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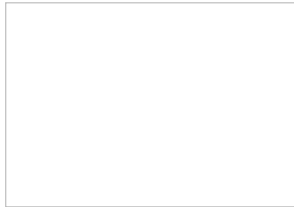


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This is the official website of the 7-volume Haunted Ohio series and the Ghosts of the Past series by Ohio author Chris Woodyard

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Enough Rope: The Hangman's Rope in the Press



The white-painted double gallows built to hang Pearl Bryan's murderers.

What is it about hangings and hanged men that so fascinates the human race? The Hanged Man is one of the Major Arcana cards in the Tarot deck. Hangman's ropes are believed to be a cure for sore eyes (Cornwall), fits and headaches (Pennsylvania), and ague (London). In Russia, a hangman's rope brought luck to gamblers. A rope from a suicide was specified to treat epilepsy in Pennsylvania and India.

The hand of a hanged man could be used to make a thieves' Hand of Glory or cure warts, goiter or cancer. The **blood of the hanged** had medicinal properties as we saw in a previous post.

As I was researching the notorious decapitation of Pearl Bryan at Fort Thomas, Kentucky and the subsequent trials and convictions of her murderers Scott Jackson and Alonzo Walling for *The Headless Horror**, I ran across the following article reporting on the ropes for the murderers' executions:

THE ROPES MADE

A PECULIAR MARK OF IDENTIFICATION UPON EACH.

The ropes with which Jackson and Walling are to be hung have been completed and delivered over to Sheriff Plummer. Each rope is 23 feet in length, and they were made to order in about a week's time from the giving of the order. They were made by Frank Vonderheide., the Main Street cordage dealer, and most of the work was done by Mr. Vonderheide himself. They are made of what is known as silver finish flax sewing twine, there being four strands of 110 threads each, or 440 threads in all. A peculiarity about the two ropes is that the one intended for Jackson has one red thread in all of the four strands, while that made for Walling has one black thread in all of the four strands. This thread was run in the ropes by the order of Sheriff Plummer, who desires to keep them separate and easily identified from each other. The four red threads in the one and black threads in the other give the ropes a peculiar appearance, and serve to intensify the realization of the direct preparation for the gruesome event. It brings out the uncanny aspects of the manufacture of a strong and pliable rope that is the

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- [June 2014](#)
- [May 2014](#)
- [April 2014](#)
- [March 2014](#)
- [February 2014](#)
- [January 2014](#)
- [December 2013](#)
- [November 2013](#)
- [October 2013](#)
- [September 2013](#)
- [August 2013](#)
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Headless Horror v. Bryan, No. 44-16310 archived on September 9, 2014

best and most perfect product of a ropemaker, and yet that has but one brief use to serve in the world, that is to be accomplished in a second—the taking of a man’s life.

George W. Ward, of George W. Ward & Co., the cordage dealers, had a piece of the rope on ‘Change yesterday. Mr. Ward furnished the raw material from which the threads and ropes were made, and no little interest was aroused by his exhibition of the object. *Cincinnati [OH] Enquirer* 16 March 1897: p. 12

Of course the executioner would want to know which rope was assigned to which prisoner—it was a point of professional pride to carefully calculate the weight of each prisoner and the drop so that the execution would go smoothly. Jackson and Walling were hung on a single gallows where a lever opened both traps simultaneously. However carefully the ropes were made, someone miscalculated: Instead of breaking their necks, Jackson and Walling strangled to death.

I began to find other notes on hangmen’s ropes in other sensational murder cases. The materials, quality, and pedigree of the ropes seemed to be a subject of absorbing interest to the public, judging from how often they appeared in the papers and the care with which these minute details were reported. For example, sheriffs might have strong opinions about the quality of their cordage or be superstitious about either using an entirely new rope to ensure a successful hanging or using an old rope that had previously hung a notorious criminal—perhaps to humiliate the person being executed. Let us put on our black caps and examine some random yet representative notes on the specifications for hangmen’s ropes and the superstitions surrounding them. And may the Lord have Mercy upon our souls....

The geographical origins of a rope’s hemp seemed to be a way to further demean the prisoner.

The Worcester Spy mentions that “a hangman’s rope made two years ago of South Carolina hemp, to hang Jeff. Davis with, was forwarded from Worcester, Mass., to Washington, on Monday. It was made by Mrs. Parmenter, a daughter of Capt. Peter Slater, who, it will be remembered by our old residents, was the builder of the first rope walk out of Boston ever established in Massachusetts. The maker of the rope wishes to have it speedily used.” *Janesville [WI] Daily Gazette* 6 June 1861: p. 2

The rope for the execution of [Abolitionist John] Brown, says the *Baltimore Patriot*, was made in Kentucky by a Kentuckian expressly for the purpose, and sent to Gov. Wise, who accepted it. *Lowell [MA] Daily Citizen and News* 5 December 1859: p. 2

A three-inch European-made Manila rope shall always be used for executions. *The Punjab Record*, Volume 24, 1890 [Was this a matter of trade protectionism, a jibe at the doomed prisoners, or an Imperialist insult to the rope-makers of India?]

Some law officials preferred a new rope so as to ensure a smooth hanging, while others treasured historic ropes.

A Hangman’s Rope

The rope which was used to-day in the execution of John Henry Young is just an ordinary hemp rope, but a wonderful story of tragic interest would be revealed, could it but speak. Nineteen times has one end been knotted around the gallows beam, and nineteen times has the noose been placed around the neck of a condemned criminal.

This rope is the property of W.A. Stewart of Cleburne, ex-sheriff of Johnson county. Mr. Stewart had the rope made in St. Louis in 1898, to be used in the execution of John B. Shaw, a white man. The rope was made by a German and was hand-twisted, the very best quality of hemp obtainable being utilized in its manufacture. The rope is eighteen feet long and cost Mr. Stewart \$12.50. The noose made to go around the neck of Shaw has never been changed. – *Houston Post. American Citizen [Kansas City, KS]* 26 May 1905: p. 3

The rope for the execution was borrowed from Sheriff Julian, of Howan County, and has been used on several previous occasions for the purpose it performed today. [from an article entitled “Hammons and Moore Hang, Two Executions in One Day. J. W. Hammons Hanged at Winston-Salem for Murder of His Wife--/Ashton Moore, Sampson County Negro Rapist, is Hanged at Clinton”] *Charlotte [NC] Observer* 3

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Double hangings were rare enough to elicit comment in the papers, like an article headed “Drew a Pair. That’s What the Hangman’s Rope Did in Pennsylvania,” which describes two men hung successively with the same rope. It was coupled with another article about a hanging of a double murderer where the rope broke on the first try, was mended, then successfully hanged the prisoner. *Albuquerque [MN] Morning Democrat* 21 February 1890: p. 1

Sheriffs could be a finicky lot about their hangman’s ropes.

ROPE COMING

Sheriff Bogue places an Order for Rope for the Execution Here September 14.

Sheriff Bogue placed on order while in Chicago for the rope to be used in the execution of Ira O. Jenkins September 14. The quality of rope he wanted was not to be obtained in Chicago, but it was sent for and is expected to reach here in a day or two. It is the same kind that was used in the execution of J.W. Cole, and the best rope for the purpose that is manufactured. The sheriff still has on hand two pieces of the rope with which Cole was executed, one of them not having been used, but he wants a new rope for this execution, so that there may be no possibility for an unsuccessful execution. *Bismarck [ND] Tribune* 4 September 1900: p. 3

Phelps and Bailey executions

Sheriff Martin will select the rope for the execution within the next few days and have it well stretched before used. He has several samples of rope of different sizes in his office. *Evening Post* [Charleston, SC] 7 July 1899: p. 4

Drawing Near, William Eubanks Preparing to Meet His Death

The rope for the execution has been purchased by Sheriff McDougall, and is now in process of preparation for use. It is unusually large five-eighths inch, because of the great weight of Eubanks, about 200 pounds. *Evening News* [San Jose, CA] 16 January 1891: p. 3

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There seems to have been a certain hierarchy in rope-makers as evidenced by the comment in the article on the Cole hanging: “the best rope for the purpose that is manufactured.” And if you found yourself all thumbs when trying to knot the rope, you could even order a pre-tied noose for an extra fee.

Manufacture Hangman’s Ropes.

There is in St. Louis a firm of rope makers and dealers, doing business on North Main street, that has a side line that it does not advertise. It is the manufacture of hangman’s ropes. The firm sells as many as 100 of these ropes annually.

The price of the rope, with the nooses ready for use, is \$5. The ropes are hand made and of hemp, and one of the employees of the firm’s North St. Louis rope walk ties the knot. A few weeks since the sheriff of Madison county, Il., had a man to hang at Edwardsville. He bought a rope that he thought would answer the purpose.

The tying of the knot he found, however, to be a more difficult matter than he imagined, and he went to St. Louis to have the noose made. The ropemaker charged him \$2.50 for tying the knot. *Rural Collaborator. Plain Dealer* [Cleveland, OH] 17 April 1892: p. 13

HE MADE HANGMEN’S ROPES

For More Than Fifty Years, Godfrey Boger Supplied Nooses.

Philadelphia Telegraph.

Godfrey Boger, 2251 North Fairhill Street, who for over fifty years had been the maker

lifelike.

- **Two Nerdy History Girls** Scandal and silk from the 18th century. Bestselling authors Loretta Chase & Isabella Bradford gossip about history, writing, and yes, shoes.

Please visit my other blog: Mrs Daffodil Digresses: A blog about costume, history, and social ephemera

<http://mrsdaffodildigresses.wordpress.com>

of the hangmen's ropes, was buried recently in American Mechanics' cemetery. He died at his home, aged 75 years, disproving a superstition among cordage workers that a "necktie maker" enjoys a short life. [I haven't found this bit of folklore anywhere else.]

Boger, who was employed at the Edwin H. Fidler company's works, at Tacony, made all the ropes used in executions in this state and in various parts of the country. Boger never witnessed an execution, although he often had been invited to attend. Of all the gibbet ropes that Boger turned out but one broke and in that case the parting of the strands was caused by friction against a sharp-edged pulley above the scaffold.

No charge is ever made by the Fidler firm for the hangmen's ropes, only the expressage being charged to the county ordering them. A member of the firm said today that there is no particular reason other than custom for not charging for the ropes. The hemp used is imported from Italy and great care is taken in twisting the strands.

Boger had been engaged in this gruesome occupation since he was 19 years old. He took great pride in his work. *Beaumont [TX] Enterprise* 18 July 1911: p. 6

Then we have the gibbet rope as talisman. Naturally something so valuable encouraged counterfeit cordage.

Hangman's Rope as a Talisman.

The popular pocket piece just now in this city is a piece of hangman's rope. If all the hangman's rope were taken from the pockets of superstitious St. Louisians, they would form a rope of considerable length. The five hangings recently taking place in this city have brought out again the superstitious that hangman's rope is a sure cure for rheumatism, consumption, heart disease, apoplexy, and everything else. The rope is a sure cure for all the ills that flesh is heir to, if properly applied and adjusted; but that is not the way that great many St. Louis men and women look at it.

In the police stations nearly every prisoner who is searched carries a bit of rope and a great number of private citizens treasure up the ghostly hempen mementoes. Every tramp carries one, and in the alleys frequented by the colored populace there are yards of rope with which Ellis and Ward were executed. The supply is not yet exhausted and half an inch of the execution rope sells for the phenomenally low sum of five cents. A gentleman with whom a reported had a conversation stated that a very nice lady had asked him for a piece of the rope. She was handsomely dressed, and pretty, too. With recklessness he promised to procure her a piece, not thinking she was in earnest. He met her again. She asked for a piece of rope. He straight-way proceeded around among his friends, but could not get any genuine. He had to have a piece for that lady, however, and the brilliant idea struck him that he could give her any piece of twisted hemp. She would never know the difference. He gave her a piece of the frayed and broken clothes-line, saying that it was a strand of the rope and she put it in her purse and went away happy. Several parties have been selling the rope about town and taking in the gullible people. *St Louis Republican. Ackley [IA] Enterprise* 4 March 1882: p. 2

Or the rope could be a hoodoo. Lynching ropes were particularly potent charms.

A Veritable Hoodoo

Strange and Eventful History of a Piece of Hangman's Rope.

A couple of evenings ago a young man named Tollman, who lives near Ellenwood, dropped in at the police station and gave a reporter there about an inch of the white plow line with which the negro who poisoned the Burks family was lynched. Mr. Tollman was present at the inquest the preceding day and had there secured the relic.

The plow line was in three strands, and some hours later the reporter separated one of them and gave it to Call Officer Beavers. A negro who happened to be in the station at the time begged a strand for himself. He said a piece of plow line with which a man has

been hanged makes a formidable hoodoo, and if the plow line is white the efficacy of the hoodoo is doubled. The reporter accordingly gave him one of the two remaining strands and wrapping the other in tissue paper put it in his pocket.

Now for chapter 2. As Officer Beavers was going home yesterday he thought to attach the string to his watch guard for safe keeping, and in so doing dropped the watch and broke it so badly that is its doubtful if it will ever run again. He put the bit of plow line in his pocket and inside of two hours barked his shin on a chair, got a cinder in his eye, spilled a bottle of ink on his pants, and had a counterfeit dollar passed on him. He then threw the hoodoo on the back of a negro who was splitting wood in the yard, and before the man struck a dozen more blows he cut his little toe off.

The reporter's first misadventure was to break a pair of eyeglasses he prized highly and a little while later he tore up a lot of "copy" by mistake and had to write it all over again. This was Monday night. Yesterday he took the hoodoo string to the dining room of his hotel and quietly stuck it in the folds of the apron of the waiter who attended him. A few minutes later the darky fell down the kitchen stairs making an unearthly clatter. And dropping the fatal talisman. He picked it up and instantly suspecting witchcraft put it down the back of another waiter.

This victim, all unsuspecting, loaded a tray with meals for six and went up to the dining room. At the head of the stairs he caught his foot and fell sprawling, breaking every dish on the tray and scattering beefsteaks, potatoes and miscellaneous eatables all over the apartment. Somebody informed him of the hoodoo, and he put it in the stove.

The possessor of the third strand has not yet been heard from, but if he gets run over, falls out of a window, breaks a leg or meets with some kindred adventure, it will occasion no surprise. *Atlanta Constitution. Daily Journal and Journal and Tribune* [Knoxville, TN] 21 November 1893: p. 7

The notion of a used rope crops up in this ghost story about a suicide's rope from Toledo, Ohio. You'll find the entire true tale in *The Face in the Window: Haunting Ohio Tales*. It's the sort of thing you couldn't sell as fiction—it would be too implausible.

cited in Wood v. Ryan, No. 14-16310 archived on September 9, 2014

A GHOST ON THE BRIDGE

THE DEPARTED SPIRIT THAT PATROLS A TOLEDO BRIDGE AT MIDNIGHT

Toledo, Ohio, December 27. One of the Cherry Street bridge-tenders said to me the other day:

"The Enquirer has caused an 'l of a row around this bridge. Since it published an account of Meyers' ghost haunting it, thousands of people have haunted me with questions about it. I do not know whether it is Meyers' ghost or his son's, but there is some mighty strange goings on around the west end of this bridge. I have seen it myself, but, Lord knows, I don't know what it is. I never went near enough to find out."

I hunted up Detective Louie Trotter, who gave me a more detailed account of the affair than I had been able to get elsewhere. He said: "I have heard the new bridge was haunted, and I know the old one was. It was like this: Some of the boys who live on the East Side were going home from duty one August morning in 1882. When we reached the first pier I was horrified to see the body of someone hanging there. It did not take us long to cut the corpse down and we found it was Pop Meyers, as he was familiarly called. His face was just as pleasant as if he were selling a pair of shoes to a customer. There was not the least sign of pain, and his wide-open eyes were looking rather expectantly up the river. He had evidently put on a new shirt, collar, and necktie, and was well dressed, except that he had no coat or shoes on. Well, we carried him home and found some letters which plainly indicated that his mind had left his body. His son, who had brought so much care on the old man's mind by his dissipation, begged us to give him the rope with which his father had hanged himself. 'I want it as a reminder,' he said, 'of my father.' Well, some way he obtained the rope, and with it,

shortly afterward, ended his life at the identical spot, with the same rope. It was not long after this that the report got around that Meyers was walking the bridge at night, carrying a rope and looking longingly up the river. I investigated the affair and found it was true something was haunting the bridge. The ghost was dressed just as Meyers was on the morning that I cut him down. The old bridge was carried away, and the story was forgotten. The first night the new bridge was opened late wayfarers were badly frightened by a phantom walking slowly along in his bare feet, making no noise as he softly trod the planks. That's all I know about it. Officer Kruse states that many people have recently told me they had seen Meyers' ghost patrolling the bridge, rope in hand, after midnight." *Cincinnati [OH] Enquirer* 28 December 1884: p. 13

*The last chapter in *The Headless Horror: Strange and Ghostly Ohio Tales* covers the paranormal history of Pearl Bryan and her murderers. For an admirable account of this case see <http://www.planetslade.com/pearl-bryan.html>.

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Posted by *Chris Woodyard* on January 19, 2013 in [Crime](#), [News](#), [Victorian](#) and tagged [Alonzo Walling](#), [executions](#), [gallows](#), [gibbet](#), [hangings](#), [hangman's noose](#), [hangman's rope](#), [noose](#), [Pearl Bryan](#), [Scott Jackson](#)

3 Responses



Paul Slade says:

February 19, 2013 at 6:31 am

Thanks for mentioning my Pearl Bryan essay here – I'm glad you liked it. I thought your own essay was fascinating, and I shall be tweeting a plug for it to my own followers in a moment.

I wondered if you'd come across the tales following William Palmer's 1856 hanging in Staffordshire, England. Here's my own summary:

"Stafford prison's ropemaker deliberately made Palmer's rope 30 yards longer than it needed to be, and then sold two-inch lengths of it to souvenir hunters at half a crown each. Ten years later, George Smith, Palmer's hangman, was still selling bits of 'the rope that hanged Palmer' to gullible customers at his pub near Dudley. No matter how much of this rope he sold there always seemed to be plenty left, prompting this cynical little Black Country rhyme:

'He's a crafty old charmer,
Is Smith who killed Palmer,
And the rope that he sold,
Would stretch all the road,
From Dudley to regions much warmer'."

You'll find full details on the PlanetSlade page here: <http://www.planetslade.com/broadside-ballads-palmer2.html>.



Chris Woodyard says:

February 19, 2013 at 10:20 am

Hello, Paul,

Thanks for your kind words and for the link. I read about Palmer in Richard Altick's *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, where he mentions the rope story, but not the rhyme.

Thanks! Your site is terrific!

Best,

Chris

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