

## A POTOSI SERIAL KILLER?



Robert B. Turner was born about 1839 in Illinois, the son of a father from Tennessee and a mother from Kentucky. In the early 1850's Albert and Margaret Turner, his parents, moved further north to Grant County Wisconsin and took up lead mining. The large family (there were 8 children) lived a marginal existence. In 1857 Albert died, leaving Margaret with the children to go on alone. Robert was the oldest. Robert entered the Company H of the 25<sup>th</sup> Regiment in December 1863, more than a year after younger brothers Jasper and Newton. He was transferred to the 12<sup>th</sup> Regiment in June 1865 and mustered out the next month. He returned to Potosi and mining with brothers Albert (Jr.) and Newton. They had to support not only themselves, but also their widowed mother and three sisters. It isn't known what instigated Robert's murderous ambitions or the events of that January day in 1874. Here is the story as reported in the

New York Times (and many other papers coast to coast):

### **A Wisconsin Troppman**

The New York Times, 18 January 1874:

#### **Brutal Murders in Grant County, Wis. – A Murderer Who Boast of Killing Forty Men.**

Milwaukee, Wis., Jan. 17. – Bob Turner, of Potosi, Grant County, Wis., has been arrested for the murder of his brother Albert. The inquest, which has just been concluded, revealed a blood-thirsty propensity on the part of Bob, rivaling that of the Bender family of murderers. The murdered man was killed with an ax, his head being nearly severed from his body, as he was coming out of a mineral hole in which he had been at work. He fell back speechless and never moved.



The murderer then called to another brother who was in an adjoining shaft, and this brother, named Newton, commenced climbing out. When he reached the surface he saw the body of his murdered brother Albert, and was about to run when Bob seized him, and showing the bloody ax threatened to kill him instantly unless he would swear to assist in putting the body away and to preserve silence. This Newton assented to, but on the first opportunity he escaped to Potosi, where he gave the alarm, and the murderer fled to Lancaster. He was pursued, arrested, and lodged in prison, where he soon attempted the life of his keeper. The second murder, which has just come to light, is that of Olney Neely, a youth of Ellenboro. Bob Turner was there cutting hoop-poles for Mr. Bell. On Tuesday, Dec. 23, the boy started from Bell's to visit his mother, who resides in New

California. His road lay through timber belonging to Mr. Bailey, where Turner was at work. That was the last seen of young Neely until the 9th of January. The people residing in the neighborhood having heard of Turner's murderous propensity, and knowing that young Neely had to pass near where he was at work, turned out on Friday last to hunt for his remains. Eight men started from Bell's, and searched the ground on each side of the road. When they arrived upon the premises where Turner had been chopping, they found the body as it had fallen two weeks before. The position in which the body lay indicated the course the blow from the ax had taken. The boy's head was nearly cut from the body, only hanging by a small piece of skin of the back and front of the neck, the ax having gone clear through the neck. The body was taken care of, and a jury impaneled to hold an inquest, and the verdict was the Olney Neely, aged fourteen years, came to his death from the blow of an ax in the hands of Robert Turner. Several other mysterious murders having taken place in the localities in which Turner had been seen, Marshal Bennett visited the prisoner and asked him to confess if he had any hand in them. He finally confessed that he remembered killing two men – a stranger whom he had encountered in a deep ravine at the back of the poor farm, and thereupon attacked and murdered him, hiding the body; the other man he met on the road to Muscoda, where he was going to get work. He says that the latter made threatening gestures, and he feared he was going to take his life, so he closed with him, and with a four-pound weight which he carried in his pocket, struck him two blows over the eyes, smashing in his skull, and killing him instantly. He dragged the body into the bushes, secreting it there. Now that he has confessed, he delights to talk of the many persons he has killed. He gloats over the skill with which he has concealed their bodies, and declares that if they were got together there would be nearly forty of them.

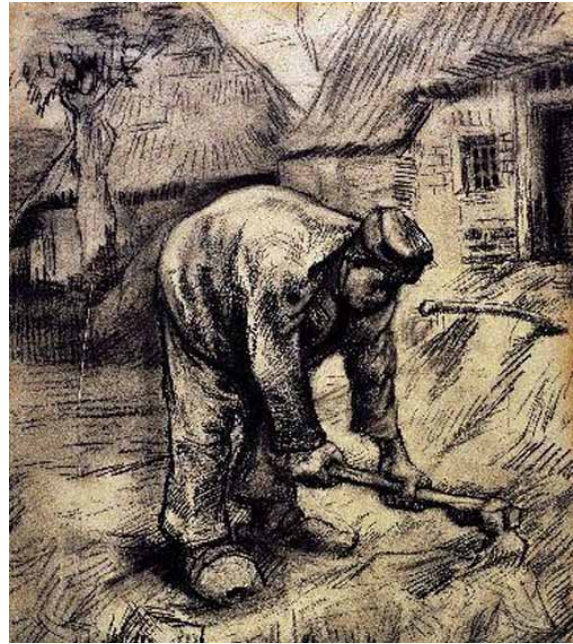
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## **The Wisconsin Murderer**

The New York Times, 25 January 1874:

### **Further Account of the Crimes of the Man Who Thinks He Has Killed Nearly Forty Persons.**

We obtain from a paper published in Grant County, Wis., the following statements relative to the Turner tragedy, at Potosi, Wis., together with the further developments concerning the career of Robert Turner, the murder of his brother and many other persons:

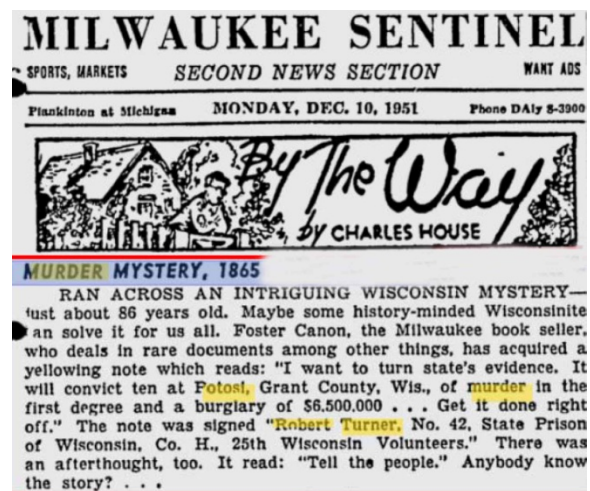


“Saturday, Dec. 6, one Robert Turner was arrested and lodged in jail at this place, for murder of his brother Albert, near Potosi. The murdered man was struck with an ax in the hands of Bob, the blow nearly severing the head from the body. The murdered man fell into a mineral hole where he was at work. Another brother, Newton, was in an adjoining shaft, when Bob called to him, ‘I have killed Al; come up!’ Newton started to climb out, but discovered his brother with a drawn ax, who proposed to kill him (Newton) unless he consented to assist in hiding the body of Alfred, and promising secrecy. Bob said that had ‘killed Alfred because there are too many in the family to support; let us cover him up and tell the folks he has gone off.’ Newton readily consented, and persuaded Bob to throw away the ax. On getting out of the hole, Newton started on a run for Potosi, closely followed by his infuriated brother. Seeing that pursuit was useless, the murderer turned and fled toward this place. Newton hastened to Potosi, alarmed the people, and Officer Wilmot was sent to capture Bob. The officer, mounted on a horse, overhauled his man about six miles from Potosi, but, having no weapons, he passed him and called at a farm-house, where he procured a revolver. Returning, he confronted the murderer and told him to surrender. Turner placed himself in a defensive attitude and prepared for a fight, but the officer's revolver soon brought him to terms. He was taken back to Potosi, had his examination, and was ordered to jail. His actions in jail since his capture, his murderous assault on a fellow prisoner named Skellinger, has already been

published in these columns. During the latter part of November and the first days of December, Bob Turner was in the employ of Mr. R. Bailey, in the town of Clifton, engaged in cutting hoop-poles. Living with Mr. R. Bell, in the town of Ellenboro, was a boy named Olney Neeley. Tuesday, Dec. 2, the boy Neeley started from Bell's to visit his mother, who resides in New-California. His road lay through the timber belonging to Bailey, where Turner was at work. That was the last seen of young Neeley until the 9th of January. The people residing in the neighborhood having heard of Turner's murderous propensity, and knowing that young Neeley had to pass near where he was at work, turned out on Friday last to hunt for his remains. Eight men started from Bell's and searched the ground each side of the road. When they arrived upon the premises where Turner had been chopping, they found the body, which lay as it had fallen over six weeks before. The boy's head was nearly cut from the body – only hanging by a small piece of the skin on the back and front of the neck, the ax having gone clear through the neck. When found, young Neeley had a paper parcel under his arm, just as he was carrying it; in his pockets were a new jack-knife, some marbles, and a fifty-cent stamp. The body was taken care of and a jury impaneled to hold an inquest, and the verdict was that Olney Neeley, aged fourteen years, came to his death from the blow of an ax in the hands of Robert Turner. When the body was found Turner was confronted by Richard Swale, who asked him to tell all he knew about the boy. Turner said he was cutting hoop-poles, and the boy came toward him yelling, with a club in his hand. He first struck him with the pole of the ax, and then chopped his head off. Monday afternoon last Marshal Bennet visited Turner in his cell, and asked him how many more victims he had. Turner answered two. 'One of them was a red-headed fellow that I killed in a ravine back of the poor farm. The other was a man on the road to Muscoda. I went up there to get work, and when about two miles from Muscoda I met a man in the road whom I knew wanted to kill me. I had a four-pound weight in my pocket that I had got at the store, and I struck him over the eye killing him. I dragged him out of the road into a thick stand of hazel brush, and left him. It was on the north side of the road, just where there is a bend.' This is Turner's story, as we have it from the Marshal. When Turner went home, after killing young Neeley, he told his brother Newton that he had been to Muscoda, looking for work. Robert Turner is a heavy-built man, five feet six inches high, and weighs about 160 pounds; is thirty-six years of age and unmarried; is dark complexioned, with a full round face, which he usually kept well shaved, except the upper lip, He

has sharp, piercing eyes, which are never still. One cannot get his eye for a moment. He has been a county charge at the Poor Farm for some time, but was always allowed to go and come at his own liking. He served three years in the army, having been a member of the Twenty-fifth Wisconsin Infantry. Turner has resided at Potosi about twenty years, and, until some two years ago, had been the head of the family since the death of his father, which occurred about 1857. There can hardly be a doubt that Turner is insane, as he says his mission is to kill all of the people – 'there are too many.' He talks of his murderous actions, and has even boasted that he did not 'doubt but that he had killed forty people, if they could be got together.' However, when interviewed, he seems perfectly rational except when the subject of murder is broached. At such times he seems to be possessed with a strong desire for blood, and gloats over his fiendish transactions with apparent relish. The utmost excitement prevails among the people of Ellenboro, and threats are made that should other bodies be found, Turner will be treated to a dose of 'Judge Lynch.'"

***Turner was convicted and sentenced to the Wisconsin State prison, where he died on May 28<sup>th</sup> 1902, but the story is not quite finished. In 1951 a note was found:***



***From this note it seems Robert was a very paranoid man. Or was he? The rest is lost to time.***