

Photo of the Month

Bolin Murder Inquest



First Street, between Elm and Poplar Streets
Rogers, Arkansas, early 1880s
Rogers Historical Museum Photo Collection

One of the earliest known photographs of Rogers is shown at right. It depicts the prosperous, growing town in about 1881 along First Street between Elm and Poplar Streets. The year 1881 is notable in the history of Rogers as the year of its incorporation. That year also hold another, but unfortunate, distinction for the community. In 1881 Rogers held its first murder inquest.

On Christmas Eve of 1881 town authorities were alerted that a shooting had taken place at the residence of the Bolin family. The inquest transcripts are not clear as to their exact address however. The coroner was absent, so Mayor J. Wade Sikes served in that capacity and began the investigation. Mary Bolin and the Bolin's boarder, George Martin, were taken into custody and held for questioning and Mayor Sikes immediately summoned a jury of the following "twelve good and lawful" men: Roland Mitchell, John Dunagin, Thomas Stoakes, J.F. McDaniel, J.W.

Davis, R.B. Parker, J.W. Boyd, J. Cook, J. Summey, M.B. Coroan (?), W.L. Prewit, and E.D. Morgan.

Testimony given by witnesses in the Coroner's inquest painted a troubled image of the Bolin home. Mary Bolin testified that Esow had previously killed two men to her knowledge and that he had threatened her life with a knife. She said that "he was a common thief, robber, and murderer" and that she killed Esow to save her own life. Mary also went on to testify that their boarder, George Martin, was sleeping in the room where the shooting took place.

A major cause of the tension between the Bolins seems to have revolved around the sale of a group of supposedly stolen knives by Mary to an individual named Billy Board. Esow had learned that the authorities were making inquiries regarding the knives and feared that the sale might lead to the discovery of his guilt, according to Mary. She reported that she knew that the knives were stolen before she sold them. She also testified that Martin knew that she and "her husband did not get along well together." But that he did not know of her intention of killing Esow.

The Bolin's twelve year old daughter, Mary, Jr., was called to testify. She said that she was awake at the time of the shooting, but that she did not see it happen. She also claimed that she heard her father threaten her mother not long prior to the murder, but that there had been no trouble between her parents during the three weeks that Martin boarded with the family. In the transcript of her testimony she reported, "Mother did not tell me what to say before I came here." Mary, Jr. also testified that she didn't know if Martin knew of any trouble between her parents.

George Martin testified that the shooting woke him up and that Mary asked him to "get up and let the people know it." Martin, a carpenter from Eureka Springs, had arrived in Rogers three weeks prior to the shooting, took lodging with the Bolins, and had worked with Esow Bolin. Martin also testified that Mrs. Bolin had not confided in him regarding the trouble over the sale of the stolen knives.

Mary, Jr. was recalled to the stand and testified as follows: "Father and Mother had a quarrel about two weeks ago. The quarrel was while they were at dinner. No one present except Mr. Martin. Don't know what the quarrel was about. Never quarreled but once in the presence of Mr. Martin."

The jury carefully examined the body, evidence, premises, prisoners, and witnesses and returned a verdict, which read as follows: "Esow Bolin came to his death at the hour 12:11am December 24th, 1881 from a pistol shot in back of the head ranging forward and breaking the skull of the forehead but not passing out. Said pistol was fired by Mary Bolin wife of said Esow Bolin." Sikes arrested Mary Bolin and placed her in the Benton County Jail to await action by the Grand Jury. The Grand Jury was then responsible for determining if enough evidence existed to issue an indictment against Mrs. Bolin and hold a criminal trial.

The most shocking testimony of the case was given by Benton County Deputy Sheriff and Jailor, W.F. Patton. After Mary Bolin had been taken to the Benton County Jail in Bentonville, Patton

visited the jail with friends during the afternoon around 2pm. At that time, Mary asked for something to trim threads from her dress and Patton reported loaning her his Barlow knife. About 3pm, Patton returned to the jail and found another prisoner, Emily Arney, sweeping out the jail. As he stepped back to allow Arney to sweep out the area of the cells, Mrs. Bolin cut her own throat with the Barlow knife. Mary Bolin's infant child was the only person in the cell with her at the time she committed suicide.

Mrs. Arney, who was also being held on a murder charge, gave the final testimony of the case: "I never did hear her say that she would take her own life. She eat her dinner and then went back to bed to nip off some ruffles, I believe. Mr. Patton told me not to come in there, she had cut her throat."