## The Murder of 1851

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The town of Centerville, just north of the Sheboygan County line, became the unfortunate center of attention in the fall of 1851, when it recorded the first murder among settlers in the County. News of the crime rapidly spread throughout the State, and two suspects were apprehended, but the case was never (re)solved. More than 160 years later, the incident remains one of the most chilling events in Wisconsin pioneer history. It also remains one of the most puzzling, because reports of the event are riddled with contradictions and the events that ensued after the murder appear as strange as fiction.

The murder occurred on Wednesday evening, September 3, 1851, when the men of the community were returning home from a barn raising event held on the property of Edward Eichoff.<sup>1</sup> Among them was Wilhelm Gerken, a young German immigrant, whose recent marriage apparently had sparked the jealous rage of two of his new neighbors: Edward's brother, Gustav Eichoff, and George Egloff. In the 1851 plat map at right I have tinted the Eichoff, Egloff, and Gerken lands in light red. Today North Avenue runs west to east between the Eichoff and Egloff properties and Center Road runs north to south between the Egloff and Gerken homesteads. The road running west to east along the northern edge of the Gerken property is East Washington Avenue (County Road Xx).



According to reports, Wilhelm had successfully obtained the hand of a woman named Catherine, despite attempts by other would-be suitors, including Eichoff and Egloff. By the time of the barn raising, Wilhelm and Catherine already had been married for nearly three years, and Catherine had given birth to a daughter name Sophia, though sadly, she died the previous year. <sup>2</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Louis Falge, *History of Manitowoc County, Wisconsin*. Vol. 1 (Chicago: Goodspeed Historical Association, 1912), p. 332, notes the murder, but he incorrectly states that the barn raising was held on the "premises of Christian Hetzel." The Hetzel family did not immigrate to America until 1863, and later censuses report the landowner as Christoph, not Christian, Hentzel. Centerville plat maps for 1878 and 1893 confirm that the Hetzel family owned the former Eichoff land found on the 1851 plat. The *Independent American*, September 25, 1851, also states the barn raising was held on the Eichoff property. This shows that Falge relied on oral sources in his own day.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The August 15, 1850 federal census for Centerville lists Wilhelm, Catherine, and Sophia. Sophia was born on October 22, 1848, and she died on October 23, 1850.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> There are several related families named Schneider (spelled Snyder) in the 1850 census, but reports state that Mrs. Schneider was going to the village of Centerville when she found the body. If I have identified the bridge correctly, she must have lived north of the crime scene, since otherwise she would not have taken Center Road to get there. Plat maps and census data combine to narrow her identify to Theresa Schneider (wife of Joseph), Helen Schneider (wife of Peter), or Charlotte Schneider (wife of Christian). Since Charlotte Schneider was the only female Schneider summoned as a witness in the case, and is listed as married, she appears to be the likely candidate. The discovery was reported in detail in the *Independent American*, September 26, 1851.

His head had been cleft with an axe from behind, and his brains were nearly gone.<sup>4</sup> His bloodied shirt had been pulled up over his head as if to drag his mangled remains out of site.<sup>5</sup>

After his body was positively identified, District Attorney, Jeremiah H. W. Colby was immediately summoned and he quickly rendered a verdict of "Murder by some person or persons unknown." Yet, there was insufficient evidence to warrant any arrests, until a few days later when it became obvious that George Egloff had fled town. Soon he was traced to Milwaukee, arrested a few miles west of there<sup>7</sup>, and brought back to Manitowoc Rapids aboard the steamer Detroit. Then Gustav Eichoff was arrested, apparently in Centerville. Judge Timothy O. Howe was summoned from Green Bay, and he arrived on September 22<sup>nd</sup> on the steamer Samuel Ward. From September 26<sup>th</sup> to November 26<sup>th</sup>, Howe interviewed twenty-five of Gerken's neighbors and five relatives of the accused. He also heard from Dr. Abram W. Preston, Manitowoc's first surgeon. On September 29<sup>th</sup> the Grand Jury found a Bill of Indictment against the accused, but since the two parties were not prepared for trial, the Judge deferred the case until November 26<sup>th</sup>, when Howe heard from more witnesses, including Mrs. Gerken.

Meanwhile, Egloff and Eichoff had been secretly boring one of the timbers in their cell, and on the night of November 28<sup>th</sup>, they squeezed out of their cell, carefully placed the timber back in place, and slipped into the wilderness. News of their escape traveled throughout the State. Egloff was described as a man of five feet, seven and ½ inches, with dark brown hair and gray eyes. He was last seen wearing corduroy pants and a striped hickory shirt. Eichoff was said to be six feet tall with black hair, grey eyes, and a Roman nose, and wearing dark pants and a dark brown dress coat. To assist their capture and delivery the Sheriff offered a \$100 reward.

They were never caught. In fact, they were never seen again until thirty-five years later (ca. 1886), when one of them (we are not told which), returned to the scene of the crime for a few hours visit. Nevertheless, no arrests were made: "grass having grown over the affair."

Indeed, life went on. Research reveals that no other members of the Eichoff and Egloff families remained in Centerville. 13

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The indictment, the clerk's costs, and a list of witnesses and witness fees (i.e., 16.5 cents per mile traveled, 50 cents for court attendance) are archived at the Cofrin Library, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, #CF1-X98. They state that Gerken had been struck in the back of the neck and side of the head with gashes five inches wide and three inches deep.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Since Wilhelm was heading home after the event, he must have taken (what is today) North Avenue east from the Eichoff property and then Center Road south to get home. This means that the murder took place on Center Road on the bridge that crosses Center-ville Creek, just before one gets to East Washington Avenue. This was the only bridge on the way to Gerken's home, in his day and in ours. The Creek appears on all of the plat maps.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Colby (b. January 14, 1821, d. May 11, 1853) was the first practicing attorney in Manitowoc County and the first burial in the city's Evergreen Cemetery. He died of tuberculosis at the age of thirty-two.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> One of the witnesses called to testify in the case was Peter Klaus, a French immigrant who lived in Greenfield, just west of Milwaukee. Likely this is the home in which he was found. Egloff too was a French immigrant, so there might have been a family connection.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Howe (b. February 24, 1816, d. March 25, 1883) served as a Wisconsin Senator from 1861-1879, and as the United States Post Master General from 1881-1883.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup>At the time, Preston (b. February 3, 1822, d. December 13, 1864) was living in the same home as Attorney General, Colby. Both men were from New Hampshire.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup>Described in the *Sheboygan Lake Journal*, December 17, 1851.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup>Details found in the *Manitowoc County Herald*, December 4, 1951.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup>Reported by Falge, *History of Manitowoc County*, p. 332. Falge's use of inner quotation marks shows that he heard this from someone in the Centerville community, but he remains mute on his source. Of all the relatives and witnesses summoned to the trial from Centerville, only a few were alive and/or still living there by 1880.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> The families last appear in the June 1, 1855 state census for Centerville. The Egloff family moved to town Newton. It is unclear where the Eichoff family went.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> For legal reasons, the indictment accuses both of them equally: "certain axes which they then and there in both their hands had and held."

The shame of the association likely encouraged them to seek fresh starts elsewhere. It is unknown what happened to Wilhelm's young wife, Catherine. Probably she was encouraged to remarry and start again. We only can imagine what became of Eichoff and Egloff, since no trace of them exists in the historical record after 1851. One only can surmise that they assumed new identities and went separately to more distant places, and though their furtive escape certainly suggests their guilt, we do not know which of them wielded the deadly axe and which was the accomplice. We will never know which of them returned years later or what motivated his visit. Clearly the murder haunted one of them. We also will never know who spotted him when he returned to the bridge after such a long absence, and why time was perceived to have passed its own sentence upon him. The only thing of which we can be certain is that one or both of them got away with murder.

Such a tale gives us insight into a time when our country's legal system had no national infrastructure and only the thinnest of State networks. It was a time when one quite literally could vanish into the countryside. Wilhelm Gerken's tragic end also offers a somber corrective to utopian visions of immigrant life in early Wisconsin. Today, only a small iron grave marker stands as a testament to his hopes.



At St. Wendel's Catholic Cemetery near Centerville