

Violent & Sensational Crimes in Early Union Parish

by Timothy Dean Hudson

Osage Indian Attacks on the Ouachita

A complex sequence of events following de Soto's brutal foray across the southeastern portion of our continent in the early 1540s resulted in the virtual depopulation of the Ouachita Valley of northeastern Louisiana by 1700. The earliest French explorers found the mere remnants of the once populous Ouachita Indians living along the river in a single village near modern Monroe, but they soon vanished. After the Natchez War of 1729–1731, numerous nearby Native American nations coexisted with the French trappers on hunting expeditions in the Ouachita Valley of northeastern Louisiana and southern Arkansas.

By the mid-1700s, French traders operated along the rivers and bayous, establishing a camp to trade with the Indians on the bluffs above the Ouachita River, opposite the mouth of Bayou Bartholomew and near the site of what is now Ouachita City. Although the majority of these nations enjoyed peaceful relations with the Europeans, a particularly warlike band of Osage Indians caused problems for the French and Spanish. Based around the headwaters of the Ouachita River in west/central Arkansas, Osage war parties threatened all those hunting in the Ouachita and Red River Valleys of northern Louisiana. An early explorer described these particular Osage as *"...a lawless gang of robbers, making war with the whole world."*

In early 1773, the Osage killed five French traders on the Ouachita, possibly at or near the Ouachita City camp. In 1783, the Osage attacked a hunting party from the Spanish Poste d'Ouachita (modern Monroe) on the Ouachita River, scalping several of the party. In 1787, another Poste d'Ouachita hunting party camped near Ouachita City. Most of the party went in search of game, leaving behind two men along with an Indian woman and her child. In their absence, the Osage attacked the camp, butchering and mutilating the men, woman, and her child. This prompted the Spanish authorities to fund the construction of Fort Miro to protect against Osage incursions, and the fort and the influx of the peaceful Choctaw neutralized the Osage threat to the Ouachita Valley. Although the settlers remained fearful of additional Osage attacks until the 1810s, no additional attacks ever materialized along the Ouachita.

Murder and Executions

Attorney Allen Carr left Alabama in early 1837 and settled in the Pine Hills of Union Parish, establishing a large plantation two miles northeast of Farmerville. Carr owned several slaves that

he reportedly treated well. In the spring of 1842, Madison J. Mullen arrived in Union Parish and settled near Carr's plantation, and by late 1843 or early 1844, Mullen became indebted to Carr. As a means to avoid paying his debt to Carr, Mullen gradually convinced two of Carr's male slaves to murder their owner. On Monday, 15 April 1844, while Allen Carr sat beside and played with his young daughter, Sarah, at his plantation, the two slaves shot and killed him. Local authorities captured the slaves, but Mullen fled. Sheriff James H. Seale built gallows for the slaves' executions, and they were hanged for murder in Farmerville on Friday, April 19th.

Meanwhile, Frederick Brazeal apprehended Mullen, for which Carr's estate paid him a reward of \$150. In addition, the estate paid attorneys another \$150 for prosecuting Mullen. That fall, the Union Parish District Court convicted Madison J. Mullen of "*using language to slaves calculated, and no doubt intended, to excite insubordination.*" The judge sentenced him to twenty-one years' hard labor in the state penitentiary in Baton Rouge. Sheriff Seale left Farmerville on November 9th to convey Mullen to "*his future residence at Baton Rouge,*" with the New Orleans newspaper predicting that Mullen "*will no doubt learn the folly of his villainous conduct before he has served out his time.*"

A Crime of Passion

William R. Manning arrived in Ouachita City in the latter 1860s with his wife, Virginia, and he obtained employment as a grocer. By 1875, they had two young children. For some time, Manning suspected that a local widower, a Mr. W. R. Reese, was engaging in "*improper relations*" with Manning's wife. Known as a fearless and dangerous man of strong will, when angered, Reese became passionate and violent, "*full of fire and unyielding.*" The conflict caused the Mannings to separate in the fall of 1875, with Virginia keeping the children. Manning took his wife and children to Mississippi and came back to work in Monroe. Hearing that his wife had returned to Ouachita City with the children, Manning went there to claim them.

Reese made it known to Manning's friends that "*there would be war*" before Manning would get the children, demanding that Manning deposit \$25 for the children's support. Learning that Reese intended to attack him, Manning went to the back room of one of Ouachita City's saloons to wait. Reese came to the front door of the saloon, standing in the doorway looking outward with a small pistol in hand with his arm hanging down, unaware that Manning was behind him. Manning calmly got up and walked towards the door with a friend at his side. He started out of the saloon and as he came upon Reese's rear, Manning put his pistol to Reese's head and fired. Reese staggered and fell, and Manning fired a second time, this time hitting Reese in the left eye. Manning spent a few

days with friends, then went to Farmerville to surrender himself for trial. After an investigation, he was released on the grounds of self-defense.

Murder and Vengeance

William P. Mabry settled near Shiloh in about 1855, living on a farm on the western edge of Union Parish. By 1885, he had reached the age of sixty years. Late on April 19th, W. C. Henderson, Walter Ferguson, Jack Melton, and Calvin Skinner met at nearby Pisgah Baptist Church and made plans to talk with an elderly black woman, Caroline Simley, who lived on Mabry's farm with her children and grandchildren. Their precise motives remain unclear, but they were obviously of a nefarious nature.

When the men arrived at Ms. Simley's house, Skinner called out for her to open the door. Frightened and afraid for her family, Caroline put on her dress and ran out of the house some thirty yards before falling to the ground. Ferguson ran up to her and hit her on the head with a stick. Skinner and the other men grabbed her and took her back into the yard, where Henderson hit her in the eye with his pistol. Hearing Caroline's screams and the commotion from his house nearby, Mr. Mabry ran towards Caroline's house, exclaiming, "*Heigho! What is the matter? What are you doing there?*" Henderson released Caroline, and he and Skinner ran around her house towards Mabry. Skinner fired at Mabry, and then all four men ran off into the woods. The bullet hit Mabry in the center of his chest, and he died soon afterwards.

Based upon Caroline's testimony, all four men were soon arrested and charged. Henderson, Ferguson, and Melton were released on bail, but Skinner was denied bail. At trial that fall, the jury found Skinner and the others not guilty, because the only witness against them was a black woman. In that era, such testimony was not sufficient to convict a white man of murder.

Two years later, on the night of 23 December 1887, an assailant went to Calvin Skinner's residence and fired at him with a shotgun loaded with buckshot, killing him. We do not know if the person who avenged William P. Mabry's murder was ever identified.

Mysterious Assassination

David Arent was born about 1831 in Strasbourg, a German-speaking city now in France near the German border, but at the time considered a part of Bavaria. After his birth, Arent's family moved north to Bergzabern, in Germany, where his brother, Julius, was born in 1841. The Arents were Jewish, and David immigrated to America in 1851, followed by Julius some years later. By 1860, David Arent had settled in Union Parish and worked as a merchant in Marion. Arent joined

the "*Independent Rangers*," Company E, 12th Louisiana Infantry Regiment at Island No. 10 in Tennessee/Missouri on 6 March 1862, but he became seriously ill, resulting in an early discharge from the Army.

Arent married in New Orleans on 4 February 1869 to Celestine Moritz, and they settled in Farmerville, where Arent worked as a dry goods merchant for the next fifteen years. In 1884, he closed his mercantile store and thereafter worked as an insurance agent. Arent served several terms as Farmerville's mayor in the 1870s, served as a notary public from 1880 through 1894, and as a justice of the peace by the early 1890s. Personally, close acquaintances described him as "*a man who attended strictly to his own business, did not meddle with the affairs of anyone else and had but few if any enemies.*"

In addition to his status as a successful and respected businessman and community leader, he endeared himself to the local populous with his philanthropic nature, which included donating exquisite Christian Bibles to local churches despite his Jewish heritage. The Arents had no children, and Celestine died on 10 November 1890 at only forty-five years of age. Two weeks later,

...in consideration of the respect and love he has for the memory of his deceased wife Mrs. Celeste Arent and in obedience to her dying request,

David Arent gave a town lot he owned to the Farmerville Methodist Episcopal Church.

In the three years following his wife's death, David Arent settled into a daily routine of living alone in his Farmerville home but taking his meals in the home of his brother, Julius Arent, who lived nearby with his wife and family. After leaving his brother's house on the night of Saturday, 13 January 1894, Arent walked in the drizzly weather to the grocery store of Martin Guehring and bought some cigars and crackers, then left for his house about 8:00 p.m.

As Arent walked towards his house through the rain, he put his walking cane under his arm so he could open the crackers. Taking two or three in his hand, he took a bite of one cracker as he walked up the rosebush-lined path leading from the gateway to his front door. Just as he reached the steps, someone in ambush struck Arent on the back of the head with an axe. He fell to the ground a few feet from his steps, and the assailant then plunged the axe into his neck. Arent presumably died quickly.

A hard rain continued to fall all weekend, and Julius Arent did not express concern when his brother failed to show up for his daily visit on Sunday. However, when David still did not arrive for breakfast Monday morning, Julius became concerned and set out to his brother's house to check on him. Meanwhile, a group of schoolboys walking to the Farmerville Male and Female Academy discovered David Arent's lifeless form lying in his front yard, with an "*ugly and deep*

wound in the back of his head." The cigars and crackers lay on the ground beside him, with two in his hand and a partially eaten cracker still in his mouth. The keys to his front door, gate, and office lay on the ground beside him. He had some money in his pocket, and his watch remained on his arm. It did not appear anyone had disturbed his body after he fell from the death blow, and his home showed no signs that anyone had entered.

Parish Coroner Dr. William Wyatt Barnes immediately empaneled a coroner's jury that interviewed one hundred witnesses, but due to the hard rain that fell continually on Sunday after Arent's murder, *"all traces of tracks were obliterated and the perpetrator of one of the foulest crimes has been allowed to remain free."* Officials initially believed robbery motivated the villain, and although some old rare coins that acquaintances knew Arent possessed were not found, neither his body nor his house appeared to have been touched. After two weeks, the investigation into Arent's murder had turned up no substantial clues.

With the coroner's jury inconclusive, a detective was assigned to the case and locals offered rewards for information on the crime. In mid-March, someone dropped off this mysterious letter to the office of Farmerville's *"The Gazette:"*

Farmerville, La, March 18, 1894.

Editors Gazette -- I see that a reward is offered for the arrest of the parties who murdered Dave Arent, and I understand that a detective is at work, if so, I desire to ask him (detective) through your paper, as I do not know him, to address me at Farmerville, La., and I will arrange to meet him with valuable information.

*Yours respectfully,
One Who Knows
Farmerville, La.*

Although the publication of unsigned letters was against the policy of *"The Gazette,"* given the chance of *"throwing some light on one of the most foul assassinations ever committed in our parish,"* in this case they made an exception. Still lacking any clues in the case, in May, Governor Foster issued a \$300 reward for information on Arent's murder. Despite continued renewal of the reward offer over the next few years, the crime remained unsolved.

Finally, five years later, information surfaced that led Union Parish officials to obtain arrest warrants for suspects in the Arent murder. On 18 July 1899, Union Parish Deputy Sheriff John W. Taylor, accompanied by Farmerville resident Henry A. Roye, headed to Monroe. Accompanied by a Monroe policeman, they went to the office of the Monroe *"Evening News"* at sunrise and arrested James Shelton, a black man who had worked there as a pressman and porter for several years.

Shelton lived in Farmerville at the time of Arent's murder, but he "*bore a good reputation.*" A year or so after the crime, he had moved to Monroe and "*has worked industriously*" at several places.

Shelton protested his innocence, "*declaring that he knows nothing at all of the crime with which he is charged.*" The Monroe paper wrote that they had no information as to his guilt or innocence, but that the paper "*hopes he is innocent...he has been a faithful employee in this office.*" A day or so after Shelton's arrest, officials also arrested Virge Wheeler, another black man. The next week, Rev. F. G. Lampton, a black minister from Farmerville, visited Monroe and reported that few residents there believed in Shelton's guilt, as under interrogation, he gave the same information that he did back in 1894 when he testified before the coroner's jury that investigated the murder.

Shelton and Wheeler spent two months incarcerated in the Farmerville jail before the grand jury concluded their investigation in late September. After hearing the evidence, the jury failed to issue an indictment against the men, and the sheriff released them on Thursday, September 28th.

David Arent's mysterious murder remains unsolved.

