



# CLAY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

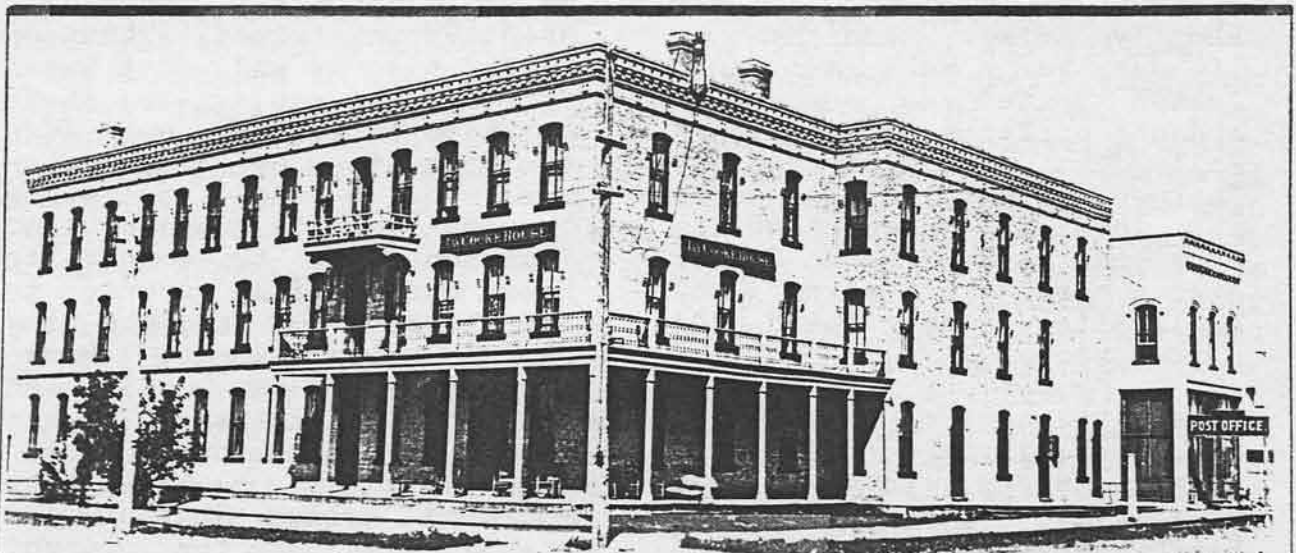
VOL. XII NO. 4

## CLAY COUNTY'S ONLY LEGAL HANGING

This month marks the centennial of the only legal hanging in Clay County. Thomas Brown was executed September 10, 1889, for the murder of Moorhead Policeman, Peter Poull.

According to several newspaper accounts, during the harvest season of 1888, a bunch of

drunken hoboos got into a fight near Hillsboro, ND. One was shot and killed. A Passing farmer gave authorities a very good description of the perpetrator. A short time later, Fargo policemen spotted a man who fit the description. They kept him under surveillance for several days until October 17, when the



Jay Cooke House, early 1880's. Erickson's Hall was upstairs in the building marked Post Office at right. The Post Office was moved in 1885 and at the time of the shooting, a grocery was downstairs. Poull was shot on the railroad track off this photo to the right.



Thomas Brown, the only man hanged in Clay County.

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suspect gave the cops the slip.

Shortly after midnight, an off-duty Fargo policeman named Benson spotted the suspect at a dance upstairs in Erickson's Hall just north of the Jay Cooke House Hotel. (The hotel was located where American Bank now stands on Center Avenue and 8th Street. The hall site is now the bank's drive-up).

Benson pointed out the character, later identified as Thomas Brown, to Moorhead patrolman John Thompson. Brown spotted the men and walked over to the doorway where they stood. He suddenly pulled a revolver and said, "You sons \_\_\_\_\_, I know what you are up to. Both of you go downstairs." The policemen did, followed by Brown.

When they reached the street at the foot of the steps, Benson dashed to the right and into the hotel bar room next door where he reportedly "hid behind the icebox." Brown told Thompson to walk north up the sidewalk. When they reached the railroad tracks, they stopped; Thompson on the west side of the sidewalk and Brown on the east. Brown demanded to know what Benson had said to Thompson.

Meanwhile, Ed Gleeson, who had seen Brown draw on the cops upstairs, and his brother located Patrolman Peter Poull outside the hotel. They told him Thompson was in trouble. Poull trotted north up 8th Street approaching Brown from the left. Brown spotted Poull, cursed and fired at Poull, hitting him in the heart. Poull said "My God, I am hit!", then fell and died. When Brown turned, Thompson pulled his .38 and shot Brown once. Brown got off two shots at Thompson and ran east down the tracks. He fired twice more at the following Thompson, again missing him. Thompson shot twice and hit Brown once. Badly wounded in the shoulder and leg, his five shot revolver empty, Brown surrendered and collapsed between the tracks. He was taken to the County Jail. (The jail was on where the Moorhead Police Station now stands west of the present Clay County Courthouse).

Brown very nearly became the only man illegally hung in Clay county. Poull was very popular in Moorhead. He left a young wife and a two-week old baby. By afternoon,

rumors of a possible lynching were afloat. County Sheriff Jorgen Jensen spirited Brown out into the county then waded down the night train at Tenney (between Glyndon and Dilworth) and took Brown to the Hennepin County Jail in Minneapolis.

About midnight, a crowd of 500 men armed with wrecking bars marched on the jail. Deputies told the crowd that Brown had been moved. No one believed this, so five men were allowed to search the jail from basement to attic. After their report, the would-be lynchers dispersed.

Brown was charged with murder and tried in January, 1889. He admitted shooting Poull but said that he only tried to scare him. The jury didn't buy that and after deliberating about three hours, pronounced him guilty of first degree murder. He was sentenced to die in June. Brown received a stay of execution from the State Supreme court but lost his bid for a new trial. His execution date was reset for September 20.

Not much is known about Brown's past. Indeed, his name probably was not even Brown. He was only about 26 but had spent much of his adult life in prison. He did time in the Dakota Territorial Prison in Bismarck under the name Tommy Ryan and at a Wisconsin prison under another name. Pressed for information by a [Fargo] Daily Argus reporter the day before the execution Brown said, "My folks - they know nothing about me - about this - and I don't want them to." He died

without revealing his true identity.

Brown spent his last months in the Clay County Jail. The Argus reporter described the interior: "Surrounding the steel cells in the jail is a corridor about five feet wide. The cells themselves are seven feet in height. On top of these and at the north end is the dungeon-or steel cage. The only light afforded is through the diamond shaped holes between the heavy cross bars. The interior is about seven by nine feet, through the center extends a partition, dividing the room in twain. In one of these little apartments, Brown has spent the lonely hours of his solitary confinement... within easy sight of these little diamond holes has the gallows been erected, near the head of the stairs leading to the top of the cells. The gallows is in the south west corner. It is created of pine. Two upright beams have a cross-piece to which the rope will be attached. The drop is even with the platform and two feet, three inches above the top of the cells and is about two feet square, so arranged that by moving a lever four slides are withdrawn and the drop falls, launching the condemned into space. From the top of the platform to the floor is nine feet, three inches, but the drop or rope will be only seven feet. The rope is about ten or twelve feet long and five-eighths of an inch in thickness. At the end is the hangman's knot, a peculiarly coiled one holding the loop. This will be kept in the Sheriff's safe until used."

The pending execution was a great source of curiosity for local residents. When the Argus reporter visited Brown, "several carriages were in front of the jail, and on entering, the reporter discovered a half dozen or more young ladies and gentlemen standing about the gallows and within only a few feet of Poull's murderer. Their conversation was not fitting to the occasion, nor calculated to steady the nerves of the man who had only a few hours to live. 'I would hate' to drop through that hole, remarked one. 'Yes, and just wonder how Brown must feel!' 'Suppose the knot would slip and he'd strangle, ugh!' Wouldn't that be awful?' And kindred remarks reached the ears of the prisoner..."

The comments did not seem to bother Brown. "This man bore up with the fortitude of a martyr, or one so hardened in crime as not to care for the present or think of the future...[He] talked with the death watch and held conversations with the prisoners in the lower cells about his impending doom in as an indifferent a manner as though it were of no concern to him... He desires there be no 'hitch' in the proceedings..."

On Brown's last day, he slept until noon and spent most of the rest of the day with the Argus reporter and praying with Father Augustine of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Moorhead and Father Wolfgang from Luxemborg. He ate no supper.

The differing approaches of

the local newspapers to coverage of the execution itself is interesting. The Moorhead Daily News stated, "The law of the state passed last winter forbids the presence of newspaper men and the publication of the details of the execution... The News is cognizant of many details... but will comply with the law and refrain from publishing them..."

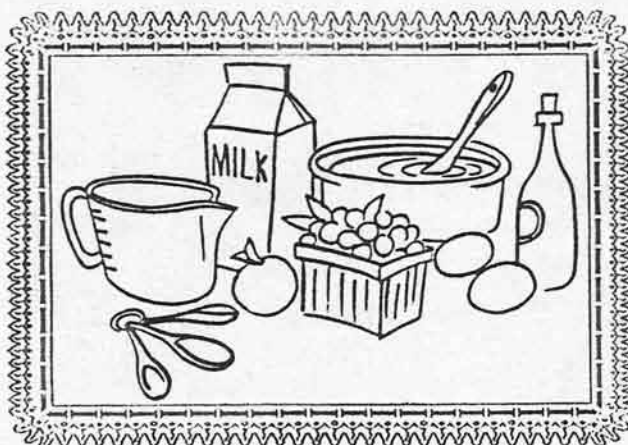
The Fargo Daily Argus applauded the News' integrity then promptly printed a detailed eye-witness account. The Minneapolis Tribune ran an article (which the Argus published and never denied) claiming, "In a vain attempt to get a better account of the Brown hanging than any of his contemporaries, Major Edwards, [publisher] of the Fargo Argus had one of his reporters arrested and locked in jail..." The unfortunate Wight was made to scrub floors and perform other menial services during his (cont p.7)



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Moorhead Patrolman Peter Poull. His murder by Brown outraged the citizens of Moorhead.

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### CCHS COOKBOOK!!!

WE ARE WORKING ON A COOKBOOK! We are looking for your favorite recipes to include. The types of recipes we are looking for are ones that have been handed down and are distinct to the area and the different families that have come here.

We welcome all of your recipes!!! We can't promise that they'll all be printed, at least in this year's edition, but we hope to make our cookbook a tradition and if we do not get your recipe in this time, we will sure try and use them next year. We'd also enjoy having a small story (a line or two) about where the recipe originated or any anecdote you would like to submit with them. So see your name in print!!! You as a member, are all invited to be authors in our very first cookbook!

Please keep in mind the following:

Please submit the recipes and or stories typed, if possible. Proofread to make sure all ingredients and amounts are

correct. If by chance there are duplicate recipes submitted, all those submitting that recipe will be given credit. Be sure to include oven temperatures and times.

We are looking for old family recipes and those same recipes if you have updated them. Submit both. If the recipe was brought to this area from another country or state give a brief history. Some editing may be done in deference to space. More than one recipe may be submitted.

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### "A CENTURY OF QUILTS"

"A Century of Quilts," North Dakota's Centennial Quilt Show will continue through October 2nd at HHIC!

The exhibit contains 45 quilts made between 1854 - 1987 which were chosen from over 3400 quilts throughout North Dakota.

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### SPECIAL EVENTS

Upcoming special events at the center include: "Quilts in Women's Lives," September 14th at 7:00 p.m.; "The Century of Quilts Project," lecture/discussion by Kim Baird, September 28th, 7:00 - 9:00 p.m. (bring your quilts); "Quilt Documentation Day," also cleaning your quilts, September 30 from 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. and participate in Yo-Yo quilting, October 1, 1:00 - 5:00 p.m.

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JUNE/JULY DONORS

MOORHEAD: KVOX Radio, Ed Gudmundson, Sam Eli, Mrs. Dewey Possehl, First Congregational Church, Louise Remley, Kelly Aakre, Marie Stevens, Verlyn Anderson, Helen Euren, and Gladys Gaudland.

DILWORTH: Hazel Johnson

BARNESVILLE: Dorothy Garven, also of Los Angeles, and Diane Haugen.

OTHERS: Institute for Regional Studies, Fargo, ND; John McDunn, Lodi, Wisconsin; and Otter Tail County Historical Society, Fergus Falls, Minnesota.

JUNE/JULY ARTIFACTS

The following are some of the artifacts received by the museum since the last newsletter:

Several copies of a family newsletter; "The Spud" - a newspaper from Moorhead High in 1934; photos of Barnesville, Moorhead, and the 1946 blizzard; a pair of wool cards and two skeins of wool; a wash board; a suppository machine and molds used at the old Moorhead Drug until the late 1930s; the remote broadcast desk used by KVOX Radio; choir robe, music stand and hymn books; various newspapers, plat books and directories; a pair of Norwegian skis; and a family history book.

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PLEASE NOTE!

ARE YOU AWARE that all CCHS members are able to visit us at the Hjemkomst Center free? All you need to do is show your membership card at the door! So stop by and visit with us soon! We'd love to see you!

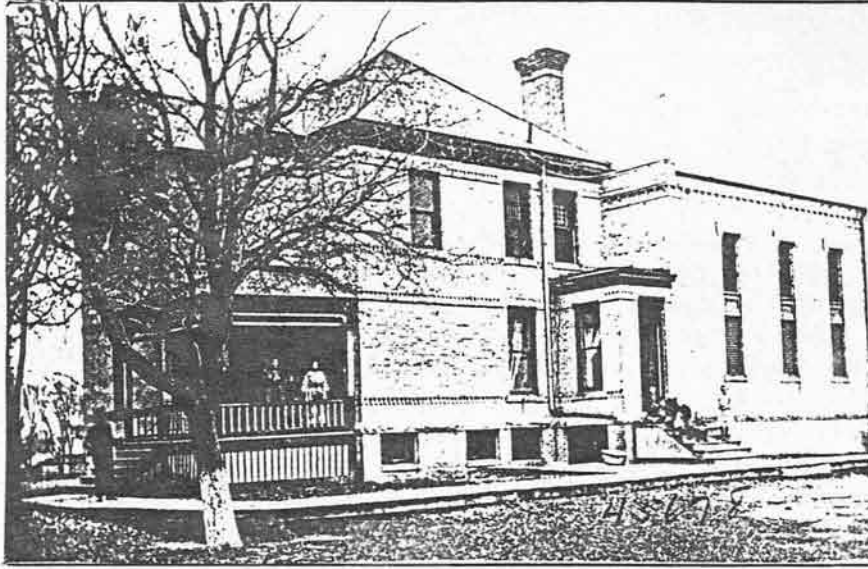
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A GREAT BIG HELLO from me to you!!! My name is Maggie, and I'm the new Office Manager at CCHS. I hail originally from New York City but was raised in Chicago. Meanwhile, I've lived a good many years out in Montana and have done extensive traveling in the U.S. I'm very excited about being here and have already been made to feel very welcomed by so many of you at CCHS and HHIC.

I'm learning all about "Ole and Lena" and words like "uff da!" If you're in the neighborhood stop by and visit. One of my very favorite things to do is talk! Let me know if I can be of any service to you and on a more personal note, thank you to everyone at CCHS and HHIC for being such warm and wonderful people to work with!!!

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GIFT CERTIFICATES will soon be available at CCHS, hopefully by next month. Buy a friend or relative a gift that is unique and a constant source of education and fun. At the same time support CCHS by helping us to bring up our membership. Contact Maggie at 233-4604 for ordering prior to availability.



## CLAY COUNTY JAIL

Scene of the hanging. To the left is the Sheriff's residence, to the right is the Jail Proper.

incarceration, and when the hour of execution came, was removed to a distant part of the jail [the ladies section]." If true, the ruse proved unnecessary. State law or no, the Argus' City Editor was allowed to witness the hanging.

The execution was set for 4:30 a.m., Friday, September 20. The spectators began arriving at 3:00. They included three men invited by Brown - H. Hannafin of Moorhead and John Kelley and Bruno Kipples of Glyndon, the County Coroner, an undertaker, the Cass County Sheriff, Sherriff Jensen and his assistants, Fathers Augustine and Wolfgang, Policeman John Thompson and about eight others. It was Jensen's job to drop the trap.

Jailor Nels Holbeck and two priests walked with Brown from his cell to the gallows. Brown kept his remarkable nerve until the very end. Holbeck later reported, "Brown walked to the steps of the scaffold alright, yet his step was not overly steady. When he reached the steps, he dropped. I put one hand under either arm and almost lifted him up the two steps and unto

the platform."

The Argus reported, "When the spectators reached the gallows, Brown was standing on the drop, on either side being a priest, all engaged in half audible prayer... Sheriff Jensen then tied Brown's feet and hands, and adjusted the noose about his neck, the knot being behind his right ear... In a weak and trembling voice, almost inaudible he bade the jailor, Sheriff and priests good by, shaking hands with them and wishing them well. He then turned to the spectators, half smiled and nodded a farewell. The black cap was then pulled over his head and fastened under the chin, he with the priests praying meanwhile.

"The drop fell at exactly 4:30 o'clock and the murderer of Officer Poull was launched into eternity... He died instantly..."

The Clay County Jail was torn down in 1966 and Brown's body lies in an unmarked grave in St. Joseph's Catholic Cemetery in Moorhead.

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## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

It was with regret that we bid good-bye to Karen Meidinger last month. She accepted a new position with the Fargo Clinic. Karen had served as our Office Manager/Secretary for the past two years. She handled a wide range of activities and duties for the Society and she served with superb skill and a work ethic that was a pleasure to observe. Thank you, Karen, for a job well done and we wish you well in your new position.

We were fortunate to locate a well qualified individual to quickly take over Karen's numerous duties. We are happy to introduce Magdalena (Maggie) Obert. Maggie has had solid office management experience and is well prepared to assist the Society with its activities. Welcome, Maggie, we look forward to working with you. One of Maggie's very first assignments is to help us organize, implement, expand and coordinate our continuing membership program.

This brings me to the main topic of this message which is MEMBERSHIP. We must increase the number of people who support the Society through membership and donations. We believe our new membership program that was started in June, which for the first time provides for full admission to the Center and its exhibits for only \$15 per year, is an excellent bargain. We have one of the most unique settings for a museum and historical society that can be found anywhere in the country.

Please feel free to brag about the Society and the Center every chance you get.

We plan to end 1989 with significant improvements in all areas of our operation but especially in membership. To do this, we need your help. Next time you are in the Center, pick up a few membership blanks and ask your friends to join us. If each of us signs up just a few members, it will really make a difference.

Be sure to stop in and view the interesting and educational exhibits here at the Center, as well as those on display throughout the County.

Next month we will report on our progress with membership and give an update on our "Rollag One Room School" project.



Finally, we appreciate your questions, suggestions, ideas and support. We encourage you to stop in or call whenever we can be of assistance.

Sincerely,

Vernon A. Pederson

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## OUTREACH DISPLAYS

### SCHEDULE

Viking Manor and Ulen-Hitterdal High School, Ulen  
Aug. 25 - Oct. 27

Moorhead Library and Glyndon Community Center  
Aug. 29 - Nov. 3

Hawley Library and Hitterdal Senior Center  
Aug. 31 - Nov. 1

Viking Manor Has the display CLEAN, CLEANER, CLEANEST with various cleaning supplies and tools. Featured are: a feather duster, crumber, toothbrush, child's wash tub and wash board, and cans and boxes of cleaners.

BACK TO (HIGH) SCHOOL is the display at the Ulen-Hitterdal High School. The artifacts were used in area high schools including: a glass lantern slide, galvanometer, slide rule, text books, a biology duplicating master and imprint, and wooden geometrical blocks c. 1890.

The Moorhead Library is hosting some of the RED RIVER LAND DOLLS which previously appeared in Glyndon. The dolls are complemented by books on voyageurs, Minnesota and pioneer life.

WASH DAY BLUES is on display at the Glyndon Community Center complete with clothes line. Artifacts include wash board, hand agitator, boiler fork and a selection of irons. Instructions for washing one load of clothing is included.

JAMS AND HAMS is displayed at the Hawley Library. The case contains a sausage stuffer, spices, glass and pottery canning jars and just a bit of history as well.

The Hitterdal Senior Center is featuring WHAT'S NEW? containing a few of the artifacts we received this year. The label not only has a description of the artifacts, but also tells what kinds of things we collect, why, and what artifacts we are looking for. The case contains a 1950s hair ornament, part of a Jarts set, a brass token, a potato festival envelope, and part of a Civil Defense kit.

### CONTINUING EXHIBITS

Opening Sept. 23 - "Exploring the Planets" - Heritage Hall

Through Oct. 2 - "A Century of Quilts" - Clay County Museum

Through Oct. - "A Century of Plastics" - Clay County Museum

Through Dec. 3 - "King Wheat" Heritage Hall

### VOLUNTEER RETIRES

EDYTHE KLOKSETH of Moorhead, one of our favorite volunteers, retired last month after three years of service to CCHS. Edythe spent one afternoon a week indexing most of our books and some manuscript collections. We will miss her good humor and help on Tuesdays, but Edythe assures us that she will keep coming in regularly as a visitor on her CCHS Membership Pass. Thanks Edythe!

P. O. BOX 501  
MOORHEAD, MINN 56560



## CCHS - 1989 Membership Information

### CCHS Membership

I would like to begin/renew my membership in the Clay County Historical Society. Please enter my membership in the category I have checked below:

- INDIVIDUAL \$15.00  
 FAMILY \$35.00

### CCHS Membership Benefits

- \*\* FREE Admission to the Center
- \*\* Bi-monthly newsletter
- \*\* 25% discount on photo reproductions
- \*\* 10% discount on acid-free materials
- \*\* voting privileges
- \*\* invitation to the annual meeting/dinner and all CCHS events

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

Date Purchased: \_\_\_\_\_

Please list additional family members (family is considered; husband, wife and children now living at home, under the age of 18) for passes.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

RETURN TO: Clay County Historical Society  
P.O. Box 501  
Moorhead, MN 56560  
(218) 233-4604

Amount Enclosed: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

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