

Museum Notes

for the week of January 22 – 28, 2023

by Kristen Parrott, curator

Recently I have been doing some research on a story that first came to light 100 years ago. I've seen old versions of the story in the archives here several times over the years, but recent changes in U.S. society have given me a vocabulary to better understand the situation.

In September of 1923, regional newspapers were suddenly filled with headlines like, "Lynxville, Wis., Man Is Found To Be A Woman" and "Death Discloses "Husband" Is A Woman". It was a sensation that generated lots of newspaper articles, most filled with inaccuracies. Some of the misleading statements no doubt came from the people whose story was being told, because they did not want their private lives revealed.

Keeping in mind that reliable information has been hard to come by, here is a brief outline of what happened: Jerusha Mary Baird (or Beard), usually called May, was born around 1866, probably on a farm in the Town of Webster, Vernon County, between the villages of Avalanche and Ross. Her parents, Jacob and Mary, had come to Vernon County from Ohio. May was the oldest of five siblings.

May married William Taylor, originally of Ohio, in 1882, possibly in Bloomingdale or La Crosse. They moved to Lynxville, Crawford County, where William worked as a farm hand, as a laborer in a stone quarry, and as an herbalist, gathering plants for medicines. May worked at the Vogel Hotel.

William developed cancer but apparently never consulted a doctor and used only his herbs as treatment. He suffered for many years until, semi-conscious, he was brought to a La Crosse hospital for treatment. There the hospital staff discovered that William had a woman's body. Today we would say that he was transgender, born female but presenting himself to the world as male.

He died there the next day, September 14, 1923. No one claimed his body, so he was buried in the potter's field at the La Crosse poor farm. May denied that she'd ever known that William was a woman. She left Lynxville and went to Viroqua to live with her married sister Martha Ames for a time, and then possibly moved west.

I don't think this situation would happen here today because people are now much more free to be themselves. I think it's tragic that William lived in pain for so long, trying to keep the secret about his identity by not visiting a doctor. And I think it's tragic that May felt compelled to deny her spouse of 41 years.

The *Grant County Herald* took an unusual but realistic stance when it declared, on September 26, 1923, that "Her story, now related, that she was unaware of her partner's sex is regarded as highly improbable. More likely, the two women formed an attachment they did not wish severed and thus kept their relation a secret."

We would like to learn more about this couple. If you have information to share with us about the Taylors or the Bairds, contact the museum at 608-637-7396, or museum@vernoncountyhistory.org. It would be good to have more facts in the file, rather than just the scandalous headlines and misleading statements of a century ago.