

[Brown, Walter Furman "Furm"]

HACKS DAUGHTER-IN-LAW TO DEATH WITH AXE AND HAMMER

Seventy-Two Year Old Walter Furman Brown, Goaded by Family Quarrel,
Murders Mrs. Bernard Brown Near Canajoharie and Then Takes Own Life—
Commits Deed While Husband Works in Field.

[slightly abridged]

Using a hammer and an axe, in what was apparently a sudden frenzy or temporary fit of insanity, Walter Furman Brown, 72, Saturday afternoon murdered the wife of his son, Bernard, then ended his own life by hanging. Mrs. [Edna] Brown, victim of her father-in-law's rash act, was 35 years of age, and had been married to Bernard Brown for 12 years. For some time past she and her husband had been living on the Joyce farm, about a mile south of the village of Canajoharie, where the double killing occurred. The father, estranged from his second wife, joined his son and daughter-in-law last fall, and the relations among the three have been strained and bitter ever since. Petty quarrels and recriminations were frequent, the woman resenting the presence of the aged man. Mrs. Brown, too, had been mentally unbalanced, and about a month ago returned from a period in the Utica State hospital. It was her practice, according to information secured by the sheriff's deputies, and other officials who investigated the affair, to do all sorts of spiteful and malicious things. The elder Brown had a bladder or kidney trouble, which he knew meant his death in a comparatively short time.

Over-Seasoned Food

His daughter-in-law made it a point to over-season his food, to aggravate this trouble, and Saturday morning put too much pepper in his eggs, which he refused to eat. At dinner, because of this refusal, she would not cook his share of the meal and there followed one of the customary quarrels, which to all appearance[s] had been settled before Mr. [Bernard] Brown and his hired man, Stanley Smith, left the house after the noon day meal, to resume the cultivation of corn.

The younger Brown and Smith returned to the farm house about 3 o'clock, finding no one at home. They did find three notes, on written to Bernard by the elder Brown, in which he hinted that he had suicide in mind. There was also a message from Mrs. Viola Abel, Fort Plain, the stepmother of the murdered woman, who, with a friend, Mrs. Oscar Smith, had called at the home during the afternoon. Finding no one there, Mrs. Abel had left the note, stating that she had been there. At the moment she was writing, the mutilated body of her murdered [step]daughter was lying in the woodshed within a few feet of her. Another note had been left by the elder Brown, addressed to Jesse Brown, a brother.

Alarm is Given

Bernard Brown, before finding these notes, had seen that the rooms of his house were in some disorder, as though a struggle had taken place. Alarmed, he consulted a neighbor, Harry Fussmer, who advised him to call the sheriff and to summon a physician. Dr. Rathbun, Canajoharie, and Deputy Sheriff Holahauer and County Investigator John E. Wires responded to the calls. After a short search they found the body of Edna Brown lying face down in the woodshed covered with a blanket, with the exception of part of the head, which protruded. Beneath her neck was the handle of a hammer, broken from the head, and three feet from the body

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lay an axe covered with clotted blood, to which strands of hair adhered. A trail of blood spots led to the kitchen.

Reconstruct Affair

These conditions coupled with the disordered condition of the living room enabled the authorities to reconstruct a satisfactory picture of what must have transpired after the younger Brown and Smith had left the house. The quarrel between the old man and the daughter-in-law had been resumed. During this quarrel he had snatched up the hammer and struck the woman over the head, inflicting wounds which had bled, but did not render her unconscious. She ran to the woodshed, where he overtook her. Whether the hammer was broken during the struggle in the house, or whether he continued to use it in the outbuilding is problematical. However this may be, he grasped the axe which lay to hand, and with this weapon he struck the woman over the head repeatedly. Satisfied that he had ended her life he covered the body with the blanket, and made his way to the wagon house about 500 feet from the dwelling, and there he hung himself.

His body was found by the county investigator and the others, soon after they had viewed the corpse of Mrs. Brown. He had taken three strands of quarter inch rope and tied a slip knot, which he placed round his neck. Standing on a saw horse he had tied the rope to a rafter above, then stepped off, or kicked the sawhorse backwards, as it was lying not more than a foot behind his dangling body.

Premeditated Act

There are also some reasons to believe that the murder and suicide may have been deliberately planned by Brown, who had little time to live at the most, and who may have been so goaded by his daughter-in-law's acts, that he calmly made up his mind to kill her and end his own life. When Bernard Brown left for the fields with the hired man at 1 o'clock or somewhat after that hour, all was quiet. Mrs. Brown was lying on the sofa and the old man sat in an automobile outside the house. As his son was starting for the fields he asked him to make some repairs to a tire, which Bernard Brown did, wondering at the time at his father's interest, because the elder Brown did not drive. The tire repaired, and the two men gone in the field, the old man may have entered the house and struck the woman as she lay on the sofa, without any resumption of the previous altercation concerning food or other differences. Whatever caused the attack, before his deed was completed he had reached a stage of insane frenzy, as indicated by the terribly mutilated condition of the head of the dead woman. It is certain, too, that the killing was done very soon after the men left for the field, as the condition of the bodies of both the man and woman on the arrival of physician and deputies, showed that both had been dead three to four hours.

Coroner C. E. Congdon, Fort Plain, and District Attorney William J. Crangle were notified of the facts, and the coroner's inquiry was still in progress today. There can be no doubt that murder followed by suicide will be the verdict.

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Native of Fort Plain

Walter Furman Brown was born in Fort Plain, August 6, 1850, son of Amenzo¹ and Almira [Furman] Brown. He was always known as "Furm" or "Farn" Brown, and few of his friends and acquaintances knew that his first name was Walter. He lived in Fort Plain all his life, up to last fall, when he moved to the home of his son, Bernard. He was educated in the public schools of Fort Plain, and when about 21 years of age, or a little older, he opened a photograph gallery on Division street, Fort Plain, which he conducted for 28 years, and for two seasons he operated a similar gallery in Sharon Springs. He was employed for ten years in the finishing room of the Bailey Knitting mills, Fort Plain, which closed about two years ago. He was a member of the Fort Plain lodge No. 433, F & A. M. His first wife died 36 years ago, and he remarried about eight years after her death. [Per his 1900 census entry he was married to Hattie Brown in 1895. The marriage record of Bernard H. Brown and Edna A. Abel in 1919 shows Hattie Van Alstyne as the mother of Bernard.] His second wife survives, also a son, Bernard; a brother, Jesse, and a sister, Linda, all of Fort Plain.

The body was taken to the undertaking parlors of B. Gray, Fort Plain, and the funeral will be held in the Catherine Nellis Memorial chapel, Tuesday afternoon at 3 o'clock, the Rev. Rufus H. Dix, pastor of the Universalist church, officiating. Burial will be in the family plot of the Fort Plain cemetery.

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Transcribed on 4 Jul 2018 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY

1. Tragically, Amenzo Brown had also committed suicide on November 20, 1900, by hanging himself in his barn. Also Amenzo Brown's daughter was hospitalized as a mental patient when he ended his life.