

An Evans resident was shot and killed December 14, 1888, and the man who allegedly killed him was hanged from a tree near the Weld County Court House in Greeley on December 29, 1888 – the only hanging ever to occur in Greeley.

The story of W.D. French.

Two men died. Two lives were lost - all over 600 pounds of flour

By Shairan Whitman, 19th Judicial District Account Clerk

We'll never know what happened between these two men to cause such hostility. In fact we know very little about either man. Records contained at the Evans Historical Museum suggest that Harry Woodbury was a shoemaker by trade. In 1883 he married, and he and his wife Mary had three children.¹

Records at the Greeley Historical Museum reveal that W.D. French was a wealthy cattleman and rancher who moved from Missouri to Colorado in the fall of 1871. He owned a ranch near Beebe Draw and a house in Evans. He was married and had four children. By many accounts, he was brash and outspoken. According to an article written by F.C. Messinger, publisher of **The Greeley Howitzer**, he (French) boasted of having killed a man in Missouri but other records showed that he narrowly missed killing him. He reportedly was quick with a gun and always wore one. He had many enemies and few friends. He drank heavily and used his money and influence to get out of trouble, whether it was with the law or otherwise. After a long illness, his wife passed away in 1887, and he was left with the care of his four children. Rumors survive to this day that he caused his wife's death.² However, probate records obtained from State Archives for French's estate show that he paid a sizable amount of money for nurses to care for his ailing wife.

In 1887, Woodbury and French entered into a business partnership. Nothing is known of the nature of this relationship, but it was short-lived. After approximately a year, Woodbury sold his share of the partnership and moved from French's ranch at Beebe Draw to French's home in Evans. As part of the settlement of their business affairs, Woodbury agreed to take 850 lbs of flour, 250 lbs of which was delivered to the house in Evans. A quarrel erupted between the two men over the rest of the flour. Reports suggest that the civil suit filed by Woodbury against French simply fueled the animosity between them. In fact on the day Woodbury died, Justice Willard had entered judgment against French for the flour. Unfortunately Woodbury wouldn't live long enough to see the judgment satisfied.

On the night Woodbury was shot, he and his wife were at home in the kitchen. They occupied the back part of the house owned by W.D. French. A common hallway ran from the front part of the house to the back. Testimony provided to the coroner by Harry Woodbury's wife indicates that late in the evening on December 14th W.D. French returned home accompanied by a few of his ranch hands and one of his sons, Juny

¹ *The Evans Historical Museum has a picture of Mr. Woodbury in front of his shop.*

² *Records at Linn Grove Cemetery contain a statement that Mrs. French passed away as a result of her husband's cruelty.*

French. She told the coroner that W.D. was furious over the court ruling about the flour and attempted to gain entry into the back of the house. Mary Woodbury said that her husband warned French several times not to come in. When French was unable to get in through the back door, he went around to the front part of the house and used a key to open the door in the common hallway. Woodbury pushed his wife into the bedroom, and almost instantly she said she heard gunfire. When everything had quieted down, she crept from the bedroom into the kitchen and found her husband lying on the floor. She ran from the house and called for help.

W.D. French, John Hogan, and John Samples were arrested about 11:30 that night and brought to Greeley to stand trial. There is mention that Juny French was taken into custody, but records don't say what might have happened to the 12 year old boy after that night. A Coroner's Inquisition held December 15th reveal that Harry Woodbury died of a gunshot wound to the abdomen, that the wound was produced by a .44 revolver, and several individuals "*could*" have committed the crime but that no one individual could be held accountable for the incident. The report states that ".....the jurors cannot determine which of these four individuals [W.D. French, John Hogan, John Sample or Juny French] fired the fatal shot."³

According to news reports of the day, there was considerable discontent about how proceedings were progressing against W.D. French and the others. Word quickly spread through the communities of Evans and Greeley that there was a possibility that French would be freed on bail or would not be charged because there was not enough evidence to try him for murder. Many feared for their lives if French was freed since they had testified against him at his preliminary hearing. Consequently, shortly after midnight on December 29th, a group of men rushed the jail, broke down the door, and hung French from the nearest tree. John Samples and John Hogan were left in the jail but later were released. Neither stood trial for the shooting.

There are many interesting facts about this case.⁴ It is rumored that a man dressed as a woman to hide his identity bought the rope that hanged W.D. French at a local store.⁵ Rumors abound as to how the keys to the jail were obtained. One suggests that Sheriff Wolaver was tied to a hitching pole outside the jail, while another says he was locked up in a nearby stable and forgotten there for several hours after the hanging. George Hodgson, curator of the Meeker Museum, reported that years later a well-dressed middle-aged woman walked into the Sheriffs Office, thrust a \$100 bill into Sheriff Ben Florance's hand and asked that French's grave at Linn Grove Cemetery be taken care of. Mr. Hodgson reported that it was W.D. French's daughter. Years later, in August of 1930, Mrs. E.C. Garland of Greeley received \$1.00 for submitting a picture of the hanging to a local newspaper.

³ *Coroner's Inquest and Verdict of Jurors dated 12/15/1888, Greeley Historical Museum.*

⁴ *Greeley Historical Museum contains more information about the hanging as well as other interesting trivia about Greeley and Weld County.*

⁵ *A portion of the original rope that hanged W.D. French is at the Greeley Historical Museum. It was donated to the city by Macy Funeral Home.*