

Stalking My Hometown
1924-1947
1925 – Murder at the Poor Farm

Before Social Security, food stamps, housing subsidies, and Medicaid, there were “county farms” (AKA “poor farms”) for the indigent and “feeble-minded” in the community. They were funded by the county or local town. Able-bodied residents were expected to work at the facility, usually farming, housekeeping, or maintenance.

Outside social activities were limited, and tempers could flair. For example, William Bivans, 76, and Nelson Anderson, 74, were residents at the county farm near Monticello. Just south of Pulaski County, the farm community of about 2,500 in northwestern Indiana. Both men served as janitors and often quarreled over work.

Finally, two weeks before Christmas 1925, Bivans stabbed Anderson to death with a pocket knife. While the occasion was Anderson playing the accordion to another resident, Miss Stella Shirley, 34, it was likely rivalry over the same said woman.

Anderson’s body was delivered to his wife living in a nearby town.

Bivans was delivered to the White County jail. The following March, Bivans was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Four months later, he was paroled by the Governor to die at the home of his daughter in Illinois. He lasted another six years, finally dying there in 1932.

Murder at the Poor Farm

AGED WHITE COUNTY MAN MURDERS RIVAL INMATES OF INFIRMARY STAGE DEATH STRUGGLE

William Bevan, 76, in Jail Charged With Fatal Stabbing of Nelson Anderson, 74; Authorities Believe Jealousy inflamed by Anderson's Attempt to Serenade With A cordon Woman 34, to Whom Both Men are Said to Have Paid Attention Responsible for Crime.

(Special to Pharos-Tribune)

MONTICELLO, Ind., Dec. 9.—"Love's Old Sweet Song" ground out on a wheezy accordion by Nelson Anderson, 74, as a serenade to Miss Stella Shirley, 34, brought death to the aged swain, an investigation by White county authorities revealed today.

It also brought a jail cell for William Bevins, 76, who is accused of stabbing Anderson to death.

The tragedy took place in the County Infirmary, where all concerned were inmates. Anderson's musical efforts are said to have irritated other inmates and a quarrel ensued in which he was stabbed through the heart with a pocket knife.

Anderson has been at the infirmary since November 1. He was an inmate of the place two years ago. Bevans was received at the farm May 1 of this year. He had been an inmate at other times. Both were laborers at Wolcott in Princeton township before coming to the infirmary.

Anderson is an accordian player. His room is on the first floor of the building while that occupied by Bevans is on the second floor. It is said that shortly before 8 o'clock last night Anderson started playing his musical instrument in a serenade of the woman he is said

to have been wooing. This aroused the ire of Bevans and from his room he stepped to the head of the stairway calling to his fellow inmate and rival in love to cease the music. Anderson in turn is said to have hurled an apple core at Bevan.

This action aggravated Bevans, who weighs about two hundred pounds and he rushed down the stairway towards his one hundred and twenty-five pound opponent. Anderson is said to have met him, armed with a stick. A blow from the club struck Bevan over the head inflicting an injury. At this Bevans jerked a pen knife from his pocket, opened the large

blade and thrust it into the breast of his opponent. The first blow was a deadly one, the point of the knife imbedding in the heart causing instant death. No persons actually witnessed the killing, the Shirley woman being in Anderson's room when the struggle ensued.

Mr. and Mrs. Bert Jackson, superintendents, were attracted to the scene of the encounter but arrived too late to prevent the crime. The superintendent notified Sheriff I. M. Stanley who upon arriving at the institution took charge of Bevans and removed him to the jail here.

News of the tragedy spread rapidly and soon scores of people were calling officers and driving to the county farm and jail as interested spectators.

The superintendents stated that while they have noticed a very marked kindness on the part of Miss Shirley towards the two men and that they had apparently had appreciated the kindness, they had not noticed that the relationship had become one of love on the part of the two men. Other inmates of the infirmary state that the rivalry between the two has been growing very distinct for several days.

The murderer here recalls the fatal shooting of Marshall Bert Cowgel of Wolcott by Ed Johnson, also of that place, eighteen months ago.

There are eighteen men and two women inmates of the infirmary. While the two groups are separated as to living quarters, Miss Shirley assists in the house work at the institution in her duties she has shown kindness towards all inmates.

A grand jury will be called within a few days to take action on the case, officers announced this afternoon.

Logansport (IN) Pharos-Tribune 9 Dec 1925: 1. Website.

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"I'd kill for some accordion music right now!"

MUSICIAN IS KILLED BY INFIRMARY INMATE

Monticello, Ind., Dec. 9.—(INS)— "Love's Old Sweet Song," ground out on a wheezy accordian by Nelson Anderson, seventy-four, as a serenade to Miss Stella Shirley, thirty-four, brought death to the aged swain, an investigation by White county authorities revealed today.

It also brought a jail cell for Wm. Bevins, seventy-five, who is accused of stabbing **Anderson** to death.

The tragedy took place in the county infirmary, where all concerned were inmates. **Anderson's** musical efforts are said to have irritated other inmates and a quarrel ensued in which he was stabbed through the heart with a pocketknife.

The tragedy occurred in Anderson's room, according to infirmary officials, who said that **Bivens** later remarked, "I've killed Nels."

The grand jury at the present term of court probably will investigate the case, it was stated.

Huntington (IN) Herald 9 Dec 1925: 3. Website (newspapers.com)

'Poor Farm' slaying

COUNTY FARM INMATE, 76, KILLS AGED COMPANION, 74

An unusual event occurred at the county infirmary near Monticello Tuesday night, when Nelson Anderson, seventy-four years of age, was fatally stabbed by William Bevans, another inmate, seventy-six years old. There had been ill feeling between the two men for some time, and a quarrel over the playing of an accordion led to the stabbing. Both men were formerly residents of Wolcott. Anderson's body was taken to the home of his wife near Rensselaer.

Pulaski County (IN) Democrat 10 Dec 1925: 1. Microfilm.

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Nursing home slayer indicted

GRAND JURY IN WHITE INDICTS AGED SLAYER

Monticello, Ind. — Tragic fate struck its second blow at the "poor poor lovers" when the grand jury returned an indictment charging William Bevans, 76, with murder in the first degree. The first of the aged swains was, according to the finding stabbed by Bevans the night of December 9. He was Nelson Anderson, 74.

Bevans, the jury recommended, should be bound over to circuit court for trial at its next term in April 1926. He will be held without bond.

Jealousy, said by some to have been due to rivalry in love and by other inmates to have been the result of natural dislikes, is held the cause of the slaying which occurred during a fight between the two men.

Miss Stella Shirley, 34, with whom it is contended both men were in love, the superintendent and others deny that her actions in any manner prompted the quarrel between Bevans and Anderson.

It was directly caused by Anderson's failure to comply with an angry demand of Bevans that Anderson stop playing an accordion. The latter, struck by a club when he rushed at Anderson, drew a knife and stabbed his rival in the heart.

For one week the grand jury investigated the case before placing its recommendations in the hands of

Winamac (IN) Republican 24 Dec 1925: 1. Microfilm.

Trial starts

"POOR FARM" SLAYER'S TRIAL STARTS NEXT WEEK

William Bevans, seventy-six years of age, will go on trial next Tuesday for the murder of Nelson Anderson, 72, at Lake View Home, White county's infirmary, several months ago, it is announced. Both men were inmates of the home at the time of the killing.

Bevans is charged with having stabbed Anderson to death. His jealousy of his fellow inmate is said to have caused him to commit the deed.

Bevans, it is understood, will plead self-defense.

Pulaski County (IN) Democrat 18 Feb 1926: 4. Microfilm.

Jury selected

BEVANS JURY IS SELECTED; CASE END SEEN TODAY

Slayer of Nelson Anderson at Monticello Poor Farm on Trial

MOTION TO QUASH FILED AT OPENING

(By Associated Press)
MONTICELLO, Ind., Feb. 23.—Selection of a jury was completed and introduction of evidence was started today in the White circuit court in the trial of the state of Indiana vs. William Bevans, seventy-six years old, charged with the murder of Nelson Anderson, seventy-four.

The case is the outgrowth of an altercation which occurred at the White county infirmary early in December when Bevans

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Bevans Jury

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and Anderson, both inmates of the home, engaged in a quarrel which ended with Bevans stabbing Anderson. The latter died before a physician could reach the home.

Self-Defense Plea

Motion to quash the indictment was filed at the opening of the trial by R. C. McClurg, county attorney, who had been appointed by the court to plead the case of the aged defendant who is without funds.

John Rothrock, prosecuting attorney, is handling the state's case and made the opening statement. Bevans' attorney indicated the aged man's plea would be self-defense. An effort will be made to complete the case by Wednesday evening.

Jury Farmers

The jury, composed of White county farmers, includes the following:

Clifford Moore, Henry Meyer, Frank Gallagher, Samuel Walters, Hugh Treanor, Homer Price, David Dollinger, James T. Ballard, George Dye, Earl Baker, Harry Weiderhaft and William F. Hagen.

Logansport (IN) Morning Press 24 Feb 1926: 1&6.
Website (newspapers.com).

'Poor Farm Slayer' given life

"POOR FARM SLAYER" GOES TO PRISON FOR LIFE

William Bivans, 76 years old, White county infirmary inmate who slew his 72-year-old rival in love, will spend the rest of his life in prison.

Bivans was found guilty of second degree murder by a jury at Monticello last Thursday night, after an hour of deliberation, and sentence was pronounced immediately afterwards by Judge B. F. Carr.

Nelson Anderson, 72 years old, also an inmate of the White county infirmary, died on the night of Dec. 8 last, of knife wounds he received after a quarrel with Bivans because the former was entertaining two women inmates with accordion music.

Bivans, on the witness stand, testified he drew his penknife only after Nelson had struck him with a piece of stove wood.

The two men jointly were janitors at the infirmary, and state witnesses testified they often quarreled over the work.

Pulaski County (IN) Democrat 4 Mar 1926: 8. Microfilm.

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‘Poor Farm Slayer’ given life

LIFE TERM IN WHITE COUNTY MURDER CASE

William Bevans, 76, inmate of the White county infirmary, on trial in the White circuit court for the slaying on December 8, of Nelson Anderson, 74, was found guilty of second degree murder by a jury Saturday evening. The verdict, which carries with it a sentence of life imprisonment, was reached on the third ballot at 6:30 o'clock, after an hour's deliberation.

The aged defendant went on the stand in his own defense. A plea of self-defense was advanced, it being alleged that Bevans stabbed Anderson in a fight after the latter had attacked Bevans with a club, striking him on the head several times. Two witnesses testified for the state last Thursday. Zella Shirley, a woman inmate of the county infirmary, who was in the room when Anderson and Bevans clashed, testified to the incidents, and in cross-examination the defense brought out the fact that the witness saw Anderson pick up a club and brandish it, saying to Bevans at the same time: “Damm you, I'll fix you!”. Another inmate named Austin also testified, but said he didn't see the altercation.

John Rothrock, prosecuting attorney, is handling the state's case and made the opening statement. Bevans' attorney indicated the aged man's plea would be self defense. An effort will be made to complete the case by Wednesday evening.

The case is the outgrowth of an altercation which occurred at the White county infirmary early in December when Bevans and Anderson, both inmates at the home engaged in a quarrel which ended with Bevans stabbing Anderson. The latter died before a physician could reach the home and Bevans was immediately taken into custody and was a short time later indicted by a grand jury. Bevans is 76 years of age and Anderson was 74.

Winamac (IN) Republican 4 Mar 1926: 1. Microfilm.

Stabber gets four-month parole

BIVANS GETS 4 MONTHS PAROLE

William Bivans, who was convicted at the February term of the White circuit court of the murder of Nelson Anderson and sentenced to life imprisonment has been granted a four months' parole by Governor Jackson, according to word reaching here. Bivans will go to the home of a daughter in Illinois, where he will recuperate from a recent illness. Bivans, it will be remembered, killed Anderson by stabbing him with a knife when they engaged in a slight altercation while both were inmates of Lake View home, White County's infirmary. He is seventy-six years of age.

Winamac (IN) Republican 10 Jun 1926: 6. Microfilm.

‘Poor Farm Slayer’ paroled

“POOR FARM SLAYER” GETS EXTENSION OF PAROLE

William Bivins, 76 year old Civil war veteran of White county, has been given an extension of 120 days parole from the Michigan City prison, on account of failing health, and giving him an opportunity to close up his life outside prison walls.

Bivins was sentenced to prison for the slaying of Nelson Anderson, at the county farm near Monticello last February, and had served nearly six months. His health broken down and now an invalid, he is waiting for the last call at the home of his daughter at Rossville, Ill. In the trial he asserted that he acted in self defense, after Anderson had attacked him with a club.

Pulaski County (IN) Democrat 4 Nov 1926: 3. Microfilm.

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William dies



William Isaac Bivans
Bivans Family Tree

Spouse: Sarah Lucretia Ingram
Father: William Bivans
Mother: Evaline Neff
Children: Phoebe Ellen
Birth: 9 Apr 1850 Franklin, Ohio, USA
Death: 11 Apr 1932 Rossville, Vermilion, Illinois, USA
Residence: 1900 Wolcott, White, Indiana, USA

Apr 11 1932. Website (ancestry.com).