

George Rahier - Unsolved Murder

George Herbert Rahier was a Brother to J.F.Rahier, Mrs. Elmer Knotts, Mrs. Bert Merrifield and Mrs. Cecil Hill. George's wife Hattie Trafton was a cousin to the Guthries. George lived about 4 miles east of Effie on what later became the Orville Randall place. Ed Erway was squatting on a corner of the Blaha homestead just west of Busti Lake.

From "On the Banks of the Bigfork" by Dorothy Manske with details by my Uncle "Dutch" Knotts and items from the Grand Rapids newspaper- (notes in quotations are mine) - Len

On Friday, July 21, 1911, the oldest son of George Rahier, George Herbert Rahier, was murdered in the woods in Effie Minnesota. (I believe he was murdered on July 19 and the body was found on July 23)

Friday afternoon George left home with a packsack and rifle to spend the day looking for blueberries. Since George was a skilled woodsman & trapper his wife was not surprised when he didn't return that evening but when he did not return the evening of the second day his family and neighbors became concerned.

(Interesting comment on "pioneer life", in today's society if you are missing 6 or 8 hours people get suspicious, in those days you weren't "missing" unless you didn't show up for 2 days.) At this time many people came from all directions and began searching the woods. After four days Nelson Phillips, better known as "Pete" found George's packsack so the search centered around this area. Soon the body was found. The body had been dragged some 40 feet and hidden behind a windfall. After examining the body the searchers found two bullet wounds. One had entered the top of the head and exited under his arm, the second shot was to the body. The coroner was called and the body was taken to Bigfork for a post mortem. Only two men in Itasca County owned guns of the caliber that had been used in the shooting. One was a Fire Warden, who had an alibi as he had been examining a suspicious fire in another location at the time of the murder. The other was man named Ed Erway. (Various spellings have been used for him including Ed, Edmund and Edwin. And Erway, Erwa and Irway.) Erway was a trapper with long trap lines who had associated with another trapper, tanner and taxidermist named Gus Soyka who lived in Bigfork. Erway had killed a moose out of season and Soyka had reported him. Erway was heard to say that he hated both Soyka and gamewardens and "They had better stay out of his way!" While walking through the woods Erway had evidently spotted George Rahier and mistaken him for Soyka. Both were about the same size and carried their guns the same way. (According my uncle, Dutch Knotts, both George and Soyka carried their guns horizontally across the backs of their necks with one hand on the barrel and one on the stock.) Erway had apparently shot George by mistake and discovering his mistake "finished him off" with a second shot. The day before the murder neighbors had spoken with Erway and he mentioned that he would be going to town the following day, so he would have traveled through the area of the murder! A neighbor named Frank Blaha had given him two letters to mail. When Erway's cabin was searched after the murder the letters were found. It is believed that he started out with good intentions but made the mistake of committing murder. Erway disappeared and was never heard from again. (Effie is only about 50 miles from the Canadian Border and a good woodsman could cover that distance, through the woods, in two days. He could have been in Canada before the murder was discovered.)

From Grand Rapids, Itasca, Minnesota newspaper- Aug. 3, 1911:

WARRANT OUT FOR EDWIN ERWAY

Charged With Having Murdered

George Rahier Near Big Fork July 14

ALLEGED THERE WAS BAD BLOOD BETWEEN THEM

Sheriff Riley Working on Case

But Without Results Up to This Date

A warrant has been issued for the arrest of Edwin Erway, a trapper and homesteader living near the homestead of George Rahier who was found dead with a wound through his head last Wednesday, charging with the murder of Rahier. The police of the county have been notified to arrest him, but to date there have been no developments. It is alleged that there had been some differences between Erway and Rahier over some trapping and that the feud had continued until the body of Rahier was found dead last week. About the time of the alleged murder, Erway disappeared, and all efforts to locate him have failed. Sheriff Riley is on the trail of Erway who is described as follows: about 35 years old, five feet eight or nine inches tall, weighs about 145 pounds, long black hair almost to shoulders, heavy black mustache, dark complexion, dark eyes, black slouch hat and wears either a black or blue suit. Occupation homesteader and trapper.

From the Grand Rapids Herald Review- Aug. 23, 1911

REWARD FOR RAHIER MURDER

County Attorney R.A. McOuat returned from a trip to St. Paul yesterday noon. While there, Mr. McOuat obtained the promise from Governor Eberhart that a reward of \$300 would be offered by the state for the capture of the murderer of George Rahier, who was killed near Bigfork July 19. Edwin Erway is suspected of the deed. The News Tribune contained an article yesterday stating that Mr. McOuat said: "The hand of crime is too busy in my district." While three murders have occurred in Itasca County during the past seven months, Mr. McOuat did not make any such statement.

(Goodness!- three murders in Itasca County in seven months! The population wasn't that big, no wonder they called it "The Last Frontier". If \$300 seems a little cheap for the reward for George's murderer, bear in mind that this was about half the price of a 1911 Model T Ford roadster, or in today's money around \$10,000.)

From Grand Rapids paper- Nov. 1, 1911:

THINK SUSPECT IS NEAR BIG FORK

Nephew of George Rahier,
Murdered Near Big Fork July 9,
Thinks Him Still In Vicinity

PROVISIONS GONE FROM CABIN

Had Big Supply Cached and a Portion Has Mysteriously Disappeared-Will Soon Have to Come Out Soon

R. J. Rahier, a nephew of George Rahier, the Bigfork homesteader who was murdered last July was in the village yesterday appearing as a witness before the grand jury and states that he is confident that Edwin Erwa who is suspected of having killed his uncle is still lurking in the woods in the Bigfork country subsisting by hunting. The man suspected has been missing from his haunts since the time of the crime and has been seen but once since when he was seen by a farmer in the Jesse Lake country, who alleges that the man suspected drew a rifle on him and warned him to stay away. Rumors of a man roaming the woods in the Big Fork country have come in from time to time and Rahier founds his belief on the fact that the man under suspicion had a considerable cache of provisions at his cabin, about half of which has recently been removed. The murdered man and Erwa had a dispute over trapping grounds George Rahier left his home near Big Fork on the morning of July 18 carrying a rifle and a packsack. Two days later his dead body was found in the woods with bullet holes in the back. His rifle and packsack lay some distant away. Settlers in the Big Fork country, according to Rahier, are confident the murderer is still at large in the woods in that section and believe that he will be compelled to give himself up soon owing to freezing weather.

The remainder is from me - Len Knotts. Each branch of the family has a "bit" to offer on what may have happened to George Rahier. One cousin says that he heard from ancestors that George was a very stubborn man. He tells a story that on one occasion George was driving a wagon down a narrow trail- he met another wagon and there wasn't room to pass. George simply sat in the wagon for an hour until the other driver gave up and got out to cut a path around him with an ax! Another story from the same source says that the people who searched Ed Erway's cabin found a great deal of blood. Could George have been the loser in a "gun battle"? Or did the blood come from George since his body was dragged 40 feet? No DNA in those days! More mystery! I have always wondered what happened to Ed Erway! Thought perhaps he might have eventually come back to the U.S. but don't find him in the SS death index. Found an Edward Erway doing time in a prison farm in Lexington WA in 1930 who is about the right age. Since the newspaper gave a description of him, I thought perhaps I could find a description of the prisoner in Lexington WA. Did a little research and found that the prison no longer existed. Records may exist somewhere, perhaps in the Washington State Archives. Wouldn't it be great to find out what happened to someone who committed a murder over 90 years ago? Guess I watch too much "Unsolved Mysteries".

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George Herbert Rahier and family at homestead cabin in Busti, April 1910



George Herbert Rahier who homesteaded Effie MN in 1904 and was murdered in 1911, with wife and children, Myrtle and Alvin, Doris being held. Picture was taken in April 1910. One more was born between then and July 1911. Notice original log building with wooden eve troughs, hand split cedar shingles. Building has frame addition as family grew. Wolf hides on wall, wolf carcass on stake, in right background. I asked old-timers why a wolf carcass- they said trappers sometimes dried a carcass, padded it with cotton & put hide back on for stuffed wolf. I asked Doris about the wolf carcass in 1998 when she was 90 and she said "That might be true but dad did some strange things for no reason at all". Notice the homemade vise in front- cut off tree 3 ft. tall, saw slot, put wedges in bottom & a bolt through that you tighten to hold items.