

FORMER FAIRFIELD GANG MEMBER DIES IN KANSAS

The Wayne County area lost one of its most colorful and controversial figures about three months ago when Charles Bryan HARRIS died in the home of a niece in Elkhart, Kansas, at the age of 91. The death was not announced publicly until this week when the Wayne County Press carried the story.

HARRIS was a farmer, and his earlier involvement in some extra curricular activities brought him instant attention in the Fairfield area, along with several brushes with the law.

HARRIS was known in his early years as Charles (Blackie) HARRIS and served with the old SHELTON gang which goes back to the late 1920's and early 1930's when he was arrested in Detroit, where federal authorities accused him of booze running and distribution of counterfeit money. Following his arrest, HARRIS spent nine years in Leavenworth Prison in Kansas.

In the following years, HARRIS split up with the SHELTON brothers, and one by one, three of the brothers were shot and killed, and, although accusations were made against HARRIS in the shootings, he denied any connection, and was never tried or convicted in any of the incidents.

The deaths included Carl SHELTON, who was gunned down in an ambush in an area southeast of Fairfield in 1947; Bernie SHELTON, who was slain outside his tavern in Peoria in 1948; and Roy SHELTON, who was gunned down in a field southeast of Fairfield in 1950.

The last shooting incident involving the SHELTONs occurred in the western part of Fairfield in July 1951, when Lulu SHELTON PENNINGTON, a sister of the SHELTON brothers, and her husband Guy were shot. The two recovered from their wounds, and moved to Florida, as did Big Earl SHELTON and another brother, Dalta, who later died of natural causes. HARRIS was accused of shooting the PENNINGTONs, but was not convicted.

In January 1963, H.S. TAYLOR, the unofficial mayor of the Pond Creek community, was slain on a rural road southeast of Fairfield. HARRIS was charged and tried for that shooting, but was later found innocent by a Wayne County jury.

In 1965, HARRIS was tried and convicted for the murder of Jerry MERRITT and Betty NEWTON of Fairfield, and spent 15 years in the Illinois prison system for that crime, and was released from the Vienna correctional center in 1980.

HARRIS had made his home since his release from prison on property owned by a niece, residing in a small trailer he owned, but usually eating with the family.

On the evening of June 20, HARRIS had sat down at the supper table in the niece's home, when he was stricken by a heart attack, and fell to the floor. He was transported to the Martin County Hospital where he was pronounced dead on arrival.

Graveside services for HARRIS were held in Elkhart on June 23, and he was buried next to his wife, Rena, who passed away in 1968.

HARRIS had owned farm properties in southeast Wayne County and had farmed them for a number of years. He had visited the area several times since being released from prison in 1980, and made his last visit to the area last spring when he passed through the Fairfield area.

And so, the question remains - Who carried out the vendetta against the SHELTONs? One somehow has the feeling that somewhere in the great beyond (either up or down), Charlie BIRGER is quietly laughing at the systematic extermination of his arch-enemies, the SHELTON brothers.

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CIVIL WAR VIGNETTES

Since we have a few pages to spare, following is another group of vignettes in a series started a few issues ago. These are simply little stories collected and written during many years of reading and studying Civil War history. MEW

MUD TURTLES AND POLLYWOGS

Federal planners, judging correctly that the war in the West might well hinge on control of the rivers, decided by May of 1861 to build a fleet of warships that would be specially adapted to navigating those tricky rivers. They sent U.S.Navy Commander John Rodgers to the West to organize a river fleet.

Anxious to deploy gunboats on the rivers as quickly as possible, Rodgers purchased three flat-bottomed side-wheelers in Cincinnati, and in June commissioned their conversion into timberclad gunboats - the Lexington, the Tyler and the Conestoga.

Rodgers had the steamers' upper works stripped away and their frames and decks strengthened with heavy timbers to accomodate the weight of four to eight heavy guns. These cannon, 32-pounder smooth-bores and 8-inch rifled guns, would give the ships a great edge over any Confederate vessel then on the rivers. Finally, he had the three ships sheathed with oak planks four inches thick.

These timberclads were completed by the end of the summer of 1861. Although they could not withstand heavy cannon fire, they proved invaluable in the reconnoitering and raiding of Confederate bases well upstream. The Lexington took part in the first action of the Western Flotilla by capturing a Confederate steamer on August 22. On September 14, along with the Tyler, she attacked Confederate batteries along the Mississippi. All three of the timberclads supported Gen. Grant's attack on Belmont, Mo. on November 7.

While Commander Rodgers was putting together these makeshift gunboats, plans were underway for a more substantial river fleet. The man who won the contract to produce the ships was James B. Eads, a veteran riverman and salvage expert as well as a hard-driving taskmaster.

Eads faced enormous technical difficulties. The ships had to be strongly protected to withstand bombardment from the Confederate forts scattered along the banks of the rivers, and they had to mount cannon at least as heavy as the fixed Confederate artillery. Yet, despite the great weight of their guns and protective gear, they had to be so shallow of draft that they could navigate in less than ten feet of water.

As a first step, Eads used his experience as a salvager and improvised freely on Rodgers' work. He purchased and converted two river boats into ironclad gunboats. The first, a five-year-old ferry named New Era, was quickly rebuilt and put into action as the Essex, carrying a crew of 124.

The second took longer, but was Eads' pride and joy because of its size and stability. It was a snag boat, a peculiarly Western vessel used to raise sunken ships and submerged trees, and was an enormous vessel, 200 feet long and 72 feet in the beam. The bow and sides were covered with iron, three and a half inches thick, and pierced with gunports for 16 cannon. The finished ship, renamed the Benton, carried a crew of 176 men and was the most effective gunboat in the Western Flotilla. The ponderous Benton moved slowly, driven by two high-pressure engines, and when the commander of the Western Flotilla, Flag Officer Andrew Foote, complained about her slowness, Eads replied that she was "plenty fast enough to fight with."

While all this conversion was going on, Eads was also planning and building seven new ironclads. Starting in August of 1861, work crews laid the keels - four of them at Carondelet on the Mississippi near St. Louis, and three at the Mound City, Ill. naval station, five or six miles north of Cairo, on the Ohio River. These vessels, adapted from the plans of Samuel Pook and often called "Pook's Turtles," were built expressly to fight Confederate shore batteries.

Each of the seven ironclads was 175 feet long and 51.2 feet in the beam. The casemate, its walls slanted at about 35 degrees to deflect enemy fire, was protected with two and a half inches of iron plate on the bow and sides. Each vessel was armed with 13 cannon and powered by two high-compression steam engines that could propel the ship upstream at five miles per hour and downstream at nine miles