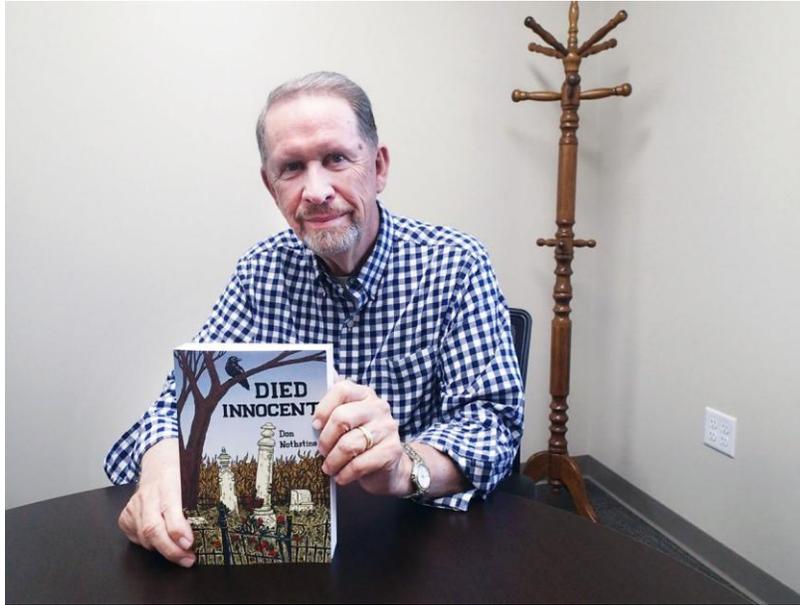


Arkoe's Dr. Talbott dies again in new novel

- TONY BROWN / MARYVILLE DAILY FORUM; Tuesday, October 25, 2016



Nodaway County resident Don Nothstine, who recently completed writing "Died Innocent," a fictionalized account of the 1880 Dr. Perry Talbott murder near Arkoe, poses this week with a copy of his new novel. A book-signing for "Died Innocent" will take place from 1-4 p.m. Saturday, No. 12, at Tobiason Stained Glass Studio in St. Joseph. A second signing is scheduled for Dec. 3, time to be announced, at the Maryville Hy-Vee supermarket.

For Nodaway County history buffs and "true crime" fans nationwide the Talbott killing remains a sensational murder that still resonates after nearly 140 years. On Sept. 18, 1880, Dr. Perry Talbott was shot through a window of his farmhouse northwest of Arkoe. The outspoken physician, Civil War veteran, newspaper publisher, and state legislator died of wounds later that evening, blaming his political enemies for the shooting with his last breath. But it was his sons, Albert P. and Charles E. Talbott, who were charged with the crime and ultimately hanged for it on July 22, 1881, in the county's first legal execution. The boys' tombstone still stands today, a column of carved rock in a small graveyard visible

from Route U in southern Nodaway County. The inscription reads, "We Died Inocent," the word "innocent" misspelled with only two "n's." Whether or not Albert and Charles actually killed their father has been debated ever since. The witness testimony and evidence used to convict the young men, many believe, was flimsy and best, and no obvious motive was ever established.

So, what does a curious and literary-minded person do when they encounter a mystery that can't be solved? Well, in Don Nothstine's case, they write a novel. Nothstine, a retired Northwest Missouri State University business professor and longtime Barnard resident, recently published "Died Innocent" — spelled with all three n's — a fictional retelling of the Talbott tragedy in which the names are changed but much of the story remains the same. In Nothstine's version, Dr. Zebulon McKee, the patriarch on a family farm located near the northwest Missouri village of Stratford, is a respected community leader nevertheless haunted by the horror of his Civil War experiences and unresolved conflicts with his deceased father. "Doc," though a prominent member of post-frontier society, is also something of a tyrant at home, and his murder completes a formula that distills into a toxic brew of unintended consequences, family tragedy, and courtroom drama.

Nothstine is currently preparing to unveil his new book, which he said took him about a decade to write, at a couple of book-signings in St. Joseph and Maryville. Published by Amazing Things Press, the novel checks in at just over 430 pages and sports a cover illustrated by area resident Joshua W. Cotter. The author said he began the project with the idea of writing a straightforward history of the murder and its aftermath with an eye toward establishing whether or not the Talbott boys were really guilty. After doing a significant amount of research, however, Nothstine said he decided the answers he was seeking simply weren't there, and that the trail toward a satisfactory solution to the real-life whodunit had long gone cold. Still, the tale had gotten under his skin early on, and the itch to write about it, in one form or another, just wouldn't go away.

“The family cemetery where these people are buried is still there, just north of Route U,” Nothstine said of his fascination with the Talbott saga. “I’d driven by it for years and always told myself that someday I was going to have to go up and look at it, and so one day I did.” From that moment on, he said, getting his version of events on paper and between covers was just a matter of time.

As have others writing about the Talbott killing, Nothstine relied extensively while spinning his yarn on a book titled “The Murder of Dr. Talbott” by Janet Hawley, essentially a compendium of newspaper articles and court records that follows the case from start to finish. The more he read through Hawley’s research, the more fascinated he became. And while the dead-ends of history ultimately proved too difficult to breach, Nothstine said the old reports set down in the flowery Victorian journalese of the day nevertheless made for fascinating reading.

“I thought, ‘Boy that’s interesting,’” he said, “so I started working on it” — and Zebulon McKee, along with his alternate 19th century Nodaway County universe, was born. “It was just a good story,” Nothstine said. “You have two boys that were hanged for their father’s murder, when in fact they may not have committed that murder. “And Dr. Talbott himself was an intriguing character — a Civil War veteran — and most people liked him. He was a state legislator and kind of a hero. Also, he had been an abolitionist and was very modern in terms of race.” But, as least as Nothstine imagines him, Talbott/McKee also had a dark side, possibly shaded by what today would be called post-traumatic stress disorder. “It looks like he was also kind of a heavy-handed SOB with his family at home,” the author said.

Nothstine worked on the book, off and on, for 10 years, generally writing in the winter and taking the summers off for golf and other retirement pursuits. But as the plot thickened, so did his work ethic. “As I got close to the end I kind of gained momentum.” he said. Now he’s hoping readers will do the same thing.

Nothstine's first book-signing for "Died Innocent" will take place from 1-4 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 12, at Tobiason Stained Glass Studio in St. Joseph. A second signing is scheduled for Dec. 3, times to be announced, at the Maryville Hy-Vee supermarket.