Editor's Note:

We are pleased to introduce Tara Cajacob, who begins a series of pieces on artifacts in the Society's collection. Tara is a volunteer writer whose interest in our artifacts inspired a Curator in the Community.

by Tara Cajacob

The uniform of an officer of the law is representative of not only the value of the work being performed, but of the qualities of the person performing the service. As unremarkable as the work of a traffic officer may sometimes seem, the dedication and sacrifices that are made by such an individual can be easily overlooked. In the case of a Lakeville man, Sylvester Gleisner, the strength and gumption he committed to his community through his work even in the face of tremendous personal tragedy, will forever remain imprinted upon the community.

Sylvester Gleisner was born on January 31, 1893 in Iowa. He spent his childhood in Auburn, Iowa, where he lived with his mother, grandmother, brother and sister after his father’s death in 1898. When Gleisner’s mother remarried, the family moved to Lakeville, Minnesota to start anew. Gleisner spent much of his adolescence in Dakota County. Of course, as for most men of the age, his late teen years brought with them the call of war, and Gleisner joined the military to serve his country during World War I. In his twenties, Gleisner joined the police department.

Gleisner was wed to Catherine Freidges when both were in their thirties. They resided together in Lakeville. Gleisner spent many years patrolling busy roads such as Lyndale and Cedar Avenues. Life as Deputy Sheriff was not without incident. In October of 1931 as Gleisner was returning home from patrol, he was injured in a car accident. His motorcycle collided with a Ford Coupe and while the young driver emerged relatively unscathed, Gleisner landed in a hospital with what were described as serious injuries, including five broken ribs. Unfortunately, as harrowing an experience as such an accident might have been, it could not begin to foreshadow what was about to unfold. Eventually, Gleisner recovered from his injuries and went back on patrol, even participating in a raid at the Hollywood Inn in Mendota; a casino run by men who were known informants for many prolific criminals including the John Dillinger gang.

On a night that was not unlike any other, Gleisner and Catherine, to whom he had now been married for nearly ten years, retired to bed for the night. Mrs. Gleisner, who had reportedly been ill for some time, woke up at three in the morning on September 29, 1932, and asked Gleisner to fetch a glass of water for her. Gleisner did so, returning to bed and quickly

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falling back to sleep, only to be awakened two hours later by a penetrating blast of a rifle, as two shots buried themselves into each of his shoulders. An account of Gleisner’s description of that horrific night said that “without an instant’s pause” Mrs. Gleisner turned the gun on herself and launched a bullet directly into her heart.

WIFE SHOOTS DEPUTY SHERIFF; KILLS HERSELF

Accounts of the incident were varied, some even indicating that Gleisner himself had wielded the gun. The coroner reported that on that sad, fateful night, Mrs. Gleisner had taken Gleisner’s gun from his holster which lay at the bedside, and attempted to murder her husband then taking her own life.

A punctured lung and two horrendous flesh wounds couldn’t keep Gleisner from returning to his work. The community he so loved and the neighbors he served seemed to rally behind him, supporting him through his recovery. Within a few short years, Gleisner’s life would return to something which would appear quite similar to normalcy.

One account, given in 1936 by a man who had received Gleisner’s help removing his vehicle from a ditch, described the Deputy Sheriff’s incredible willingness to assist in the effort as follows:

... I believe he was actually sorry there wasn’t more mudholes to pull me out of. Do you know, I felt so good because he felt so good over being able to help me, in return for his kindness I was almost tempted to throw a brick through a window, steal a calf or rob a bank to give him the job of capturing me and locking me up where I couldn’t do any more damage.

Finally, in 1961 at the age of 68, Gleisner realized his happily ever after when he married Catherine Ann Redmond Walsh, with whom he would live until the end of his 83 years.

There is a German proverb: the finest clothes are often lined with heartache and sorrow. Certainly, Sheriff Deputy Sylvester Gleisner’s uniform is representative of his struggle, but also of what he was able to accomplish in the midst of his adversities. Through his hard work and his willingness to serve his neighbors, he was able to do more than simply overcome his circumstances; Gleisner demonstrated extraordinary traits of everyday heroism.

ENDNOTES

4. Dakota County Tribune 29 May 1936.

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