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The Best Damned Lawyer in Watertown:

The Bill Cody Story

INTRODUCTION

Bill Cody, the subject of this narrative, was a complex person well known, in his day, as the author of several proposals for the Sunday closing of barbershops and certain institutions of entertainment, which in no way endeared him to a large part of the citizenry. Strangely, he is better known by many of the Watertown elderly for something he never actually did.

Mention the name “Bill Cody” to an old-timer today and invariably the response elicited will be “Oh, yes! The guy who kept cows in his basement.” But although Bill and his cows did provide some notoriety in newspapers throughout the state, there is nothing in the records of any official governmental body in Watertown, nor in any of the newspapers of day, that Bill Cody, or anyone else, for that matter, ever kept any cows in any basement at any time.

So, if he didn’t do that, just what did he do to make himself the subject of extensive research? He was a pharmacist by education, never studied law, but could hold his own with the best legal minds in the area during his 85 colorful years of life.

His father, Dr. James Cody, was a popular, highly esteemed physician who had, by the 1860’s, become highly regarded, not only in his home town, but throughout the entire state as evidenced by Gov. Harvey’s appointing him to service “on the field of Pittsburgh” early in the Civil War. Later he served, for a short time, as Medical Pension Examiner of the state of Wisconsin.

At the close of the Civil War, the Cody family consisted of Dr. James, his wife, Adeline, the daughter of Capt. James Rogan, “. . . a sincere Christian warmly cherished and tenderly loved by those she knew,” a daughter who later married J. Salick, and three sons, James, Edward and William.

Although the cessation of hostilities on the battle fields brought peace to the country in general, it was just the beginning of the troubles which would plague the Codys for many years. The *Watertown Democrat* reported the first of a series of tragedies:

In Fulton, Illinois, on the 1st of May, 1865, JAMES M. CODY, son of Dr. James Cody of this city, in the 16th year of his age. He was pursuing a course of study at a military school in the place where he died, and the intimation his father had on his son's sickness was on last Saturday. Dr. Cody immediately started to visit him, but before he reached his destination, was met with the sad intelligence that the boy was no more. The remains were brought to his home here, last Tuesday afternoon and he who went away with high hopes and a thousand blessings for his health and welfare is sorrowfully brought back shrouded for the grave, making disconsolate the household his presence would have filled with gladness. Such is life, and such are the dark shadows that may any hour fall across the sunniest pathways.

Watertown Democrat, May 4, 1865

Four years later a second son, Edward, died suddenly.

In the city of Watertown, on the 13th inst., at the age of 16 years and 11 days, EDWARD D. CODY, son of Dr. James and Adeline Cody.

The sudden death of this exemplary and promising youth is a severe and trying affliction to his bereaved parents, being the second son, whose untimely loss they have been called to mourn within the past four years. The many hopes that clustered around him render his death all the more painful to the family circle, thus sadly broken by the departure of the one so cherished and beloved. The tender sympathy of numerous friends will be with the sorrowing parents and relatives, but no ministrations of kindness can alleviate the anguish of such dispensation

Watertown Democrat, June 17, 1869

Dr. Cody's life was further devastated by the death, August 8, 1872 of his wife, Adeline, the aforementioned daughter of Capt. James Rogan. At the time of her death, the couple had two living children, a daughter, Mrs. J. Salick, who lived

on West Washington Street,¹ and a son William G. Cody, who appeared to live at “the homestead.” Dr. Cody and Theresa nee Kelly, his second wife who he married January, 1889 had two minor sons at the time of the divorce proceedings which so shocked the community.

During the years of his first marriage, Dr. Cody had accumulated two houses and at least a dozen farms in and around Watertown, a fact which some were wont to say contributed to young Bill’s engineering family relationships which finally resulted in the divorce of Dr. James and Theresa, and, ultimately, saw the good doctor being committed to the Northern Hospital for the Insane where he died.

Although Bill Cody had graduated from a prestigious pharmacy school, he spent little time as a pharmacist. Watertown became vaguely aware of his existence when they learned that not all was well with Dr. Cody’s second marriage. They paid a bit more attention to him when, a few years later, he acquired a stable of race horses and began doing quite well on the circuit; but they really sat up and took notice when he became involved in what was termed “The Cow Cases” and in his sporadic attempts to close barber shops, bars and other public places on Sundays. His many scrapes with the law provided him with much experience with the legal system and his retentive mind provided him with the colorful appellation

THE BEST

DAMNED LAWYER

IN WATERTOWN

¹ In the 1880’s there were two Washington Streets; one west of the river, commonly referred to as North and South Washington and an-eight-block street running from South First Street east to North Street, today called Market Street. It is unclear which part would have been called West Washington.