

Martin County Sheriffs – Part I 1857-1898

The history of law enforcement in Martin County dates back to the pioneer days of the mid-1800s and includes some very interesting and colorful incidents. The following is the first in a series of three articles, including pictures, documenting the sheriffs that have served Martin County. This is based on information taken from the archives of the Pioneer Museum as well as documentation and research provided by Martin County Deputy Sheriff Jean Vath.

The following sheriffs served the county from 1857-1859: Isaac A. Lewis, the first Martin County sheriff, served from 1857-1858; and B. F. Lilly served from 1858-1859.

Willard Harrison, Hosea A. True, Richard James, E. D. Walker; Amasa Bowen; David Bates; Oren Prentice; C. H. Bullard; William Bird, Jr.; Sommerville Hill; and Washington P. Hill; served from 1860-1898.

Willard Harrison served as sheriff from 1860-1863. During his term, jurors were selected for criminal action against an individual for burning another county resident's cow barn. At that time, Martin County had eight farms and a population of 151.

Hosea True, originally from New Hampshire, served from 1864-1865 during the Indian uprisings. He also worked on a government survey crew.

Richard James served from 1865-1866 and encountered the first reported murder in Martin County. Trappers found the body of Charles White of Yankton, South Dakota, with a bullet hole in his head. His horse, revolver, knives, and \$1,200.00 in cash were by his body. He was buried where he was found as his family didn't want his body returned to South Dakota.

E. D. Walker, Amasa Bowen, David Bates, and Oren Prentice served during 1866-1868.

C. H. Bullard served from 1869-1876. He captured three men from Faribault County that had stolen a yoke of oxen near East Chain. Since Fairmont didn't have a jail at that time and transporting them to Mankato seemed too costly, their incarceration involved being watched by a deputy at all times. The three attempted an escape when the deputy and sheriff were briefly away. However, the sheriff's wife foiled their plot by holding them captive at gunpoint until the sheriff returned.

William Bird, Jr., originally from New York, served as sheriff of Martin County from 1876-1884. During his term Fairmont's first suicide was reported, a result of self-inflicted poisoning. During his tenure, he also witnessed the discovery of a male body near the home of A. M. Welcome. Authorities could not determine the identity of the man, where he was from, or the cause of death. Another somewhat bizarre incident involved a man being arrested on a criminal warrant sworn out by his wife for slander as a result of his stating that she was a woman of "easy virtue." In addition, a warrant was issued for an individual keeping a house of "ill fame," and a theft of \$300.00 was reported from the Occidental Hotel in Fairmont.

Sommerville Hill served as sheriff of Martin County from 1885-1892. Sommerville, and his brother, Washington P. Hill, were the sons of James J. Hill who came to Martin County as an early settler in 1866. Sommerville Hill also became Fairmont's first Chief of Police. A major event during Sommerville Hill's term involved Mule Farm in Jay Township being destroyed by fire in 1888.

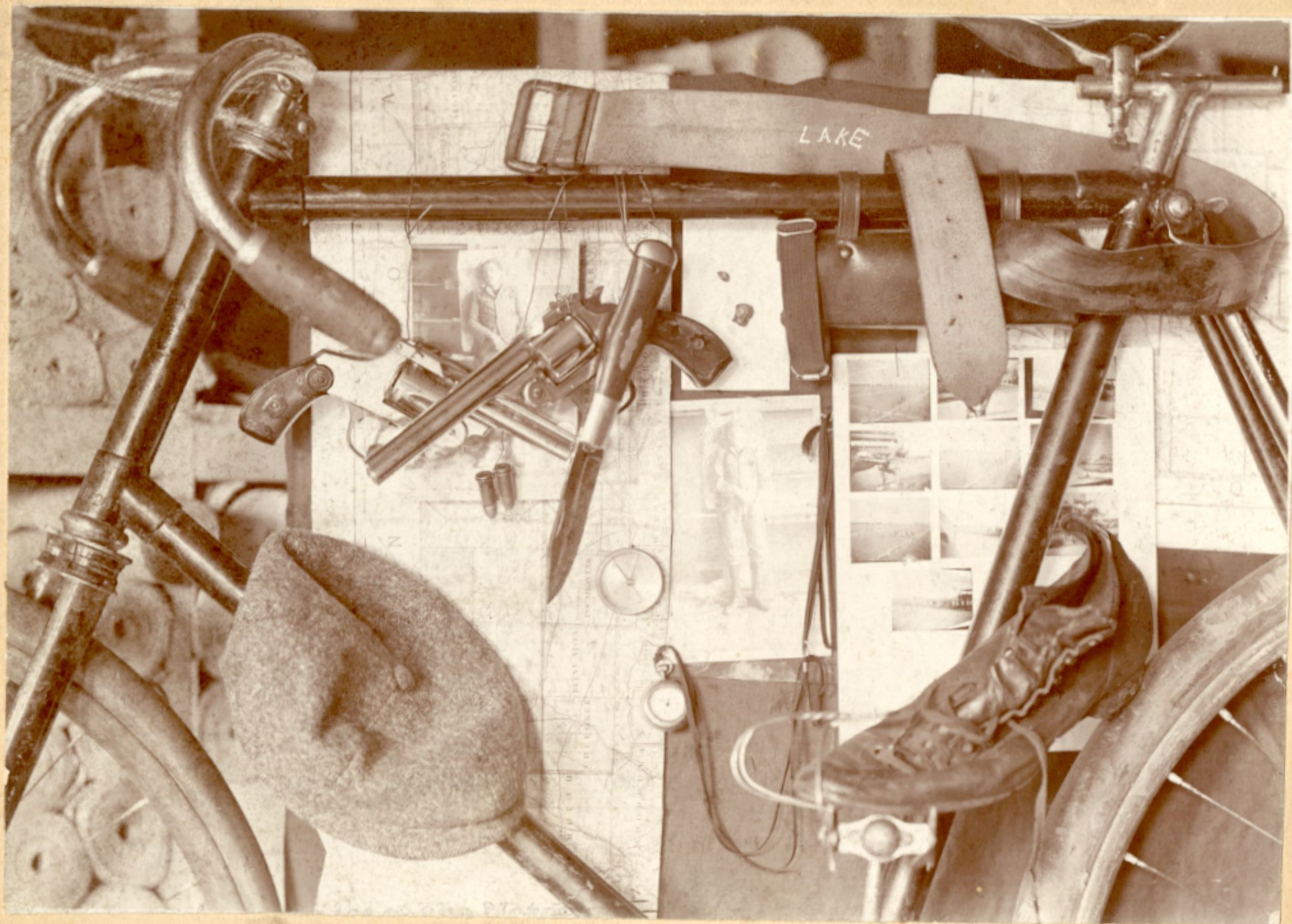
Washington P. Hill served as sheriff of Martin County from 1893-1898. During his term in office, Lee Palmer of Jackson died in 1894 on a farm near Sherburn when he fell 150 feet while clinging to a guide rope from a balloon. Another noteworthy event that occurred during Hill's term in office took place in October of 1896 when the Sherburn Bank was robbed by two brothers. The robbers escaped on bicycles making off with \$1,000.00. However, they dropped \$2,000.00 in cash while fleeing the bank and overlooked another \$2,000.00 in gold that was in the till. Two men in the bank were killed during the robbery and Bancroft, Iowa, Marshall William Gallion was also killed. Marshall Gallion was killed during a shootout when his posse came across one of the robbers hiding in a farmhouse fourteen miles east of Elmore. That robber was wounded and then committed suicide to avoid being captured. The second robber was apprehended in Lake Mills, Iowa, claiming that his brother killed the people in the Sherburn bank.

The pioneer days of Martin County provided a number of interesting and challenging law enforcement issues. Although some of those challenges from the past were similar; many were very different from those law enforcement officers face today.









Relics of the Notorious Sherburn Bank Robbers.