Who's Who In Wisconsin Rapids

The Who's Who column will be run each Saturday in the Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune. It will include a brief sketch of the life of citizens who have helped make history for Wisconsin Rapids.

Peter McCamley

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Peter McCamley, son of John and Catherine Turley McCamley, was born at Kenosha, Wis., April 15, 1850, where he lived until seven years of age, when he came with his parents to Saratoga. The journey was made in a prairie schooner drawn by a yoke of oxen.

His father bought a farm in Saratoga on which Peter worked and lived with his parents until fourteen years old. He then left the farm and entered into the employ of Francis Biron, one of the early day lumber kings of this vicinity. He worked at lumbering and logging for Mr. Biron for a period of ten years, after which time he learned the wagon makers' trade of Joseph Hasbrouck, following it for three years.

Elected Sheriff in 1887

In the year 1876, Phillip Ward was elected sheriff of Wood County and appointed Mr. McCamley his undersheriff during his term of office. At the fall election of 1887 he succeeded Mr. Ward as sheriff of the county.

On October 29, 1879, Mr. McCamley was united in marriage to Miss Margaret Hannifin of Centralia. Directly following the wedding Mr. McCamley and his bride took up their residence for several weeks at the Roach House. They afterwards moved to the Sheriff's residence in the old court house which was erected on the site of the brewery building on First stheet north.

Recalls 1880 Fire and Flood

The following year proved the most disastrous of any in this city. The Rablin House which was then one of the best hotels in the state, was burned to the ground, and Harry Compton, one of the firemen, while fighting flames was seriously injured by a falling piece of cornice which struck him on the head. Mr. Compton never fully recovered from the injury. Two days following the hotel fire, the waters in the Wisconsin river began to rise and continued until the whole main street for block was under water. J. L. Ferguson, while in the rear of his hardware store trying to protect his property went down in the raging waters and his body was never seen again.

When the waters had receded the streets were filled with logs, stumps old slabs and all sorts of flood trash, and were impassable. At this time a heated discussion arose between the residents as to rebuilding Main street on the "top of the hill" which is now known as Eighth street. The business owners on the old location gravely protested and in a short time they won out and Main street was rebuilt in its present location.

Entered Hardware Business

At the end of his term as sheriff Mr. McCamley and E. S. King bought the remainder of the Ferguson hardware stock to which they added new supplies and on January 1, 1881 they formed a copartnership under the firm name of McCamley and King. They remained together as business partners for about a year when Mr. King sold his half interest to McCamley, which he sold to E. C. Pariseau. These two continued together in business until 1882 when McCamley sold his half interest to Pariseau and again entered the political field, as candidate for sheriff. He was again elected to this office.

The present court house was built in 1881 during which time Mr. McCamley was one of the members of the County Board of Supervisors. A very bitter fight arose between Centralia, Pittsville, and Marshfield, who wanted the county seat removed and all claiming the best location. For fear of an injunction being served preventing the building of the new court house, Judge Charles Webb prepared the papers for the contract and had them properly signed, and together with Judge Geo. R. Gardner and Mr. McCamley went to Green Bay and let the contract to Brauns and Masters and the Court House was built in Grand Rapids on the lovely site where it still remains.

Reelected Sheriff

After his election Mr. McCamley moved his family into the sheriff's residence in the basement of the Court House.

It was during Mr. McCamley's second term of office that the most brutal and notorious murder case ever tried in this county was held. A young man by the name of Fred Fenner of Westfield had purchased a pair of mules of an old German farmer by the name of Hessler, agreeing to pay him when they reached Sherry. When they arrived at Mill Creek within two miles of Sherry, Fenner drove off the main road into the nearby woods and, drawing a gun, fired two shots in the old man's brain, killing him instantly. He then beat his skull to a pulp with a black snake whip which he had purchased of H. W. Lord of this city.

After killing Hessler, Fenner drove on to Sherry and sold the mules to Sherry and Briggs who owned and conducted a lumber mill at Sherry. C. F. Kellogg of this city was one of the main witnesses in the case. He was then bookkeeper for the Sherry Lumber Company to whom Fenner gave the Sherry and Briggs check to be cashed. About a month after the murder Hessler's body was found by Moses Blain.

Capture Murderer

In the meantime Fenner had returned to Adams county where he afterwards gave himself up to the district attorney and sheriff of that county. He was brought back to this city and placed in the county jail to await trial, and on account of his treachery was closely watched. One of the duties of the prisoners was to scrub the jail floor. One time while engaged in the work, Fenner obtained an axe handle under thee pretense of wanting to mix the compound they were using to clean the floors. At an unguarded moment he hid the handle in his cell and in the evenings, when Mr. McCamley was entering the cell to lock him in, he raised the axe handle to kill McCamley, but the sheriff discovered him just in time and prevented the blow from being struck.

Fenner was attired in a suit of underwear and heavy woolen socks and rubbers. His cap was hid inside his shirt and he was fully prepared to make his escape. He was more closely guarded after that and was given no liberties whatever. His case, which attracted wide spread attention, came to trial in the May term of 1893. People for miles around came here to attend the case. He was convicted and sent to prison at Waupun for life, but was pardoned and released on parole about seven years ago.

Appointed Postmaster

Following his second election as sheriff, Mr. McCamley was appointed postmaster, January 13, 1886 for a term of four years, under Grover Cleveland's administration. The postoffice was in the same building and premises now occupied by Beardsley's Grocery Store. During his term as postmaster, the present wagon bridge over the Wisconsin river was built and he was appointed, together with John Parrish of Grand Rapids, and T. E. Nash and Geo. Corriveau as a committee to let the contract, which was awarded to the Milwaukee Bridge and Iron Works for the sum of $17,400.

In his earlier years, Mr. McCamley also worked in the lumber mills for Francis Biron. At the expiration of his last term as sheriff he worked in the hardware department of the Johnson & Hill Company in the old Garrison building. The company later formed a partnership with L. M. Nash and conducted a hardware store under the name of the Centralia Hardware Co., transferring their stock to the Nash building, which at present is occupied by the Nash Hardware Store. McCamley remained in the employ of the Nash Hardware Company until February 10, 1893 when he was appointed Treasurer by the County Board to fill the unexpired term of Peter Bever.

His next venture was time keeper and purchaser of supplies for Daly & Sampson for their lumber camps at Mill Creek, after which he scaled logs for James Cameron at Mill Creek, two miles north of Vesper.

From there he went to Grand Rapids and worked a year with Joe Golla at carpenter trade. During the year 1879 Mr. McCamley was Mayor of the city of Grand Rapids. In 1907 he was appointed by the County Board as Supervisor of Assessments.

Mr. McCamley ha been poor-commissioner for Wood County for the past thirty-five years and a member of the County Board for eighteen years. He is at present in the employ of the Johnson & Hill Company store where he is salesman in the hardware department.

Father of Five Children

Five children have been born to Mr. and Mrs. McCamley, all of whom are still living. They are three daughters, Mrs. F. L. Steib and Miss Elizabeth McCamley of this city and Mrs. Arlie Gullickson of Stevens Point; and two sons, Howard and Kenneth both of this city. Kenneth is manager of the hardware depart-

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ment of the Johnson & Hill Co. store.

Mr. McCamley is a devout Catholic a member of SS Peter & Paul Catholic Church and also a member of the K. C. and the Catholic Knights of Wisconsin. He is an ardent and life long democrat, and no one is better known or more highly respected in this city, and, in fact, in the entire county, than our esteemed citizen, Peter McCamley.

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