

Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

COLD AND DASTARDLY MURDER: Part 1 of 4

Just across the road, to the North of my family’s farm lies a small stand of woods that has seen more than its share of troubled history, dating back at least one hundred years. Ever since I was a young boy, I have not been able to look at these woods without thinking about the intriguing tale of murder that happened there, nor forget about the story of the visit that was paid to my great grandmother by the convicted murderer, many years later.



Hale Township, McLeod County Map Key: F=home of Josef and Frantiska Fajmon; M = home of Jim Micka; K = home of Albin Kadlec (source: Google Maps)

Imagine yourself living in rural McLeod County exactly one hundred years ago: another Minnesota winter has descended upon your family, your crops have been harvested and the fields are covered in new fallen snow. Your winter workday involves tending to your animals and chopping wood to keep your stove fired and your house warm. Your early mornings and early evenings are lit by kerosene lamps, as rural electrification would not become a reality for another twenty-five years. And then on one peaceful and fateful winter evening, after having had supper with your spouse, you hear a knock at the door...

This is the first in a four part series of historical articles to retell this tale.

COLD AND DASTARDLY MURDER

Hutchinson Leader, December 9, 1910

“A little log house on a little farm in the woods in which lived a peaceful and hard working old Bohemian couple, Joseph Fajmon and his wife, was the scene last Sunday evening of a murder as ghastly and as cold blooded as was ever recorded in the annals of crime in Minnesota.

That there exists in McLeod county such a monster as the one who that evening suddenly and unforeshadowed invaded the little home and snuffed out the life of poor old Mrs. Fajmon would have been disputed by every man, woman and child in the county. That such a monster does or did exist here all of the circumstances of the shocking tragedy indicate and that instance grim and sure will yet overtake and punish him there is little room for doubt.

The news of the crime was first received in Hutchinson about nine o'clock, when John Urban, living near the Fajmon home phoned from the Zavoral's, three miles away, to Dr. D.L. Axilrod that a murder had been committed and asking him to come at once. Mr. Urban at the same time phoned to Sheriff Klaus at Glencoe. Dr. Axilrod, accompanied by Richard Pugh, was taken to the scene of the murder by Chas. Senescall in his automobile. Arriving at the Fajmon home they found the house dark, the door locked and twenty or more farmers standing about with guns and lanterns. They learned from those present that Mrs. Fajmon had been shot by a man who came to the house sometime between dark and seven o'clock and that Mr. Fajmon, after notifying some of the neighbors had locked the house and gone to the home of his daughter, Mrs. John Friauf, three miles distant. The doctor raised a window, went inside with a lantern and unfastened the door. On the floor, so close to the door that it could hardly be opened without grazing it, lay the body of Mrs. Fajmon, resting partly on the left side. On the upturned right side of the head was a gaping wound, about half an inch above and in front of the right ear; under the head, matted in the hair and staining the floor for half an arm's length from the body, was a pool of blood. Life was extinct, though the body was still warm.

The only signs of disorder in the room were a miscellaneous lot of articles pulled out from behind a cupboard and scattered about on the floor. In half an hour Sheriff Frank Klaus and Dr. T.W. Hovorka, coroner, arrived from Glencoe and Mr. Fajmon also returned. With Dr. Hovorka acting as interpreter, Mr. Fajmon's English being scarcely intelligible, Fajmon told of the murderer's search for the money which he evidently knew the old couple had laid by, but which he failed to secure as Dr. Hovorka, pulling the cupboard out from the wall found in two old tin cans \$410 in bills.

The assembled farmers looked upon the appalling sight of the body of the kind faced old woman lying there stiffening in its own blood and then glanced at one another with a grim and knowing look. In their minds was this common thought: “there is but one person who could have committed this bloody deed” And yet each dreaded to be the accuser and the name on each one's tongue was not given to the sheriff at the instant when it would have meant the most to him and might have put him hot on the trail of the murderer.

The story of the murder is best given by the husband of the dead woman in his testimony before the coroner's inquest held the next day. Mr. Fajmon is aged about 55 years. He is not a man of acute perceptions. He is slow to think and act and the fact that he is extremely near sighted explains why it is that he can give only a general description of the man who stood undisguised in his presence for perhaps five or ten minutes. Speaking through Dr. T. J. Trutna of Silver Lake, who was sworn in as interpreter at the inquest, Mr. Fajmon said:

“While we were sitting in our home together a man came in, between five and seven p.m. after supper. We have supper at various hours, five, six, or otherwise. It was dark when the man came in. Appearance, about my size perhaps or slightly smaller, quite a heavy set fellow, no beard (smooth face) and red face. Had a gray long coat and a gray, flat cap with a shield, collar of coat large, same color and material as coat, no fur, and coat was buttoned up to chin. When he came in he had his hand in pocket out of which he pulled a revolver, nickel plated and large size. Do not know whether hammerless or not. Aimed from one to another of us and said, “Put hands up and give me your money, or I will kill you.” Pointed gun at me oftener. I said we had no money. He made threats of death. I then gave him some money, about three dollars. He said he knew we had more money. My wife then went down to the celler (sic) to get more money. He stood by the door in the meantime, between the door and myself, pointing the revolver continually at me. My wife brought the money and was giving him the money on the table, amount about five or six silver dollars, (from a baking powder can). I took the opportunity when he was not watching me to slip up stairs. He wanted more money from my wife, and she told him she had no more. When he turned around and missed me, he asked my wife where I was. She said she did not know. He then called, “Fajmon come down, I want you to come.” I answered, “I won’t come down, I am afraid of you.” I then went to the south window, opened the window, which slips up and down, put my left foot and greater part of my body out, when the window fell down and caught my right foot, and I had trouble to extricate myself, but finally got loose and fell to the ground, fell on side of my body. Did not get severely hurt. As soon as I was outside I went to neighbor, Jim Micka, and told him what happened. He took his gun and went with me back to my house, when some distance from my house Micka fired his gun and listened. No voices being heard we went close to the house, looked in the window, the light burning, and saw Mrs. Fajmon lying on the floor. We then came to the door, which was partly opened, and I came in first, and Micka followed me, I began crying looked over her body, saw blood and wound on head, and saw she was dead. A lantern was lying beside her body and a key on a string in her hand. The lantern was broken. I remained in the house and Mr. Micka went to neighbor Kadlec to get him to come over. They not coming from some time I left the house after them. When I came to Kadlec’s, I rapped and got no answer. Then I came back and blew out the light, locked the door of the house and went to John Friauf’s.

Every word uttered by that man was given in Bohemian, clear language, with no dialect showed that he was a Bohemian. He used the honorary pronoun in second person, vy and not ty. I do not know the man, don’t remember of hearing his voice before. He had a bass voice, spoke rather quick, was not hoarse. Had nothing on his face to disguise, had his cap drawn over his eyes pretty well. Was not over 20 or 25 years of age, had bare hands. Did not notice his hands much, did not notice his feet, did not walk lame. Had no trouble with neighbors or anyone else. Did not hear or see anyone else here besides him. To prove to him that we had no money, my wife volunteered to show him the grain in the granary proving that we had not sold the grain yet. She procured the key after she came back from the celler (sic), but she went into the cellar with lantern lit. The scratch on my nose I sustained in the fall from the window. I was married to my wife over 30 years, do not exactly remember the date of marriage. Lived happily together. The name of my children living in this community are Annie Fajmon and Francis Fajmon. She was married before and had four children. The property is deeded equally to each of us. Each has half. No testament has been made by either me or her. When I came back with Jim Micka I do not know the exact time.”

County attorney Sam G. Anderson was on the ground early next morning co-operating with Sheriff Klaus and Coroner Hovorka in searching for clues that might permit Justice to point her finger unerringly at a certain person under general suspicion as the one whose hands are stained with blood.

A coroner's jury composed as follows was empaneled: Orrin Vaughn, Jos. Chalupsky, Frank W. Urban, Frank Navratil, Jos. H. Kosek and Frank Nuwash. The jury summoned as witnesses Jos. Fajmon, whose testimony is given above, James Micka and Dr. T. J. Trutna.

Mr. Micka testified that he had known Jos. Fajmon and wife for 37 years; that former came to his house between six and seven o'clock the evening of the murder, saying there was a man at his house threatening that "he will kill us" if he don't get the money; that taking a shot gun, the two went over plowed land to within three rods of the house when they stopped. A lamp was burning in the house. They fired the gun, waited awhile then went in the house and found the dead body of Mrs. Fajmon lying on the floor. He then went to Albin Kadlec's and got Mr. Kadlec and wife to go through the neighborhood giving the alarm.

Dr. Trutna testified that he had known Mrs. Fajmon about three years; assisted the coroner in autopsy on her body; found the bullet entered head half an inch above and in front of right ear, passing horizontally into brain tissue, making a large lacerated wound. The tissue in the wound showed powder burns. Concluded from appearance of wound that muzzle of gun was pressed against the temple, which would cause instant death.

The jury, after viewing the body and hearing the testimony, returned a verdict that "Frances Fajmon" was killed by a gunshot wound in the head inflicted by a person whose identity is to us unknown" In the afternoon of the same day a Pinkerton detective began work on the case, co-operating with the sheriff and county attorney. They incline to the theory that the murderer had planned to kill both the old folks if need be to get the money which he evidently knew they had concealed in the house. He let the old man escape up stairs, supposing he had him caged and could kill him at his pleasure, but finding he was gone and might arouse the neighbors, he dared not remain and search the house. His foot prints where he ran across the plowed field, showing that he had on a good grade of shoes, little worn, were found. Clues were found pointing suspiciously to two or three different parties, but not with sufficient directness to warrant an arrest. Yesterday the services of another detectives were enlisted—and still the crime remains a mystery—a mystery more impenetrable than the famous Dr. Koch case at New Ulm, but let us hope the fiend may not be as successful in concealing from the eyes of Justice his gory hands as was the murderer of Dr. Gebhardt.

Joseph Fajmon and wife are old and respected residents of Hale township. Mrs. Fajmon was twice married, her first husband, Wencel Krejci, dying 33 years ago on the place on which she was so foully murdered.

She married Mr. Fajmon about three years afterwards. By her first husband she had four children, Mrs. John Friauf, living three miles from the old home; Jos. Krejci of Hale and Michael of Polk County. Another of her sons, John, died in Washington state 12 years ago. By the second marriage she had two daughters, Frances and Annie, employed in Hutchinson, and a son, Frank, who died in the state hospital at St. Peter last winter. She was aged 65 years.

Should the fiend incarnate who took her life be apprehended. McLeod county will have its third trial for murder. In the early eighties Chas. Hayes was tried for killing James E. Chesley with a pitchfork. Public sentiment never considered it a case of deliberate manslaughter and Hayes got off with a year in the county jail. Fifteen years ago two brutal tramps, Cingmars and Musgrove, shot down Sheriff Joe Rogers in cold blood. The famous Bill Irwin defended and F.R. Allen, then county attorney, assisted by Attorney General H.W. Child, appeared for the state. On trial before Judge Francis Cadwell Musgrove got off with 20 years in the states prison, but before Cingmar's case came to trial both of the red-handed murderers were lynched."

If you have any contributions or suggestions for topics for future columns, please contact me by email: tkadlec@gmail.com or call me: (651) 271-0422 or send your letters to my attention: 1408 Fairmount Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105. Děkuji! Tony Kadlec