

Escapee who hid on farm still reaped what he sowed

While in Ga., he lived near sheriff, who didn't know he was a criminal

J.R. Wyatt was in jail in York for robbing the Crawford & Williams store of McConnellsville when he found an opportunity to escape on Jan. 28, 1915.

In July, word came back to York where authorities could find Wyatt. Deputy Sheriff F.E. Quinn was dispatched to Trenton, Ga., the county seat of Dade County, to bring Wyatt back.

Trenton was described as a "wild and mountainous place." Quinn and Sheriff W.N. Tatum, the Dade County sheriff, refused to tell the curious how they found out that Quinn was in Dade County.

Sheriff Tatum would only say that he knew Wyatt, whom he knew as J.E. Woods, because Wyatt/Woods had bought a small farm next to his and grew "splendid crops of corn, beans, cabbage, etc."

Sheriff Tatum was so impressed with the improvements to the place that he was negotiating to buy it when word came that his neighbor had criminal charges in York.

After the arrest, Quinn and his prisoner boarded the train to Atlanta and changed at Blacksburg, where they caught another train to York.

When the train pulled into

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York's station, there was a large crowd assembled to catch a glimpse of the "cunning" prisoner. The Yorkville Enquirer reporter reported that Wyatt "wore a nonchalant look."

The sheriff had a broad grin on his face when he greeted his deputy and Wyatt in handcuffs. "Why, howdy, Wyatt," said the sheriff, and the escapee replied with a grin, "Howdy, sheriff."

Wyatt had had a beard and moustache when he escaped. Now he was clean-shaven and much thinner than before. "His face wore a careworn expression which he did not possess formerly," wrote the reporter, who visited Wyatt in the York jail.

The reporter persuaded Wyatt to tell the story of where he was between his prison escape and buying the farm in Dade county.

Wyatt said that for several days after the robbery he hid out in the woods near McConnellsville. Then he went to the home of a Rock Hill friend, shaved his beard and moustache and went to Charlotte. In Charlotte he purchased a ticket book and went by train to Chattanooga, Tenn. He didn't find work there, so moved on to Memphis, Tenn., and from there to Little Rock, Ark., where he had relatives. In Little Rock, he adopted the name of J.E. Woods.

Wyatt couldn't find work in Little Rock, so he returned to Memphis and took a job shoveling coal on a steamboat. When he got tired of that, he returned to Chattanooga, where he got a job as salesman for the Southern Ice Company at \$15 a week.

Wyatt's wife joined him in Chattanooga and they set up a grocery and restaurant business. Things went well and Wyatt was prospering but decided that he was in a dangerous position where he could be recognized.

Wyatt sold the business and went down to Trenton, Ga. He paid \$325 for 20 acres and put in the crop that his neighbor, the sheriff, so admired. He said Sheriff Tatum offered him \$500 for the farm. Wyatt did not want to sell and felt he was safe from being caught.

Now, as he lay on a pallet in the jail, looking thoroughly chagrined, Wyatt said, "They got me; I am going to come clean with the whole thing now ... They got me straight, and I know it."

Deputy Quinn had a slightly different version of the likelihood of Wyatt going straight. Quinn said while the train was speeding through Georgia on the return trip, Wyatt informed him that he (Quinn) could take a nap if he wanted to.

Deputy Quinn, with a grin, replied, "No thank you; I'm not a bit sleepy."

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