



FOLKLORE

Songs from the gallows

A story from early Springfield history

By Pete Ellertsen

Springfield had an anniversary during the holidays. The occasion wasn't observed, but Nov. 26, the Saturday after Thanksgiving was the 196th anniversary of the city's first public hanging in 1826. There's a good story that goes with it, too. A story about a man from Athens with "a most excellent voice" that people were still talking about 50 and 75 years later. I learned the story as a volunteer interpreter at Lincoln's New Salem State Historic Site researching the music of frontier Illinois in the 1830s. It was an object lesson in how our history and our folklore are often interconnected.



The man with the excellent voice was the defendant, and I'm reasonably certain he sang the tune we know today as "Auld Lang Syne." But instead of the familiar words by Robert Burns, he sang a hymn by Isaac Watts: "Hark from the tombs a doleful sound ... Ye living men come view the ground, / Where you must shortly lie."

I wrote it up like this in 2006 for the *Prairie Picayune*, the interpreters' newsletter at New Salem:

"According to the Rev. R.D. Miller's *Past and Present of Menard County* (1905), the first person to be executed in Springfield was a Nathaniel Van Noy of Athens, convicted on charges of murder in 1826. The hanging was Nov. 26 in 'the hollow just east of the new [in 1905] capitol in Springfield,' and Miller said it drew 'the largest gathering that, up to that time, had ever met in central Illinois.'"

162 PLENARY, C. M.
 "Hark! not at this, for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice:—& they that are in it shall come out."
 ISAAC WATTS, 1707. Key of G Major. A. CLARK, 1835. Alto by S. M. DENSON, 1911.

Plenary is credited to A. Clark in the "Sacred Harp," first in 1835, and in each Revision up to 1895, and has retained some page 106 from the time the book was first compiled in 1834. A. Clark and A. C. Clark are believed to be the same person, and that Mr. Clark composed "Plenary," at least as it has been published in the "Sacred Harp." See further remarks about Clark under tune "Goway," page 127. It was published in "Southern Harmony," by William Walker 1835 and also page 166, also "Christian Harmony," page 64. The words of the hymn are taken from Isaac Watts, "Hymns and Spiritual Songs," Book 2, 1707. See other sketches of Isaac Watts in this book. Alto added by S. M. Denson, 1911.

Here's the story, as Rev. Miller told it.

"On the scaffold the murderer, who was a most excellent singer, asked permission of the sheriff to sing. Being granted the privilege, he stood on the platform, or cart, and sang in full, round tones that old hymn, composed by Dr. Watts, the first verso of which is:

'Hark from the tombs a doleful sound
 My ears attend the cry;
 Ye living men come view the ground,
 Where you must shortly lie.'

"He sang the entire hymn and then the cart was drawn from under him."

I guess I'd sing the entire hymn, too. And I wouldn't rush the tempo, either.

Like a 'Frankenstein' novel

In 1826 Springfield was a little cluster of log cabins, mostly strung out along Jefferson from First Street to Fourth, where it intersected an Indian trail running north to Peoria. The hanging took place a little distance from town, at the edge of a grove, or wooded area, just east of today's Illinois Statehouse that stretched from a creek bed, near the present railway overpass on Second Street, past the Illinois Supreme Court building and south past the secretary of state's offices in the Michael J. Howlett Building. To the north was mostly open prairie.

By all accounts, the hanging was a festive occasion at a favorite spot for public gatherings (baptisms were regularly conducted nearby at a "baptizing hole" in the creek). And the occasion had a macabre twist that left people talking about it, quite literally, for decades.

Several accounts are available

online. Local historian Tara McClellan McAndrew in 2016 pieced the rest of the story together for the *State Journal-Register* from 19th- and early 20th-century newspaper accounts and a 1909 reminiscence by early settler Zimri Enos in the 1909 *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society*. And in 2013 Erika Holst, curator of collections at the Springfield Art Association, wrote it up for *Illinois Times* and the Sangamon County Historical Society posted an account to its website based on John Carroll Powers' 1876 *History of the Early Settlers of Sangamon County*.

Van Noy was a blacksmith living near Athens, then still a part of Sangamon County. Historical accounts vary on the details, but he was accused of murdering his wife. McAndrew says a customer checked their cabin when the blacksmith's shop was empty; he found her body in the cabin, and Van Noy had fled the scene.

Holst tells the story like this, and it jibes with what I read in Rev. Miller's Menard County history:

"It all began on Aug. 27, 1826, when Van Noy's wife did not prepare his breakfast with acceptable speed. Hungry, and reportedly drunk, Van Noy picked up a stick and struck a fatal blow to her side, killing her instantly.

"He was immediately arrested and put in jail. The wheels of justice moved at lightning speed; his trial began the next day, and the day after that he was found guilty and sentenced to hang on Nov. 26."

The stories are not inconsistent, and I'm inclined to believe both accounts. In any event, Van Noy was charged, tried, and convicted in record time. Miller says a witness was present when he struck his wife, so that may help explain the speed with which the legal proceedings were conducted.

McAndrew fills in some of the details:



"When the blacksmith showed up at his cabin that night, he was arrested and taken to the jail, which was at the current intersection of Sixth and Washington streets, according to the Dec. 6, 1897, *Journal*. He told authorities the Indians killed his wife. A jury disagreed. Within three days, he was found guilty of murdering his wife while intoxicated and sentenced to hang on Nov. 26."

When the big day came, people from all over the Sangamon River country came to watch. Relying on the 1897 reminiscence in the *Illinois State Journal* by William H. Powels, whose father took him to the hanging, McAndrew sets the scene of the hanging like this:

"As the wagon carrying Van Noy traveled from the jail, west on Jefferson and south on First Street to the gallows in 'the hollow' south of our current Statehouse, the crowd at the jail followed in a long procession. Before the execution, Van Noy led the large audience in a hymn. 'He sang in a firm, clear voice,' recalled Powels in the 1897 *Journal*."

And that's not the whole story.

Van Noy arranged for the town's doctor, Addison Filleo, to revive him by administering electric shock from a "galvanic battery" — more or less the same technology as in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* — but it wasn't successful. Says McAndrew, who was reminded of *Frankenstein*:

"Per their bargain, Dr. Filleo still tried to revive Van Noy. He took the body to his office 'on Jefferson Street, midway between Second and Third streets,' according to the recollections of Enos, whose family lived about 50 feet from the office. But, unlike Mary Shelley's novel, which was published just eight years earlier, electricity didn't animate the monster.

"So Dr. Filleo dissected the body — with 'the door and window wide open and a crowd of men and boys in the street looking on,' stated Enos. The crowd became so disgusted, the physician finally moved his work to the back room."

No wonder they were still talking about it 70 years later!

Folklore, hangings and history

What of the story of Van Noy - singing at his hanging? I'm inclined to trust it, at least as a good example of a typical reminiscence of the 1800s. Miller's early Menard County history is as reliable as any of the county histories and old settlers' accounts (Athens was still in Sangamon County in 1826, and that's why the hanging was in Springfield). The "old hymn composed by Dr. Watts" is certainly edifying enough in the context, and it was not uncommon to hear stories of people making music at a hanging in the 19th century. It's a time-honored part of American folklore.

Traditional fiddle tunes like "Hangman's Reel" and "Coleman's March" often picked up the motif. Even the folk song "Tom Dooley" has an "old violin" in it (at least in the version picked up by Doc Watson and the Grateful Dead). And Tom Dula (whose name was pronounced like "Dooley") actually lived. He "played for the local square dances and was a very popular young man around the com-

munity,” according to the local chamber of commerce in Wilkes County, N.C., where the events recorded in the song occurred. Young Dula may have been a little too popular. He got involved in a love triangle, and eventually he was hanged upon conviction of murdering “poor Laurie Foster.”

Just because a story turns up later in a song, that doesn’t mean there aren’t elements of truth in it.

When I wrote up Springfield’s story of Van Noy, the man with the “most excellent voice,” and his attempted resuscitation by the town doctor with the “galvanic battery” for the *Prairie Picayune* out at New Salem, I was mostly interested in the music. I sang with a group of shape-note singers demonstrating period music, and I was documenting early American folk hymns that might have been sung at New Salem.

The tune was certainly common in frontier Illinois. Not only did it appear in the shape-note tunebooks; it was commonly sung with the words of a nursery rhyme, “Old Grimes is dead, that good old man; / We ne’er shall see him more.” And in her reminiscences published as *A Woman’s Story of Pioneer Illinois*, Mrs. Christiana Tillson recalled hearing a hymn by Charles Wesley, “When I shall read my title clear, to mansions in the sky,” lined out by a pioneer preacher to the same tune in the 1820s near Hillsboro.

The tune is an old Scottish melody. Rev. Miller’s history only records the words of the hymn that Van Noy sang — “Hark, from the tombs a doleful sound ...” — so there’s some guesswork involved in assigning a tune to it. But it’s a reasonable guess. Hymns and tunes got switched around pretty freely in the early 1800s, but both *The Missouri Harmony* and *Southern Harmony* print Watts’ hymn with a tune they call “Plenary” that is very similar to the one we know as “Auld Lang Syne.”

Those are the two tunebooks that were most used in frontier Illinois. So I felt confident the song would have been sung to that tune at New Salem during its heyday in the 1830s.

For a little more than 10 years, we sang in the historic village. And as we performed the music from the old shape-note tunebooks at, say, the Rutledge Tavern, where young Abraham Lincoln had gathered with his friends to sing from *Missouri Harmony*, something magical happened. It was as if some came back to life and walked among us, at least for a minute or two.

We never sang at a re-enactment of a public hanging, of course, but we

did perform once for a “cemetery walk” at the Old State Cemetery adjacent to the Old State Capitol in Vandalia. And you’d better believe we sang “Hark from the tombs a doleful sound” on that occasion! It’s all part of our heritage and folklore.

 Peter Ellertsen of Springfield is an amateur folklorist with a love for shape-note singing and traditional music.



Wild whiskers

A topiary sculpture in downtown Macomb brings new life to some well-known whiskers. The “Living Lincoln Topiary Monument,” sponsored by the several McDonough County organizations, recognizes 100 years of service by Rotary International in Macomb, and Mr. Lincoln’s several visits to the city in 1858.