

SKETCH OF THE LIFE OF
WAYNE POWERS

ONE OF THE MEN HANGED FOR MURDER
AT ESTILLVILLE, FEB. 6TH, 1885

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WAYNE POWERS, the subject of this sketch, was born September 14, 1862, in Scott County, Virginia, near Osborn's Ford. His parents, both of whom are still living, gave him such training as was essential to the development of qualities calculated to render him an upright and useful member of society. He was a very promising youth, and until he had grown almost to manhood, was loved and respected by all his acquaintances. One quality, however, was lacking in his nature, which brought him to his deplorable end. This quality was moral firmness and resistance to temptation. Being under the influence of evil associates, he suffered himself to be led away from the straight path of rectitude, and his sad lesson should sink deep into the hearts of all the youths of our country.

His first crime was petit larceny. He and Jackson Ramey stole seven chickens from Jacob Stair and sold them to George Porter for three pints of brandy. A short time afterward the same two took each a horse from Isaac Powers' stable and rode them a few miles, again in quest of brandy, the hellish agent of the ruin of both.

The two boys were paying their addresses to two sisters, Misses Leanie and Nannie Mead, and unpleasant remarks having been made concerning them by George Lee, they vowed revenge. Powers borrowed a gun intending to kill Lee, and made three unsuccessful attempts to execute his nefarious purpose. At one time he snapped a gun three times at Lee, the gun for the first time failing to fire. Shortly afterwards Powers, having purchased some wearing apparel for Joseph Spivy, and Spivy refusing to pay for them, he and Jackson Ramey went to Spivy's house and tried to shoot him but were too much intoxicated to carry out their purpose. Warrants were issued for them the next morning, and Powers hearing that George Lee was summoned to arrest him, waylaid the road intending to kill him. Becoming impatient, he went in pursuit of Lee, and unexpectedly came up on a crowd of men, who arrested him, gave him a preliminary hearing before justices of the peace, and sent him to the Scott county jail for further hearing. While in jail he sent Spivy five dollars and a warning that if he appeared against him he would kill him when he got out. Spivy left the country, and Powers was released from imprisonment.

A few days later Powers and Jack Ramey were on their way to Creed Johnson's to get brandy and met George Lee, and Jack and Lee had a difficulty. They then went on, and returning, made an agreement that in case one should kill Lee the other would testify that it was wholly in self-defense. Passing by Lee's house they saw that his door was closed, and thought that no one was at home. The dog ran out and Ramey shot at him. Lee then came out with a pistol in his hand and hot words passed between him and Ramey, each daring the other to shoot. Ramey would have fired, but Powers discovered two men watching them at a distance, and persuaded Ramey not to shoot, as they would be witnesses against him. Some time afterwards Lee and Powers waylaid each other with guns, but fortunately did not meet, and Lee moving from Powers' neighborhood, the feud for a time was permitted to subside.

The next trouble was with a man named Berry Jones. Jones accused Powers and Ramey of stealing his watermelons. Powers went to see Jones about it, and found him at the house of Isaac Powers. Several men were there, who interfered and prevented a difficulty that in all probability would have terminated in murder. Powers told Jones he would see him again, and on the following Friday went to Jones' house for the purpose of "having it out with him." He called Jones to the door and threw a rock at him. Jones ordered him away, threatening to shoot him if he refused to go.

Powers went to the door and put his hand into his pocket for his pistol, but found that he had left it in his coat pocket where he threw the rock from. He picked up another rock, but was persuaded not to throw by Jones' wife, and in a few minutes left the premises. A warrant was issued for his arrest, but Jones not appearing against him the warrant was dismissed.

Powers describes his next difficulty as follows: "Jack Ramey and I met a man inquiring the way to 'Little' John Ramey's. After giving him the directions, we went to Daniel Ramey's and got some brandy and returned to where we met the man, and going down the river, heard him hollo at Isaac Powers' boat-landing. We sat down and waited for him to come up, and when he came up we asked him his name. He replied that it was Trent. Jack asked him which one of the Trents, and he said 'young Silvester.' Jack then stepped back and cocked his pistol on him, and told him he had a warrant for him. Turning to me Jack said, 'Search him, Horn,' having previously told him our names were Horn. I said, 'do you summons me to search him?' He said 'yes.' I then took a bottle of brandy out of his pocket and asked Jack if it was an unlawful weapon. He replied that it was, to lay it on the bank; that a man drank some of it a few days before and it killed him. We then let him go on."

Some time afterwards Powers was arrested on a charge of stealing a small amount of money from Fletcher Kenedy, and lodged in the Russell county jail. He remained there twenty-two days and was admitted to bail to await an indictment, which was not made, as the evidence against him was insufficient.

Powers and Ramey's next crime was theft. The two boys went to Thomas Wolfe's house and stole some jeans, a pair of shoes and a bushel of wheat, with which they intended to buy brandy. They were intoxicated, and did not sell the goods that night. When they recovered from their drunkenness Jack sold the shoes to a son of John Blevins, who, when he found where they came from, returned them to Mr. Wolfe. Powers was arrested, but could not be proven guilty, and was released.

The next link in the chain of Wayne Powers' criminal career is one of the darkest and direst conceivable, one that partakes more of the nature of savages than of enlightened human beings. It was an attempt to murder his brother, Jonas. In order that we may present this dark page in his lamentable record more clearly, we use the doomed man's own language in describing it: "Jonas came to father's house and raised a quarrel with me. We were both

drunk. Mother cried, and begged me not to hurt him, and went out to the corner of the house and was talking to Wash Powers, who had just come with his gun. I had his gun in my hands, and Jonas crawled to the door and commenced vomiting. I cocked the gun and was taking aim at his head. Wash caught the gun and exclaimed, "My God, what are you doing?" Jonas then went in and lay down on the bed. I went in and sat down by the door, near to him, and drew my pistol and fired at his head, just missing it, the ball entering the wall just over him. Mother screamed, and I left the house and lay out in the woods till night when I became sober. When I came in they told me what I had done, and it made my heart ache to think about it. We examined the bullet-hole in the wall and it seemed impossible for it to have missed Jonas from where he was lying."

Wayne and Wash Powers were going through Isaac Powers' pasture, and Wayne was again intoxicated. He drew his pistol and attempted to shoot Mr. Powers' mule. Wash knocked the pistol up and it fired into the air. Wash ran off a short distance and sat down, crying that he was shot. Wayne went up to him, and finding that he was not shot, cocked his pistol in his face and told him he would give him something to hollo for. Wash seized the pistol with both hands. Wayne pulled the trigger, catching Wash's hand between the hammer and tube and cutting it to the bone. He says if he had succeeded in killing his brother he would have committed suicide.

Wayne Powers and Jack Ramey went to preaching in Buffalo hollow, intending to whip Nathan Casteel and break up the meeting. On the way they threw down Casteel's fence. Arriving at the church Wayne said with an oath that he had an appointment to preach there that evening, and intended to do so or die. Casteel ordered him arrested. The two boys walked to the fence and declared that they would die before they would be arrested. They then went to Bill Ramey's still-house, got some brandy and said they intended to "whip out" Buffalo hollow. Going directly to the house of Nathan Casteel, and finding that Casteel was at his father's, a short distance below, Jack went in and compelled the women to prepare their dinner, which they carried with them down into the field above "old man Casteel's" house, and calling Nathan Casteel out, they invited him to come up and take dinner with them. Casteel and four other men, each carrying guns, started up towards them. Jack had a pistol in his hand, and cocking it, ordered the men not to cross the fence. Wayne had no pistol, and

attempted to wrest the pistol from Jack's hands, when it fired, shooting a hole through his wrist, and shattering it so that his hand came off. This was in February, 1883.

In the following July Wayne Powers went to West Virginia, Shortly after arriving there he went to church and got into a difficulty for which he was indicted in the Wayne county court. Jonas Powers, George Gibson, and Joe Mead arrived there from this county a few days later, and George Gibson hired to a Mr. Garret to work on the farm.

FULL PARTICULARS OF THE MURDER OF WILL GIBSON

We come now, kind reader, to the last chapter in the dark career of this youthful criminal—the murder for which he paid the penalty on the gallows. The following is the whole story as told in Wayne Powers' own language:

"About two weeks before George Gibson's time was out with Garret I prepared to come out to this county, and my business was to kill Nathan Casteel, and take a woman back to West Virginia. Before starting I went to see George, and he wanted to send a letter by me to his wife. George then insisted on me to wait till Monday week and he would come with me, and said that we could have a great deal of fun up through the mountains of Kentucky. He said nothing about Will Gibson at that time. I agreed to wait. George came to me on Sunday before we started and told me that Will Gibson was coming with us, and said that he would name something to me, and see how it would suit me. 'If you will not go into it,' said he, 'you must promise to say nothing about it.' I promised. He said, 'How would you like to make \$12.00 in money and clothes enough to do you two years?' I asked how I could make them. He said that Will Gibson had them. I asked how we could get them. He said, 'We could kill him and hide him.' I replied that I could not do that, that in all my outlawry and bad behavior, it had never entered my mind to kill a man for what he had. George said that we could kill him and it would never be found out, that he had planned it all out when all the rest were asleep. 'You and the Ramey boys,' said he, 'were too bold in what you did.' I insisted that we 'slip off' and come by ourselves, and insinuated that I would not come if Will Gibson came. George said, 'Wayne, if you do not go I will kill him myself, and cut off his head and hide it, so that if his body is found it will not be recognized.' Then we started on Monday, George and Will Gibson, brother Jonas and myself. I had a half gallon of brandy. A short distance on the

way George asked me what I thought of his proposition. I replied that I could not hurt a man unless I had some cause. We all stopped to take a drink of brandy, and Will said to me, 'I will make your cross-eyes dance worse than they do.' Stepping to the road-side, I drew my pistol and told him then was as good a time as he would ever get. George said, 'Come on, boys, and dry that up.' We all then went on together, and just before we reached Sandy river George again asked if I would assist in killing Will. I said 'yes, I will kill him if he crooks his finger at me, but I don't want his clothes or anything he has.' Next day I was sober, and would not have harmed him in the least, but I had a grudge at him, and when I got to drinking I wanted to kill him, and George said, 'Wait till we get to the place where I can hide him.' I told him I did not want to hide him, what I did I did face to face. He said, 'If you will not have anything of his I will give you five dollars of my own money, if you will do as I tell you. He has a twenty-dollar suit of clothes that I intend to have.' We lay over at a man named Wade's waiting for a boat. I became sober and studied about what George had said, and saw that he intended to kill Will. I went down Sandy river and watched for a raft of timber to get on and go back to West Virginia, knowing that when intoxicated I would go into anything. No raft came along. Nothing more was said till we reached Osborn's gap, where George expressed a hope that we would not get out of the mountains before night, as it would be a suitable place to execute the fiendish deed. I carried the valice and led the way into the "settlements" before night. We tried to get some brandy at a man named Mullins, but failed. I said, 'Boys, I wish we had some brandy, as my feet and legs are sore. Will said it did not matter if they rotted off. I cursed him, and said that I had taken about all I intended to off of him. As we came through the Flatwoods George said to me, 'If you are going to do that now is the only chance.' I replied, 'George, I can't do that.' He said, 'If you will, I will hide him, and it will never be known.' He offered to let me stay at his house all summer, and said if it was ever found out he would give me money to take me wherever I wished to go, if it was across the sea. Will and Jonas walked before, and in every laurel and brushy place George would draw his pistol, but I persuaded him not to fire. He drew his pistol two or three times, and the last time I caught his arm. After we got through the woods George said that he knew of a cave on Chestnut ridge where we could hide him. Will Gibson asked where we could get brandy. We told him that the nearest

WAYNE POWERS

was at 'Little' John Ramey's. We then went on to Ramey's field, and George told Will and Jonas to stay there, as Ramey's license may have expired, and Will being a stranger, we could not get the brandy. George and I went after the brandy, and when I got it I drank a good deal, and everything that Will Gibson had said to me came to my mind, and hearing there that Bill and Jack Ramey had been sent to the penitentiary, I became 'blood-thirsty,' and did not care for anything. We got five pints of brandy in a bucket. We then came on into the gap above 'Little' John Ramey's, built a fire and drank some brandy. George took me out twice and told me not to kill him there, and I told him I would rather 'take it out' with him face to face. George said to wait till we got on Chestnut ridge, and he would put his hand on my shoulder as a signal when to shoot him. We then started to the ridge, and at the path leading to Charlie Horn's Jonas Powers left us, and we did not see him again that night. On the ridge we took a drink, and George touched me on the shoulder and I fired as quickly as possible. When I fired Will dropped his valise, and putting his hand on George's shoulder, said, 'Who did that, George?' George said, 'I don't know.' While they were talking George drew a bowie-knife from his pocket, and when Will saw the knife he jumped back and started to run. George dropped the knife, scabbard, razor and rule and took after Will and shot him twice. At the second shot Will fell and George stuck the bowie-knife in him to the hilt three times. I heard Will tell George that he had gone back on his best friend. George called me to come down, but I refused. He then came up to where I was and I went down with him. Will's head was nearly severed from his body, and George's arm was bloody to the elbow. The horrible sight shocked my conscience. George then piled dry rails on the mangled body, and told me to pull sedge grass with which to kindle a fire under them. I did so, and after kindling the fire, George took off his bloody shirt and put on one of the murdered man's. He wanted me to take some of the clothes, but I refused. He had a coat that he had gotten from Will that day, which I swapped for that night. I saw George search Will, and take from his pocket one ten-dollar bill, besides some other things and some other smaller change. Before we parted on the hill above the scene of the tragedy, George gave me four dollars, and said he was going back to put more rails on the burning body. I went to Liza Hawkins' and saw nothing more of George that night. I left him about two hours before day. The murder was committed on the night of April 19th, 1884.

WAYNE POWERS

"On the 22d of April I was arrested, on the 23d tried before justices of the peace, and on the 24th, together with Jonas Powers and George Gibson, lodged in the Estillville jail."

A few days after their imprisonment Wayne Powers accused George Gibson of swearing falsely against him on his trial before the justices, a quarrel ensued, and Powers would have killed Gibson had not the timely appearance of the jailer prevented him from staining his hands with another man's blood.

On the 20th of November, 1884, Wayne Powers' trial began in the Circuit Court of Scott county, Judge John A. Kelly, of Marion, presiding. The trial consumed four days, and resulted in a verdict of "guilty of murder in the first degree." On the 28th of November Judge Kelly pronounced the death-sentence on Wayne and Jonas Powers and George Gibson, and fixed the 6th of February, 1885, as the date of their execution. Jonas Powers, however, was given a respite of thirty days by the Governor. Two days before his execution, Wayne Powers made a profession of religion, and expressed a willingness and readiness to meet his fate.

Thus ends the career of Wayne Powers—four years ago a bright and harmless youth—to-day the occupant of a murderer's grave. Under the baneful influence of evil associates and intoxicating drinks, the last four years of his life were spent in planning and executing criminal deeds which culminated in murder and its ignominious expiation on the gallows. Let the youths who read this little book think seriously of the sad lesson of this unfortunate youth, and thereby take warning and avoid the evils that led to his ruin.

O. A. Strandlin

Kingdom of Denmark

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