



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.”<sup>6</sup> 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 Eichhoff 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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 Eichhoff 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.<sup>10</sup> 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. Eichhoff 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, life went on. Research reveals that no other members of the Eichhoff and Egloff families remained in Centerville.<sup>13</sup>

<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>5</sup> Since Wilhelm was heading home after the event, he must have taken (what is today) North Avenue east from the Eichhoff property and then Center Road south to get home. This means that the murder took place on Center Road on the bridge that crosses Centerville 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>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>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>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>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>10</sup> Described in the *Sheboygan Lake Journal*, December 17, 1851.

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

<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>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 Eichhoff family went.

<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.<sup>14</sup> 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*