuck mattress was soaked with blood.

Apparently the parents had struggled hard with their slayers. Their bodies were in the center of the floor. Ina's fingers had been cut as if she had awakened and grasped the blade that slashed her throat.

The washpan of water on the kitchen range was stained red with blood, mute testimony that the assassin had washed his hands there. A bloodstained hatchet and a butcher knife, belonging to the Sells, were in the kitchen floor.

MENDALL ran back to his house, roused his oldest son, and sent him on horseback to Erie to locate Sheriff Charley Prange. The sheriff arrived at the home of the **Sell family** at around daybreak. News traveled with amazing speed in the prairie country of the frontier days. There were no telephones, no telegraph wires to the isolated farms, yet by mid-morning wagon loads of the prairie people were converging on the **Sell cabin** and others were coming on horseback.

Brutal death was no stranger to that prairie country bordering on Missouri. The pro- and anti-slavery people had fought, killed and burned homes for ten years before the Civil War. It continued on through the war. After the war came such men as the James boys and the Youngers, and outlaws of lesser fame.

By 1886, this breed of desperados had passed from the picture, but in their place were gangs of horse thieves and marauding thugs that looted farm houses and sometimes killed. It was known that a gang of horse thieves had been operating in that area for several weeks, a fact that later was to prove important in the mystery.

WITH all this background of terror, the mass murder of the **Sells family** produced a form of hysterical fear that so often appeared in the old West. Horse thieves didn't kill entire families, and those early day settlers, living isolated, sensed that what had happened to the Sell family could happen to them.

Suspicion was at once directed to the 16-year-old **Willie Sell**. The only way to explain this suspicion was the frontier feeling against the weak. Willie was 16 and didn't weigh 90 pounds. Other youths on the prairies the same age were strapping six footers, capable of doing any kind of work. Willie did no work, was not able, and spent his time reading. So to the rough frontier men and woman thought there was something queer about him.

The inquest held that day (justice was swift on the prairies) did add fire to this suspicion. By midday County Attorney C.A. Cox and Coroner J. P. Fouch had arrived at the Sell home. The bodies weren't moved and the inquest was held in the macabre setting of the four bodies with their skulls smashed lying in the positions in which Mendall had found them.

Mendall testified that Willie Sell had come to his farm fully dressed. Coroner Fouch ordered Willie to undress. There was blood on his underwear, especially on one knee. Blood was found under his fingernails and on the wrinkles of his knuckles. It appeared that Willie had tried to wash his hands.

Then Willie told this story:

The family had attended Sunday school as was their habit, for they were very religious. The summer before the Rev. J.T. Murray, & brother of **Mrs. Sell**, had conducted a revival meeting at the Methodist church. All three of the Sell children had joined.

ON Sunday afternoon the family returned home. Willie said he went to bed before the rest of the family, right after the family prayers. But first he had placed his boots and outer clothing on a chair beside the bed so they would be handy. The family's milk cows had been getting out on the neighbors land in recent days, and it was Willie's job to retrieve them when they did.

Willie was asleep almost as soon as he hit the bed. He was not sure what had awakened him but he sat up and saw a figure of a strange man framed in the doorway and a glow of light from the other room.

One catlike move sent Willie over the footboard. In the other room there was a hurried scuffling of feet.

The lamp went out. The door was slammed tight.

Willie told his story with no sign of emotion, which caused those already convinced of his guilt to nod their heads knowingly. He recalled he had run into the main room of the house and stumbled over the body of his father. The floor was covered with blood and Willie knelt on one knee, placed an arm under his father's head and tried to arouse him without success.

Willie said it was at this moment everything turned black for him. But somehow he pulled on his outer clothing and ran from the house. Outside he saw again the man he had seen in the doorway and ran after him. But the fleeing figure outdistanced him. Finally he joined a second man on the road and the two of them rode off on horses the second man had been holding. Willie stood in the road alone and listened to the fading sounds of the horses galloping over the frozen ground.

THE finding of a sum of money in the pocket of **James Sell's** trousers hanging on the end of the bed didn't help Willie's case. This eliminated the robbery theory, which would have been the motive for marauding outlaws. It was known that Sell had saved a fairly large sum for the building of a new house, but this wasn't found anywhere in the house.

Witnesses testified that Willie had quarreled with his brother over the affections of a girl in the community and the older brother, Watta, had won out and Willie had threatened to get even with him. It was also testified that Willie had resented his father and mother's insisting on his working.

With this evidence, and the prejudice against Willie, the Coroner's jury promptly found that the **Sell family** had died at the hands of **Willie Sell**. So deep was the feeling against Willie that the sheriff had to move fast to save him from the lynch mob that had formed outside the Sell house.

"Get to the front door and harangue the mob," Sheriff Orange said to County Attorney Cox. "I'll get the kid out the back door and on a horse."

BUT the mob had figured the sheriff would make this move, and half of them circled around to the rear of the house. The sheriff stepped out the rear door, with Willie at his side and his two six guns drawn and ready for action. The mob started to close in on the sheriff and Willie.

"Take it easy, men," the sheriff warned. "The first man to touch Willie will get a bullet through his guts."

The sheriff received unexpected help from Coroner J.P. Fouch, who had found a shotgun in the Sell kitchen and was behind the sheriff, pointing the shotgun at the mob. Faced with these three guns, the mob retreated slowly. The sheriff got Willie to two saddled horses, tossed the runt-like youth in one saddle and got in the other himself. The mob was screaming its fury, but the sheriff and Willie rode into the night and the mob didn't follow.

Willie was taken to Fort Scott and lodged in jail there for his safety. He was charged with murder.

On August 12, 1886, he was brought to trial in Erie, a trial that was to have weird repercussions for many years in the prairie country. It was frontier justice at its worst - brutal, intolerant, and hysterical. Feeling against Willie had increased. The **Sell family** had pioneered in Eastern Kansas, moving there in 1871 from McDonough County, Illinois. They settled on an eighty-acre farm. **James Sell** was well-liked and was a hard working man also taught school in the winter. His older son, Watta, was tall and handsome and one of the most popular youths in the community.

BUT a family had been massacred at an isolated farm, and the same could happen to any settler. And to those rough and uneducated settlers, frail little Willie, who didn't weigh 90 pounds, became a bloodthirsty ogre, a monster of murder who trod the prairies breaking skulls of grown men and slaughtering women and children.

County Attorney Cox conducted the prosecution. As Willie had no funds, the court appointed Homer Batman to defend him. Batman was paid from the **Sell estate**, which was unusual and which left Willie no money whatever. Batman asked for a change of venue. This was refused, and the jury was made up of the same men who had tried to lynch him at the **Sell cabin**.

The thermometer registered 112 outside, in the small courtroom the heat settled like a suffocating furred robe over the packed crowd. With the heat was the rancid stench of stale tobacco and sweating bodies. Willie sat frightened and alone a small mite of a boy who didn't have I friend. Listening to the state present its case against him.

Willie, dazed and browbeaten by three hours of constant hammering by the prosecutor, fainted on the witness stand. Whereupon, the county attorney turned away and mumbled just loud enough for the jury to hear:

"I knew he would weaken. He couldn't stand the pressure."

In the crowd a low murmur arose and a single comment passed from seat to seat:

"He must be guilty or he wouldn't have fainted."

It was whispered in the courtroom that Willie had gone up to the tower of the courthouse and confessed to his guardian and two other men. But years later, when the men were approached separately and asked about is, they denied it.

The case against Willie was built around three arguments:

1. Why was he spared? If an outsider had massacred the family why didn't he kill Willie? Watta slept on the inside. Therefore the killer would have had to lean across Willie to strike Watta's head and slash his throat.
2. Did Willie try to hide the blood on his underwear, feet and hands by putting on his outer clothing?
3. Willie's somber appearance on the stand - he testified without weeping, and that was enough to convince most people in Neosho County of his guilt.

BUT the state's case had many large holes. Attorney Batman showed that when Watta had been killed, blood spattered on the wall almost to the ceiling. And over the pillow where Willie lay, yet

plainly outlined on the pillow was the spot where Willie's head had lain. On it there was no blood. This, Batman argued, was ample proof that Willie had indeed been asleep when the murder was committed.

Batman also pointed out that both of the parents had struggled. Willie weighed but 90 pounds. How, he asked, could he have overcome them? Batman argued that in the dimly lighted rooms it would have been quite easy for the killers to miss a 90 pound boy buried under a mountain of covers.

Then there was the matter of the butcher knife. Doctors testified that it was dull as a hoe, and couldn't have been used to slash the throats. Instead they must have been cut with another Weapon, never found.

But the jury found Willie guilty on the first ballot and the judge sentenced him to life.

**Willie Sell** had no money for an appeal. He entered the Kansas State penitentiary a despised and hated boy. With him he took a fountain pen, his mother's Bible and her picture, which, for the next 21 years, he would keep hanging from a wall in his cell.

The case against Willie Sell didn't stop there. For eight years no one thought of doing anything for him. Then a Kansas City, Kansas, woman, Mrs. Sophie M. Boyce, daughter of a judge, learned of the case. She told her father and together they went to Erie and read the evidence. They came away convinced that there had been a great miscarriage of justice in the cast of **Willie Sell**.

After that Mrs. Boyce dedicated her life to getting Willie free. She wrote 600 letters in his behalf in longhand and got up a petition for his pardon. The first name was that of the county attorney who had prosecuted him. Several of the jurors signed it.

New evidence began to show up. Several of the men who had been first in the cabin, revealed that they had smelled chloroform and J.C. Boulin, an Eric druggist, revealed that two strangers on horseback had come to his store on the night of the murders, bought sonic whiskey and some chloroform which they carried off with them in a peculiarly shaped bottle.

They rode away in the direction of the **Sell farm**, the druggist said. Later Boulin bought the farm and in the chip yard he found a discarded bottle with the same crooked neck.

It was revealed that near the **Sell home** a gang of horse thieves had been operating. Sell, a member of the Anti-horse Thief Association, had ridden with a posse that pursued three of the outlaw brothers and shot one of them. Now a motive appeared for the grisly slayings - a motive of revenge.

AT this time on the frontier stealing horses was the favorite pastime of a bunch of outlaws who made their headquarters in Southern Kansas, and Indian Territory, squatting on the Osage lands.

There appeared in defense of Willie Sell men who admitted, shamefacedly, that they had found the tracks of horses on the road exactly where Willie said they would be on the morning after the murders.

Mrs. Boyce and her father, Judge James M. Mason, privately printed 10,000 copies of a book called "Voice From the Prison," which they distributed to influential persons throughout the state. For 13 long years they went before every pardon board and governor.

At last their arguments began to sway Governor E.W. Hoch. But the people of Erie arose in an angry mass and burned effigies of Willie and the Governor. A mistake had been made most of them admitted, but they were afraid that freeing Willie might bring adverse criticism to their community.

In April 1907, 23 years after he entered prison, **Willie Sell** walked out a free man. He had worked in a dispensary while in prison and now he went to work in drug stores in Nortonville and Alta Vista, Kansas. Four years later he bought his own drug store in Kansas City, Kansas, and ran it for 39 years. He was a model citizen and church member, even heading a boys club and operating a post office.

A convict in the Kansas penitentiary later confessed to the crime, but later refused to return to Neosho County. He said that on the night of the murders he and two companions had planned to rob the home of a German farmer. He told of purchasing chloroform and whiskey and riding to the **Sell home** instead, planning to divide the Money they had heard was hidden there.

**Willie Sell** never returned to Eric. Late in life, when a son of Mrs. Boyce's offered to drive him there, he refused.

He spent his last years in the Wyandotte County home and died in July 1960, at the age of 91 in a Kansas City, Kansas hospital. During his respected and productive life after prison Willie was able to repay at least part of the favor done for him by Mrs. Boyce. Her husband was stricken and she was left with her brother's three children to raise. Willie put the oldest to work in his store at a generous salary.

When Willie died Mrs. Boyce's sons reflected her own belief in his innocence by having him buried in the Boyce family plot in Quindaro cemetery. He lies near Mrs. Boyce, the woman who saved him from a life in prison. She died some four months before at the age of 93.