

Holt County Sheriff Bernard F. Kearns, age 26, was shot and killed in the line of duty on March 28, 1881 in O'Neill, Nebraska.

Sheriff Kearns was elected Holt County Sheriff in 1879, and from 1877 had served as a Holt County Deputy. Sheriff Kearns was also proprietor of the City Hotel and in partnership with Dan Neely. The City Hotel was located at the present site of the Golden Hotel.

Texas cowboys had worked on Holt County ranches throughout the year of 1880. Many had decided to stay in O'Neill for the winter.

On the afternoon of March 28<sup>th</sup>, Eb Stewart, an armed Texas cowboy, entered the bar room at the City Hotel and walked toward the dining area. Sheriff Kearns stopped Stewart and told him he was too drunk to be allowed in the dining area, as there were women present. An argument ensued and Sheriff Kearns disarmed Stewart.

Stewart later returned with William Reed, another Texas Cowboy, to retrieve the firearm. Sheriff Kearns refused to give Reed the gun and said Stewart could have it the next day when he sobered up. Reed then started to draw his gun on Sheriff Kearns. Sheriff Kearns gained control of the firearm and struck Reed across the side of the face with it. Reed walked out the bar room door bleeding badly from the head wound.

Sheriff Kearns then took a few steps into the bar room, and spun around upon hearing a rush of movement at the door behind him. He had quickly assumed Reed was coming back through the door. Sheriff Kearns fired and struck Deputy James Connolly who was coming to his aid. The shot broke Deputy Connolly's leg. Sheriff Kearns exclaimed, "My God, I've shot my best friend".

William Reed returned to the bar room while Sheriff Kearns was in a time of great distress over shooting Deputy Connolly. John Smith, a cowboy, accompanied Reed and for a 3<sup>rd</sup> time asked Sheriff Kearns for the guns. A single shot was fired while Sheriff Kearns and Smith discussed the matter. Reed, having re-armed, had shot Sheriff Kearns at close range in the abdomen. Sheriff Kearns returned fire, but did not hit Reed.

Sheriff Kearns, knowing he was mortally wounded, said "Let me go to the priest" and walked out into Douglas Street. Two concerned citizens asked Sheriff Kearns what was the matter, to which he replied, "I am shot through – get the doctor for Jim". Dr. Benner quickly arrived and Sheriff Kearns said "Attend to Jim – you can do nothing for me".

He then walked toward the Catholic Church, meeting Father Smith along the way, and was assisted back to the hotel. Father Smith took Sheriff Kearns upstairs to a bed and there administered last rights. Sheriff Kearns last words to Father Smith were, "Reed killed me, but let him go".

William Reed, after the shooting, fled on horse back and was captured by a posse of eight well armed men in Atkinson, Nebraska. He was returned to O'Neill late in the evening and placed in a second floor hotel room under heavily armed guard. Reed was taken to West Point, the nearest adequate jail, the following morning.

A Holt County Grand Jury indicted William Reed for 1<sup>st</sup> degree murder. Reed's attorney was granted a change of venue and the murder trial took place in Antelope County. There a jury acquitted Reed of murder and said he had acted in self defense.

On this day, we honor and appreciate the great service and ultimate sacrifice Sheriff Bernard Kearns made for the citizens of Holt County. In 2007, after 126 years, Sheriff Kearns' name was added to the National Police Officers Memorial in Washington D.C.. This was largely made possible by the extensive research and assistance of the Holt County Historical Society.