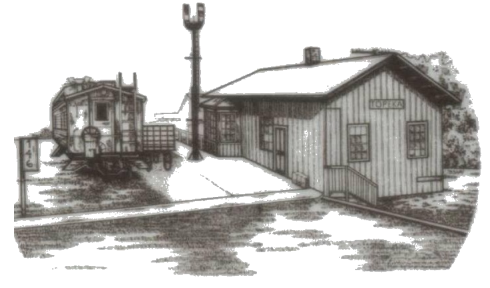




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The Blacklegs, the Regulators and the Hanging

Many families have someone they wish could be pruned from their family tree. And in spite of their deep spiritual roots, the Lattas of Hawpatch are no exception. One of the main leaders of the notorious “Blacklegs” was William Latta. Exactly how he fit into the Lattas of Hawpatch family tree is unclear, but it is clear that they were related. The “Blacklegs” illegal activities were widespread with direct ties to counterfeiting, stealing horses, and robbery.

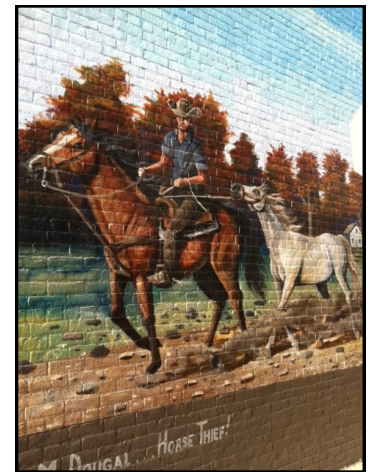
William is credited with the recruitment of Gregory McDougale, the horse thief depicted on a wall in Ligonier. He was hung near Diamond Lake in Noble County on January 26th, 1858.

Widespread criminal activity made the Hawpatch an unsafe place. The area south of Topeka known as “The Knobs” was a well known haven for the criminal element. Marauding gangs of horse-thieves and outlaws soon earned the area a reputation of being totally lawless. Horses were stolen and moved out of the county by regular lines, along which the criminals and their cohorts had established permanent stations. The illegal activities went as far as Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, and Canada. Finally on March 9, 1852, the Indiana Legislature passed an act authorizing the formation of several companies of “Regulators”, whose duty it was to apprehend horse thieves and felons.

It appears that these “legalized vigilantes” operated for several years before officially organizing. The first company in Northeastern Indiana was not formed until four years after the Act was passed. The first company formed on September 20, 1856, and was known as the LaGrange County Rangers. The men from Hawpatch didn’t officially organize until March 1st, 1858. This would have been after the capture of McDougale and eight others near Rome City.

R.H. Reicks’s 1982 history of LaGrange and Noble counties states that the Regulators for Hawpatch and the vicinity met in the home of Francis Ditman, in Clearspring township. They gave themselves the name “Clearspring and Eden Detective Police”. Their president was (Dr.) Abner Lewis, vice presidents were Charles Roy, Francis Ditman, William Gibson and William Denny (presumably the son of Dr. John Denny and the grandson of Revolutionary War and War of 1812 hero Walter Denny). John McDevitt was chosen secretary and Hawley Peck, treasurer. The L’ennial, Ligonier High School 1927 yearbook (p.12), has both a photo of the surviving Ligonier Regulators (Invincibles) as well as a reference to Allen J. Ramsby (1841-1937) who was, “born and raised on the Hawpatch”. Ramsby was the grandson of Elizabeth Ramsby (1789-1869), a widow who was one of the early settlers of Eden township. One of Elizabeth’s daughters was Eliza Ann Ramsby Parks. Current Topeka area resident Craig Helman’s great grandfather, Alvin, was a brother to Allen.

There are several versions of the origin of the term “Blacklegs”. Some attribute it to the gang’s activities in Ohio. In the 1820’s with commerce developing from the opening of the Ohio canal, a man by the name of James Brown formed a counterfeiting ring, “the blacklegs,” in the Akron, Ohio area. William Latta of Bath, Ohio, was identified as being a member of that ring. Others point to the dense tamarack swamp south of Wolcottville near Rome City.



Painted brick wall in
Ligonier, Indiana

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Blacklegs continued

We know that William Latta, William Hill and George Ulmer were ringleaders of the of the most notorious gang of horse thieves and counterfeiters in northern Indiana known as "Blacklegs," who operated in Noble County and throughout northeastern Indiana during the late 1840s and early '50s. Their base of operation was Latta's tavern and saw-mill near Rome City. The Blacklegs reeked havoc and terrorized the area for 20 years.

William Latta may have been the oldest son of Moses Latta and Rachel Todd. I have not been able to track down how Moses and Robert Latta were related. Moses and Rachel, moved from Westmoreland, Pennsylvania, to Bath, Ohio, in 1810. They are listed as having 4 sons and 7 daughters in the 1820 census, William being the oldest.

It appears that William followed his sisters to Branch County, Michigan. In his confession Gregory McDougale stated that he met William Latta in Burr Oak, Michigan. The 1850 census for DeKalb County, lists William Latta, age 40, male, farmer, born in Pennsylvania. His wife was Eliza, age 37, born in Pennsylvania. His children were Christiana, age 12, Lydia, age 10, Joseph T. H., age 6, and Catharine Cidelia, age 3, all born in Ohio.

M. H. Mott, a Kendallville lawyer and recording secretary of a group of vigilantes who called themselves the Central Committee of the Noble County Invincibles was authorized to write a "History of the Regulators of Northern Indiana" in 1859. Here is some of what Mott had to say:

On 17 January 1858, Gregory McDougale and eight others were arrested in or near Rome City. Taken to Ligonier, McDougale was brought before the Committee of Noble County Invincibles on the night of 25 January 1858 whereupon a committee of five men was duly appointed to examine the witnesses and report upon the evidence and the final disposition of the case. The committee, after having made a full and fair investigation of all the testimony ...recommended that the said McDougale be hung by the neck until dead on Tuesday, the 26th day of January 1858 [which is to say the following day!] at 2 o'clock p.m.

TAHS Quiz

1. Who was the first president of the Clearspring / Eden Detective Police?
2. Who wrote the History of the Northern Indiana Regulators?
3. Name the three leaders of the Blacklegs.
4. In what year was Gregory McDougale hung?
5. How many years did Violet Hanshew clean the Methodist Church?

The hanging went off as scheduled - nine days after McDougale's arrest and some 18 hours after his "trial" before the Invincibles. As he stood on a makeshift gallows near Diamond Lake, just east of Ligonier, waiting for his executioners to drive the farm wagon out from under him, McDougale delivered an impassioned plea to the young people in the crowd.

Following a short exhortation and prayer by Rev. Wolcott, here are some of McDougale's final words to the young people in the crowd exhorting them to heed his sorry fate and forego a life of crime. *"I'm happy to see such a crowd around me, and I hope all young men will take a warning from me. I never committed murder. I say to young men, keep from houses of ill-fame, and instead of playing cards, read your Bible. Many present are probably as bad as me, but I hope they will all, especially the young men, take warning by me. My only source is God. I trust to Him for mercy. I trust in the Lord."* His full confession, his sad farewell to his wife and child, as well as his final words can be found in Mott's booklet.

The Regulators then set off in pursuit of William Latta, William Hill and George Ulmer, whom Mott describes as "the chief pioneers and leaders of the banditti." Motivated by rewards of several hundred dollars, private detectives pursued Ulmer all the way to Pittsburgh and back. He was finally caught in Warren, Ohio, on July 17, 1858. After three quick trials, he drew a sentence of eight years.

Hill headed in the other direction and was nabbed later that summer along the Iowa-Missouri border and returned to Indiana. He escaped from the Noble County Jail on March 6, 1858, while awaiting trial and hadn't been heard from by the time Mott's booklet was published.

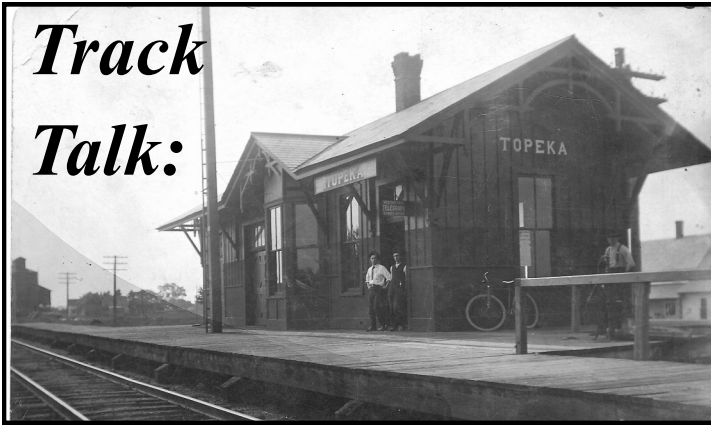
Latta eluded the bounty hunters, but he couldn't hide from today's internet search engines. Thanks to Lawrence Sullivan's research, we know what happened. There, in southeastern Iowa, just where McDougale's brother had said he was, our man was listed among prisoners at the state penitentiary at Ft. Madison: William I. Latta, 60, farmer, born in Pennsylvania, crime counterfeiting.

The Davenport (Iowa) Gazette reported on April 21, 1859:

COUNTERFEITERS ARRESTED.-- Just as we are going to press we learn the particulars of the arrest of two men at New London and the finding of about \$2,000 in counterfeit money. The parties are an old man, who gives his name Wm. Latta, and a young man who has recently been in the employ of Mr. Bacon, of Washington, Iowa. The old man came to Washington from Wisconsin, and left shortly afterwards with his young confederate, under circumstances which gave rise to suspicion. Information

Continues on page 3

Track Talk:



Schedule of Events:

The Depot Museum is open on Saturdays from 9 am to 11 am through October. Admission is FREE.

September 20, 2011 - Topeka Library - 6:30 pm

Program: "Topeka History I've Discovered During My Years in Office"

Speaker: DeWayne Bontrager
Topeka Clerk-Treasurer

November 15, 2011

Program: Dinner Meeting
Election of Officers
Special Guest:

Tentative:

An Evening With Mr. Lincoln

Fritz Klein, from Springfield, Illinois, is one of the foremost Abraham Lincoln presenters/impersonators in the country. Klein will be featured in an upcoming History Channel special in February of 2012.

For tickets call 260-499-0126.



Blacklegs continued

was given to Sheriff Gallagher, of Fairfield, and Sheriff Devol and Deputy Penny, of this place, who traced the suspected gentlemen to New London and made the arrest. About \$2,000 in counterfeit bills, of the Sack City Bank, Wisconsin, were found in a manger in the barn where they were arrested.

In his article entitled *Leader of "Blacklegs" Caught in Web He Never Imagined*, Sullivan says that he did not find a story on Latta's trial and conviction, but did come upon a later report that he was freed in the summer of 1860 under a governor's pardon that a leading cleric of the day described as "fishy." The preacher claimed Latta was released in return for a promise to pump \$20,000 in counterfeit currency into a political race then under way in western Iowa.

William Latta died on November 18, 1867 at the age of 68, and was buried in the Greenwood Cemetery in Monroe, Wisconsin.

HG

Topeka Loses Two Great Ladies



Violet Hanshaw, longtime Topeka resident, passed away at the age of 99 on July 3, 2011.

Born in Lexington, IL, Violet moved to the Topeka area in 1923. In 1941, she married Elmer Hanshaw. They would share 65 years. She remembered when SR 5 was a dirt road lined with trees all the way to Ligonier.

Violet was a member of the Topeka United Methodist Church and had cleaned the church for 50 years. She was also a member of the Topeka Historical Society.

Lena Slabach Borntrager Suderman,

age 98, died on July 9, 2011. Lena was a member of the Maple Grove Church and had been active in the community for many years. Lena and her husband, D.C. Borntrager, owned and operated Borntrager Shell station on North Main Street for many years.



"We study history not to imagine what they were like, but to imagine what we might become."

Answers:
1) Dr. Abner Lewis
2) M. H. Mott
3) William Latta, William Hill and George Ulmer
4) 1858
5) 50 years

Topeka Area Historical Society

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Hawpatch History Detectives Investigative Report

Your Hawpatch History Detectives have uncovered a number of items of interest:



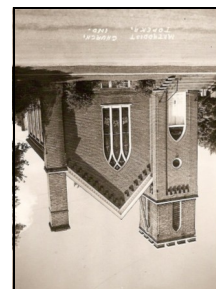
Within the next few weeks a main stay of downtown will be no more. In late July, renovations were being done on the building on the northeast the corner of Lake and Main. The structural damage was so extensive that the cost of repairs made it prohibitive. The historic building has been the home to such businesses as Tustison's Hardware and Miller's IGA. In the early photo, one can see two Red Crown gasoline pumps.



Violet's Last Ride

Violet Hanshew's last wish was that her casket be transported to the cemetery by a horse drawn vehicle. The pastors and pallbearers accompanied the body as it made it's way to the Eden Cemetery a mile west of town, stopping briefly in front of her home just north of the Topeka United Methodist Church on Babcock Street.

Visit Us Online: www.topekahistoricalociety.com



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