Theft Of Lincoln’s Body Thwarted By Infamous Agent

By Michelle Henry

Patrick D. Tyrrell is best known for his role in disrupting a plot to steal Abraham Lincoln’s body in 1876. He is memorialized in the Biographical History of the America’s Irish in Chicago. 1897 as a “celebrated detective,” concluding that “no roll of Chicago’s American Irish would be complete were it wanting in the name of Patrick Daniel Tyrrell.”

According to his biography, Tyrrell was hired in 1874 by the Secret Service, a relatively new agency whose main objective was to thwart counterfeiters. Without a federal currency, most banks issued their own paper money, making it easy to print and circulate counterfeit bills. It is estimated that close to half of all paper money in circulation during the Civil War was counterfeit.

Tyrrell was working for the Secret Service in Chicago in 1876 when a plot was hatched by a notorious gang of counterfeiters to get their engraver, Ben Boyd, released from prison. Boyd’s printing plates were so skillfully executed that they fooled most experts.

One of Tyrrell’s informants infiltrated the gang and learned that their plan was to steal Abraham Lincoln’s body and hold it for $200,000 ransom and the release of Boyd.

Tyrrell received permission from Abraham Lincoln’s son, Robert, to let the crime be partially carried out so that the culprits could be caught in the act. Tyrrell and his agents were waiting in the cemetery on the night that the culprits had planned to break into Lincoln’s tomb.

As they were opening Lincoln’s sarcophagus, a noise alerted the robbers and they scattered into the night. Ten days later, Tyrrell and his men had arrested all of them. They were charged with larceny (destroying a monument and grave robbing were relatively minor offenses at that time).

Tyrrell’s secret service describes Tyrrell as having arrested more counterfeiters, captured more counterfeit money, and done more to break up the business than any one who was ever connected with the secret service.

Records held in the Chautauqua County archives in Mayville present a different side of Tyrrell’s character. Tyrrell was a toddler when he came with his parents from Ireland to Buffalo. By age 14, he was working as a carpenter in the local shipyards.

In December 1851, Tyrrell married Mary Shannon and shortly thereafter moved to Dunkirk. Together they had eight children. Tyrrell’s career in law enforcement began in Chautauqua County when he was appointed a deputy in 1868 by Sheriff Lewis Andrews. In the county archives are several civil actions against Tyrrell. In 1869, an action was brought against him for not returning a gold watch that he had taken as evidence in a robbery. The watch’s owner claimed that Tyrrell was using the watch as his own and refused to return it. Several additional civil actions followed for nonpayment of notes.

Tyrrell was later sued by Sheriff Andrews for “deceit, fraud, delay, neglect, or oppression” for not properly accounting for the money he was collecting in legal fees as deputy. The sheriff was awarded a judgment of $829 against Tyrrell. Tyrrell’s career in law enforcement appeared to be over.

The family left Dunkirk and moved to a farm in French Creek. The relationship between Tyrrell and his wife Mary was apparently tumultuous, because in April 1870 Mary sued for support. She stated that she had been turned out of the house and that Tyrrell refused to let her return or to support her.

In his testimony in Dunkirk, French Creek, and Buffalo, Mary was awarded a legal separation from Tyrrell on the grounds of cruel and inhumane treatment, and support of $115 per year. The separation stipulated that “neither party is at liberty to marry another person during the life of the other party.”

Tyrrell left Chautauqua County and headed west with his older son John, who had recently married (we know this because Tyrrell stated his objection to the marriage in his response to Mary’s claim for support).

We next find Tyrrell in 1875 in Marshall, Iowa, where he married Kate Tyrrell, his son John’s young widow! We don’t know where or when his son died.

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