

# The Hanging of Elizabeth Reed

By Ray Elliott

Time was when there wasn't much for convicted murderers to look forward to after completion of their sentences. Take old Elizabeth Reed from Purgatory Swamp south of Palestine, for example.

Reed was accused and convicted of slipping a little "sweetin'" in her husband's coffee (or sassafras tea, according to the account you read) back in 1844. Her sentence? To hang by the neck until dead. And that didn't take long. What happened to her after. ...

But let's take a look at the events leading up to the hanging before going on to what little I could find out about what happened to her after she completed her sentence. Existing accounts are sketchy and inconsistent, and this account is based on a composite of the articles about the event now on file at the Robinson Township Library.

Reed and her husband, William, lived in a log cabin in what one writer called Purgatory Swamp; another writer said this cabin was located eight miles south of Palestine or about a half a mile northwest of Heathsville.

During the summer of 1844, William Reed became ill. A doctor was called to the cabin. After a brief examination, the doctor said the feeble old man couldn't live long. And he didn't.

A neighbor girl, Eveline Deal, was called to the cabin to help care for him. After the doctor left, Elizabeth put some white powder in the old man's coffee. He was dead when the doctor returned.

At the time of the funeral, Elizabeth acted like the grieving widow. It wasn't until later that her behavior became suspect. Or, more likely, it wasn't until the Deal girl told someone that she had seen Elizabeth pour white powder in the coffee that she was suspected of murder.

The paper that contained the powder was still in the cabin. Evidently Deal turned the paper and her suspicions over to the sheriff, and he conducted an investigation. It was established that Elizabeth had bought the powder (arsenic) from a Russelville druggist. The paper was the kind used only by that druggist who identified it as the one he had wrapped the arsenic in for Elizabeth.

Witnesses testified that she had gone to the druggist in a disguise to buy the poison. What kind of disguise was never mentioned. In various instances, Reed was described as

a strange woman, ("of a very peculiar and hardened disposition") who seemed to have a facial disfigurement of some kind. She always wore a white cap or band tied around her head and wore a veil over her face when she went out. Perhaps that was the disguise.

At the time of her arrest in August of 1844, Reed was placed in the county jail at Palestine. She quickly burned the log jail (which was never rebuilt because the county seat was moved to Robinson) to the ground. Until a change of venue was granted, she was kept in the loft of the sheriff's cabin "with a chain fastened to one of her lower limbs, and thence to a part of the bed."

In September of 1844, the Grand Jury indicted her for murder. The change of venue was later granted, and she was moved to Lawrence County. Her trial was held in April 1845, and she was found guilty and sentenced to be hanged on May 23, 1845.

One eyewitness said years later, "The (execution) day dawned bright and balmy." Some 20,000 people had come from all over Illinois and Indiana to watch the hanging. Many of them arrived before dawn.

Elizabeth Reed supposedly gave a full confession which was later printed in pamphlet form. She was visited regularly in Lawrenceville by the clergy and allegedly confessed to them or their wives. It is difficult to determine what actually happened, because one account of the incident indicates that the governor of Illinois offered to revoke the execution sentence if she would confess.

Whether she ever confessed or not, she rode to the site of the hanging on the morning of May 23, 1845, sitting on her coffin. The crowds surrounded her on all sides, singing songs like "On Greenland's Icy Mountains." Reed, who had been baptized after her conviction, was dressed in white and had shouted, prayed and sung as she rode along. She mounted the scaffold singing "psalms of praise."

One writer said the "scaffold stood on the northeast corner of the green hill (in Lawrenceville) with the maple tree at the bottom which had its top badly broken by the great number of men and boys anxious to see the taking off of this poor woman." A later writer said the hanging took place near the 10th Street bridge.

Take your pick.

Before the hanging, a preacher preached Reed's funeral as she sat on the scaffold. At the conclusion of the long sermon, a black hood was placed over her head and she stepped to the trap and the sheriff, who had tried to resign rather than hang a woman but didn't because there was nobody else to do it, cut the rope which held the trap by a small pulley fastened to a post. Reed plunged through the trap, "revolved several times, but did not struggle much" and was lowered from sight. Her sentence was completed.

No, they didn't put a convicted murderer in jail long in those days. Nor did they spend much money to bury one. Reed was buried in a shallow grave beneath the scaffold. Relatives dug her up that night and reburied her in an unmarked grave next to her husband in the southwest corner of Baker Cemetery near Heathsville. According to available reports, to posterity Elizabeth Reed has the distinction of being the first and only woman to be hanged in Illinois.