

# **“The Patrick Noonan Case”**

in

## **HISTORY OF FILLMORE COUNTY, MINNESOTA**

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### **FOREWORD**

by

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In the history of this state, “the Patrick Noonan Case” is not an important event. Except to the surviving families, it was forgotten long ago. The account of the assault, flight of the suspect, his decades-delayed apprehension, trial, and punishment is typical of descriptions of crimes that appear in volume after volume of county histories published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in this state. Short accounts of violent crimes were a feature of county historiography during these years.

We can speculate why early county historians could not resist telling the stories of crimes and their aftermaths. Without exception these early histories contained almanac-like lists of people, dates of events, meetings and elections, amounts of bonds for the erection of public buildings were noted; society was divided into categories such as “churches,” “banks,” “schools,” “bench and bar” and so on. And perhaps therein lays the answer to why the “Noonan Case” appeared in two histories of Fillmore County, the first published in 1882, the second in 1912: it added excitement and mystery to an otherwise dry chronology. Like many “true crime” stories today, these tales of crime on the frontier are entertaining. Moreover, from some of them, we can learn a lot.

The story that follows appeared on pages 494-495 of the first volume of a two volume history of Fillmore County published in 1912. Though re-formatted, it is complete. The author's spelling and punctuation have not been changed. This account refers to an "earlier" version of the case that appeared in a "former history of this county." That reference is to *History of Fillmore County, Minnesota* 324-325 (Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Co., 1882), reprinted in 1982 by the Fillmore County Historical Society. The two are nearly identical except that the following version describes the capture and trial of Patrick Noonan.

The original title of this article in the 1912 county history was "The Noonan Case," but it has been re-titled "The Patrick Noonan Case" to prevent confusion with "The Kate Noonan Case," another article posted separately on the MLHP. □

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IN

**HISTORY OF**

**Fillmore County**

**MINNESOTA**

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**CHICAGO**

1912

## The Noonan Case.

On Saturday, October 17, 1874, Patrick Noonan, who lived three miles from Fountain, started for the latter place with a load of wheat, telling his wife as he left that he proposed to have "a spree and a row." Mrs. Noonan, therefore, sent her boy to town to inform the parties to whom Mr. Noonan would sell his wheat, of his intentions, and warned them not to let him have any money. Finding he could not get the cash for the wheat, Mr. Noonan borrowed \$25. After drinking heavily, he began quarreling with a young man known in that vicinity as John Shinnors, whose real name was John McDonald. After some harsh words, Shinnors hit Noonan a blow in the face, but before the blow could be returned they were parted by the saloon-keeper. After this, during the whole evening the matter seemed weighing on Noonan's mind, and he was unusually silent and reticent, and seemed meditating a plan for revenge. That night Noonan met a clerk in the saloon, one Eric Gilbertson, and in course of conversation showed him a piece of lead whittled nearly round, about the size of a hen's egg, and told him he had "made that for Shinnors and would fix him." Nothing more was done at that time, Noonan sleeping in the shoe shop over night saying nothing to anyone.

About 9 o'clock the next morning (Sunday), Noonan walked up town, apparently sobered off and in good humor. He met Shinnors at the corner, and the following words ensued: Noonan: "What did you hit me for last night?" Shinnors: "Because you insulted me." Noonan: "How did I insult you?" Shinnors: "It makes no difference. I don't feel at all like apologizing." Noonan: "Then tell me what you hit me for." Shinnors: "Because I liked it." Noonan: "Well, you're a curious sort of a man." Shinnors: "That's just the kind of a cat I am. I hit you because I liked it, and I am just that kind of a cat."

Shinnors then went into the shoemaker's shop, and in a few moments came out, and, as he went by, Noonan tried to hit him. Shinnors warded off the blow, at the same time making a jump into the street. If he had turned and grappled Noonan it is said the crime might have been avoided, but the moment he saw the weapon, which Noonan had done up in a handkerchief and used as a slung-shot, he thought his only safety lay in flight. He ran out

in the middle of the street at his utmost speed, but Noonan was too much for him. He caught him just before he reached Patrick Ferris' hotel, and aimed a blow with his slung-shot which hit him on the back of the neck, knocking him down. He hit him three or four quick, successive blows after he went down, one very severe one on the right side of the head, near the crown which broke the skull; then, giving him a kick, ran up the street exclaiming as he ran, "I done that because I liked it, by G—d! I've fixed him, d—n him!" Shinnars died two days later.

Noonan made his way to the woods, and the most diligent search failed to unearth him. Nearly ten years have rolled by, and his whereabouts still remain a mystery. His family resided on the old homestead until March, 1882, when the entire family—mother and three children—left for parts unknown. It was generally supposed by the residents and pioneers that they had gone to meet the exiled husband and father, but where, no one but his family and himself know.

The above account from a former history of this county gives the earlier history of the case. But another chapter was to be written after a lapse of thirty years.

After committing the deed, Noonan went to Wabasha county, where he stayed three weeks. There he heard of Shinnars' death. Driving twenty-five miles to Lake City, he boarded a train for Milwaukee, and from there made his way to Fulton City, Ill. Then he went west and had various experiences until arrested in Helena, Mont., and brought back to Fillmore county in 1902. The case was tried in November, the prosecuting attorney, John W. Hopp, being assisted by R. J. Parker, and the defense being in the hands of Thompson & Gray. Noonan was found guilty of manslaughter in the fourth degree and sentenced to one year in prison. ■

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