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Author(s): Lisa L. Ossian

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Bandits, Mad Men, and Suicides: Fear, Anger, and Death in a Troubled Iowa Landscape, 1929–1933

LISA L. OSSIAN

Iowa experienced two well-known incidents of rural violence in the early 1930s with the “Cow War of Cedar County” during 1931 and the Farmers’ Holiday Movement Strike in northwest Iowa in August 1932. However, the violence in rural Iowa from 1930 to 1933 became far more widespread, insidious, and personal than these two nationally covered mob incidents. The most extensive violence during the early Depression years involved hired hands and family members attacking and killing each other on scattered farmsteads, bandits robbing vulnerable country folk for their hidden money, gangsters stealing from small town banks, prohibition officers raiding rural stills, or farmers hanging themselves from barn rafters. The climate of financial fear, whether real or exaggerated, added to this overall morbid tension, and mid-western rural society no longer projected an idealistic image of strength, peace, and prosperity but rather one of fear and violence.

WITH HIS RIFLE SLUNG OVER HIS SHOULDER, John Kingrey, a young man several payments behind on his Model T, started walking from his father’s barn early one summer evening across the field to the Keefer sisters’ farmhouse. Three mornings later on Monday, June 20, 1932, local authorities

LISA L. OSSIAN currently teaches history at Des Moines Area Community College. She received her master’s degree in women’s studies from Eastern Michigan University in 1987 and her doctorate in the Agricultural History and Rural Studies Program at Iowa State University in 1998. Ossian serves on the Iowa State Historical Society Board of Trustees, the Speakers’ Bureau of Humanities, Iowa, and the National Women’s History Project Board of Directors. This essay is part of a larger project titled “The Early Depression Dilemmas of Rural Iowa.”

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discovered the completely burned bodies of the two elderly sisters in the cellar and their stash of money missing. Detectives could only secure several fingerprints and collect four empty twenty-two-caliber shells from the middle of the kitchen. What followed the “Tragedy in Lonely Marion County” was the first conviction in the nation based solely on ballistic evidence.¹

Letitia Keefer and her younger sister, Jennie, had lived and farmed together on their family homestead two miles northeast of Knoxville, Iowa, for over fifty years. Officials theorized that the two sisters had hurried to finish their milking that evening because a terrible thunderstorm threatened and so had surprised John Kingrey, whom they certainly recognized as a neighbor, carrying out his robbery. Law enforcement speculated that Kingrey shot both women, carried their bodies to the center of the kitchen, and doused them with oil or kerosene to burn the evidence and hopefully the entire house. However, with the windows tightly closed, the fire lost its oxygen supply, burned through the linoleum kitchen floor, and dropped the bodies into the basement. The flames soon extinguished, leaving behind several remnants of evidence.²

John Kingrey, who still lived with his parents, stubbornly refused to discuss any of the events or display any emotion when officials questioned him the next day. Throughout the following four months of investigation and trial Kingrey simply sat with an eerie silence in the Wapello County jail though charged with double murder. His demeanor eventually earned him the nickname, “the human icicle.”³

Kingrey maintained his story during the entire investigation and subsequent trial: that particular evening he had shaved, sat on the front porch for a while, and then wandered over to “the old house,” an abandoned house situated between the Kingreys’s and Keefer’s, to shoot ground squirrels. That explained his short absence with the rifle and butchering a hog the next morning explained the blood on his shoes. However, he had no witnesses, and his story seemed too flimsy.⁴

Clues followed. Although Kingrey’s car was repossessed earlier that week, he was somehow able to make the needed payment by Saturday. Authorities also believed Kingrey’s shoes matched the prints found in the Keefer’s garden. The house had remained in perfect order following the crime except for drops of blood on the locked money barrel in the upstairs bedroom. The sisters usually deposited every one hundred dollars in the local bank but had started keeping more money on hand to pay their

hired farm help. Detectives also found three empty purses and one with fifteen cents.⁵

The main evidence of the murder trial, besides the rather circumstantial findings, remained the identification of the fatal bullets as being shot from Kingrey's rifle. When Judge Dingwell sentenced John Kingrey to "hard labor for life" for the murder conviction, a local reporter described the mood of the courtroom as "simple and matter-of-fact as the sentencing of a bootlegger to 30 days in jail." Kingrey simply shook his head and gulped when the verdict was read. Later, in the sheriff's office, when his parents visited him at the courthouse, he commented wistfully, "Well, I guess my only hope is to try for a new trial."⁶

Although the police used innovative ballistics work in solving this case, violence was not unusual in rural Iowa during the 1920s and 1930s. Since the end of the Great War, farmers had experienced the stresses of deprivation, poverty, and constant worry. Their problems were many and varied: depressed foreign markets, fewer domestic markets due to population shifts and diet changes, increased farm mortgage debt, overproduction of farm crops and animals, increased mechanization with resulting maintenance costs, over-tilled marginal farm land, continued reluctance of farm families to leave for city jobs, and drastic drops in farm prices. As historian Roger Biles commented, farmers certainly felt a sense of fatalism and urgency in the years leading up to New Deal legislation. "The long-cherished American goal of owning a family farm," he noted, "seemed genuinely at risk." Agricultural stresses overwhelmed rural Iowans in the early Depression era, culminating in the anger, fear, and frustration that led to violence.⁷

Generations later, Iowans remembered the desperate feelings and actions of the early 1930s. In 1970 Oscar Helene, who had lived on a northwestern Iowa farm near Marcus for almost eighty years, described the overall changes in Iowa's agricultural Depression-era climate. "The farmer is a pretty independent individual," Helene explained. "He wants to be a conservative individual. He wants to be an honorable individual. He wants to pay his debts. But it was hard. The rank-and-file people of this state—who were brought up as conservatives, which most of us were—would never act like this. Except in desperation." Helene added one last thought, "What I remember most of those times is that poverty creates desperation, and desperation creates violence."⁸

Another Iowan, John Wilkinson from Rock Falls, remembered his

father's explosive comment when he first heard the news of the 1929 Wall Street stock market crash. "The radio was on in the bungalow on Mill Street along the Shell Rock River on that morning of October 30, 1929," Wilkinson wrote in his memoir, "and I was up and having a bowl of oatmeal and raisins with my father. The seven o'clock news was our first knowledge of events of the previous day in New York City. My father looked at me and said, 'Judas Priest!'" And then Iowa's economic climate turned even chillier with "the arrival of the somber, desperate thirties." "Yes, things would be different, all right, as my father warned me that morning at breakfast, far more so than he or anyone else could possibly have expected at the time," Wilkinson commented. "A slow, silent fear had set in. It was a new kind of mass fear, never before experienced on a national scale. It was a fear about losing everything—jobs and savings, homes, farms, cars, children."⁹

One of the constant agricultural worries, which led to violence, was the increased amount of farm indebtedness. Iowa farmers carried an excessive amount of farm mortgage debt. In 1933 Iowa State College professor, W. H. Murray, explained the extent of the debt crisis in Iowa: "If corn were selling at the present time for \$1 a bushel it would take more than a billion bushels to remove the mortgage cloud that now hovers over Iowa farm owners." Indebtedness often led to foreclosure, which meant more to farmers than losing a family business. As one farmer described the mortgage cloud, "We are becoming desperate; we are losing our whole life's work, and we are trying to stave off foreclosure until our state or federal governments pass some sort of legislation to lighten our huge burden of taxes and high interest." Although a young boy at the time, Carl Hamilton long remembered his parents' foreclosure experiences. "We had 'lost a farm.' Those words are easily said," Hamilton wrote many years later. "But losing a farm is a traumatic experience; it leaves its mark on a family. Many small businesses fail, of course. But the loss of a farm means not only the business and a lifetime of savings, but also the home itself—the very house in which the family lives. Many families never recover from the psychological shock."¹⁰

To prevent these personal tragedies, some farmers gathered in mobs to hinder foreclosure sales in what became known as penny auctions. Sometimes these inherently violent actions failed. In 1933 six hundred Sac County farmers gathered at the Sac City courthouse protesting a

farm foreclosure and requesting a postponement of the sale of Alfred Krusentjerna's farm. They were unsuccessful, as the First National Bank at Odebolt bought the farm for ten thousand dollars. In Villisca, however, in the same year, one hundred out-of-town members of the Farmers' Holiday Movement stormed a sheriff's sale to persuade mortgage holder Mary Shaw to reconsider. As the reporter concluded, a compromise was reached, as "Cooney is to remain on the farm another year." At other times, mob action succeeded, as when farmers sabotaged a farm foreclosure near LeMars in February 1933, when the forced sale brought a grand total of forty-five dollars to the mortgage holder as complete settlement for the farmer's debt.¹¹

Along with penny auctions, Iowa farmers organized at other times to express their discontent. In 1931 Cedar County farmers began to protest the mandatory testing for tuberculosis of their cows, which could result in the possible condemnation and destruction of their private property. State officials set up testing stations at five points in the county. Initially, just five hundred farmers picketed these mandatory stations. Shortly afterward, one thousand farmers held an "indignation meeting" to protest the law. Then 1,500 farmers appeared before the state legislature to voice a protest and suggest repeal. Violence began to surface when seventy-five farmers threatened a state veterinarian. And, when several farmers positioned machine guns on their farms to keep inspectors out, the governor placed an entire township under military rule and requested federal troops to help end the situation. This rural violence agitated observers. One leading newspaper editor described his frustration. "Iowa requires a return to its former sanity and sense of responsible citizenship," he began, "[Iowans must] cease to listen to loud mouthed and irresponsible agitators, cease to follow the lead of political calathumpians and self servers and get back to the Iowa basis of common sense and judgment that made Iowa known and celebrated and respected on both sides of the oceans." He concluded that, "If this incident shocks Iowa into sober thought and serves to lead toward a return of former Iowa sanity it will have been worth all it cost."¹²

Unfortunately for the editor, the Cedar County conflict did not end rural mob violence. The Farmers' Holiday Movement's proposed strike had been fermenting over the years. On the same day that officials discovered the Keefer sisters' remains, another front page article in the *Knoxville*

Express described seventy-five enthusiastic farmers and their wives meeting in a schoolhouse at Attica for the Farmers' Holiday Movement, and almost all present agreed not to sell farm products after July 4th. Historian Robert Goldston succinctly described the culmination of the Holiday Movement. "That summer of 1932, farmers in Iowa blockaded roads, armed themselves with pitchforks and shotguns, and refused to allow farm produce to go to market. Dairy farmers dumped milk into Midwestern roads rather than see it sold for 2 cents a quart and then resold by distributors for 8 cents a quart." During that long hot summer of 1932, one local farmer, George Prohaska, noted the parallel between the Farmers' Holiday Movement brewing in northwest Iowa and the Bonus Army stewing in Washington, DC. "If Mr. Hoover and the senate don't do something for humanity pretty soon," Prohaska predicted, "they are going to find the farmers lined up with the veterans."¹³

Yet the violence in rural Iowa was far more widespread, insidious, and personal than these two nationally covered mob incidents. The most extensive violence during the early Depression years involved hired hands and family members attacking and killing each other on scattered farmsteads, bandits robbing vulnerable country folk for their hidden money, gangsters stealing from small town banks, prohibition officers raiding rural stills, or farmers hanging themselves from barn rafters.

"Bandits" became the preferred word to describe masked men, sometimes in overalls, who terrorized small Iowa towns with bank robberies. Bandits almost always had guns, sometimes machine guns, perhaps knives, and occasionally explosives. When targeting banks, they preferred those in small towns because they usually had rather ineffective local law officials, while the banks themselves had weak or nonexistent security systems, few employees or customers for defense or as witnesses, and just enough available cash on hand to entice them. During the early 1930s the small towns of Winterset, Cherokee, Prairie City, Hillsboro, Sibley, Gillett Grove, Danbury, Centerville, Galva, Quimby, Turin, Luverne, New Windsor, Maurice, and Movile experienced bank robberies. In 1930 twenty successful Iowa bank robberies occurred, with more than ninety thousand dollars taken. Only four additional attempts proved unsuccessful. By mid-1931 Iowa's banks had experienced thirteen robberies with a total loot of over twenty-seven thousand dollars. By December 1932 the eleventh successful bank robbery that year added to a collected amount of \$157,000 of

which \$112,000 had been recovered. As the *Davenport Democrat* quipped, “It’s a cold day, nowadays, when an Iowa town doesn’t stage a good-sized fire or a bank robbery.”¹⁴

The bank robberies usually involved some violence. The first bank robbery of 1931 resulted in six thousand dollars stolen, and the cashier’s wife left tied up in the cellar. In Prairie City, one lone bandit, with the words “Put ’Em Up,” forced three officials to put \$824 in a sack for him shortly before he placed the trio in the vault. In another typical story, two bandits robbed the Sioux County Savings Bank of \$1,500 and escaped in their “light automobile” after striking two people—a customer and the vice president. Another gang of bandits carried out a violent spree in which they attacked the entire small Iowa town of Danbury one August night in 1932. Several of the thieves bound and gagged the night watchman and carried him out to a cornfield, while other bandits proceeded to rob the lumber yard, gas station, meat market, confectionery shop, general store, and a second gas station for a grand total of two hundred dollars along with a stash of cigarettes.¹⁵

Considering the risks to one’s person and freedom, robbing banks and entire small towns, despite convenient rural motor escape routes, remained costly. Illegal liquor, both its manufacture and distribution, provided another opportunity to earn quick cash, but it too presented dangers and was an inherently violent occupation. In Iowa’s small city of Dubuque during the 1920s, the city boasted forty-one thousand citizens and one thousand bootleggers, and the Iowa Anti-Saloon League warned of Dubuque’s isolated countryside, that the “islands and bluffs are swarming with stills, some of which turn out huge quantities of liquor.”¹⁶

Rural Iowa offered a number of advantages for the production of illegal alcohol, such as hidden sites and abundant supplies; corn sugar produced little odor and left no mash while being very economical at approximately one hundred pounds of sugar for five dollars to produce an alcohol some considered of the highest quality. The Des Moines Booze and Vice Squad alone conducted more than three thousand raids in 1930, with 275 arrests and four thousand gallons seized. The raid on Frank Neppel’s farm near Templeton in March of 1931 was the largest yet, producing the famed Templeton Rye, a reddish whiskey highly prized in Chicago, Omaha, and Kansas City speakeasies. In September 1932 a seizure near the coal-mining village of Carney in Polk County collected

seven hundred fifty gallons of alcohol worth five thousand dollars. Thirty miles outside of Des Moines in May of 1932, the Madison County sheriff led another large moonshine raid with the arrest of five men and five hundred gallons of mash. Prohibition officials warned about the growing tensions within the area, believing that a Des Moines “bootleg war” might rival Chicago’s, so these officials suggested purchasing a faster car for liquor chases. “A faster car will give us a chance to make alcohol running a little more difficult,” said Prohibition administrator Glen A. Brunson, as he explained the new car’s potential power capability of seventy-five miles an hour.¹⁷

Good strong booze and cold hard cash were not the only commodities coveted enough to lead to criminal behavior. Near Estherville, chicken thieves stole three hundred of Joe Scholte’s three hundred four chickens late one night, and the farmer believed those chicken thieves must have been familiar with his premises as they seemed to experience “little trouble in making off with the fowls.” Legal punishment for animal thefts could be swift and sure in Iowa’s courts. A jury in Clarinda listened to three days of testimony and evidence regarding the chicken theft by C. A. Hamm from the T. R. Young farm yet took only half an hour to reach a decision of guilty. In another example, Harold and Ernest Clay from Marshalltown received three and six month sentences, respectively, as poultry thieves. When two farmers in Jackson and Martin Counties were accused of stealing cattle, both men received “a charge of grand larceny in the first degree.” One Brooklyn farmer ironically exposed a chicken gang as he was hitchhiking on his way back from the Chicago market after being robbed of his vehicle and thirty-five crates of chickens. He noticed along the route home his own truck parked in a farm yard west of Chicago. Eventually officials arrested six men, including a poultry dealer, and confiscated the chicken gang’s entire loot: fifty trucks’ of chickens worth one hundred thousand dollars.¹⁸

Chicken theft reflected people’s desperation during the Depression and, like other crimes, could lead to violence. Arne Waldstein, who grew up on an Iowa farm during the 1930s, recalled his teenage brother Howard’s determination to catch a chicken thief. “One night, while on ‘watch,’ Howard was sure he saw a would-be chicken thief drive into the farmyard,” Waldstein began the family tale. “He grabbed the 12-gauge and started to sneak out of the house. Sister, Dorothy, half curious and

half scared, decided to sneak downstairs to reinforce her older brother.” But little Dorothy accidentally knocked a pair of shoes noisily down the steps. Waldstein then illustrated the final portion of his brother’s story, “Howard, stationed on the back porch, was ready to draw a bead on the thieves’ car. Supposedly, hearing the ruckus, the thieves panicked, and wheeled their car around and took off! Howard never quite forgave Dorothy for ruining his apprehension of the thieves. The rest of us never quite accepted the reality of a robbery in progress.”¹⁹

Farm animal theft, however, could be complicated, messy, and noisy, with little return for the effort but swift local punishment. Far more attractive to the lawless element became the discovery and raiding of hidden money stashed on Iowa’s isolated farms. As the *Des Moines Register* proclaimed in a large 1931 headline, “Bandits get \$8,000 on Iowa Farm.” Other stories abounded. One Monday evening in 1932, three farm bandits entered the farmhouse of siblings John and Alura Hummel, interrupting their late supper. The men tied the two up and threatened them until they revealed their hoarded money. Half-an-hour after the bandits fled, John escaped from his rope binds and walked to his nearest neighbor for help.²⁰

During the Depression, such robberies were common and often violent. In 1931 in the small town of Leon, two masked men burst into Mrs. Tullis’s cafe and beat her until she revealed “where the money was kept.” They then tied her up, poured kerosene on her body and the floor, and lit a match as they fled with a grand total of thirteen dollars. Neighbors soon heard her screams and rescued her from the burning building. The next year, Edna Shaw was less lucky while visiting her relative Gerald Randol. Asleep on the davenport in the living room, she was woken up by the noise of people breaking in. She grabbed a gun lying on top of the radio and opened fire. One of the intruders shot back, and Edna died from a bullet through the heart. In another incident in 1932, two men forced a widow living on a farm outside of Boxholm to open her door and let them in. When she refused to reveal her treasured money, they tortured her—tying her wrists with wire, jerking her around the farmhouse, and poking their gloved fingers into her eyes—until she finally told them. The bandits dragged the elderly woman off to the barn, where they found one thousand dollars. Then, they gagged her, tied her to a chair, and fled. Neighbors discovered her the next morning, semi-conscious. Sometimes rumors of cash were sufficient to attract crime. In 1932 two bandits entered the

Gross's home. They tied the couple to chairs, beat them, and demanded the rumored money. The bandits even threatened to burn the house down and did start a small fire, which they eventually doused before leaving in frustration. The total loot stolen from the household was six dollars.²¹

Although keeping money at home was a natural response to the bank failures of the time, as the *Times-Republican* of Marshalltown pointed out, it could lead to robberies and possible death. A February opinion piece titled "Iowa needs better policing" explained that farmhouses, far from neighbors but perhaps close to hard-surfaced roads, became particularly vulnerable targets. As the editor described, "They lie open to all murderous yeggs who steal a fast car and are willing to do murder to a pittance." A national anti-hoarding campaign conducted earlier in 1932 had returned \$112,000,000 to circulation, and the Iowa campaign chair especially discouraged local practices of "burying or hiding money." Unfortunately, the Keefer sisters, among others, had not listened to such warnings, choosing to conveniently hide money on their vulnerable farm rather than make regular deposits into a potentially unstable local bank.²²

Outsiders certainly preyed upon the vulnerable isolated Iowa farmsteads, especially defenseless elderly couples with hoarded money, but the rural violence during the early 1930s was also perpetuated by those familiar to the farm—hired hands and relatives. Jealousies over money, land, and perceived status could suddenly erupt. Longstanding resentments over workloads, dependency, or wealth might also turn ugly; domestic incidents of violence inevitably escalated in times of severe economic stress. As Anna Rochester noted in her Depression-era project entitled *Why Farmers are Poor*: "Behind the cheerful air of the 'middle' farmer's house and barns and fruitful fields, there often lurks a haunting anxiety and a greatly reduced standard of personal comfort."²³

Mental illness never diagnosed or treated, and perhaps exacerbated by the Depression, could also turn deadly. When Clarence Brewer shot and killed his employer of seven years as well as his employer's wife, then turned the gun on himself, no one could explain the triple shooting. Brewer "bore an excellent reputation and was considered an excellent farmer. During all the years he was employed by Lambirth and the succeeding year he had been on very friendly terms with the Lambirths, and was chummy with both Lambirth and his wife." Another such farmer, Bill Shull, labeled insane in 1915, and again taken before the Sanity Commis-

sion in 1925, had little attention paid to his condition until he threatened to shoot a rural mail carrier one February day in 1932. A posse attempted to arrest him, but the farmer then drew his gun on the sheriff, so another officer was forced to shoot the crazed man. Insanity perhaps also explained the murder/suicide of Nanno Andressen. He fell from a windmill in 1922, leaving him unconscious for several days. That incident, which led to some sort of trauma, or perhaps mounting financial difficulties, remained the only reasons his brother could possibly offer to explain why Andressen killed his family and himself one winter day in 1932. Andressen stormed into the kitchen that winter morning and shot his wife, her sister, and his two children as they ate breakfast before chores, and then he proceeded to drive to nearby Stout, leaving a note at a garage: "Call at Nanno Andressen's plase and you will find five dead bodys [*sic*]. Everyone is dead."²⁴

Domestic violence caused many of the deaths on farms during the early Depression era. Usually the extreme violence of one or multiple murders would be followed by a suicide. When local newspapers recorded such events, the most frequently cited reasons for violent outbreaks were severe drinking, strained finances, and simmering jealousies. But events and motives remained numerous as were the methods: shooting, poisoning, choking, beating, or slashing.

Several weeks after the Keefer sisters' murder, another murder occurred on a Knoxville farm, but this situation had been familial and fermenting for many years. Suel Mefford, a fifty-two-year-old farmer partial to home brew and "never sober more than a day or two at a time," had continually threatened and abused his family for almost twenty years. When family members criticized his home brew operation, he became even angrier and more desperate than usual and threatened to "clean out the whole bunch." That night his wife slept downstairs with their young teenage daughter for safety, while their eighteen-year-old son, Irvin Mefford, stayed on guard so that his father would not be able to carry out his threats. However, early in the morning, Irvin snapped. He carried his rifle upstairs and fired three times on his sleeping father. Then, picking up the telephone and calling the neighbors, Irvin asked them to alert the local officers. Later, the son tried to explain his actions: "It was a case of killing dad, before he killed us."²⁵

Murder was one violent personal choice, suicide another. Shortly after

the stock market crash of October 1929, a legend began to circulate regarding the high number of suicides resulting from the trauma, and this suicide myth became so well established that it still flourishes today despite a number of Depression-era historians who have tried to counter the exaggeration. There was some increase in the number of suicides, however, with a national rate by May 1930 of eighteen out of every one hundred thousand people. Sacramento, California, had the highest rate at 52.8; Des Moines stayed lower than the national average at 14.5 per 100,000. Regional newspapers took notice and offered explanations, such as that in the *Tribune*, which suggested the cause was “tremendous assaults of worry.” An editorial by the *Register* in the late summer of 1930, asked, “Why Suicide?” The essay suggested that “money difficulties” seemed to be only part of the answer.²⁶

From the twenty-one newspaper stories of farmers who committed suicide during the years from 1929 to 1932, several patterns emerge. Twelve men hung themselves, six fired guns, two disappeared, and one swallowed poison. The men ranged in age from fourteen to eighty-three, but most of the men (sixteen out of twenty-one) were over the age of forty (often over sixty-five years of age). All but two of the deaths occurred outside of the farm home, usually in the barn or corn crib. No known reasons for the suicides existed because suicidal men tended to leave very few notes. Ill health accounted for the majority of the reasons cited by family members, with financial troubles or worries as the second major cause. Often some combination of the two seemed to lead to the suicide.

John Harms’s story represented this emerging pattern. Harms, age fifty-five, informed his family after supper one July evening in 1931 that he needed to repair fences for a bit. When he failed to return after nightfall and could not be found, neighbors gathered to search the farm. One of the neighbors found the body hanging in the barn, and Coroner S. H. Luken believed Harms had been dead several hours. His report concluded, “Failure of crops and hard times were given as the reason for the act.”²⁷

The stories of four farmers near Winterset who committed suicide between January and March 1932 are similar. Hugh Patton, “a well-known retired farmer,” hung himself in a barn early one Saturday night. He had paid off all his debts as best he could shortly before his death, which included filing a deed to the local cemetery that very day. Still, his family recalled no prior warning of his extreme anxiety. Harold Wenzel, also described as

“well-known,” hung himself from a corn crib rafter on a Monday morning, around 4:30 a.m. In both cases, family members blamed ill health. The third Winterset suicide, also a man over fifty, was John Bell, who hung himself in his barn. The fourth farmer’s suicide, however, took place in the home rather than outbuildings. After Merritt Ogburn placed his shotgun muzzle to his forehead and pulled the trigger, Mrs. Ogburn ran to find him on the stairs. A reporter tried to explain the tragedy: “Ogburn, a lifelong resident of the county, was subject to periods of despondency. He brooded over the financial condition though there was really no cause for it: he was out of debt and his farm was clear of mortgage. He was a hard worker and his patient industry made him owner of 100 acres of land.” Other locals tried to identify the cause of these cases. The editor of the *Winterset News*, one of the local newspapers, concluded that the “Suicides of four farmers in Madison county was [*sic*] caused by the fear of failure, to anxiety over their financial affairs, and by the general air of depression that has settled over the county.” He quoted Harriet Beecher Stowe’s advice: “Never Give Up.”²⁸

Still, the local suicides continued when in early May another local farmer, Frank Newton, age sixty-six, shot himself with a revolver by one of his straw stacks. Financial worries and ill health were again blamed. He left his wife a note “saying that he feared he was losing his mind.” By the end of that fateful year, near Winterset, two young boys, finishing their morning farm chores, discovered their father’s body hanging in the barn, just before Christmas. No known cause was reported for his suicide.²⁹

Women also committed suicide, but resulting newspaper reports were not as detailed, and women’s methods varied more than men’s. One farm woman near Waverly jumped into a cistern in October 1929, another hung herself in a woodshed, and another near Lorimor shot herself in the spring of 1932, shortly after the rash of the four Madison County suicides.³⁰

The causes of female suicide, at least as reported, were similar to men. Ethel Cox, age forty, lived with her sister Eva and their parents on the outskirts of Winterset. One November morning Ethel started the kitchen fire as usual but then hung herself in the woodshed where her sister later found the body. Eva believed that her sister had “worried about general business conditions and the state of her health.” When Mrs. H. Nagel, another farm woman, pressed a thirty-two revolver to her right temple and pulled the trigger, she was just forty-nine years old, but in her suicide note

to her husband, she wrote of extreme worries about her health. A neighbor, Henry Shawler, found her body on a pile of corn in the corn crib where it appeared she had laid down before her death.³¹

For both men and women, worries over ill health and lack of money often precipitated their suicides. Arne Waldstein described in his memoir a neighbor's suicide early one morning in the winter of 1933. Sixty years later, he still vividly remembered his father quickly driving his team and wagon out on a muddy road through the early morning mist. "Though visibly unsettled by the tragedy, Dad described the tragic scene at supper," Waldstein recounted. "Grant was lying on his back on the hay, his right hand still holding the revolver extended from his body. There was no grimacing expression. He looked like he was asleep, with his mouth open." Neighbors believed Grant's motive was financial ruin. "The tragedy left psychological scars on our neighborhood," Waldstein pointed out, "another of many scars the Great Depression generation carried hidden in their psyches for the rest of their lives."³²

The statistics confirm all the many personal stories of Iowa's rural violence during the early years of the Great Depression and point to many more psychological scars left undocumented. Within a forty-year period from 1925 through 1964, almost 1,700 homicides occurred in Iowa, with an average of 42 each year. Out of each one hundred murders, thirty occurred within the family between spouses, parents, and children; fifty happened outside the immediate nuclear family, but with familiar individuals such as "lover quarrels or drunken fights"; and twenty occurred due to such crimes as robberies, raids, or rapes. The year 1930 witnessed seventy-eight murders, the worst in Iowa during this forty-year period. From 1929 to 1937 murder numbers remained consistently and significantly above average.³³

In this same forty-year period, Iowans committed 14,849 suicides, averaging 371 each year, nine times more suicide deaths than murders. During the Great Depression, suicide escalated because of the numerous bank failures, high unemployment rates, and significant percentages of farm foreclosures. The year 1932 witnessed the highest number of suicides in Iowa with 563 cases. In fact, the high number of suicides in rural Iowa between 1930 and 1934 completely skewed the forty-year average. As sociologist Walter Lunden explained his mortality charts, "Contrary to data in most areas, suicides are higher in the rural areas of Iowa than in urban

sections.” Though the exact cause and effect can never be determined, the number of farm foreclosures mirrored Iowa’s suicide numbers. The climate of financial fear, whether real or exaggerated, added to the overall morbid tension.³⁴

Perhaps no soup lines existed in the Iowa countryside, but its people still suffered greatly from the depression that began shortly after the Great War. Rural society no longer projected an image of strength and peace but rather one of fear and violence. Bank robberies and liquor wars infiltrated the country and other examples of escalating rural violence abounded: abused family members plotted revenge, distressed farm hands snapped with loaded shotguns, and wealthy land owners committed suicide in their barns.

NOTES

1. *Des Moines Register*, Oct. 28, 1932, p. 1; *Des Moines Tribune*, Nov. 12, p. 1; Nov. 14, p. 1, 5; *Knoxville Express*, June 23, p. 1, 7; June 30, p. 1; July 7, 1932, p. 1.
2. *Knoxville Express*, June 23, 1932, p. 7; *Des Moines Tribune*, Nov. 14, 1932, p. 1, 5.
3. *Knoxville Express*, June 30, p. 1; Oct. 13, 1932, p. 1; *Des Moines Tribune*, Nov. 12, 1932, p. 1.
4. *Knoxville Express*, June 30, 1932, p. 1.
5. *Knoxville Express*, June 23, 1932, p. 7.
6. *Knoxville Express*, Nov. 3, p. 1; July 14, p. 1; Oct. 27, p. 1; Nov. 10, 1932, p. 1; *Des Moines Register*, Oct. 28, 1932, p. 1; *Knoxville Express*, June 23, 1932, p. 1.
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Moines); *Des Moines Tribune*, Jan. 1, p. 4; Sept. 5, 1931, p. 1; Dec. 10, 1932, p. 1; *Marshalltown Times-Republican*, Feb. 8, 1930, p. 6 (the Davenport paper is quoted in the Marshalltown paper).

15. *Marshalltown Times-Republican*, Jan. 9, 1931, p. 1; *Des Moines Tribune*, June 18, p. 1; Sept. 5, 1931, p. 1; Aug. 9, 1932, p. 1; *Burlington Hawk-Eye Gazette*, July 27, 1931, p. 1.

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