

HAWARDEN...HOW IT ALL BEGAN

HEROES AND TRAGEDY ON THE SIOUX RIVER

Chapter 20:

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It was a perfect day in May, 1916 and a picnic was planned for all the girls in the high school by the high school principal, Miss Davis. According to the account written by York Johnson, brother to Neva (one of the victims) there had been trouble in the high school between the principal and the superintendent, so to solicit support from the student body she planned this picnic to be held on the Sioux River across from the old mill, in the Falde pasture on the South Dakota side.

The river was swollen after recent heavy rains and it was not only high, but carried a swift current. York's father ran the shoe store in town and it was open until 8 o'clock. About 6:30 his sixteen year old daughter popped into the store asking her dad for thirty-five cents so she could join the rest of the girls at the school picnic. Mr. Johnson handed her a handful of change and told her to take what she needed. When she turned to leave, she said, "Thank You, Daddy", and those were the last words he ever heard from his daughter.

The girls and their teacher all gathered at Calliope on the bank of the river where a number of boats owned by Snoggs Conrad, the school janitor and also "John Boats" owned by a number of other local citizens were tied to a small dock under the old Calliope Bridge above the dam. The men in charge of the launching knew the river was high. They could hear the water rushing swiftly over the dam. They should have known that the river this night was not a place for young girls. None the less, they proceeded to load the excited young ladies six to a boat to paddle or row across the river a little upstream to their picnic site.

The first two boats proceeded slowly to their destination. A music teacher named McCarthney had been boasting to the girls that she was a great oarswoman and knew all about handling a boat. She was placed in the third boat with Bonita Sidwell, Alma McGlaughlin, Edna Boorman, Marjorie Fairbrother and Doris Johnson. At that moment, Doris Johnson's father called out to her that he was manning one of the other boats, and she should ride with him. Doris left to go with her father and Neva Johnson (York's sister) stepped in.

Conrad Snoggs shoved the boat off with Miss McCarthney and Marjorie Fairbrother each on a pair of oars. It was immediately evident that the teacher knew nothing about rowing as she pushed on the oars against the pull of Marjorie Fairbrother; the boat shot out into the stream and headed for the dam in the rushing water. As it approached the dam, unchecked, the girls began to panic. Bonita Sidwell and Alma McGlaughlin jumped out above the dam. Neva Johnson stood up as if to jump just as the prow of the boat hit the dam and she fell over backwards into the swirling waters below the dam. The boat hesitated a moment and then with the teacher and two other occupants went over the dam, tipped over, and spilled the young women into the dangerous waters. The Hawarden Independent of May 18, 1916 reports. *No pen can picture nor tongue describe the horror of that incident. The girls were at the utter mercy of the roaring, tumbling waters, and there was slight chance that their frail strength could withstand such a severe trial.*

John (Snoggs) Conrad immediately plunged into the water above the dam, and pulled Bonita and Alma to safety. The cries of terror by the stricken girls attracted the by-standers as well as fishermen below the dam. Gust N. Anderson was working on his boat nearby above the dam and hastened to the scene. Jess Vearrier and George Van Sickle were in a fishing boat some distance below the dam and also hastened to the scene. Not one of them hesitated an instant to plunge into the icy water in an attempt to rescue the drowning girls.

The teacher, Miss McCartney was reached first, still clinging to the submerged boat. She was brought to safety by the brave men. The other girls had all disappeared beneath the surface of the river.

Meanwhile, the news of the accident had spread like wild fire. Automobiles loaded with doctors, nurses and others rushed to the scene, hoping to be of assistance during this tragedy. Russell Metcalf was in one of the first cars to reach the river and without any definite knowledge of the precise location of the disaster, immediately plunged into the water to search for bodies. He happened on to the body of Neva Johnson just a moment after the body of Marjorie Fairbrother had been brought to the surface by Samuel Strong and George Vearrier. The body of Edna Boorman had been the first to be recovered, and rescuers felt that she had been in the water less than five minutes. Considering the swiftness of the current it is nothing short of a miracle that the bodies were all recovered in such a short space of time. Opinions vary somewhat, but it was generally agreed that they had all been recovered in a span of around twenty minutes.

Attempts at resuscitation were immediately started as soon as the bodies were brought to the shore. Doctors, trained nurses and strong men and women with willing hands stood by to assist in the attempts to find a spark of life in any of the three cherished sisters, daughters and friends. As the desperate attempt to revive the girls continued, one by one, the parents were notified and began arriving at the tragic scene. When it was finally determined that further efforts to save the girls were futile, the bodies were lifted into automobiles and sadly returned to the homes they had left so joyfully just a few hours before. Many a bitter tear was shed that night.

Sunday (sadly it was Mother's Day that year) was the day set for the triple funeral. It was determined that the Presbyterian Church was the only building large enough to accommodate the crowd. People flocked to the church the day of the service and many stood outside in spite of a steady downpour of rain.

The Hawarden Independent gave this report: *This direful calamity, which in the twinkling of an eye removed from our midst three of our best loved and most highly cherished maidens-girls in the fullness of the enjoyment of youth just blossoming into young womanhood-has enshrouded every home in the community in pallor of gloom. It is a community loss and one in which every citizen feels a vital share.*ⁱ

ⁱ Hawarden Centennial Book 1987 pages 894,895
Hawarden Independent: May 16, 1916