

# THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

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# THE HANGING

By James Comstock

It was a silly question the sheriff asked.

"Which one of you men wants to be hung first?"

"Hang him first," yelled Grogan. "He stooped on me and that's why I have to hang."

Daniel Grogan was old. His white hair made him look like the saint he wasn't. If there was anybody who could have moved that Parkersburg, West Virginia mob to sympathy, old Grogan could. Even if he did admit to the fatal shooting of Abram Deem on September 15, 1864. But the mob wasn't to be moved. They had come to see a hanging and a gray-haired old rascal standing on a gallows wasn't melting their hearts.

"Hang him first, sheriff, he was the one that done the shooting," pleaded Thomas Boice, the other man on the scaffold.

The two condemned murderers started quarreling among themselves and the sheriff had to decide the matter.

"All right. All right, boys, if you are going to sound like two tomcats, you can fight like tomcats," he said.

He threw a double-noosed rope over a beam and dropped one end of it around Grogan's neck and the other around Boice's. "Tie their hands behind 'em," the sheriff said to a deputy, "but don't tie their feet. Let them kick each other. They can kick each other all the way to Glory."

The crowd heard these words. They laughed fit to kill. It was a big day in Parkersburg. Many of them had seen a single public hanging, but never a double. There was some slight disappointment that Mortimore W. Gibbony had broken jail when he was found guilty along with the other two. Later when he was caught, he said the Lord had helped him escape because he wasn't really in on it. He had just dropped by Boice's still house and had a little too much to drink and when that "South lovin'" Abram Deem came along, he just went along with Boice and Grogan when they decided to turn him in to the Home Guards.

The three didn't figure they had done anything wrong in shooting old Deem in the back when they decided it would be too long between drinks before they got him turned over to the Home Guards and then maybe too the Guard

would just put him in jail. Not only was he a South-loving son-of-a-bitch, but he had been turning his hogs into his apple orchard instead of bringing the apples to Grogan's still house the way he ought to. And besides, what was the Civil War for if it wasn't for shooting rebel-lovers and letting decent people get even with folks who had done dirt to their neighbors.

The three were soon captured. Mrs. Deem heard the shot and right after she saw the three drunks pass the house and recognized them all. Right after that one of Deem's kids came along and saw the body. Squire Tracewell held the inquest and he told Captain William Logsdon that he had better do something.

Captain Logsdon had organized the Home Guard to protect Parkersburg people from Rebel attacks, but lately there was nothing to do and the men were tired of sitting around on their fannies. He ordered Corporal Kenly to bring the three back to Parkersburg even if they did kill a Southern sympathizer.

The trial was short and sweet and Judge George Loomis sentenced the three to hang on November 2, 1864. Their lawyer wrangled a writ of error and the time was extended to July 4, and then they had to wait for the October term of court and the judge ordered them to hang on November 24, 1865. The three rascals got another hearing and the hanging was postponed again. In the meantime Gibbony got wind that the two were going to turn state's evidence and pin the whole thing on him. He removed some masonry one night and bowed out.

The final date was set for February 9, 1866. The war was now over. Parkersburg had got back to normalcy and didn't like it at all. There was a brief spell of prosperity right after the war. Everybody had the "go west, young man" fever and Parkersburg on the Ohio River was the gateway. It was a railroad terminal and a water terminal, and over 100,000 men, 10,000 mules and horses and all the wagons and equipment came by rail for reshipment by water to the western land beyond. One historian of the period counted ninety-two steamboats being loaded or awaiting their turn for the western movement.

Early in 1866 the migration was finished and Parkersburg twiddled

its thumbs. Occasionally there was a drowning and somebody would shoot off the two long cannons that the Home Guard had left with balls aplenty and powder on top of Fort Boreman Hill. And there were holidays and famous birthdays that called for cannon fire, but little else. And the town was dying on its feet.

Even Fog Thompson couldn't help matters much. Fog was the village idiot who lived across the river in Ohio, but he came to town often, too often, some thought, and made enough noise so that people knew he had come. What God hadn't given Fog in the head, He gave him in the lungs, and when he would get into a johnboat and pull off from the Ohio banks, he would emit a sound that was peculiarly similar to a foghorn, only much louder, and Parkersburg knew he was coming. A Parkersburger, whose identity has never been disclosed and who was doubtlessly activated by the purest misanthropy, gave Fog an army bugle. Fog mastered the instrument as far as one note went, which wasn't much by musical standards, but helped the town bear its tribulations.

Hangings, for some reason, known best to the judges themselves perhaps, are scheduled for a Friday, and Friday of February 9, 1866, was the day set for Grogan and Boice to pay their debt to society. It was, too, a day that would bring excitement to a town that had nothing but a showboat and it with nothing but "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Good Northerners that they were, the Parkersburgers were getting weary of seeing Little Eva going to heaven night after night via that wire-and-pulley contraption that never quite worked.

Friday or no Friday, the big day for West Virginia towns always was and always will be Saturday, and the Friday for the hanging started really on the Saturday before when all the folks came to town. They whooped it up through Sunday and Monday, and Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday, and when the day of the execution

dawned there was hardly a soul in the town who was not ready for the biggest day in his life.

Fog Thompson's one-note trumpet blast woke the town to a chilly dawn, and it wasn't long until a large crowd answered the idiot's call and

milled in front of the jail where the two protagonists awaited their cue to go on. A deputy raised a window and looked out.

"Get your head back in there, you son-of-a-bitch, until it's time to put it into a noose."

The deputy explained that he was neither Grogan nor Boice, but the crowd wasn't listening. One of the crowd lowed that maybe he would come in and hold his own hanging right then and there. The deputy dispatched a runner to the Home Guard

# PEOPLE

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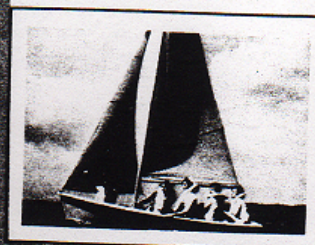
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# INDIANA

**WHERE THE GOOD LIFE IS BETTER**

command and the soldiers, welcoming the opportunity of doing anything officially, came with bayonets bared and drove the crowd from the jailyard.

The streets were decorated in holiday attire and the stores and street vendors were making hay while the bleak February sun shone. A farmer had set up a snake show on the street and to thaw them to the proper reptilency, he put a lighted lantern on the straw-strewn floor. The place afire. The populace was sober enough to save a building from burning, but not the snakes, and then wanted to lynch the man for his cruelty to "poor dumb creatures." Even a snake has feeling, one drunk said.

At four different places in the town a preacher of varying degrees of social acceptance, going from the unknown tongue to pure Methodism, held forth, foretold of impending doom. The population began to swell with the arrival of excursion boats, and a group of Confederate veterans and Southern sympathizers started a riot that had to be ended with the Home Guards' bayonets.

"Get your whiskey here, folks. Why bother with a bottle when you can get a jug for two dollars? There's plenty of time before the hanging, folks," a grizzled moonshiner shouted.

A riot started at mid-morning when the Ohioans started coming across the river and when the oil workers drifted in from the oil fields. The sheriff had no sympathy for the Ohioans—he called them "damned pilgrims"—because they had always criticized West Virginia for its public hangings.

"Still they don't mind seein' one," the sheriff said as he called out the Home Guard to "chase them back across the damned Ohio."

The sheriff had to break off and rush out of the building when a deputy whispered that a man was putting a ladder up against the window so he could have a look at one of the condemned men. No sooner had he got that matter settled than a drunk staggered up to him with a bottle.

"Give this to old Grogan and Boice. Let them have a good time before they die."

That set a pattern that went on even after the execution was over, and the sheriff had enough liquor on hand to start his own grog shop. "Good for the election," he said.

The upper stratum of the town's society kept far afield of the hoi polloi and watched the shenanigans from the hotel veranda with arched eyebrows. Frequently they rode horseback through the crowd at the jail to see if they were missing any-

thing. The crowd made respectful way for the clergy that came through in the persons of Father Parks for Catholic Boice, and Reverend Monroe for Campbellite Grogan. The priest had asked for a private cell, but the jailer said no. "I lost one of the sons of bitches, and if another gets away, they'll hang me."

The cramped cell didn't seem to cramp anybody's style. They decided they were headed for mutual destinations and the two creeds dovetailed quite well. Grogan helped Boice in his devotions, and when the minister announced a hymn Boice joined in. Only the two men of God seemed confused at the turn of

then been rather faithful Jefferson Davis Americans, came for flags and the shrewd merchant didn't have to wait for the Spanish-American War to come along and close out his patriotic stock. There was a musical backdrop for the drama that was being enacted on the street. Some drunks had gone down to the showboat, "persuaded" the captain to get up steam and start playing the calliope and left him with enough liquor to make sure the tunes were lively.

A vendor ballyhooed pictures of "the scalwags, praying for their immortal souls. Right down on their knees, Lord have mercy." At noon the Home Guard started firing the

cleared the streets, and after them came, in special uniforms and in a place of honor, the brave heroes who had arrested Grogan and Boice. Next came the fife and drum corps, with Fog Thompson threshing his arms like mad and blowing like a viper. The sheriff rode next in a surrey, complete with fringe on top, and driver on box. In his hand he held a rope, and he took pleasure in exhibiting the nooses at either end.

Behind the sheriff came the two men for whom the bell was tolling. They sat in a surrey and with them were clergymen Parks and Monroe. An armed deputy drove. Behind came an old road wagon drawn by one nag of a horse. Loaded thereon were two wooden coffins. Home Guards brought up the rear, and behind them the people infiltrated after seeing the parade go by.

Grogan was old and his nerves were a network of steel wires. One could not have told that he was on his way to ignoble death. Boice was younger and made of softer stuff. When the Methodist ladies came to put white shrouds upon the condemned men before leaving the jail, Boice fainted and had to be revived with some smelling salts that one of the ladies had brought for herself. Sitting in the surrey, Boice trembled so much that Father Parks gave him a cigar.

"Smoke this, son," he said, "and calm yourself."

Boice puffed and inhaled and blew out the smoke and he kept on puffing and inhaling but the cigar had gone out.

A man on a horse came up to the surrey and reached out his hand to Boice. "Here's the two dollars I owe you for whiskey. I don't want you to go off to Glory and me owing you two dollars. I ain't gonna be owing no dead man nothing."

Boice didn't see or hear. The man took the money and shoved it into the collar of Boice's shroud. The Reverend Father Parks removed the money with two fingers as if it were poison to the touch and dropped it over the side of the surrey.

The parade followed down Market Street, across the old red covered bridge across Little Kanawha, and out into the open highway that led to the hill where the men were to be hanged. Fog Thompson bowed and scraped and flung his arms and the fife and drum corps followed after. The crowd mocked and laughed and only the condemned men seemed impervious to it all, and only the two men of the cloth seemed to be in their right minds. Near the bridge where the bawdy houses had sprung up to serve the soldiery, the girls came out and made some lascivious motions at the condemned



things. Grogan had been baptized the night before, and later in the evening some ladies of the Methodist Episcopal Church came in and sang some hymns. There was some difficulty in selecting one proper for a man who was departing via the hemp. They gave it up and settled on "My Faith Looks Up to Thee..."

Outside in the streets the Civil War was being fought all over, a neat little maneuver that was engineered by a Parkersburg merchant who was caught with a shipment of American flags prior to Appomattox. He pinned flags gratis on the first ten drunks that passed his store, slapped them on the back, and told them that no Abraham Lincoln American should be without one. Soon everybody, especially those who had until

cannon on top of Boreman Hill and alternated the two guns at ten-minute intervals so that a boom would be sounded every five minutes. The municipal fife and drum corps gave a concert in front of the jail at noon. Somebody convinced Fog Thompson that he should be in front of the band and he took his place there, bellowing forth his ear-splitting one-note.

The sheriff appeared at an upstairs window. He had an announcement to make. The prisoners would be paraded to the place of execution, starting at noon sharp, and everybody was to clear out. The crowd didn't budge an inch, and the sheriff had to call out the Home Guard again, and they, grateful for their role in this historical pageant,

men while the crowd roared.

The Home Guard called out cadence with: "Helter-skelter down Bull Run, / Every Reb run his best..." The sheriff ordered them to sing something more appropriate "for two souls that are about to rise up into Glory." The steamboats in the river tooted a salute while the showboat's calliope played "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

The parade now started up the hill and as they came to the first ledge, the voices of a choir of white-robed Baptist ladies burst into a hymn and poor Boice started crying. "Oh, Jesus, have mercy on me, a sinner," he kept saying. The priest had told him that prayer was the best for a man like him.

When the sally passed the singing ladies, they tried to fall in behind the prisoners, but the Home Guard told them nothing doing, and ordered them to infiltrate the crowd. The steeper the hill got, the more unorganized the procession became. The horses had to stop frequently because the people kept pulling at the vehicles.

The top of the hill was wind-swept, dreary and forbidding, not at all the kind of day one would want for a hanging. Bottles and jugs came to the rescue and soon the party spirit prevailed. The sheriff mounted the scaffold and looked about him. As far as he could see, there were upturned faces. The trees about were full of shivering, teeth-chattering kids, some of whom had dogs in their arms.

A reporter for the *Parkersburg Times* climbed the steps and surveyed the sea of humanity below. He wrote:

"It was a most revolting sight. I looked around to see just one look of pity for the men about to be hung, but there was not one. Beautiful ladies, whose presence would grace any gathering, watched the condemned men with a leering look of excitement that almost turned my stomach. Not one, not even one look of pity. God help them."

The prisoners were led up the steps. The sheriff asked which one wanted to be hanged first, and de-

cided to hang them simultaneously. He started fumbling with the rope, and the Baptist ladies, a bit breathless, started singing, "My faith looks up to Thee, Thou Lamb of Calvary..."

Reverend Monroe prayed and

started to address the crowd. Father Parks moved over into a corner and started to administer quietly the last rites. The sheriff interrupted him.

"If you please, Father, I think the audience wants to hear what goes on. Let's let Reverend Monroe have his

say first and then you."

Father Parks gave in and placed two chairs for the two prisoners to sit on. He was afraid they wouldn't be able to stand through Reverend Monroe's sermon. The preacher

*Continued on page 114*

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## THE HANGING

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lambasted the audience but they had ears to hear not. Fire from heaven wouldn't have moved them. Then the priest took over briefly, concerning himself with the man who was about to die.

"Would either of you men like to testify?" the sheriff asked the prisoners.

Grogan spoke: "I am a Christian man. My wife and I were baptized by Reverend Worry Martin, a Campbellite."

Boice wanted a last word. "I am a saved man. I am going straight to Heaven. I want to tell everyone here to keep away from whiskey." He looked at Grogan. "And bad company," he added. The look Grogan gave him was not inspired by the pale Galilean.

The sheriff noticed that there was something wrong among the spectators and sent a deputy to see what it was. He came back and whispered in the sheriff's ear. "Somebody started a rumor that Gibbony is in the crowd. They say he come back to see the other two hung."

The sheriff was relieved. He was afraid it was Union vets organizing a rescue party. He stepped toward the two men and told them to get up. He put the rope over the beam above and then put the noose over each man's head. He dropped the black hoods over their heads. He read the death sentence slowly. He took hold of an axe and held it high in the air as he said, "I hereby commit your souls to the Maker that gave them, and may He have mercy on you."

A man stepped up and whispered in his ear; the sheriff relaxed the axe, went over to the railing and said, "All right, Fog, let her blow."

Bursting with pride and glowing with rapture, Fog put his lips to his bugle and gave his greatest one-note concert.

The axe went up and came down again on the rope that held the trapdoor and two bodies dropped as one.

It was a mistake hanging two people by a rope that hadn't been tested. It broke. The men landed on their coffins below, and the two ministers, fearing that the men would be strangled, rushed to their aid. Only Boice needed help and Father Parks undid the rope that was choking him. Old Grogan jerked off rope and hood and shroud and galloped up the steps to the sheriff, who by now was seated in one of the chairs and looking as if suddenly life wasn't worth the trouble.

"You got to hang him first, sheriff. See I am the only one able to walk back up here. You got to hang Boice first. Now, doncha?" He was shaking the sheriff by the shoulders.

Suddenly the sheriff wasn't interested in hanging anybody. All of a sudden he had become an old

man and looked terribly tired.

The deputies carried Boice up the steps and as he was the more manageable of the two, fixed the rope about his neck, tied it to the beam above, and opened the trapdoor without the least bit of ceremony and sent him off to Eternity. He shook and quivered for twelve minutes. They let him hang another twelve minutes and pronounced him dead.

Grogan saw all this. He saw his partner in murder froth at the mouth and saw him die. He felt them put the noose about his own neck and suddenly he felt nothing at all. He was in the next world.

The pendulumlike swinging of Grogan was more than one drunk could resist. He rushed to the body and held on, swinging with it, and singing at the top of his voice. A deputy dragged him away.

A young swain walked up to the suspended man, manipulated his pocketknife, and presented his lady love with a piece of white cloth from the kicking man's shroud. Not to be outdone in gallantry, other youths stepped out from the crowd, and soon there was no shroud.

Friends cut down Boice's body and took it away, but Grogan was as lonely in death as in life, and the sheriff buried him in the pest house burying ground. The spectators filed down the hill.

A month later, the fugitive Gibbony was found in Kentucky and was brought back to Parkersburg. He had already been sentenced so the sheriff and his deputies took him out to the Dils cemetery on the Northwestern turnpike, dug a grave, and quietly hanged him. The sheriff didn't feel up to another hanging with the trimmings. *W*

### Synopsis

*The introvert is so concerned  
With matters analytical  
He fancies every eye is turned  
On him, acutely critical.*

*The extrovert may make  
mistakes  
But rarely finds them taxing.  
He's happy with the bed  
he makes  
And lies in it, relaxing.*

*Sometimes, if one is quite  
alert,  
One notices an ambivert  
Who quietly observes the two  
And figures out what not to do.*

Irene Warsaw  
(From *A Word in Edgewise*,  
Franchtown, N.Y., Golden  
Quill Press Publisher, 1964)