

“Events 90 Years Ago “Kept Tongues Wagging””

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Ottawa in the 1890s was much like we might imagine, a quiet, sedate little college town with a downtown full of ornate Victorian buildings and churches full of pious Sunday parishioners.

Yet that is only part of the picture.

Ottawa also had its rowdy, sometimes violent, side which kept tongues wagging. As one Kansas newspaper editor quipped, “In Ottawa it seems like every day someone is getting murdered, committing suicide, or being elected to high public office.”

Ninety years ago this week, a pair of bizarre incidents occurred which tend to support this notion. It began when Charles and Hamilton Lathrop, the young owners of a grocery and butcher shop on Main, went on a drunken “rounding up of the town” with three of their friends. As the Ottawa Weekly Herald observed with disgust, it was a “General spree...intent in creating all the disturbance that a crowd of maudlin men could conceive.”

The spree came to an abrupt and bloody end late that night, Nov. 21, 1894, at the home of a Mrs. Sherman near Oak and Tecumseh. The five drunken men roused up the sleeping household by loudly demanding entrance.

Young Ben Sherman, the paper reported with melodramatic flair, sprang from his bed to defend his mother and home. An argument ensued in which the men “talked saucily” before the Sherman boy fired a warning shot over their heads.

Emboldened by their liquor, the Lathrop brothers advanced with one making the retort, “Put up that revolver, I’ve eaten bigger guns than that.”

So much for famous last words. The Lathrops pushed forward again, and Sherman shot them both in the chest. Needless to say, the evening’s finale had a “sobering” influence on the other three.

Charles Lathrop was killed instantly. “Ham” Lathrop was more fortunate as his bullet struck no vital organs and exited on his left side. With no explanation, the Ottawa Republic brightly announced the next day, “This morning the ball was found in his shoe.”

The deceased Lathrop, however, was not yet at the center of his last controversy. Early the next day, two rival undertakers got into a fight over the corpse, during which one of them was stabbed.

This second tragedy apparently arose out of the confusion that followed the first. “Ham” Lathrop directed his brother’s body to be taken to the Clark and Sessions undertaking establishment, as no one could be found at his first choice, Chalmers and Co.

The next morning, George Chalmers and George Miller from the latter funeral parlor arrived at Clark and Sessions with their “cooling board” and demanded the body.

In the heated argument and scuffle that followed, Sessions was stabbed in the side. The wound was first thought to likely prove fatal, but daily progress reports announced Sessions' steady recovery.

In the days that followed, Charles Lathrop was buried at Highland Cemetery after a funeral at his 224 S. Oak home. Miller, "who previous to this affair has not borne a very enviable reputation," according to the Weekly Herald, was found guilty of assault and battery.

And Ben Sherman, after being convicted of murder, got the jury's verdict set aside after an outpouring of support from Ottawa citizenry.

So ended this double tragedy of 90 years ago. It's hard to say whether any good came as a result, other than cooling off the local rabble-rousers. What is more certain is that it provided weeks of conversation for astonished Ottawans.

As the Ottawa Weekly Herald breathlessly reported the next day, "There was more excitement on the streets this morning than Ottawa has known for many a day..."