

# Desperadoes in Durand

On July 9, 1881, four shots shattered the quiet around Durand, and two brothers lay dead at the hands of two brothers.

Many of the older couples had retired already; some of the younger folks were hanging around outside. Even though it was a Friday evening the streets were, as usual, pretty quiet in Durand. But as the full moon rose on that mid-summer's night in 1881, four shots rang out almost simultaneously from four different guns. A witness said the men were not more than 15 feet apart when the shooting commenced. In almost a single flash, two brothers lay dead, and the two brothers who shot them were headed to the woods of the Eau Galle bottoms, sorely wounded and soon to be the subjects of the largest manhunt in Pepin County's history.

The slain lawmen were widely known and respected around western Wisconsin, and in the hours after the shooting they became martyrs and heroes.

Charles Coleman, 40, a former sheriff of Durand and still-some-time lawman, had served during the Civil War and acquired a reputation as a gallant soldier. He'd been wounded in the forehead by a rifle ball, and the injury had left him unable to work. His death left his wife and several young children "in rather straightened circumstances," according to the Pepin County *Courier*, "[with] nothing ... except their home." As explanation the paper added, "He [had] made one or two applications for life insurance, but was unable to pass the medical examination on account of his old wound."

His brother Milton, younger by almost 15 years, was deputy sheriff of Dunn County, where he lived with their widowed mother. The paper noted, "He was engaged to a young lady, a teacher in the public school at Menomonie,



Top, left to right: Ed Maxwell, Alonzo Maxwell. Bottom, left to right: Milton Coleman, Charles Coleman.

and at the time of his death was planning for his marriage and housekeeping early in the fall. We understand that his life was insured for \$1,000 for the benefit of his mother."

The funeral of the Coleman brothers was the largest Durand had seen to that point. Charles' body was buried in the Durand cemetery, as the Durand Brass Band "played a solemn dirge as the mournful procession pro-

ceeded from the house to the grave." Milton's body was taken by ferry to Menomonie. No formal ceremonies were held; by that point so many men were gone, having formed huge hunting parties to find the assassins.

The brothers who shot the Colemans were already notorious throughout western Wisconsin, but, just as the shooting had made the Colemans into martyrs, it made Ed and Alonzo Williams (a.k.a. Maxwell) into legends.

Although thirty-year-old Ed Maxwell was small — 5'1" and about 140 lbs. — he was powerfully built, broad across the shoulders and very muscular. He was swarthy with a black moustache and black hair, which made his piercing blue eyes even more alarming. Though he was a rough character, he was intelligent, educated, "very gentlemanly in address" when he wanted to be, and known as a splendid penman.

Alonzo, Lon as he was called was five years younger than his brother, tall but slightly built and fair-skinned with auburn hair and dark brown eyes, "handsome to the point of being pretty." He had been recently widowed, and at the time of the shooting was still dressed in mourning clothes.

A report from Stillwater, published in the St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, gave a bit of history about the desperadoes: "The first known of Ed. Maxwell, alias Williams, in [Stillwater] was about six years ago, when he threatened to shoot Chief of Police Shortall, who went

to arrest him for discharging his rifle on the levee in this city. He got away from the officer, but the latter in looking up his history found that he was wanted in McDonough Co., Ill. The reward of \$350 offered for his capture (a little over \$6,000 in 2004 dollars) so spurred the officer that he and Sheriff Holcombe, then-deputy sheriff, went to work, and by dint of strategy captured him ... notwithstanding [that Ed] had a seventeen-shooter Winchester rifle and two revolvers, all loaded in his possession at the time....

"He was so notorious a character that at least 2,000 people met him at the depot upon his arrival at Macomb, the county seat of McDonough county. He was tried and sentenced on three indictments to six years in Joliet, from which place he emerged about a year ago. He had been in jail in that State before, and had broken out.

"As soon as he got out of the penitentiary he came up to Hersey, Wis., where Lon, his brother, has been living for the past two years, and they are supposed to have been the parties who broke into the St. Croix Lumber company's store at South Stillwater [in May 1881]."

After the bandits had escaped the lumber company, they had retreated to Lon's home in the tiny village of Hersey. Explained the *Pioneer Press*, "They gave the people to understand that they would be friendly to those who were friendly to them and a terror to those who attempted to interfere....

"Naturally enough, therefore, the people did not care to join a posse against them, and Sheriff Kelly returned to Hudson for aid, while the robbers made for the

forests. A few days later he received a telegram announcing that they had returned to Hersey, when he organized a stalwart brigade of well-armed men here and started to effect their capture, but before his arrival the birds had flown and nothing more was heard of them, only in an indirect way, until the dispatch, stating that they had just murdered two officers and a heavy reward was out for their capture, alive or dead."

After his capture, Ed Maxwell gave an account of the shooting to the *Pepin County Courier*: "While sitting in Spooner's grove they saw the Colemans go hurrying up the road and supposed they were being surrounded by an armed posse. They followed on after and met the Coleman's ... with their guns leveled upon them. They opened fire at once, as Ed claims in self-defense, and killed both of them. Charlie Coleman shot Lon in the face and arm and then shot Ed in the arm. Ed counted 16 shot that went through his coat sleeve six of which entered his arm, while Lon had 26 in his arm."

At the time, of course, the Colemans weren't around to testify as to the veracity of Ed Maxwell's account — nor were the Maxwell boys around to give it, having lighted out for the Eau Galle bottoms. After the shooting, an enormous reward — totalling some \$1,700 (\$30,000 today) gathered from the State of Wisconsin, Pepin County, Dunn County, and Henderson Co., Ill. — was published for their capture.

The search was on, but, although the hunting parties ranged up to 250 men including a detachment of the Ludington Guard from Menomonie, it was no avail. As the *Courier* angrily noted, "The officers think they had them

surrounded twice, but so well acquainted are the Williams with that part of the country that they have slipped through both times. That they have friends and assistants about the Eau Galle bottoms there is no doubt, and if the assassins escape it will be through their assistance, and a conspicuous example will very likely be made of some of them before this matter is done with." The paper went so far as to opine, "Lynch law is sometimes justifiable."

Unbeknownst to the searchers, the Maxwell boys had slipped away already and were making their way west as fast as their injuries would allow. It was some four months later, in November, that authorities caught up with the Maxwell gang — half of it anyway. Sheriff Killian, of Kearney County, Nebraska, gave the following account to the *Courier*: "Monday night, Nov. 7th, two men applied at the house of a German farmer in Merrick Co. for lodging and food. He did not like their appearance and sent them to the next farm house, that of a German who had recently arrived in this country and could understand no English.

"After they had departed, the first-mentioned farmer hunted up an old copy of a Milwaukee paper and compared the description it contained of the Maxwells with the appearance of the two men who had just left. Satisfied that they were the desperadoes, instead of 'goose hunters from Hastings' as they claimed, he hurried to Grand Island and notified Sheriff Killian of his suspicions. Killian summoned three men he could depend on.

"They reached the house about 4 o'clock [a.m.] and called for some coffee, stating that they were out after geese, and had

taken an early start from home so as to be on the ground when the geese commenced to fly. Killian entered into conversation with Ed. The boys were soon satisfied that they were not officers and were thrown off their guard. Lon stepped out of doors leaving his Winchester in the adjoining room.

“Killian’s plan had been to capture them while eating breakfast, but Lon’s departure changed his plan and, walking up to Ed who was holding his rifle, he took hold of it saying, ‘I want to talk with you’. A struggle for the rifle then commenced, the other men joining in and Killian soon wrested the gun from Ed, took it out into the other room, and hid that and Lon’s also. He did not suppose they had any other arms, but returned to the struggle to find that his men had Ed on his back on the floor and he had worked himself along to the bed where he got both of his revolvers, but they were taken away before he could use them.

“Putting handcuffs on Ed, Killian rushed out of the house to find Lon — and found him sooner than he expected. Lon had heard Ed’s cries and came running around the corner of the house with two revolvers. He fired at Killian but missed, and the latter jumped inside the door. Lon tried to get in but was confronted by a double-barreled shot gun, which failed to go off, and he thus escaped.”

He’d last been seen at Aurora, 22 miles away, where he sent a boy into a store to buy some food. Lon would never see justice, at least at the hands of a court. Then again, neither would Ed.

Ed Maxwell was brought back to Durand in short order and

taken to a cell under heavy guard. There he talked with the *Courier* and awaited his trial.

On Saturday afternoon, November 19, he was brought into the courtroom. According to the *Courier*, “The house was crowded with men, women and children from nearly all parts of this and adjoining counties, anxious to get a view of the notorious criminal. He gave his name as William E. Maxwell, and to the charge as read by the Justice, entered a plea of ‘not guilty.’ He also waived an examination and was committed for trial.”

He wouldn’t return to the courtroom. No less than six duly appointed lawmen were taking him back to his cell, but as they pushed through the crowd at the bottom of the courthouse stairs, several in the crowd yelled, “Hang the son-of-a-bitch,” and a dozen or more men tackled the officers. “A man with a noose,” the paper noted, “dodged in the door and soon had it over the murderer’s head with a regular ‘hang man’s knot’ under the left ear. The officers made a desperate resistance, but were overpowered by superior numbers and hurried down the hall away from their prisoner.

“Maxwell fought like a tiger, but he fought without his favorite weapons ... and in less time than it takes us to write these lines, the rope was securely ‘round his neck, a cry from the leader of ‘haul away!’ and the rope tightened with a jerk that landed Maxwell on the porch outside the building ... from where he was dragged to an old oak tree east of the court house and quickly suspended 30 feet in the air, with his handcuffs still on and a heavy pair of shackles hanging from his left foot. As

soon as they could possibly get to him (about 15 minutes) the officers cut down the body, which was interred in the Potter’s field of our cemetery.”

After the lynching, the *Courier* added this warning: “We hear of some threats having been made by parties supposed to be in sympathy with the Maxwell brothers, of personal violence to men supposed to have taken part in the lynching of Ed. Williams, of burning their dwellings, etc. We can only advise the parties to go slow.... There is more rope here and plenty of responsible men who are not afraid to use it when the occasion demands.”

As much for fighting words like these as for the deed itself, Durand suffered a reputation as a den of vigilantes for some time afterward. At the height of the furor, as many as a dozen lynchings were ascribed to the town by area newspapers, although there really haven’t been any others, at least not yet.

One question, though, still nagged at the town folk occasionally: What had ever become of Lon Williams, or Alonzo Maxwell as they knew his name was now? As some had already heard, he had been captured, but on his way to the Montana State Prison at Deer Lodge, he dove through a stagecoach window near Miles City. Once again, Lon Maxwell had escaped into the night.

It would be years before a skeleton wearing handcuffs was discovered in a mountain valley near Livingston, Montana, more than 200 miles west of Miles City. By that point the handsome desperado had traveled more than 800 miles — far enough to escape the law but not his fate.