

*The Uffda Trial**

by

Gerald Anderson

Reviewed

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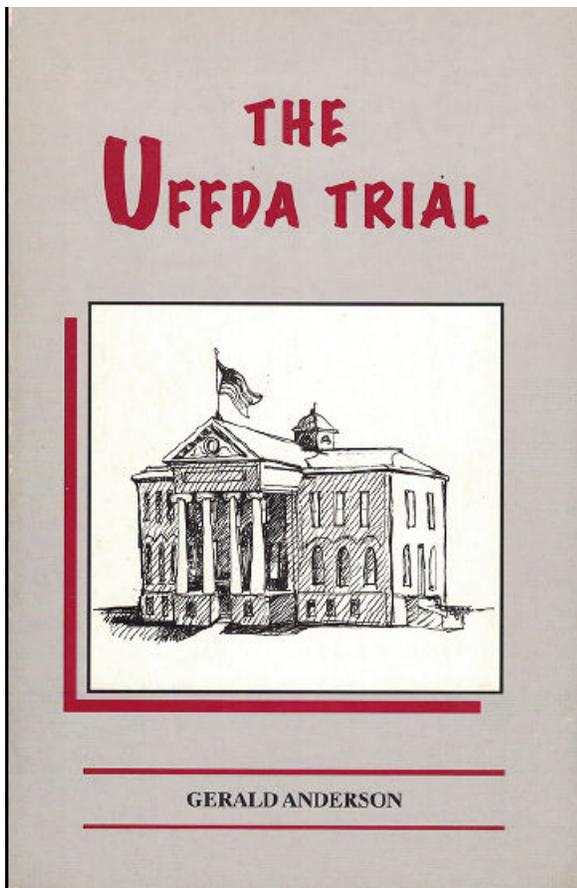
Robert M. Smith

The Uffda Trial is a fictional account of what life was like in rural Northwestern Minnesota in 1926. It not only describes the lifestyle and mindset of the Scandinavian farmers in the area, but also puts the events of the day into political and historical context. Much of the dialogue used in the novel replicates the often humorous and unvarnished accent, style, and mannerisms of the second and third generation families. The book is enjoyable, informative and seems to be historically accurate.

* Martin House Publications, Hastings, Minnesota. 192 pages (1994). According to the author's online biography, it is "an historical novel, based on an actual event." Unfortunately he does not tell us more about the actual case.

The author, a former college history professor, has written two other historical novels, *The Unicorn Murder...or...Victoria's Revenge* (2013) and *Saving England* (2014), as well as a series of "Otter Tail County Mysteries" that include *Death Before Dinner* (2007), *Murder Under the Loon* (2011), *Murder in Bemidji...or Paul's Bloody Trousers* (2011), *One and a Half Stone of Stories* (2014), *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Corpse...or...a Brush With Death* (2015), and *Death of a Viking...or...Drown by the Old Mill Stream* (2016).

The main character is Karl Thorsen, who at 23 was forced to drop out of high school to work on the family farm. He was bright, but frustrated with farm life. He was more worldly and intellectually curious than his peers, but he knew his opportunities were limited. Karl would love to get married, but he had no interest in anyone who came from the very homogenous little world he occupied.



One day, Karl and his brother attended a dance in a neighboring town, and there Karl met Julie. She was unusual because she had dark hair, and this was fascinating to Karl. There was a mutual attraction, and Karl set about courting Julie. Karl learned that Julie's father had an unsavory past.

The action is set in the fictitious Minnesota town of Vingelen. The residents of Vingelen were half Swedish and half Norwegian. Vingelen in the 1920's was not prospering like much of the rest of the country. Life was simple. Farm chores needed to be done. Church had to be attended. Vingelen was extremely insular, and the

residents were less assimilated into American life than might be expected, given their longevity in this country. But the larger outside world was beginning to influence everyday life due to the advent of the radio, telephone and movies.

One day, there were posters that appeared in Vingelen advertising a series of films that proclaimed a free 11- month old baby would be given away at a film festival. This set the town abuzz. Since there was so little in the way of entertainment that came to Vingelen, virtually all of the residents wanted to go the festival, particularly to find out who was going to get the baby. While the whole idea sounded preposterous, everyone wanted to find out what happened.

As it turns out, Julie's father (Morrison) was the perpetrator of a prior scam in town, and he was also the promoter of the film festival. The film festival was also not what it appeared to be. First, instead of showing an entire movie, what were shown were 5 different reels from 5 different movies that had nothing to do with each other. Moreover, at the end of the showing, Morrison announced that not enough people had shown up to the festival, so he could not award the baby as promised. However, he agreed to run the festival again the next day, and if enough people showed up, he would give

away the baby. The next day, again no baby was awarded. A third showing was announced.

The townsfolk seemed to accept the scam, and many actually enjoyed the films, even as disjointed and unrelated as they were. However, a number of the younger residents decided that they would take justice into their own hands by pelting Morrison with rotten eggs.

Out of loyalty to Julie, Karl made clear he would not participate in the egging. Although he actually tried to prevent the assault on Morrison, Karl was identified as the main perpetrator, and was forced to stand trial.

The author describes the important events of the day nationally and internationally, as reported by the *New York Times*. The Teapot Dome scandal was described; a Miami land boom was expected after a hurricane; Lillian Gish starred in “The Scarlett Letter” on Broadway; and the French balked at a debt accord. But in Vingelen, the only news that was of any import was about the egg case.

At the trial, Karl and others were charged with assault and battery upon Morrison. The victim testified that he provided entertainment to the people of Vingelen, that at no point did anyone ask for a refund. Yet after the last showing, he was hit with eggs, which propelled his head into a telephone

pole, causing pain and suffering. After the assault, Morrison, covered with rotten eggs, sought refuge at a local café.

Art Lein, a local known for his fondness of liquor, was the only other patron of the cafe at the time. He testified next. His testimony provides the book's title, and gives a taste of the local patois. Here's an excerpt:

“Well then, Mr. Lein, what did you think when you saw Mr. Morrison come into Flora’s Café, bleeding and covered with eggs?”

“I yust tought ‘uffda!”

“Uffda, Mr. Lein? What do you mean?”

“I mean uffda!”

“What does uffda mean, Mr. Lein?”

“Vot does uffda mean? Don’t yew know English, den? It yust means uffda. Yew slip in da barn ven yew got yer Sunday pants on, dat’s uffda! Yer flask gets a little hole in it, and dat’s uffda! Yer daughter starts going out wit an Irish Catlik, dat’s uffda! And by golly, ven I saw dat guy stagger into Flora’s dat vas really uffda! Vot more can I say?”

“Yes, Mr. Lein,” said the prosecutor, obviously trying to hurry the testimony. “Now can you tell us how long Mr. Morrison and his daughter were forced to stay in Flora’s Café?”

“No, I don’t tink so,” replied honest Art, who had just taken an oath.

“Can you at least tell us approximately what time they left the café?”

“No, yew see I tink I fell asleep a little bit dere. Flora, she voke me up about midnight. I suppose it was, ven she wanted to close up, yew know.”

The prosecution’s case did not improve from there. The entire trial, described near the end of the book, is a comic disaster. The defense lawyer was good friends with all the jury members. Everyone knew the verdict before it was announced. The jury was mostly interested in the free meals provided. The judge began drinking heavily during deliberations. The defendants thought standing trial was better than having to do their farm chores.

The novel provides a fair amount of social and political commentary of the day that is still relevant today. For example, during a lunch break during the trial, some the defendants describe their own lawyer as a good guy, but just a politician who wants to get elected “just to raise our taxes.” Karl exploded when he heard this. He told his fellow defendants:

“Raise taxes! You damn right he should raise taxes. When are any of you ever going to learn that raising taxes is the best thing that can happen to us? ...

“Who do you guys think you are?” Karl demanded. “Andrew Mellon? Rockefeller? Carnegie? They are all good Republicans. They don’t want their taxes raised. They can educate their own kids. Hell, they can buy their own universities. Which one of us can go to college? None of us! And the rich are going to make damn sure we stay dumb so we won’t compete with them.

“Now look,” he continued, “the best way to tax is progressively. Those that have it pay a bigger percentage than those who don’t, right? Right...If we ever wake up, we can squeeze the fat cats who are squeezing the farmers. Sure it would be nice to have ten or

twelve more bucks at the end of the year. But by raising taxes, we can change society! And you guys who don't know sour owl shit about it, sit and bitch about nickels and dimes.”

In the end, there is hope for the future of farming and for Karl and Julie's relationship.

There is little that a lawyer or legal professional can learn about trial practice or trial technique in this novel. However, the novel does reveal how small town justice sometimes works. I recommend this book to lawyers and non-lawyers alike, especially those of Scandinavian descent.

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Reviewer

Robert M. Smith is a graduate of University of Minnesota College of Liberal Arts (1974) and University of Minnesota Law School (1977). He practiced law as a solo practitioner from 1977 to 2017.

His reviews of Neil S. Boardman's novel, *The Wine of Violence* (1964) and Roger Stelljes's mystery, *The St. Paul Conspiracy* (2006) are also posted on the MLHP website.

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