

The Sorsby murder trial, one hundred ten years later

By City Historian Dr. Walter Howell

It was happenstance, not design, when James Anderson, director of the “Voices of Clinton” reading cast, selected the date of April 11, 2019, for the reenactment of “The Sorsby Murder Trial.” The presentation begins at 7 p. m. in the courtroom of the Clinton Justice Building on the corner of Leake and Monroe Streets and falls on the one hundred and tenth anniversary of the celebrated trial.

William Sorsby was the former postal clerk in Clinton. Everyone knew him from their daily treks to the post office to check on their mail. The *Weekly Clarion* ran a photograph of Sorsby on the front page of their January 14, 1909, issue, and readers knew what he looked like, a striking contrast to the woolly haired and unshaven fugitive captured after three months in hiding.

There were no questions about who shot and killed Charles Fitzgerald, the U.S. postal inspector, on the platform of the Clinton railroad depot in September 1908. Twenty-two passengers awaiting the train to Jackson witnessed William Sorsby shooting the victim. The defense claimed Sorsby was insane when he committed his crime.

A plea of “not guilty by reason of insanity” was seldom used in Mississippi murder trials and rarely successful. When Sorsby’s attorney entered the plea, Judge Porter ordered a mental examination of the accused by Dr. J. W. Buchanan, director of the East Mississippi Asylum in Meridian. The defense had its “expert” witness, Dr. Sydney Johnston, a physician in Vicksburg and childhood friend of Sorsby’s. Both doctors later testified.

The trial began with the state prosecutor framing the murder by calling on eyewitnesses to testify to the shooting. Postal officials and the Clinton bank teller explained how Sorsby had embezzled money from the post office and then tried to cover his crime with a loan from the Bank of Clinton.

The trial was held in the county court house in Jackson. It disrupted people in the quiet college town of Clinton. Many notable residents testified for the state. Captain William Lewis, a celebrated Civil War veteran, rented Sorsby a horse used in his escape. He testified Sorsby always acted normal



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William Sorsby, following his arrest

around him. Dr. William Lowery, president of Mississippi College, and faculty members Dr. John Provine, Dr. James Coleman, and Professor James Sharp all testified that Sorsby was sane.

John Abou, Clinton merchant and neighbor of Sorsby, testified that Sorsby came by his store on the day of the murder and confessed he had embezzled postal funds. When Abou said he had ruined his life, Sorsby replied, “Well, I was ruined anyway; had been checked up short, but paid it back.” Abou did not think Sorsby was crazy.

Family members testified that Sorsby was insane. State senator C. B. Vance, a cousin, said “all the Sorsbys were nuts.” Mrs. R. A. Ladner of Bay St. Louis, another cousin, admitted a large number of family members were in mental institutions.

Mrs. M. E. Benn and Ben Todd, both of Clinton and friends of the defendant, gave the unique perspective that Everett Sorsby was insane, and his son William looked just like him, inferring that looks could determine insanity.

Sorsby’s mother and his wife Margaret were the last witnesses for the defense. Both said he was crazy. The twenty-year-old wife of three years sat behind her husband during the trial. The weekly *Clarion* observed: “relatives and friends have done everything possible for him, and quite a sympathy has been worked up in his behalf, as well as on behalf of his sweet and devoted wife, whose sympathetic eyes have appealed powerfully to the jury, and doubtless made more impressions upon that body than did the speeches.”

The defense and state made their summations during the afternoon of Monday, April 12. The case went to the jury at the end of the day, and, to the surprise of everyone, the jury returned with a verdict the following morning, Tuesday, April 13, 1909 – one hundred and ten years ago.

To learn the fate of Sorsby, mark your calendar for April 11 at 7 p.m., to see the reenactment of the trial, to be held at the Clinton Justice Building. A follow-up epilogue is also scheduled for the next issue of *The Clinton Courier* on April 2.

English language teacher receives DOVE customer service award for February

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Clinton’s public schools have a diverse student population, including more than two hundred fifty children whose first language isn’t English.

These students rely on the English Language Learner (EL) program for resources and support in adapting to a new language and culture. One teacher in this program, Michaela Charanza at Clinton Park, works with her colleagues at other schools to highlight EL students in a monthly newsletter, notify parents of upcoming events and tests, and communicate with families on available resources.

“She also recently helped recruit a family who is moving to this area from Ecuador for a job at Continental Tire,” said Michaela Charanza Public Information Officer Sandi Beason. “The family came to visit and tour our schools, and asked specifically about resources available for their incoming kindergartner, who only speaks Spanish.”

“Ms. Charanza met the family at the Clinton Park office and gave a tour of the school — in Spanish — and was able to answer all their questions and make them feel at home.”

Charanza is the recipient of the Clinton Public School District’s Dedication of Our Valued Employees, or DOVE, customer service award for the month of February.

“We work hard to recruit families to our community, and we do not take for granted that families coming for jobs at Continental will automatically choose us,” Beason said. “Through Ms. Charanza’s gracious hospitality,

one more family chose Clinton, and hopefully they will encourage their co-workers to do the same.”



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As a DOVE Award winner, Charanza will receive gift cards from Cock-of-the-Walk restaurant, Playtime Entertainment and Chick-fil-A of Clinton.

The DOVE Award is given each month during the school year to an employee who goes above and beyond in showing customer service to students, parents and the community. A five-member DOVE award selection committee chooses each winner from a pool of nominations.

Anyone can nominate a CPSD employee via the online form on www.clintonpublicschools.com. DOVE Award recipients will be formally recognized at school board meetings, on district announcements and in *The Clinton Courier*.



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