

The History of Martin County Sheriffs

The history of law enforcement in Martin County, specifically the sheriffs of Martin County, dates back to 1857. The following is a historical account of what might be considered some of the more interesting and fascinating events involving the sheriffs that have served Martin County, especially in the earlier years, as well as the cases and events they investigated and encountered. I would like to acknowledge and thank Martin County Deputy Sheriff Jean Vath for her help in providing historical information and research for this article.

There were 10 sheriffs in Martin County from 1857-1877; however, there is not a great wealth of information about these early sheriffs. Isaac A. Lewis was Martin County's first sheriff and served from December of 1857 to July of 1858. He became sheriff when Minnesota Governor Samuel Medary appointed commissioners to establish both Martin County and a county seat. B. F. Lilly served as sheriff from 1858 to 1859.

Willard Harrison served as sheriff from 1860-1863. During his tenure, jurors were selected for criminal action against an individual for burning another county resident's cow barn, and \$200.00 was appropriated for the 1st Martin County court house. At that time, Martin County had a total of eight farms and a population of 151.

Hosea A. True served as sheriff from 1864-1865, during the time Indian uprisings were reported in the area. He was originally from New Hampshire and he had also worked across the county on a government survey crew.

Richard James served from 1865-1866. The first reported murder in Martin County took place during his tenure as sheriff. Trappers found the body of Charles White of Yankton, South Dakota, by Twin Lake. White, who owned a store and a transportation business, was on his way to Mankato with twenty-four yoke of oxen. He left his oxen by Twin Lake and went on horseback to try to find a shortcut to Mankato, which was apparently unsuccessful. His body was found two months later, in a swamp that had dried up, along with his horse, revolver, knives, and \$1,200.00 in cash that he was carrying. A bullet hole was found on one side of his head. His family had no interest in having his body returned to South Dakota, so he was buried near where he was found.

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

C. H. Bullard served as sheriff from 1869-1876. Prior to that time, he served as a 2nd Lt. in the National Guard in Fairmont. An interesting event that took place during his term involved three men from Faribault County that had stolen a yoke of oxen near East Chain. Upon being captured in Iowa, they were returned to Fairmont. However, Fairmont did not have a jail, and since keeping them in Mankato seemed too expensive, it was decided that they would be held in Fairmont and watched by a deputy at all times. One day, when the sheriff was out of town, the three tried to escape. However, before

they could get away, they were confronted by the sheriff's wife holding a revolver. She foiled their plans and held them at bay until the sheriff returned.

William Bird, Jr., who moved here from New York, served as sheriff of Martin County from 1876-1884. During his term, Fairmont experienced its first suicide when, in 1879, a man poisoned himself. Other interesting events involved the discovery of a body near the home of A. M. Welcome. Officials were unable to determine the cause of death, the identity, or where the man came from. Another incident involved a man being arrested on a criminal warrant sworn out by his wife for slander in his stating that she was a woman of "easy virtue." Additionally, a warrant was issued for an individual keeping a house of "ill fame," and \$300.00 was stolen from the Occidental Hotel in Fairmont.

Two brothers, Sommerville Hill and Washington P. Hill, also served Martin County as Sheriff. They were the sons of James Hill, who came to Martin County in 1866. Sommerville Hill, also Fairmont's first Chief of Police, served as sheriff from 1885-1892. Washington P. Hill served as sheriff from 1893-1898. Some notable incidents at that time included a man from Jackson falling 150 feet to his death from a balloon, the Sherburn bank robbery of 1896 in which two men, an employee and a customer, were killed at the bank. The bank robbers, brothers Hans and Lew Kelliham, escaped with \$1,000.00 from the bank and rode off on bicycles. In attempting to capture the outlaws at a farmhouse fifteen miles east of Elmore, Marshall Gallion of Bancroft, Iowa, was killed. The robber, Hans Kelliham then ran from the house, and seeing there was no escape, committed suicide. The other robber, his brother Lew Kelliham, was captured the next day in Lake Mills, Iowa.

E. E. Ward served as sheriff from 1899-1926. During his term, the skeletal remains of a man and a canine were discovered during the construction of the new Martin County Courthouse in 1906. Also, the Peoples State Bank of Monterrey was robbed of \$1,485.00, and Sheriff Ward shot and killed a man in front of Wallace's Clothing Store who was attempting an escape after being charged with sexual assault.

From 1913-1926, William S. Caver served as sheriff. He was the son of Sam Carver, well known for the famed "Carver-Tuttle" fight near Ceylon in 1862. During his service as sheriff, John Monk of Welcome was appointed by Minnesota Governor Burnquist as a motorcycle patrolman in 1917. The National Bank of Truman was robbed when seven men captured the Truman Village Marshall and locked him in the village jail. The criminals tried to blow the safe at the bank and eventually escaped with \$300.00 as well as an undetermined amount from safe deposit boxes. It is also of interest to note that Sheriff Carver was at one time a high ranking member of the Ku Klux Klan. He lost his bid for reelection in 1926 because of his association with the Klan; even though he went public stating his Klan involvement was a mistake, as well as his high conviction rate of bootleggers.

Gus H. Jorgenson, who served as sheriff from 1927-1931, was the first Martin County law enforcement officer killed in the line of duty. On September 8, 1931, Sheriff Jorgenson was called to a farm in Nashville Township where the farmer and his wife

stated they had been threatened by a beet worker. When Sheriff Jorgenson arrived, he was directed to the “shack” where the beet worker was located. He was greeted at the door by Nicholas Rodriguez, the beet worker, who then shot Jorgenson and pushed him out the door. Sheriff Jorgenson staggered to the farmer’s house, collapsed, and died on the steps leading to the farmhouse. A posse was formed made up of local law enforcement officers and the National Guard. Tear gas was used to get Rodriguez out of the shack. He came out shooting with two weapons and was consequently shot and killed by the posse.

William L. Roehler was the Martin County Sheriff from 1931-1946. During his term as sheriff, the 1936 Hand’s Park tornado took place. Also, three Welcome businesses burned, a plane crashed in Monterey killing one person, and he was involved with the capture of two men who had escaped from a Nebraska prison.

From 1947-1950, A. R. Batterman served as sheriff. William Musegades was appointed Deputy Sheriff in 1947, and in 1948 the State Bank of Ceylon was held up by two men who made off with \$5,000.00.

William Musegades served as Sheriff of Martin County from 1951-1971. When elected, he couldn’t immediately take office because he was on active duty in the military, and William Klusendorf acted as Sheriff until he returned in August of 1951. His wife, Velma Musegades, cooked for the prisoners, was deputized, and she also later served on the Governor’s Crime Commission. During his service as sheriff, a Grand Jury was called for a triple murder and one of his deputies, Lester Uhrhammer, was killed in the line of duty. One September evening in 1955, Deputy Uhrhammer and a friend were on their way to a dance at Interlaken when they noted an individual driving erratically. Deputy Uhrhammer recognized the individual and noted that his license had been previously taken away. They followed the vehicle and made a stop four miles north of Sherburn. While Deputy Uhrhammer was searching the vehicle, his gun discharged, hitting him in the hand and face and killing him. The Grand Jury called in this case returned a “No Bill,” meaning charges would not be brought against the driver of the vehicle, by a vote of 17-6.

From 1971-1978 Richard H. Evanson served as sheriff. The yet unsolved murder of JoAnn Bontjes took place in 1975.

The other sheriffs to serve Martin County include Larry Willard from 1979-1982; Gerald Nutt from 1983-1994; Robert Meschke from 1995-2002; and the present Sheriff, Brad Gerhardt, has served from 2003 to the present time.

For more information on Martin County Sheriffs, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.