

# Murder, Suicide at Deer, AR on January 28, 1919

In October of 1982, Rhonda Teter submitted an article for the Historical Notes section of the "Newton County Times". Little did she know that the article would, 18 years later, help descendants of Hiram J. Keefer solve the mystery of their grandfather's disappearance in the early 1900s, giving them the clues they had been looking for.

The article, which first appeared in the Lake Charles, Louisiana "American Free Press" on February 12, 1919, then reprinted in the Summer 1980 issue of the "Newton County Homestead", a Publication of the Newton County Historical Society, told of a double killing at Deer, Arkansas, on January 28, 1919. The victims were Laura Clayborn and her alleged murderer, H. J. Kiefer. Mr. Kiefer had moved to Deer in or about 1916 and opened a shoe repair shop close to Ab Clayborn's store.

It seems that Kiefer had taken an interest in Laura, Ab Clayborn's 19 year old daughter (note: While the Cemetery Book indicates that she was 29, the 1910 Census shows her as 10 years old), who did not feel the same toward him and had rejected Kiefer's advances. On that January day in 1919 Kiefer reportedly went to Clayborn's store, where he found a bunch of men waiting for the store to open. A letter to the editor written by a cousin of Laura's, soon after the 1982 story appeared, quoted Kiefer as saying to the men, "Laura will have to primp and get all dolled up before she comes to the store." He then told the men "It looks like it would be a good day to go squirrel hunting", so he believed he would go.

H. J. Kiefer left the store and went something like a mile and half down the road where trees had grown up on each side of the road. There he met Laura as she was on her way to open the store. Kiefer allegedly confronted Laura and after shooting her twice, cut her throat. She had evidently thrown up her hand for he had shot off one of her fingers. A young man plowing in a nearby field is said to have witnessed the killing.

Kiefer apparently then went to the home of George Spurlock, a minister, and told him: "I've done something very bad and I'm going to kill myself. I want you to preach my funeral." Spurlock agreed to do so.

Upon hearing of his daughter's killing Ab Clayborn allegedly went to Kiefer's house and called for him to come out. When Kiefer did not appear Clayborn allegedly shot the windows out of the house and then entering the house, found Kiefer's body lying on the bed with a bottle of strychnine beside him. The grief stricken Clayborn then allegedly "emptied" his revolver into Kiefer's body then dragged the body out into the yard and after piling bedding and fence palings on top of it, set it on fire. As the South wind blew, the scent of burning flesh is said to have reached the neighbors' houses on the North side of town.

Locals have said that a couple of neighbors asked Clayborn if he "thought Kiefer had been burnt enough"? When Ab answered in the affirmative, they then pulled the body out of the fire and buried it near the top of the bluff on property that Kiefer owned .

Several questions needed answers. The biggest mystery was, whether or not this H. J. Kiefer could possibly be the missing grandfather, Hiram Joseph Keefer, who had disappeared so many years before.

The Keefer family had never talked about the grandfather to any great length and had left the impression that he had simply vanished. All the grandchildren knew was that sometime around 1910 Hiram J. Keefer was no longer with his family.

On March 17, 2000, one of the grandchildren contacted Rhonda Teter to find answers to a few of those questions. Rhonda assured the questioner that she and the Historical Society would do what they could to help him find answers. In her mind she was remembering bits of the story, how H. J. Kiefer's body had been set on fire. She wasn't sure there had been anything left to bury.

That afternoon Rhonda enlisted the help of Donna Dodson, hostess for the Bradley House Museum, who contacted the family for further information on the grandfather, including his birth date (August 18, 1859), and the approximate date of his disappearance.

While reading the story in the Historical Society's copy of the Newton County Homestead, Donna noted that there were more than a couple of things which pointed to this being the elusive grandfather. The age was about right, initials were the same, both men had sons who were in France during WWI. One of the strongest indicators for this being Hiram J. Keefer, was the journey to Forsythe, MO that H. J. Kiefer made each year. Family members had said that the Keefers had once lived in Forsythe.

The article also alluded to the fact that H. J. Kiefer had owned land at Deer. Several phone calls and a trip to the courthouse proved, almost conclusively, that this was indeed the missing grandfather, Hiram Joseph Keefer. A deed for land at Deer, was found recorded in deed book AB, page 466, dated 22 August, 1916, showing the name Hiram J. Keefer as buyer. This deed was for the same piece of property which the locals had identified as the old Kiefer place.

Although they will never know all the facts as to what happened on that January day in 1919, at last the grandchildren know the approximate burial place of their grandfather, a grandfather they had never known and had heard very little about from their family.

Hiram Joseph Keefer and Caroline Fadelia "Delia" Brook were married on September 26, 1888 at Clay Center, Kansas, and by 1900 were in Forsythe, MO with 5 children. On the 1910 Taney County, MO, Census they had 6 children.

A divorce from Fadelia was granted to Hiram J. Keefer on Oct. 20, 1915 in the Circuit Court of Taney County, Missouri. Delia was living out of state at the time and did not appear.

As always the Newton County Historical Society would be interested in obtaining information concerning incidents such as this or any other interesting happenings from the past. The Historical Society can be reached by phone at 870-446-6247, or by writing them at P. O. Box 360, Jasper, AR 72641. The email address is [history@ritternet.com](mailto:history@ritternet.com)

by Donna Dodson

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