

A MURDER IN MINNESOTA - 1879
MPAFUG MEETING 9 JULY 2025
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There are many situations that require a unique research plan when it comes to family history. I am going to share my learning journey in regard to the murder of my great-great uncle, Henry Koldeway. I admit my journey started when I was a curious novice in 1983. I probably made every mistake that could have been made. But I had a lot of fun doing it and I learned a lot along the way. Keep in mind this journey began before personal computers and the Internet.

Research Timeline:

- Fall 1983 - Learned Oral History from my Mom's cousin, Elaine Koldeway Zarnstorff.
- Took road trip to Long Prairie, MN, where the murder took place.
 - Visited the Todd County Historical Society Museum
 - Visited the Todd County Leader (formerly Todd County Argus) Newspaper
 - Visited Gertie Disselbrett Kahlert (her father and Henry Koldeway were half-brothers)
 - Saw the property where the farm was located. Owner told us they finally had indoor plumbing in the 1960s.
- Results:
- Learned that people in Browerville were still talking about an event that had taken place over 100 years ago.
 - Copied the first two articles from the Todd County Argus (weekly newspaper). At that time, with the newspaper so old we were not allowed to take a photocopy or photograph of the articles and had transcribe them by hand. We stayed until the newspaper closed for the weekend, and so we were not able to transcribe later articles.
 - Found the summary of the event on a poster display at the Todd County Historical Society Museum.
 - Met the delightful Gertie who gave us a tour of the area and helped us to understand what it would have been like about 100 years ago.
 - Took photos that by today's standard, were just awful!
 - At the time, we had attained the goal of learning when, how and why Uncle Henry was murdered.

Nov. 1998 (15 years later)

- Christina M., former wife of a Meide descendent, researched all of the articles in the Todd County Argus and put them online. She also contacted the Burlington Historical Society and Don VandeSand referred her to Elaine. Christina wrote a beautiful letter, specifically requesting information on Sophia's baby born in January, 1880.
- Christina shared the articles from the Todd County Argus. This brought so many questions to mind, opening the avenue of more research.

Early 2013: (15 years later)

- Rick P. contacted Don VandeSand at the Burlington Historical Society. Don referred him to Elaine Z. Rick had been married to a descendent of William Disselbrett (Disselbrede), and was researching on his children's behalf. Once again, a generous sharing of information took place. Rick shared copies of many records from the Family History Library in Salt Lake City.

May, 2025: (12 years later)

- My contact with the Todd County Historical Society for photographs yielded a happy tidbit! A local author, Jeff J. Lucas, recently wrote a book about the murders: *An Atrocious Affair-The Todd County Frontier Killings of 1879 and Other Tragic Events of Early Todd County*, 21 May 2025.

Note: There are many situations in Family History that need gentle, diplomatic care when sharing research. Murder is one of these situations. Here are some examples:

- When we were reading about the murder in the Todd County Historical Society Museum, a docent told us that one day a young woman was found crying while reading about the murder. This young woman was related to the Meide Brothers.
- In addition to the murderers, Black John and Black Mike Meide, there was a third brother living in Todd County. Todd County Argus: "There is one of the brothers still left, named Joseph, but he is of a different turn and is a good citizen and expresses no sympathy for his brothers.
- The newspaper described Sophia as the cause of all the trouble. She was 17 years old and "does not know enough to distinguish good from bad." When Mike told Sophia that he bought her from her husband, she supposed it was a legitimate trade. But Mike very likely killed Uncle Henry more because of his standing between him and Sophia than for anything else. (My Mom was offended by the description of Sophia).
- Christina Meide gathered the newspaper articles and published them online. She asked the readers to read ALL the information before making a judgement. Personally, I think the strongest evidence was that John Meide could inform the authorities where to find the bodies. Until that point, none of the authorities knew where the bodies were.
- John Meide was hung by the townspeople who stormed the jail and dragged him out to a tree. On 14 Nov 1879, the editor wrote: "As to the crowd (about 50-60 in all) who did the lynching, all we have to say is that they are, under the law, guilty of murder and will doubtless regret the rash deed which stained their hands with human blood. No excuse can be found in this case as the prospects were that the law would deal properly. It is also unjust to destroy property to avenge social wrongs no matter how flagrant. It was such violence of law which began this trouble."

In Summary:

- Researching stories in your family tree can be an exciting endeavor. My experience was memorable in so many ways! Not only did I find out facts about my ancestor's murder, but I met family members along the way that I would never have met if it hadn't been for my search. In over 40 years I have met delightful relatives, young and old, poor and not so poor, but every single one, a true character to remember! That would never have happened without my interest in family history.
- Be ready for a diverse list of spellings for surnames! At one point Elaine and I had 13 different spellings for Koldeway. Some started with the letter "C." Also, be ready for different names (AKA). Sophia had so many different spellings and different names that it was difficult to keep track.

Koldeway	Luttermann
Kolway	Luthermann
Kohlway	Isferding
Kalway	Isperding
Calway	Esperding
Colway	Euperding
Kolwer	Disselbrede
	Disselbrett
- Don't forget to contact the local historical societies for information or referrals for each of your lines. Especially in smaller cities or counties. The people working there have a deep interest in what happened in their locality and can be more help than you could imagine! Don VandeSand of the Burlington Historical Society spent his life making it easier for people to find their ancestors. I have found this to be the case over and over again. The Internet provides us with so much information but the people can expand on the facts with memories or new connections.
- Be generous! Sharing your information when others are researching is not only helpful to them but you can also receive amazing information from the person you have helped.
- Be kind. Think about how your questions or information you are sharing will affect the people who receive it. Be sensitive to their situation. I remember hearing about the woman crying in the Todd County Historical Museum.