

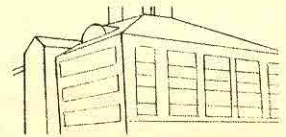


1871-1998

# Clinton County Trails

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## Clinton County Murders

(Second in a series)  
By Wayne Summers

### Chesley Dew Murder



Chesley Dew<sup>1</sup> was a 5'6", 140 pound, light-skinned black man. Born in North Carolina about 1820, he appears in the 1850 Clinton County census as working for Thomas Wilson in Watertown Township. Two years later, on March 1, 1852, Chesley purchased 80 acres on Chadwick Road, between Francis and Forest Hill, in Riley Township.

Through hard work and frugal living, he was able to purchase additional land until his holdings exceeded 200 acres. His most recent purchase had been an 80 acre parcel on the northwest corner of Francis and Chadwick Roads. The land came with a house which he moved into leaving his old one on the south side of the road unoccupied. Chesley also owned 10 horses, a prize stallion, 50 sheep, 10 hens, 2 roosters and various other livestock. By anyone's reckoning he was one of the most successful farmers in the area.

Neighbors considered Chesley to be quick tempered, opinionated, and quick to file lawsuits. Many had had disagreements with him at some point. They also considered his practice of tethering his animals by placing ropes around their necks as abusive.

During the summer of 1880, Mary M. Guy<sup>2</sup>, a black woman in her mid-30's, arrived in the area from her home in Montcalm County and started up a relationship with Chesley, a man in his early 60's. At about the same time, her brother, Benjamin F. Guy, arrived and began using the alias William W. Cooper<sup>3</sup>. He contacted Chesley in the fall of 1880 about working some of his land. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February of 1881, Cooper and his family<sup>4</sup> moved into Chesley's unoccupied house on the south side of the road.

Cooper, six foot and muscular, had married Martha Lett in Berrien County in 1859. He enlisted in Company I of the Michigan 1<sup>st</sup> Colored Infantry in 1864. After the war he had resided in Montcalm County's Bushnell Township until moving to Eagle in 1880.

<sup>1</sup> He was often referred to as "nigger Dew." His relatives were a brother in Canada and several nephews.

<sup>2</sup> Mary M. Guy was from Bushnell Twp., Montcalm County. In the court testimony she refers to her little boy. It's not known where her son was living during the time she was married to Chesley.

<sup>3</sup> The 1880 census for Eagle Twp. lists him as Wesley W. Cooper with wife Mary M. and three daughters. Since his wife was Martha, the Mary M. may have been his sister or a second wife. Although he claimed to have used the Cooper name since 1864, he is listed as Benjamin F. Guy in military records and the 1870 and 1900 census.

<sup>4</sup> Two or three of his children were living with him at the time. He had at least two older children who were living with relatives.

On March 10, 1881, Chesley and Mary<sup>5</sup> were married. Soon after the wedding they began to quarrel. In early June a violent argument broke out between the two. Mrs. Dew reported that Chesley had her on the floor choking her when her brother arrived. At first Cooper had tried to talk Chesley into letting go. When that didn't work he pulled him off, wedged him against a wall, and cut off his air supply. After the fight, Mary Dew, complaining of illness, moved across the road with her brother. At the end of June she filed for a divorce on the grounds of cruelty, demanded a share of the property, and moved back with her mother in Montcalm County.

On July 3, 1881, Cooper visited his sister in Montcalm County and returned home the next day.

On July 8, 1881, William A. "Lonnie" Burritt and Lyman Tyler went to Lansing together to get some supplies. Lyman had lived in the house Chesley now occupied before moving to Gratiot County. During the trip Lyman and "Lonnie" discussed Chesley. They talked of the problems Lyman's wife had had with Chesley, of the way he treated his animals, and how he had beaten his wife. They decided that he should be taught a lesson. While in Lansing, Lyman bought some tar. Upon arriving back in Riley Township, they shared their plan with neighbors, including Cooper. Since it was getting late, it was decided to postpone the deed until the next night.

On July 9, 1881, a group of neighborhood men gathered at Nathan E. Jones' house. They decided that Darius<sup>6</sup> Utter would do all the talking. Cooper did not want to be involved, but was told what to say and do when the men arrived. Nathan Jones collected feathers from a cushion along with a brush while his son George gathered some rope.

Later that night, Nathan E. Jones and his sons George and Almeron "Myron", Nathan Daniels, Darius Utter, Lyman Tyler, Monroe Eddy and William A. Burritt arrived at Chesley's home. Utter knocked on the door and told Dew he was needed to get a doctor for Mrs. Jones. When Chesley refused to open the door, they broke it down. He attempted to beat them off with a bed slat while they dragged him out of his house. The men then stripped him, bound his hands and feet with rope and proceeded to tar and feather him. As soon as the men left, Cooper arrived, cut the rope and helped him up.

After that, Chesley began sleeping on a horse blanket in the mow of the barn with an axe next to his side.

On July 13, Mary Dew wrote to Cooper and asked that her things be sent to her. Cooper collected the items and had his wife deliver them.

In late July, Mrs. Dew approached a cousin, Isaac Drenshaw, who was visiting Granny Dew in Montcalm County. According to him, she offered \$400 and a pair of horses if he or his brother would kill Chesley and he refused. Mary Dew and several of her family members said this conversation never happened.

On August 17, Mary Dew purchased a revolver in Muir and then went to Fowler where she met up with Cooper. She gave him the gun and \$385 in notes. According to Mary, Cooper had requested the gun because he feared for his life. Others saw it as giving him the tools to arrange and pay for a murder.

On Monday, August 22, Chesley went to St. Johns on business.

On the morning of Tuesday, August 23, Cooper's daughter saw Chesley doing his chores.

About a half-mile west of Cooper's house on the south side of the road, there was a footpath that led back to a spring which Chesley used to water his livestock during the summer months. It was probably on this path that Chesley was attacked.

About 10 o'clock Tuesday night, Edson Smith said his dog barked as though people were going across in back of his house.

Mary Smith said she heard a noise south of her house and saw a man going toward Dew's woods.

Dr. Bates and his daughter were returning to DeWitt about the same time when they saw a wagon heading away at a rapid speed with nine men sitting in it.

Cooper said his wife woke him in the night saying she heard someone call out "murder." He went outside, saw some men and thought Dew was being tarred and feathered again. Not wanting to get involved he went back inside.

The next morning Cooper awoke about 5:30 and started a fire in his stove. Looking across the road, he noticed the barn doors were open. Cooper and his wife crossed the road to the barn and found Chesley's body hanging inside. His hands were bound behind him. A rope was strung from a beam and tied around his neck allowing his feet, one missing a shoe, to hang about 6 inches off the ground. Cooper's wife fainted.

After carrying his wife back across the road and putting her to bed, Cooper headed east to the homes of Nathan E. Jones and Robert Pinkham. He

<sup>5</sup> Since the marriage was not recorded with the state, it's not known if she used the Cooper or Guy name.

<sup>6</sup> Some sources say Darwin Utter

