

## Running A Town

Whether it's a town of three hundred like Sharon in Western York County or a metropolis like New York, towns perform a lot of unseen tasks to provide services for its citizens. For the small town, and especially around the turn of the twentieth century it was more simple as the 1891-1920 Treasurer's ledger for the town of Sharon reveals. In those days one or two men were all that was needed to provide water, a sewer system, sanitation, and law enforcement for the small town whereas today each service requires a separate department and a battery of hundreds of employees. In 1889 when the town of Sharon was chartered, its intendants or councilmen were immediately faced with providing their citizens with certain services--water, good roads, sewage disposal and the endless job of maintaining order and keeping residents within the bounds of the law.

Water being one of the basic needs of mankind and animals, the town's leaders began working toward a public water system by digging a well in the middle of town. While most homes would have gotten their water from nearby springs or had wells dug in their yard, the public well was for use of the merchants and animals. This public, rock lined well was probably fifty or sixty feet deep and was covered by a wooden cover and lid under a simple shingled roof. A watering trough, bucket and dipper accompanied the well. Periodically, usually once a year, the well was cleaned of any rubbish, rodents or birds that might have fallen in. In 1905, the town was paying \$1.50 for the performance of this task. In 1913, Dempsey Good was paid \$105 for digging a new public well. John Rainey Saye, son of Doctor Saye, was paid \$1.40 for filling in the old well while his uncle John S. Rainey purchased the old well house for \$2.50.

As second service offered by the budding town was a public restroom (Privy). Though it is not a pleasant thought, the privy collection pit had to be cleaned monthly and sometimes twice a month during hot summers. This job paid \$1.00 to \$1.50 each time the cleaning was performed. Several local black men -- Dave Lee, Charley Pratt and Hayes Robbins -- performed this job for years.

Usually the performance of a town's services--today and yesteryear-- quietly takes place without notice. This, we would certainly expect from a small rural town near the turn of the twentieth century. In reality, those were violent times and towns across the county sometimes resembled the wild West. A perusal of county coroner's records and police logs might startle the reader with the frequency of violent acts and blatant disregard for the law that was county-wide.

Less than a year of the chartering of the town of Sharon in 1889, Matt Darwin was walking the railway tracks outside of Sharon on his way to work on the George Leech farm near Hickory Grove. Most pedestrians used the train line as it was the shortest route and easier to walk the dirt roads. He was just outside Sharon when he discovered a mangled body scattered several yards along the tracks. He continued on to his employer's home of George Leech who was the magistrate for Broad River and Bullocks Creek townships. Leech visited the scene where someone later had the messy job of collecting the body parts and putting them in a box and taking them into Sharon. There Leech conducted an inquest on 28 May 1890. The jury concluded "John Doe" was struck by a train while walking on the tracks while intoxicated.

Within a few days a second inquest was held to positively identify the body. William Ross noted the body was “torn to pieces and packed in a box when I saw it...the head was not entire” yet, he was able to identify it as the body of Robert Bradford. Bob Sutton could not make much of the mangled pieces but recognized the shoes as belonging to Bradford. Inquest Juror, W. L. Plexico, a resident of Sharon, gave positive identification saying he knew Bradford by the remaining portion of his face and moustache.

Bradford’s death passed from most people’s memory; after all drunks get struck all the time by trains; and after all, what is the lost of one more drunk. Three years later a couple of inmates-- Matt Byers and Fred Rainey-- were in the York County jail waiting for their trials, and sitting up late one night “chewing the fat.” Matt Byers had been arrested for housebreaking, and Fred for selling illegal liquor. During that late night session, Byers confided that three years earlier he and three others killed and robbed a man near Sharon.

Rainey passed the conversation to George Witherspoon, the jail cook, who passed the story to Deputy Sheriff P. W. Love. Once the story was made known to the public, W. D. Grist of the *Yorkville Enquirer* came to interview Byers on 29 March. The prisoner was escorted from his cell to the debtor’s room where Grist and Love heard his story. Byers pretended “to be ignorant at first and did not want to talk about it,” but when Love suggested he might be able to help him on the larceny charge, Byers began to spill the beans.

Byers said that during the afternoon of 28 May 1890, he, Thomas Jackson and Robert Bradford were walling in a well when Bert Byers came by to see Jackson. He visited with Jackson for about thirty minutes and in the course of conversation found that the men were going to be paid later that day. Greed began to permeate Matt’s soul.

Sometime during the day Bert met with brothers George and Ed McCaw and told them how they might lay their hands on some easy money. The three plotted to waylay Bradford on the railroad just outside Sharon as he walked home that evening. The men gathered at the chosen site and began playing cards to pass the time. After a while Matt Byers came and they decided to cut him in, making a four way split. Matt was sent up the tracks to hide in the bushes, and give a whistle when he saw Bradford coming.

By the time Bradford was leaving Sharon the sun had already set, but the moon was so bright it was easy to travel by foot. Matt stayed at his position, not knowing that Bradford had left town by an alternate way and would join the main tracks below him. When the other men saw Bradford, he was nearly upon them, but they decided to go though with their plan. The McCaws stepped on to the tracks and asked their intended victim for a drink of whiskey. When he told them he had none, one of the assailants called him a liar and grabbed him by collar and threw him to the ground. Another began beating Bradford unmercifully with a heavy stick. Byers heard the commotion and arrived at the scene as Bradford was “kicking his last kick.” After robbing their victim they decided the best way to cover their crime was to place the body on the tracks, even placing it so the neck laid on a rail. When they finished, they threw the club into Bullocks Creek and hid behind a cedar bush to wait for the night passenger train to do its bloody work.

Several days after Byers made his confession to Deputy Sheriff Love and Grist, Yorkville attorney Hart came to hear the account straight from Byers. Hart had been hired by the railroad company to investigate the “accident” in case they were sued for damages. Hart had “come to knowledge and belief from facts and circumstances” that Bradford had been murdered and placed on the tracks to cover the crime, clearing the railroad of any responsibility.

Matt Byers’ trial was placed on the fall docket and began on 31 October. Love’s testimony and plea for leniency obviously was effective since the jury returned a verdict of “Not Guilty.” He was released within hours of the trial. The others paid the price in the state penitentiary.