

The Accidental Hanging Tree

Trempealeau County

An oak tree in Trempealeau County figured in a not-so-warm welcome home for a man just released from prison. In fact, so unwelcome was he, his family and neighbors gathered to scare him away for good. While his wife served coffee to guests, they pretended to hang him. But things went awry and the scare turned into a real hanging for Hans Jakob Olson, aged 51, on the night of November 24, 1889. The oak tree that served as gallows stood on the John Brekke farm in the Town of Preston. It has long since been taken down.

The rascally Olson, who was greatly feared by those who knew him best, had the reputation of marauding around the community at night, scaring people half to death. He had just returned to his farm

after serving a term at the state prison at Waupun for attempted arson and murder of a local hardware dealer to whom he owed money. (He had bored holes in chunks of stove wood, filled them with gunpowder and had them delivered to the hardware dealer. The stove exploded but no one was hurt.)

The hanging, while intended only to convince Olson to leave the area, “accidentally” ended his depredations for good. The victim’s grown son and two neighbors and Olson’s wife, Bertha, were directly accused of the crime. Some 30 other men were implicated as spectators who did nothing to stop it. The four convicted received sentences of life imprisonment but were pardoned after five years. The spectators were each fined \$100 plus \$7 costs.

Source: Odin Anderson, Madison