

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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APPREHENSION OF THE MURDERER

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THE MURDER OF EMMA LOUISE HUNT

"She loved me once, or pretended she did, but she proved false to me and I have sworn I will kill her and I shall do it... I shall make her suffer as she has made me suffer before I kill her and yet I love her... she must die... the body of the girl you all can find."
— William Lake, Murderer

"The worst thing of having a romance is that it leaves one so unromantic."
— Oscar Wilde

This is a story about one of the most brutal homicides ever committed in the history of Orleans County. The facts of this case were entirely researched by Donald L. Smith of Holley in 1977. It is therefore to Mr. Smith's credit that this story is made possible.

Emma Louise Hunt and William Lake were both employed by Joseph Van Camp, a well-to-do farmer in the Town of Carlton. Emma, age 20, was a domestic or hired girl in the household while Lake, age 24, served as a hired man. William Lake was supposedly deeply in love with Emma who in turn did not seem to favor his advances. She had on several occasions refused to accompany him to various places of amusement. This sort of treatment provoked Lake until he sought his revenge. At some time prior to the murder of Emma Louise Hunt on Thursday, Oct. 18, 1894, William Lake wrote a letter of confession, excerpts of which have been quoted above.

On the evening of the tragedy, Mr. Van Camp and family had occasion to leave their home for a short time, leaving Lake and the girl alone in the house. As soon as they were gone, Lake went into the living room where Emma was sitting and asked her why she had refused to accompany him to a dance in Albion that evening. She told him it was because he was "a loafer and a drunkard." He said no more but went to the barn to procure a hammer. In a moment he returned and walking over to where she was sitting, struck her on the head with about twenty-five very severe blows with the hammer. Not being satisfied, he then went to the pantry and obtained a butcher knife with which he cut her throat. In addition to this, he then slashed the blade across her body which completely disemboweled her. With this fiendish mission accomplished, he then left the Van Camp residence.

When the Van Camps returned home, they immediately discovered the hideous crime. Neighbors were alarmed and a search of the house and premises was made which resulted in the finding of a confession letter in Lake's room. He evidently had written it that evening while the Van Camps were eating their supper. This of course, proved that Lake had fully premeditated the awful deed.

Orleans County Sheriff John G. Rice offered a reward of \$300.00 for the arrest of Lake. For three days officers were on his track but he was not apprehended until Sunday noon when he was discovered hiding in the barn of Mrs. Richard Hoag near Waterport. He was arrested by Constable Barry Handy of that village and delivered to Sheriff Rice. Lake admitted everything including having written the letter of confession. The following Monday he was arraigned before Justice W. C. Ramsdale with District Attorney Edward B. Simmons in charge of the prosecution. Attorney Thomas Kirby was engaged in Lake's behalf. Constable Handy and Isaac Crosby of Waterport claimed the \$300.00 reward for Lake's capture.

Lake's trial for the Hunt girl's murder was held on February 13, 14, and 15, 1895 in the Orleans County Court House with Supreme Court Judge Henry A. Childs presiding.

Lake's defense by Thomas Kirby was that his mind was in such a condition at the time of the murder he was not responsible for his act. Several witnesses in his behalf testified that he frequently had severe headaches. Lake (assumed name) was an illegitimate child which fact also played a great part in his actions for it bothered him greatly. His early childhood had been spent in Genesee County before coming to Orleans County and being adopted by Mr. and Mrs. John Ross of Waterport. Kirby tried his best to prove Lake insane. The case was given to the jury at 5 P.M. on Friday afternoon and after remaining out for about five hours it returned with a verdict of "murder in the first degree". He was unmoved when Judge Childs pronounced the death sentence upon him. Throughout the trial Lake never denied anything and completely accepted and looked forward to his sentence. He was remanded to Auburn State Prison where he was sentenced to be electrocuted during the week of April 1, 1895. Lake's attorney moved for a new trial but the motion was denied. During his incarceration at Auburn Prison, William Lake became a convert to Christianity. His letter of confession included several atheistic statements such as: "I say to you all there is no God or he would not let people suffer as they do."

On Thursday, April 4, 1895 at 12:45 P.M. in Auburn Prison, William Lake became the seventh man in New York State to be executed by electrocution.

The total time from the date of the crime on Oct. 18, 1894 to the date of the execution on April 4, 1895 was precisely 168 days. Something to think about when we're told nowadays of court calendar backlogs.