
The Murdered Family: Mystery Of The Wolf Family Murders

When the investigators arrived at the crime scene, they were faced with one of the most gruesome crimes of North Dakota's history. Based on what they found, it was determined that the murders occurred two days before the family were discovered. And while combing the crime scene, they found some evidence that would prove to become crucial to the investigation. Firstly, the Wolf Family's phone lines had been cut. Then according to German newspapers at the time, the bodies of Bertha Wolf and the farm hand, Jacob Hoffer were both allegedly found with gloves on. If this piece of information is indeed true, it would indicate that they both had only just recently come in from working the fields when they were killed. Next, allegedly, there was only one pool of blood in the kitchen. This led many to speculate that it was only Jacob Hoffer that was killed there. However, when that is compared to blood splatter in the cellar, which indicated that the killer or killers possibly forced the female members of the Wolf Family into the cellar where they were then killed. The police also uncovered the bloody hatchet along with some rags and clothing with blood stains on them that may have been used to try and clean up after the murders, including a pair of overalls that were believed to have belonged to Jakob Wolf.

The investigators followed Maria and Edna Wolf's blood trail to a window. They speculated that the two girls left the house through that window to get away from their attacker and went to hide in the barn underneath a stack of hay. And this is where they were eventually shot and killed.

From the evidence, it seemed as if Jakob Wolf was attempting to also flee to the barn and it was on the way there that he was also shot and killed in the yard and then dragged into the barn, placed next to his daughters and covered in hay.

Neighbors helped in the search of the property, trying to unearth evidence to who the killer or killers may be. It would be the local auctioneer, Ian Mayor who would be the one to find one of the murder weapons, the shotgun, in a pond just off the property. But tracing that back to the killer or the victims would be an impossible task. There was no serial number on the gun and no manufacturers had no records of the gun being sold. No one in the town recognized the gun so tracing it back to its owner was a dead end.

Neighbors were questioned and one stated that they did hear gunshots at the property on the day of the mornings, at around 10am. They didn't think anything of it though. There were problems with wild foxes in the area and thought that maybe Jakob Wolf or Jacob Hofer may have been shooting at some on the farm. Another neighbor would claim to be on the phone with Beata Wolf at the same time, around 10am, when the phone line went dead. This would support the police's theory of the time the murders took place, sometime after breakfast. However, there is a contradictory account here of a third neighbor who claimed to have seen Jacob Hofer and Bertha Wolf near the house, in a field at 11.30am. What this sighting does do is support the theory that Jakob and Bertha were not at the house when the killings began but an hour and a half later is a stretch to the timeline.

It wouldn't take long for word of the Wolf Family massacre to spread around the state of North Dakota. Paranoia and fear ripped through the community of Turtle Lake for years to come.

Farmers would stay up into the early hours of the morning with guns in hand, willing to do whatever it took to protect their families even if it involved not sleeping for days at a time. And the investigation soon becomes entangled in a range of rumors, town gossip, suspects with ulterior motives and pressures from influential people within the town to solve this crime quickly. At the time of the Wolf Family murders, the Governor, Lynn Frazier was facing re-election. His opponent being attorney general, William Langer. Within a week of the crime, the police and the governor faced extreme pressure from the public who had raised a collective reward of \$10,000 for anyone who could give information leading to an arrest. Now \$10,000 was a ridiculous amount of money in 1910 and would amount to more than \$250,000 in today's currency.

Once Langer got word of the crime and that the police had yet to arrest a suspect, he sent his own team of investigators from a neighboring town to travel to Turtle Lake to help the local police. And this wasn't something that was done on the quiet. Langer did a press conference so the public would be well aware that it was he and his team of investigators that were going to solve the crime.

Langer's team of investigators included Chief Chris Martinson who was the chief of police in Bismarck. Given that his jurisdiction was quite a ways away from Turtle Lake, it is believed that his involvement was only due to the encouragement of William Langer. He would also be the one to receive the reward the governor had offered for the arrest of those involved with the murder, also assisting the attorney general's specially selected team was George McDowell who was a special agent for the Northern Pacific Railway, and Eugene Franklin who was a private operator for the Field Detective Agency in St Paul. Franklin also worked as the main detective for the attorney general.

It wouldn't be long before headlines would be dominated with the opposing investigators of the governor, Frazier and the attorney general, Langer, with special mention of Frazier's refusal to use the state's money to try and track the killers. This gave Langer the opportunity to gain favor with the public vote. While the political side of the investigation was the main talking point in the local newspapers, detectives were determined to unearth crucial evidence from the crime scene.

Despite all the people working on solving this case, there were no suspects and they were no closer to discovering the owner of the alleged murder weapon found. All they knew was that each family member was shot once with the exception of Jakob Wolf who was shot twice. A total of eight rounds would mean that the gun found would have had to have been reloaded three times. This led to investigators considering there may have been two killers for some time. This soon changed back to the belief these murders were carried out by a sole attacker when news of a rivalry between Jakob Wolf and a neighboring farmer came to the investigators attention. Henry Layer.

Three weeks later, Layer confessed to the brutal crimes. In his first affidavit signed, his confession said that he left his house and went to the Wolf family farm to complain an issue he was having with Jakob Wold's dogs. He went to the farm to demand monetary compensation for the injuries to his cows that they had apparently argued about six months prior. He said that he walked into the house, into the kitchen where all of the Wolf family were having breakfast. Apparently, Jakob had told Layer to get off his property and then when Layer refused to leave and tried to reason with him, Jakob proceeded to threaten him with his shotgun. According to Layer, there was a struggle and then two shots were fired and then two shots were fired after

one another. If this was what happened here, these were the two shots that would have killed Beata Wolf and the farm hand.

Layer then claims that he went into the front room, reloaded the gun and proceeded to shoot the rest of the family. He said that he could not remember who he shot first but thought it was Jakob Wolf. He said that at that time, Jakob had started running towards the barn when Layer shot him the first time. Layer then claims he went into the barn where he found the two girls, Maria and Edna hiding in the corner. He claims the only reason he didn't kill the baby was simply because he didn't know she was there. He pulled out the telephone wires and left the house, closing the door behind him. He said he picked up the empty shells and carried them with him. He broke the gun and threw it along with the shells into the nearby woods. He said that he then went to his house which was approximately two miles away. He said he believed he got home about three hours after he first arrived at the Wolf family farm.

He signed a confession for all eight murders and was immediately taken before a judge. Now it is important to state that while Layer was given the option on several occasions to take on legal counsel, he was also allegedly under believe that his life was at risk. He refused legal counsel. He told the judge that he wanted to take whichever route would get him to jail the soonest sentenced to life imprisonment. The police involved were awarded \$1000 for the arrest and conviction and the case was closed. Or was it?

Regardless, Layer changed his story three months later. Layer's family championed on his behalf for him to at least get a trial. They had heard him protest his innocence to them for months. But the issue here was no one in government wanted this to happen. They were being hailed heroes by catching the killer and didn't want to risk that by granting a trial and all the inconsistencies being questioned in court. They denied all requests for a trial and they denied that there was no violence in obtaining the confession and that Layer confessed freely upon seeing the pictures of the crime scene.

Despite this, on August 10 1920, he signed another affidavit. And in this affidavit, he described the interrogation. He said that in the days after the murders, four men came to his house and told him that he needed to go with them to talk about the killing. While on the way to the police station, investigators spot a man walking along the side of the road. They alleged this was an escape convict. They stop and put the man in the back of the truck along with Henry. The two men were put in a cell together and the convict told Layer how he had plans to escape again but Layer refused to go along with these plans. The convict would press Layer for hours upon hours with questions about the murders. And when the convict asked Layer why he was in prison, he would always reply with the same answer. He didn't know. That he didn't do anything wrong.

What Layer didn't know was that this was an entire set up. That the convict Layer was locked away with and who questioned him for hours was not a convict at all but a private investigator hired in hopes that a confession could be coerced out of him without an interrogation. But when this wasn't working, this was when he was taken into another room to be taken into the sheriff's office for the questioning that would ultimately result in the confession. According to Layer's new claims, during this questioning, he was continuously shown pictures of the murder scene. And this would continue until the early hours of the morning. Layer claimed he was then threatened. He was told there was a mob outside waiting for him as they wanted to take justice upon themselves. Apparently, he was told the only way he would survive was to confess and go to jail.

It didn't stop there though. Apparently, the investigators took his chair away and made him stand to the point that he got dizzy. He continued stating his innocence even though all of this. After that, one of the investigators hit him in the head with his billy club, took him by the hair and dragged him around the room. Layer claims that this man sat across from him and told him exactly how the murders happened. He told Layer what to say and then threatened that if he didn't confess, he would be beaten to death. At this point, Layer gave up. He was crying and then confessed. This was when he signed the confession.

The original affidavit was signed by the prison barber, a man named Myrtle Cook. And he confirmed that all of this did indeed happen. He confirmed that he was responsible for shaving Henry Layer and giving him a haircut. And that when he started working on him, he saw that Layer was badly beaten up and that both sides of his face and the top of his head were swollen and it was obvious that he was beaten up by someone. When Layer was asked what happened. He said that he was beaten by the investigator. He apparently broken down and cried and kept of insisting he was innocent.

However, the doctor that examined him at the prison would counterpoint this and said that he was in quote/unquote "normal physical condition". He noted that Layer had two bruises on his face, one on each cheekbone but there was no noticeable swelling.

So, based on this, something happened. But to what extent? At this point, we will probably never know. But it is something to point out that on the Sunday after his was incarcerated, his family went to visit him and they were told that he was in no condition for visitors. It would be two weeks before his family would be allowed to see him and by that stage, any bruising would have faded or been non-existent. Especially since we are talking about bruising and swelling here and not lacerations or open wounds.

So if not Layer then who? And why? And how? There are so many questions here. There is the theory that law enforcement put forward and was for a very long time accepted to be truth. And that was Henry Layer was the sole killer and that he acted spontaneously out of anger because Jakob Wolf's dogs seriously injured one of his cows. Because of this, he thought that Jakob was responsible and should provide him with monetary compensation. He murders the entire family, with the exception of baby, Emma that he didn't know was there as she was asleep in her room. He is then arrested, confesses, pleads guilty and is sentenced in life imprisonment. And that's where he dies five years later.

And then on the flip side of things is what Layer says that happened. His version of events is that he never left the farm on the day of the murders. That he falsely confessed under the impression that he was going to be killed by a murderous mob if he didn't. And the reason that this false confession was pushed so hard was because of outside influences of political people in power and the pressure that placed on the investigators to close the case quickly. And despite Henry Layer's rights to receive a fair trial and to obtain legal council to make sure that happened, none of it did. Layer was made believe that he didn't have a choice here beyond pleading guilty. And then when he did make attempts to go down this path, all requests for an appeal were denied without good reason.

There are those who believe that Layer had nothing to do with this. A German newspaper in August of 1920 put forward an alternative narrative to Layer was the sole killer in this case. They put forth the idea that an unknown murderer killed Jakob Wolf outside, then followed that

with Beata Wolf and their daughters in the cellar, then murdered the farm hand, Jacob Hofer in the kitchen as he walked in from the fields. Since his body was lying on top of the others, it is fair to assume that he was killed elsewhere and then dumped in the cellar in the attempt to hide the body after his death. It was then speculated that the killer or killers then pursued the other daughters into the barn where they were found hiding and then shot in the back of the heads. And then, of course as we know, baby Emma was left alone for reasons unknown. No motive is known though and the newspaper didn't offer up any. The possibilities are endless though. Rival farm maybe. The Wolf Family had state of the art machinery that maybe someone else wanted but didn't want to or couldn't afford it. Maybe it was someone who had an issue with the Wolf Family because of their heritage. As we said there was some unease in the area because of the war against families of Russian and German heritage. Maybe it was something else entirely that we don't even know about. Without knowing who was responsible, it is difficult to know the why.

Where are they now?

After Henry Layer was imprisoned, he and Lydia got divorced. It is thought so there would be no legal implications for her to potentially testify against her husband and maybe to lessen the negative opinion about her in the community. After his imprisonment, Lydia struggle to keep the farm running with six young children. This resulted in five out of their six children were placed in an orphanage. Only their youngest stayed with Lydia. Unfortunately, one of their children, Berthold Layer was killed at the orphanage in an accident when he was run over by a truck at age 6. The eldest child, Blanche did grow up and return to Turtle Lake but endured ridicule and rumour causing her a lifetime struggle with anxiety and depression.

After the murders, baby Emma went to live with Beata's sister and her husband until they both passed away in the 1930s. After that, she was adopted of a couple who lived near Turtle Lake. She grew up, become a teacher, get married and had three children of her own. From all accounts, she lived a happy life. Emma Wolf died on October 16 2003 at age 84.