

The Taylor– McQueen Saga: Murder and Retribution

by Timothy Dean Hudson

This violent saga resulted from the ill-fated 1898 marriage in Farmerville of Sudie McQueen and James Marion Taylor Jr. Both Sudie and Jim came from well-known pioneer families who arrived in the Bayou d’Loutre region east and north of Farmerville during the 1830s and 1840s and helped establish the new parish. Sudie descended from the Auld, Ward, Albritton, and Lee families, and Jim from the Taylor, Matthews, and Dawkins families. In fact, Jim was the great-nephew of Judge John Taylor, an early settler and the first parish judge. At the time of their marriage, both Sudie and Jim had close relatives serving in prominent public positions and known throughout the parish and state.

Despite his illustrious family connections, at the young age of seventeen, Jim Taylor got into trouble when he seduced and had “*improper relations*” with a Ms. Daniels, a woman of twenty-five. Despite his youth, public opinion blamed Taylor for the scandal, and her brothers swore vengeance on Taylor to avenge their sister’s honor. In fear of his life, Taylor left Union Parish for a few years, returning in late 1898 in hopes that the public’s condemnation and the Daniels’ anger had subsided. Soon after his return, he married Sudie McQueen.

Later the next year, Jim and Sudie moved to Texas, settling in Collin County, just north of Dallas. There they lived together unhappily until 18 April 1900, when neighbors observed Sudie in a badly bruised condition. She explained her bruises with claims that she suffered a rough fall down a flight of stairs, but instead of improving, she gradually deteriorated. As her situation became critical, Taylor disappeared. Sudie then made her dying deposition. She had not fallen downstairs but had suffered a severe beating from her husband. He jerked her from her bed and punched her repeatedly in the abdomen. In addition to breaking two ribs, his severe beating caused critical damage to Sudie’s internal organs. Sudie died soon after making her deathbed revelation, and the Collin County sheriff immediately issued a warrant for Taylor’s arrest on the charge of murder.

Taylor had returned to north Louisiana and secured employment in Monroe under an assumed name. An informant led the Collin County sheriff to Taylor, and he was arrested and brought back to Texas to stand trial. At least four of Taylor’s Dawkins uncles worked as lawyers, and his uncle, Oliver C. Dawkins, served as his chief counsel at his trial in November 1900. One of the key witnesses was Taylor’s first cousin, Dr. Jordan Gray Taylor of Farmerville. After testimony, the jury found Jim Taylor guilty of second-degree murder, sentencing him to serve five years in the Texas State Penitentiary.

Dawkins immediately filed a motion for a new trial for his nephew on numerous grounds. The court granted the motion and called for a new trial the following April. After extensive preliminary depositions for the new trial, the county attorney filed a motion to dismiss the charges. Dawkins had convinced them that Sudie's dying declarations were "*not made under circumstances which would make them admissible as evidence.*" The remaining evidence was circumstantial and insufficient to warrant or sustain a conviction. Jim Taylor was immediately released from incarceration.

Sudie's father, Willis McQueen, had witnessed Jim Taylor's first trial, and upon the dismissal of all charges, he publicly swore vengeance on his son-in-law. Moreover, Sudie's murder had also resurrected the Daniel brothers' enmity against Taylor. Since the legal system had failed them, McQueen and the Daniels brothers, Joseph, Floyd, William, and Guthrie, decided to enact their own form of vigilante justice.

In August 1903, Jim Taylor Jr. assisted his brother, Robert Bufford Taylor, with building a new house near his old one about six miles northeast of Farmerville. Just after daylight on August 26th, Jim walked along the road towards the construction site. Suddenly and without warning, McQueen and the Daniels brothers rose from their concealment and opened fire with their weapons, riddling Taylor's chest with buckshot. As the young man slid to the ground, one of the assailants ran from his cover and emptied his gun into Taylor's body as he lay dying. Bufford Taylor and his wife ran from their old house to investigate, but McQueen and the Daniels fled. Due to the public nature of their quarrel with Taylor, they were immediately arrested as prime suspects in his murder and confined in the parish jail. After a month's confinement, the grand jury decided that the circumstantial evidence against McQueen and the Daniels was insufficient to warrant an indictment, so the sheriff set them free.

Two years later, additional witnesses came forward and provided evidence that convinced a grand jury to finally issue an indictment against them. The sheriff went to Webster Parish and arrested the four Daniels brothers near the Arkansas line. Willis McQueen had since moved to Calhoun, and so the Union Parish sheriff sent a telegraph asking for the Ouachita Parish deputy sheriff to go arrest McQueen.

When the deputy approached McQueen at his house and served him with the warrant, McQueen "*cheerfully acquiesced to the situation.*" However, he asked for a few minutes to go back into his house, shave, and change clothes. His complacent demeanor deceived the deputy, who consented to McQueen's request, seating himself in an adjoining room in partial view of the prisoner to wait. Growing impatient after a lengthy delay, the deputy entered the room where

McQueen was shaving, only to find he had been watching a strange man in front of the mirror, pretending to shave while McQueen had taken flight.

Assured of a speedy trial and tired of evading law officials, three weeks later McQueen caught the stage from Choudrant to Farmerville and turned himself in to the sheriff. Before his July 1905 trial in Farmerville, special arrangements had to be made for a judge, since District Court Judge Robert B. Dawkins was Taylor's uncle, and so he had to recuse himself. Instead, they brought back retired Judge William R. Roberts and appointed him Special Judge to adjudicate the case.

As the trial opened, the District Attorney presented the circumstantial evidence against McQueen and the Daniels brothers for murdering Jim Taylor Jr. to the court. The defendants felt so confident of their case that their counsel presented neither evidence nor argument. As expected, the jury found the accused not guilty. The "*Gazette*" editor wrote that the court let McQueen and the Daniels brothers go, "*leaving the crime to the unlashd eye of God for detection and the punishment to his infallible hand.*"

