

"The Reno Brother's Gang and the Floyd County Jail"

The Night of Blood

By: The Man Behind the Mask

They called it the Night of Blood. The night that the Reno Gang of Indiana met justice via the noose. The night that a remarkable outlaw enterprise was ground into the dust, once and for all.

It happened in the early hours of December 12, 1868, in the small Ohio River town of New Albany, Indiana.

The Renos had been headed to that end for a long time. Father Wilkison had a criminal record dating back to the 1820s. And the boys—Frank and John in particular—started getting into mischief in the 1850s, when they were in their early teens. There was talk about cheating at cards. When fires destroyed the town of Rockford—not once, but twice—and the Renos bought up all the land for a song, folks in Jackson County were pretty sure who lit the matches. But nothing could be proved.

That was the story time and time again. During the Civil War, the boys were probably involved in some robberies but no one could prove it. Frank and John and Simeon Reno did some war profiteering, too, by enlisting in the military as substitutes for others. The Renos got paid for the privilege. Of course, then they'd desert—only to repeat the process.

After the war, they began branching out. Train robbery, burglaries of county treasuries, horse theft, cattle rustling, extortion, arson, counterfeiting, and murder. They'd try anything at least once, and they were more than happy to travel in their quest for riches—Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, and probably some other places as well. Sure, on a few occasions they'd get arrested; sometimes they'd go to trial. But nothing stuck.

That is, until John went to Gallatin, Missouri, to blow the county safe in November 1867. He'd have gotten away with that one, too, except that one of his accomplices panicked. The name John Reno was given to the lawmen, and they proceeded to get him in Indiana. On the train back to Missouri, they told John that he might be lynched when he arrived in Gallatin; the citizens were angry because the county was bankrupt, thanks to John. So he opened up to them, confessed, and headed to prison for a few years. Johnny was always the lucky one.

Three months later, a couple of hardcases raped, robbed and killed an old woman in Jackson County. A group of vigilantes rose up, saying that enough was enough. The hardcases ended up swinging from a tree.

The same special treatment was given to some of the Reno's buddies. It was July 1869 when the hooded riders took a few gang members from the sheriff. They were hung from a beech tree just outside of Seymour. Just a few days later, four more wore the hemp necktie at that same tree.

But the big finale was yet to come.

The law finally caught up with the core of the gang. Of course, that only happened after the boys robbed another train, this time getting almost \$97,000 from the Adams Express folks. Will and Sim Reno were grabbed in Indianapolis. Frank Reno and Charley Anderson were found in Windsor, Canada. After a bunch of wrangling between the U.S. and Canada, the Pinkertons brought them back to the states. All four ended up in the Floyd County Jail in New Albany.

The Reno family had paid to have the boys transferred to that lockup, which was one of the strongest in the region. Some of their friends had threatened to break them out. The vigilantes let folks know that the hangings weren't done.

Something had to give. It did. On the Night of Blood.

It actually started on December 11, 1868, just a few ticks shy of midnight. About 50 men gathered at the depot in Seymour. They wore scarlet hoods over their heads and their overcoats were turned inside out. Some of them had numbers chalked on the backs of those coats, indicating that they were leading this hunting trip. A Jeffersonville, Madison and Indianapolis Railroad locomotive pulling two passenger cars was ready to go. The group boarded the train, and it took off toward the south. It traveled dark and quiet—no lights, no whistles. It didn't really matter; the men had cut all of the communication lines between Seymour and towns along the line, so no one could have sent the word that the vigilantes were on the move.

The 50-mile trip to Jeffersonville took about 2 hours. That's where the group got off, only to take over another train that was aimed in the direction of New Albany. The second leg of the trip was just 15 miles. It took a little over an hour to reach the destination.

So it was just after 3 in the morning when the masked men disembarked at Pearl Street. This was no mob, rushing pell-mell toward the jail, fueled by adrenaline and anger. Every step was premeditated. Each move was precise. Only the men with numbers scrawled on their coats spoke, barking out orders in a military fashion.

The vigilantes cordoned off a section of three blocks around the jail. Sentinels were placed on each corner. Startled passersby were taken into custody and herded back to the train. Meanwhile, the main body of the vigilance committee marched toward the building that housed the Renos and Charley Anderson.

It was less than ten years old, a two-story brick structure with the sheriff's residence at the front and the jail in back. The vigilantes headed to the front door.

Outside at the curb, guard Luther "Chuck" Whitten was warming his hands over a fire. He'd been assigned this position to keep watch for intruders—whether they came to break out the Renos or to lynch them. Some reports say that when the masked men approached him, Whitten went into a frenzy of fear. He didn't try to stop the group; he didn't try to raise the alarm, although his screams and shouting did the same thing. They bound and gagged him, then headed for the door.

Inside, Sheriff Thomas Fullenlove was coming out of a sound sleep, awakened by the noise out front. He'd just gotten downstairs when the vigilantes came in. He tried to run; someone shot him in the upper right arm, shattering the bone and inflicting terrible pain. Then the masked men demanded the keys to the cell room.

Fullenlove refused to give in, so some of the vigilantes beat him with clubs. A couple of them twisted his wounded arm. He still wouldn't talk.

So they went upstairs to get Mrs. Fullenlove, who'd heard the commotion from her bedroom. They brought her down to her husband, again demanding that the keys be handed over. The Fullenloves again demurred. Number 1 threatened to burn down the whole building with everyone in it. Somebody pulled a gun and pointed it at the sheriff. The tensions were running high.

Some of the marauders had stayed upstairs, looking for keys. Instead, they found two county commissioners hiding in a closet. The officials were roughly pushed to the main floor area. And dire threats continued, getting louder and more profane.

Then the keys were found, hidden in the drawer of a washstand at the foot of the Fullenloves' bed. One of the vigilantes brought them downstairs on the run, and the group moved toward the cell room door.

It was quickly unlocked, and the door swung in—revealing night jailer Thomas Matthews, armed with two pistols at the ready. Number 1 said Matthews could just as well hang alongside the Renos, a fate that the guard wanted to avoid. So he stood down, dropping the revolvers and allowing the group to enter.

The cell room was just that—a series of small, metal cages that had been bolted and welded together, forming a square with a large open area in the middle. There were two tiers. The upper level had a metal walk that ran along the cell perimeter, leading to an iron stairway in the southwest corner. The intended victims were upstairs, next to that stairway, in adjoining cells. Another eight or so prisoners were scattered in other cells.

Frank Reno was first. A few of the vigilantes went to his cell and unlocked it. The eldest of the Reno boys tried to fight, but he was overwhelmed. Some accounts say he was hit over the head, or struck by a rock from a slingshot. Some said that he kept asking his executioners, "Gentlemen, what are you doing?" And he may have asked for leniency for his little brother Will.

The men in the masks put a noose around his neck, throwing the loose end of the rope over a beam near the ceiling and then grabbing it when it came down. Reno was lifted up and tossed over the side of the guardrail on the walkway. His neck snapped when the rope went taut. William Reno was next.

Several of the accounts say that he was housed in the same cell as his brother Sim. That's unlikely, considering just how tiny those cells were. But in either case, the door to his cage was unlocked and he was grabbed by several strong hands.

Will pleaded that he was innocent of the crimes, that he didn't deserve to die. He may have been right. But it didn't matter. He got the same treatment as his oldest brother—the noose around the neck, the free end over the beam and into the grips of several vigilantes, his body hurled over the side. Some reports say that his neck wasn't broken in that fall, that he died slow. One of his killers wanted to put an end to it, so he leaped from the walkway onto Will, hoping to break the young man's neck. It didn't work. All that he managed to do was to pull the noose tighter, so that it became almost hidden as it squeezed into his neck, effectively garroting him.

Simeon Reno was third. He apparently fought for his life, wrenching plumbing from the wall of his cell to use as a club. He nailed a couple of his killers before they got the best of him. Someone hit him over the head with a board, knocking him senseless. The process continued, except that he was slowly lowered over the guardrail. His toes barely reached the ground.

Charley Anderson was the last to go. Poor Charley was terrified. He begged the vigilantes to give him some time to pray. They told him it was too late for that. They put the rope around his neck and tossed him over the side.

The rope broke.

Anderson lay on the ground, a bit stunned but still asking God to have mercy on his soul. The Great Master might just have done that, but the masked men wouldn't be so generous to his physical being. They picked Charley up, put another noose around his neck, and then slowly pulled him up. Charley Anderson died quiet.

One of the vigilantes had worked himself into a blood lust and demanded that the rest of the prisoners get the same treatment. Number 1 put an end to that in a hurry and led his men out.

Behind them, Sim Reno regained consciousness. He fought hard to keep his toes touching the floor, but the distance was just a bit too much. It took him about a half-hour to die, all the while the other prisoners were screaming for help. But it didn't come.

The masked men took one of the county councilmen along for the short walk to where the train was waiting. The group marched in an orderly fashion, and then boarded the train quickly and quietly. Number 1 gave the man the jail keys and told him to fetch a doctor for Sheriff Fullenlove. And as a farewell, the leader shouted out, "Salus populi suprema lex!" The will of the people is the supreme law.

As the train chugged away, some New Albany police showed up and fired a few shots. A couple of vigilantes returned the fire, but no one was hurt. The town of New Albany was now fully awake. A posse was formed to go after the masked men with the aim of catching them at Jeffersonville. It was a good plan, and the only thing they could do since all of the telegraph wires between New Albany and J'ville had been cut.

The vigilantes apparently had prepared for such a thing. They got off the train about five miles outside of Jeffersonville. Eventually, they all got back to Seymour—although how they did it has never been discovered.

Back in New Albany, the bodies weren't cut down for a couple of hours. A coroner's jury was quickly appointed and sent in to the jail to take a look at the vigilantes' work. But they wouldn't reach a verdict for another five days, and when it came down it was no surprise—"...death by hanging committed by parties unknown."

The reason that a judgment wasn't rendered that morning was that a huge crowd had gathered around the jail and threatened to break in to get a view. Town officials decided that the corpses had to be removed to another, more accessible spot. Some cheap wood caskets were brought in, and several strong men carried the bodies over to the Floyd County Courthouse. The crowd lined up and began filing by the coffins. Most agreed it was an awful sight.

Pretty soon, the survivors were brought to the scene: Charley Anderson's widow; Sarah Reno, the wife of Frank; and Laura Reno, the sister of three of the dead men. She was especially horrified by the appearance of Will Reno, with the thick rope cutting into his neck and distorting his features. The bodies were handed over to the relatives on Sunday, December 13. Charley Anderson was quickly buried at the New Albany Cemetery. The next day, the Renos were shipped back to Seymour for interment in that town's cemetery.

A German language newspaper in Louisville carried a notice from the vigilantes that threatened more lynchings if Reno associates and relatives didn't turn to the straight and narrow. An English version was handed out in Seymour on December 21. The message was clear and it must have had an impact. The Reno Gang was finished. Over the next decade or so, most of the folks named Reno left Jackson County.