

## A Case of Familicide in Orrick, Missouri: The William B. Rainwater Murders *by Susan Chance-Rainwater, 2018*

In March 1897, newspapers across the country carried a headline similar to the one in the Kansas City Journal:

### **Foul Murder**

#### **Terrible Quintuple Tragedy near Orrick, MO**

##### **Bee Rainwater's Awful Deed**

##### **Claimed four victims and then ended his own life**

The Kansas City Journal was the nearest large newspaper, and theirs seems to be the originating story. It's also the most complete. Other newspapers were quick to pick up the sensational story, though not always with the apparent accuracy of the original.

### **The crime**

On 20 Mar 1897, William Brashear Rainwater, known as Bee, his wife, and a number of relations, were gathered at the home of William Artman. Bee noticed dogs barking in the distance, and roused his brother-in-law, John William Thurman, saying, "Johnnie, let's go shoot those dogs." This seems like an odd thing to say, but maybe the neighborhood was being menaced by a pack of wild dogs or coyotes, and it was an opportune moment to deal with the problem.

John Thurman got his gun and left the cabin with Bee Rainwater. About 50 yards from the cabin, Bee shot John Thurman, though not fatally, and then returned to the cabin. He then shot his mother-in-law, Latishia Vandiver Thurman Artman, his step-daughter Ethel Fannie Gentry, and his wife, Mary Elizabeth Thurman Gentry Rainwater. He left the cabin, found John Thurman still living, killed him, and then committed suicide.

Bee did not shoot William Artman, Sr (Latishia's second husband), and Artman's 10-year-old daughter. The account of the shooting must therefore have been provided by William Artman, because he was the only adult witness left alive.

The newspaper articles all indicate that Bee disliked his mother-in-law, and believed she was meddling in his marriage. The Kansas City Journal article, unlike the others, provides a clearer picture, noting that Bee was abusive towards his wife and that she frequently left him to escape the abuse. Her mother took her daughter's side in this situation.

During the shooting spree, Bee is reported to have shouted, “Damn you, I’ve got you all now.” This was a familicide. David Wilson of Birmingham City University divides family annihilators into four categories – self-righteous, disappointed, anomic, and paranoid (see Wikipedia article). Bee Rainwater fits into the self-righteous category, justifying his actions by holding his mother-in-law responsible for the breakdown of his family, and the consequences that followed. Bee is described in the newspaper articles as “a man of peculiar temperament and few words” who did not get along with his neighbors or his family.

### **The deceased**

The articles covering this story, the four I have cited here and the others available through various newspaper services, don’t report the names identically. The names Artman and Thurman get switched in some articles. I am basing my identification primarily on the Kansas City Journal article, and the resulting tombstones. It’s possible to match a tombstones containing 20 Mar 1897 as the date of death with the names of the individuals in the articles.

If you look at the 1850-1880 federal census records for Orrick township, Ray County, Missouri, you’ll see certain names clustered together decade after decade: Artman, Thurman, Rainwater, Good, Caskey. These families arrived in the area between 1840 and 1850, and intermarried repeatedly.

### **The deceased were:**

- **Latishia Vandiver Thurman Artman.** She married (1) Benjamin Thurman, Jr and (2) William Artman. The issues regarding her maiden name are described at the end of this article.
- **Mary Elizabeth Thurman Gentry Rainwater.** She was the daughter of Latishia Vandiver and Benjamin Thurman. She was married to (1) John Gentry and (2) Bee Rainwater.
- **John William Thurman,** called Johnnie in most articles. He was the son of Letitia and Benjamin Thurman, and the brother-in-law of Bee Rainwater.
- **Ethel Fannie Gentry.** She was the daughter of Mary Elizabeth Thurman and John Gentry, the step-daughter of Bee Rainwater.
- **William Brashear “Bee” Rainwater.** The son of Malcolm B. Rainwater and Margaret Artman. Margaret Artman was the aunt of the surviving William Artman.

### **The survivors were:**

- **William Artman.** He was the second husband of Latishia Vandiver Thurman, father-in-law of Bee Rainwater, and nephew of Bee’s mother.

- **Gertrude May Artman.** All of the articles mention the 10-year-old daughter of Mrs. Artman who survived, but none provide a name. Substantial evidence supports the assertion that this is Gertrude May Artman.
- **Grace Rainwater.** One article says that Bee Rainwater and wife Mary Thurman had a daughter of their own. The daughter is never named, and she was evidently not present at the time of the shooting. She is found living with her father's sister Catherine in the 1900 census.

### **The Caskey/Vandiver maiden name problem:**

There is some question as to whether Latishia's maiden name is Caskey or Vandiver.

Latishia and her first husband, Benjamin Thurman, were married between 1861 and 1868. To date, no marriage record has been found for the couple. We are therefore left with the problem of her maiden name.

The 1860 census of Camden, Ray Co, Missouri contains a Leticia Caskey, age 4. Under ordinary circumstances, her age would rule her out, but her father, Sampson Caskey, has members of the Good family living in his 1850 household, and is the household following Owen Artman in 1860. The Artman relationship is clear enough. A member of the Good family married into the Thurman family in 1869.

The nail in the Caskey coffin is the 1870 census, which shows Letishia Caskey still single and living in her parents' household. She married John Popejoy three years later and was still living in 1930. She is listed in her father's estate administration as Letishia Popejoy. So she simply cannot be Latishia Thurman Artman.

But there's another Latishia, surnamed Vandiver in the 1860 census of the same county. She and her brother James are apparently orphans. She's 11, which makes her the right age to be the future Mrs. Thurman, but her family is not geographically close to any of the other families in the cluster.

However, when Benjamin Thurman died, an administrator bond was filed for his estate by James Vandiver. Thurman's widow Latishia is named. The conclusive piece of evidence is the Social Security application of Latishia's son Lewis Artman, which gives his mother's maiden name as Vandiver.

### **SOURCES**

1850-1900 federal census records

2403: "Whole family murdered: jealous farmer kills his wife, her relatives, and then himself," 23 Mar 1897, New York Times, New York, NY

2410: "Devil possessed must have been the man who did this slaughter," 22 Mar 1897, Aurora Daily Express, Aurora, IL

2727: "An Awful Tragedy: a man kills his entire family and then himself," pg 6, 13 May 1897, Phillipsburg Herald, Phillipsburg, KS, includes drawing

2847: "Foul Murder: Bee Rainwater's Awful Deed Claimed Four Victims and Then Ended His Own Life," pg 1, 22 Mar 1897, The Kansas City Journal, Kansas City, MO, Vol XXXIX, No 285

Wikipedia: Familicide, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Familicide>, 2 Apr 2018

2313: Findagrave.com, South Point Cemetery, Orrick, Ray Co, Missouri

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