

THE WASECA COUNTY HORSE THIEF DETECTIVES

The forward march of settlement across the middle western states was frequently so rapid that the establishment of effective forms of government lagged behind the need of the pioneers for law and order. The settlers, consequently, often took governmental matters into their own hands and set up temporary organizations for the protection of their lives and property. Evidence of this resourceful spirit among the pioneers is found in such organizations as claim associations, committees of vigilantes, and horse thief detective societies.

In southern Minnesota and northern Iowa, horse thieves were particularly active in the sixties and seventies, and they proved a constant menace to the pioneer. Some old settlers claim that the thieves were so well organized in gangs that they had definite "stations" to aid in their escape and "blind stalls" to conceal the stolen horses. The raids made by gangs of horse thieves did not fail to go unchallenged by the dauntless pioneers, however, and in many counties indignant settlers met to plan some means of combating the menace to their property. Such meetings usually resulted in the formation of horse thief detective societies.

It is the purpose of this sketch to recount the early history of one such pioneer organization, namely, the Waseca County Horse Thief Detectives. The history of this society is of interest not only because it is typical of the numerous organizations of its kind that existed throughout southern Minnesota in the sixties, but also because it is the only one known to the writer that has continued in existence to the present time.

The immediate cause for the formation of a horse thief

detective society in Waseca County was the theft in the summer of 1862 of a valuable pair of horses belonging to a newly arrived settler. The thieves were found residing within the county and were arrested and convicted of larceny; but, pending an appeal to the supreme court, they broke jail and escaped. The stealing of the horses, the escape of the thieves, and the expense involved in their arrest and trial created great indignation among the settlers and led to the organization of the Waseca County Horse Thief Detectives.¹

Some eighteen pioneers met in the town of Wilton on February 16, 1864, organized a horse thief detective society, drew up a constitution, and elected officers.² Besides the regular officers, in 1872 the constitution provided for the election annually of fifteen men, designated as "riders." The riders chose one of their group to act as captain and to "control and direct all their operations." It was the duty of the riders to be prepared at all times to start in pursuit of thieves who had taken from a member of the society property of any kind valued at more than fifty dollars. The riders also held secret meetings and made any regulations that they considered necessary to "secure their safety and efficiency when in pursuit of horses or thieves." In cases of emergency, all members of the society could be called into service if the captain of riders considered it necessary.³

¹ James E. Child, *History of Waseca County, Minnesota*, 345 (Owatonna, 1905).

² Wilton was the county seat in 1864. The railroad, which passed through Waseca County in 1867, was built some miles from Wilton; the village of Waseca then grew up and Wilton rapidly declined.

³ Waseca County Horse Thief Detectives, *Constitution*, articles 8, 9, 12, 13. The original constitution is evidently lost; the constitution in effect in 1872, a copy of which is in the possession of the society at Waseca, is cited in this article. A typewritten copy, which is used as an appendix to the writer's "History of the Settlement of Waseca County, 1854-1880," a master's thesis prepared at the University of Minnesota in 1931, is in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

The constitution instructed the members of the organization to notify their president of stolen property immediately upon the discovery of its loss. The president and the captain of the riders then heard the complaint of the aggrieved member, and, if the property loss conformed to the restrictions of the society, the captain sent his band in pursuit of the thieves.⁴ Thieves could not be sure of escape even if they went beyond the limits of Waseca County, for there is evidence that members of other societies were ready to cooperate with the Waseca County society. It was the duty of the Waseca County secretary "to inform all adjoining societies of property suspected to have been stolen with a description of the property stolen and such other information as the circumstances may warrant."⁵

The code of the frontiersman is illustrated by the method of punishing thieves. If the riders were successful in capturing the thief or thieves, a committee of five members and the president of the society, who acted as chairman, discussed the case and decided upon the course of action to pursue. The constitution provided that they were either to "commence legal proceedings before a civil magistrate, at the expense of the society" or to "take the offender into their own custody, and when said committee are fully satisfied that the ends of justice may be attained, with less expense and trouble to the society, than by legal process, may satisfy the same as in their judgment may seem just to all parties."⁶ This means of justice sometimes meant hanging to a tree. On one occasion in the early seventies a man was suspected of stealing a horse, and a large mob gathered near Waseca and proceeded to place a rope around his neck. They were ready to hang him when two members of the society rushed to the scene and persuaded the mob to release the suspected man, as there was some doubt of his guilt.⁷

⁴Article 15.

⁵Article 6.

⁶Article 16.

⁷*Waseca Herald*, March 7, 1929.

In 1870 the people of Waseca County were greatly stirred by the report that two horse thieves from Winnesiek County, Iowa, were escaping through Freeborn and Waseca counties to the north, closely pursued by officers of the law. At Wilton the sheriff of Waseca County and a number of others joined the chase and the horses were recovered at Waterville in Le Sueur County, some ten miles beyond Waseca. Shortly afterwards the thieves were apprehended and imprisoned at Waterville. Rumors followed that an attempt was to be made by accomplices to rescue the prisoners, but the residents of Waterville were determined to prevent the prisoners' escape, and a large body of citizens stood ready to reënforce the officers of the law. The sheriff of Waseca County enlarged the guard with some thirty men. Subsequently the thieves were taken back to Iowa for trial.⁸ This, however, did not close the incident for the people of Waseca County, many of whom suspected two men residing in the village of Waseca of being connected with a gang of thieves operating in Iowa and Minnesota. Waterville seems to have been a favorite place for thieves to congregate, and the fact that the men in question had lived there for many years increased the feeling against them. A large number of farmers from the northern and western parts of the county, accordingly, proceeded to Waseca in a body with the intention of hanging the suspected men. They were caught, and only the prompt action of the justice of the peace, with the assistance of several others, brought about the release of the accused men before the mob had acted. So intense was the feeling against the suspected men, however, that they were placed under guard as a protection.⁹ This incident and others like it became widely known and doubtless served to frighten horse thieves, for it was generally believed that if a thief were caught in Waseca County he would be hanged.

⁸ *Waseca News*, June 1, 1870.

⁹ Child, *History of Waseca County*, 226-228.

Occasional periods of activity among thieves occurred in the seventies, and at such times the local paper advised the horse thief detectives to "brush up." Membership in the organization increased considerably in times of danger and a careful watch was kept. By 1880 professional stealing was practically at an end. The quarterly meetings of the society gave way to annual meetings held at Waseca and the members proudly boasted that since the organization of the society in 1864 no member of the society had lost a horse by theft.¹⁰

Although horse stealing became a thing of the past, the pioneers did not allow the Waseca County Horse Thief Detectives to pass into oblivion, as other similar societies had done when their period of greatest usefulness was over. Sentiment no doubt has been largely responsible for continuing the organization to the present time. For many years meetings have been considered chiefly social affairs. The society still functions, nevertheless, and recently it has concerned itself with the recovery of stolen automobiles, tractors, or any other property valued at twenty-five dollars or more.¹¹

GLADYS HARSHMAN DU PRIEST

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

¹⁰ *Waseca News*, July 3, 1872; *Minnesota Radical* (Waseca), June 13, 1877; *Minnesota Radical and Liberty Blade* (Waseca), March 10, 1880.

¹¹ *Waseca Herald*, February 23, 1928; *Minneapolis Journal*, March 2, 1930.



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