THE MEEKS MURDERS

An Ozark folksong begins:

"I'm one of Mister Meeke's little girls, an' if you'll lend an ear, I'll tell you all the saddest tale that ever you did hear..."

Just before dawn on May 11, 1894, Mrs. John Carter, who lived four miles southeast of Browning, Mo., heard a knocking at her door. She rose from her bed and found on her doorstep a pathetic, bedraggled child of six or eight years. The girl's clothing was torn and caked with dirt and blood and she had a large gash in her forehead. A kind woman, Mrs. Carter brought the girl in and began to tend to her needs. She questioned the child about how she came to be there and the story that unfolded is among the most bizarre and most repeated in Missouri history.

The child said her name was Nellie Meeks, and she had spent the night in a strawstack. In garbled, incoherent sentences she explained that "they" had killed Papa and Mama and Hattie and the baby and left them in the strawstack.

Shocked, but not quite convinced, Mrs. Carter awakened her nine-year-old son, Jimmy, and sent him to investigate. After the child found the bodies, he came back and reported this to his mother. She then sent him out to tell the neighbors. Passing through the field, the boy caught sight of George Taylor harrowing around the old strawstack, attempting to hide the wagon tracks he had made the night before.

The boy innocently walked over and informed him there were dead people in the stack, so he should be careful not to harrow over them.

George Taylor must have done some of the fastest thinking of his life. He took the boy with him to the house and told him to go in and sit down, that he would be in as soon as he put up the team. Then they would both go and investigate.

Needless to say, the child waited a long while. George Taylor saddled a horse, rode to Browning and found his brother. The two of them then left the area.

George and William Taylor were well known in the northeast Missouri area. They were ambitious young men with a finger in every pie. Bill was a graduate of Missouri University School of Law, and had served in the Missouri General Assembly. After this he worked as a cashier at the People's Exchange Bank in Browning. Both men were good-looking and well dressed, and it is said that George, the younger, was exceedingly handsome.

Throughout the late 1880s the Taylor brothers prospered and eventually the public discovered why. They were charged with forgery and larceny in 1891 for writing false bank drafts, some of which went through the First National Bank of Kirkville. Additionally, they were indicted on charges of arson and cattle rustling. Gus Meeks was also implicated in the cattle rustling case and was indicted along with the Taylors. He pled guilty and was sent to the penitentiary.

About one month before Gus Meeks' tragic death, the governor pardoned him in order that he might be used as a witness against the Taylors.

Anxious to be rid of Meeks, the Taylors agreed to provide him with a wagon, team and $1,000 if he would get out of the area. It was agreed that Meeks would leave with the Taylors on the night of May 10, 1894, spend the night with them, and leave the next day. His family was to join him later, after he was settled.

But when the Taylor brothers came to pick up her husband just before midnight, Delora Meeks refused to let him go without her. Fearing for her husband's life, Mrs. Meeks reasoned that the Taylor brothers would not try anything with the family along. She had already packed their meager belongings and awakened their three daughters, Mamie, not yet two years of age; Hattie, four years; and Nellie, probably around six years old.

THE VICTIMS

May 11, 1894, all but one member of the Gus Meeks family were murdered and their bodies placed under a strawstack. Gus, Delora, Hattie and Mamie Meeks were all killed by William and George Taylor, but a third daughter, Nellie, survived the gruesome incident. The story of the murders has become an important part of Missouri folklore and was recorded in dozens of poems and songs which have circulated since that time, especially in the southern part of the state.
The family loaded themselves into the wagon, but their trip was abruptly and tragically brought to an end on Jenkins Hill a short distance east of Browning. George Taylor jumped from the wagon, pulled out his gun and shot Gus Meeks. His frightened wife started to jump from the wagon; she, too, was shot. Hattie, the four year old, was also shot, and Mamie, the baby, was beaten to death with a rock. Nellie was also beaten, and assumed to be dead.

The brothers then loaded the bodies back into the wagon and took them to a field near George Taylor’s home. One shallow grave had already been dug beneath a straw pile. Four of the bodies were crammed into this grave, but it is not known exactly where Nellie spent the night. Nellie said she roused a little when she was thrown from the wagon, but she did not move or speak. In “The History of Sullivan County,” it was stated that Nellie later said, “When the man put me in the straw, the one with the whiskers (Bill) kicked me in the back and said they are all dead now, the villain sons of bitches!” They covered her with straw and she heard them trying to burn the family’s belongings. They were unsuccessful, however, and ended up burying them near the strawstack.

There are some interesting theories about how Nellie arrived at the Carter house the following morning. The George Taylor home and the Carter home were at equal distances from the strawstack. She could have easily gone to the Taylor home and lost her life. Some simply say “Providence” guided her to the Carter’s. There is another story that claims Nellie heard her dead mother’s voice and it told her which way to go. Regardless, she was miraculously guided; Nellie arrived at the Carter home and the whole gruesome story was brought to light.

A coroner’s inquest was held, and the Taylor brothers were subsequently charged with murdering the Meek’s family, but by this time neither of them could be found. Some 1,000 men from surrounding counties had pursued the pair with bloodhounds, with no success. George and Bill were not found until June 26, 1894, when Jerry South apprehended them in Batesville, Ark. They had spent the last month-and-a-half in towns throughout southern Missouri and northern Arkansas, staying in hotels and living in relative comfort.

The trip back to Linn County had to be rerouted to avoid a lynch mob, but the group finally arrived safely. The Taylor brothers were both refused bond. The original trial was January 29, 1895, but it was delayed because of a misunderstanding about the date.

**THE TRIAL**

The trial began March 18, 1895, in Carrollton, Mo. Carloads of people came in on the railroads from Sullivan County and surrounding areas. The Taylor brothers arrived, neat and well groomed, and apparently not nervous. They maintained they were innocent and seemed confident they would be cleared.

From all indications the Taylor brothers were given a fair and thorough trial. Both the prosecuting and defense attorneys fulfilled their responsibilities well. Perhaps it was because both sides did such a thorough job that the case had to be tried twice.

The prosecuting attorney was T. M. Breshenen, and the defense attorney was Colonel John Hale. Several witnesses from around Jenkins Hill testified to having seen the bodies. They testified to the gory condition of the bodies and about the track around the strawstack. Mrs. Kitty Edens came to the stand and testified to having heard five shots just after midnight the morning of May 11, 1894.

The mother of Gus Meeks, Mrs. Martha Meeks, lived in the same house with her son. She told about how the Taylor brothers often visited her son, and how they asked to see him after he returned from the penitentiary, and how she overheard the conversation in which the Taylor brothers agreed to give Gus $1,000 to leave the area.

Mrs. Meeks said she was always afraid the Taylor brothers would kill her son. She testified Gus received a letter May 10, which had the heading of the People’s Exchange Bank of Milan. It read, “Be ready at 10:00. Everything is right.” It had three stars for a signature. She tried to persuade her son not to go, but that night George Taylor came in and helped Gus carry out the household goods. Gus told his mother that William was outside, but Mrs. Meeks said she did not see him.

Several people testified to having seen the Taylor brothers out in the wagon about 10 o’clock the night of the murder. A man named Dillinger testified that Bill Taylor had told him he would kill Gus Meeks.

Mrs. John Carter told about how Nellie had appeared on her doorstep and relayed everything Nellie had told her. Jimmy Carter told of his experiences when he talked to Nellie and found the bodies. Several witnesses testified to seeing blood stains in the Taylors’ wagon, and several said they saw George Taylor riding home at a fast rate early in the morning of May 11.

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**Story by Ellen James**

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**THE ACCUSED**

William and George Taylor were convicted of the Meeks murders. William was hanged in April 1896, but George was never recaptured after breaking jail.
Jerry South, member of the Arkansas legislature and captor of the Taylor brothers, took the stand for the state. He had received $1,500 from Linn County for capturing the pair, and if they were convicted, he would receive $500 from the state. The defense insinuated that this was the reason South was testifying for the state.

Most of the witnesses for the defense were relatives of the defendants. Some cousins and the mother of George and Bill testified they had seen no blood in the wagon, only old, dried, red paint. Mrs. George Taylor testified that her husband had slept in her bed all night May 10. Mrs. William Taylor testified her husband had returned home at 10 p.m. May 10 and had slept until 5 a.m. On cross examination she was asked if she had told Rev. P. M. Best that her husband was gone all night the night of the murder. She denied saying any such thing.

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Then Bill Taylor himself took the stand. He gave some general information about himself and his education. Then he told what he did the night of the murder. He said George went home with him at 4 p.m. on the 10th. They ate supper together, and then George went home and Bill went back to the bank, where he worked until 10 p.m. He said he went home then, and slept until 5 o'clock the morning of the 11th. He said George came to the bank just after 8 a.m. and told him that Gus Meeks was dead and the body was on his place.

George wanted to get an officer and take him down to investigate but Bill said he thought they were being framed because it was general knowledge that Meeks was going to testify against them. So Bill recommended they simply wait and see what developed.

George Taylor took the stand as cool and collected as his brother. He more or less matched Bill’s testimony.

The case was given to the jury April 9, 1895, but they failed to reach a verdict. The case was retried but little new evidence was introduced.

D.C. Pierce testified that George Taylor had told him that he (George) was not afraid of Meeks because they would get him out of the way.

Nellie Meeks, the ward of Mrs. Pierce, was at the trial. During some of the proceedings she went to where the counsel for the state was sitting and climbed into the lap of Prosecuting Attorney Pierce.

Much of the testimony was the same as at the first trial but this time the jury found William and George Taylor guilty. The judge sentenced them to hang.

March 3, 1896, the Supreme Court of Missouri upheld the verdict and set April 30, 1896, as the execution date.

April 11, 1896, George and Bill Taylor broke jail. Bill was recaptured but his brother was never found. George Taylor was reportedly seen from time to time but he was never captured. Several men on their deathbeds confessed to being George Taylor.

April 30, 1896, William Taylor was hanged in Carrollton. Before his death he left this written statement:

“To the public: I have only this additional statement to make. I ought not to suffer as I am compelled to do. Prejudice and perjury convicted me. By this conviction my wife is left a lonely widow, my babies are made orphans in a cruel world, my brothers mourn and friends weep. You hasten my gray-haired mother and father to the grave. The mobs and that element have haunted me to the grave. I had hoped to live at least till the good people realize the injustice done me but it cannot be so. I feel prepared to meet my God and now wing my way to the great unknown, where I believe everyone is properly judged. I hope my friends will meet me all in heaven. I believe I am going there. Goodbye all.

W.P. Taylor

Nellie, reportedly a charming and pretty child, was raised by her Grandmother Page. She married Albert Spray at a young age. She gave birth to a daughter, Hattie, in February 1906, and she died soon thereafter of complications from childbirth. There is some confusion about when Nellie was born, but she was probably only about 18 or 19 when she died. It is said that she carried a deep scar in her forehead throughout her life.

Over the years the story of the Meeks murder was recorded in dozens of songs and poems which circulated throughout the state. Many of the songs were collected in the Ozarks, where Nellie lived with her grandmother. Most songs were very sad and sentimental, and some were more accurate than others. This is one version circulated in Northeast Missouri:

**THE MEEKS MURDER OF 1894**

*In Milan, Sullivan County, there lived a family poor, A father and mother, three children 'round their door. The man was sent to prison for stealing he hadn't done, But for telling on some others his freedom he won.*

*He said the Taylors hired him or rather led the way; For this the Governor pardoned and sent him home to stay Until he was needed further to swear before the court Against the Taylor brothers and his country to support.*

*On the night of May 10, two men to Milan came To get the Meeks family and murder the same. They said they wanted to hire him, they told him of their scheme. They would give ten thousand dollars, a wagon and a team.*

*If he would leave the country and not appear in Court Against the Taylor brothers and this the cattle suit.*

*The wife said they will kill you, but the husband he thought no,*
So they bundled up their baggage and started off to go.

They traveled very nicely until near George Taylor's farm
And there the murdering ended with but a slight alarm.

They thought that all was ended and now to rest a while,
But alas, God's hand protected and saved a little child
Who saw them kill poor papa, dear mama, sisters two
And then they tried to kill me and that was all I knew.

Until we reached the strawyard the burial to prepare,
But God was with me there before and God was with me there.

The burial was ended, the murderers were gone
And this poor little orphan who was left in the world alone,

Came forth to seek protection
In her dark lonely hour
With God to guide her footsteps
By his mysterious power.

This man sold his life some money to gain
To his wife and dearest children the price was just the same.
Kind friends and dearest people who in this world are poor
Be true and ever honest, for honesty is power.

Dozens of other versions remain so that although a great injustice occurred and four lives were cruelly cut short, their story is preserved forever through our music and folklore.

Albert Spray of New Salem, Mo., displays his unusual fiddling style. Spray married Nellie Meeks in 1905, and they had one daughter, Hattie, in 1906. Nellie died soon afterward of complications from the childbirth. Spray learned how to play the violin at an early age, and entertained at local events and fiddling contests for many years. (Photo courtesy of Josh Shoop)

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Milan Standard Newspaper, Milan, Mo.

Interview with Azelene Evans.

Postcard photos of the Meeks family and the Taylor brothers (Pages 2 and 3) courtesy of Patton Carter.