

# 100 MOMENTS

## IOWA LAW ENFORCEMENT: PRE1921

By Bret Braafhart (1997-current)

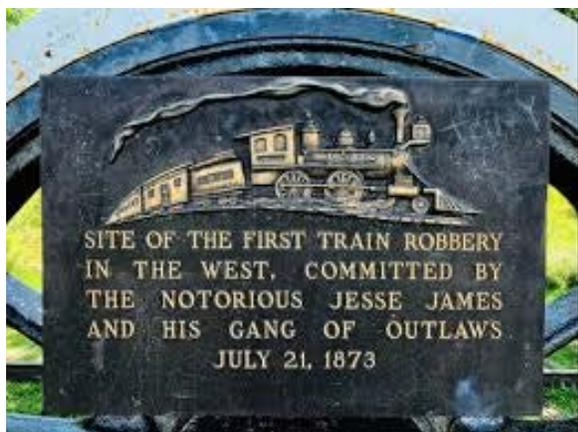
The law enforcement landscape in Iowa has been evolving and transforming ever since our first settlers arrived. During this time Iowa truly was part of the 'Wild West'. Watching old western movies, and listening to folklore may give you an exaggerated and glamorized idea of what was occurring in the late 19th and early 20th century; however, it is not hard to imagine how close they were to reality. Especially when you hear the story of Frank and Jesse James and their gang, who staged

traveled throughout the south and Midwest and had previously robbed a bank in Corydon Iowa in 1871. No doubt the James gang, and a number of other 'outlaws', operating during that time, played a significant role in the development and growth of our law enforcement profession and was a catalyst of our future.

Just like many occupations, law enforcement had to keep up and evolve with the changing environment. Population growth (from around 40,000 in 1840 to around 2.4 million in 1920), transportation changes, public pressure, state and federal legislative changes, the need for updated equipment, along with a lack of communication and cooperation among agencies all played a role in how we look today.

Along with all the other forces prodding law enforcement forward, a number of high profile cases in the late 1800s and early 1900s surely added to the recognition that something more needed to be done.

The unsolved brutal murder of 20-year-old Anna Wiese in Vienna Township (Marshall County) in 1893 was certainly such a case. The young housekeeper was attacked on her way home after a night out with friends. She was repeatedly stabbed, clubbed, and had her throat slashed. Authorities believed they had



1873: ATLANTIC, IOWA

Marker near Atlantic marking a train robbery by the James Gang.

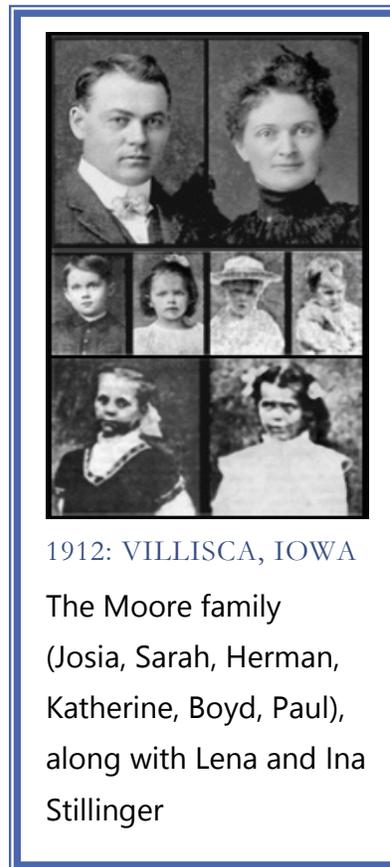
the world's first robbery of a moving train in 1873 right here in Iowa. This notorious gang

a good case against a local woman, along with her husband and son, whose reported motive was that the woman felt Wiese was “immoral” and had inappropriate relations with her son. However, after two failed trials, the suspects were acquitted and the case went cold.

Another high profile case is well known as the Villisca Axe Murders, which occurred in June of 1912. This case involved a person or persons entering a house in Villisca, Iowa, and bludgeoned to death eight people sleeping there, including two adults and six children ages 5 to 12. This notorious homicide case involved a nearly ten-year investigation, repeated grand jury hearings, and a murder trial. According to reports, the same subject or subjects may have been responsible for up to two dozen similar murders occurring between 1911 and 1912 around the Midwest. This case is known to have spurred the legislative action that led to the establishment of the Bureau of Criminal Investigation.

One more headline-grabbing case involved the brutal rape and murder of twelve-year-old Alta Braun in Sioux City, Iowa. According to the August 24, 1917, Le Mars Sentinel paper, it was reported that Braun was believed to have been attacked and strangled by a person unknown to her. The circus had been in town and the sheriff and police worked the theory that the crime was committed by one of the employees, or one of the “tough characters” usually found in the wake of a circus. At one point, a subject was arrested and held but was ultimately released due to a lack of evidence tying him to the crime. This case also went unsolved and remains that way today.

These are just a few of the cases that highlight the challenges Iowa law enforcement faced pre-1921. Many of the crimes and associated investigations involved multiple jurisdictions



and were believed to have been perpetrated by traveling criminals. From James gang heists to the Villisca Axe Murders the groundwork was laid for a more centralized state law enforcement agency.

**BRET BRAAFHART - 2021**  
Bret is the current Special Agent in Charge for the Sex Offender Registry Unit. After a year with Capitol Police, Bret joined the DCI in 1997 as a Gaming Enforcement Officer in Clinton. Additionally, Bret served the DCI as a Gaming Enforcement Officer in Osceola, a Special Agent (Vice) in Des Moines, a Special Agent (Polygraph) in Des Moines, a Special Agent in Charge (Professional Standards Bureau and Special Enforcement Operations (aka Gaming)).