

STARRETT, JOHN MILTON  
1872-August 1, 1917

FARMER LOST LIFE IN EFFORT TO SAVE FRIEND

That the heroes of peace are as notable as the heroes of the battle field, and that self-sacrificing courage is not wholly confined to the realms of literature was demonstrated on Wednesday last, when John Starrett gave his life in a futile effort to save his friend, John Swartz.

The two men were digging a well on the farm of Mr. Starrett's father, T.G. Starrett, eleven miles northwest of Dwyer. A blast of powder had been fired and after waiting a few minutes for the gas to escape, Swartz went down in the well with his foot in a loop in the rope on the windless. He had hardly reached the bottom when he had called to be drawn up. When about half way to the top, he was overcome and fell back down in the well.

Fully realizing the danger, without a moment's hesitation, Starrett grabbed the rope and slid into the well to rescue his friend. A moment later, he called to his father to draw him up. The father began turning the windless, but directly the load was gone and he realized his son had also been overcome by the powder gas. He then took the team and hurried to M.F. Coleman's for help. Several men, including Dr. Hanna, were soon at the scene of the accident and the men were taken from the well. Starrett was still alive, but life had left Swartz, his neck having been broken when he fell from the rope. A few hours later, Dr. Phifer was summoned from Wheatland, but he arrived there was but little sign of life in Starrett, and he died a little later in the evening.

Both of the men were in the prime of life, about 45 years of age, and were highly respected citizens. Both had lived on homesteads a little over a year. Mr. Swartz leaves a wife and two small children while Mr. Starrett left a wife and five children, the oldest being 16 years of age.

Mr. Starrett's effort to save his friend was characteristic of the man. It had been his habit, all his life, to be helpful to the other fellow, often sacrificing his own comfort and welfare to do so, yet never failing to respond to the call for help, and it was with the lifelong habit of self sacrificing generosity that he finally "laid down his life for his friend".

The body of Mr. Swartz was sent to his old home in Nebraska for interment. Mr. Starrett was buried in the Wheatland cemetery.

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A most deplorable accident in which two well known residents of the dry farm section northwest of Dwyer lost their lives occurred on Wednesday at the farm of John Starrett, north of Cottonwood creek. Mr. Starrett had been engaged in the work of digging a well on his homestead, being assisted in the work by a neighbor, J.H. Swartz, and the accident in which both gentlemen lost their lives occurred about nine o'clock Wednesday morning.

As near as we have been able to gather the facts in the case the accident happened as follows: A blast of powder had been shot off in the well to lessen the work of digging, and after waiting about twenty minutes for the well to become cleared of the powder fumes, Mr. Swartz entered the well to ascertain the effectiveness of the blast. He was lowered into the well in the bucket used for hoisting the dirt, Mr. Starrett operating the windlass. Swartz had been in the well only a few seconds when he called to be raised to the surface, and Mr. Starrett had made only a few turns of the windlass when he discovered that Swartz had fallen from the bucket. Starrett had made a loop in the rope into which he slipped his foot and descended into the well to rescue his companion, after calling his father from the house to operate the windlass. Starrett attempted to tie the rope around Swartz's body when he too was overcome by the gas in the well, his foot slipping from the loop in the rope, consequently the elder Starrett was unable to raise the body of his son from the well.

The elder Starrett was compelled to go to the Coleman ranch on Cottonwood for help, a distance of about two and one-half miles, after which the well was cleared of gas and the bodies brought to the surface. It was discovered that Mr. Swartz had been killed when he fell from the bucket, his head having struck on a rock in the bottom of the well. Starrett, however, was found to still be alive, although in a very bad condition on account of the effect of the gas. He lived for about three hours, when his life, too, passed out.

It is the opinion of those who have visited the scene of the accident, that a pocket of natural gas was opened when the charge of powder was fired, as it is claimed the presence of gas in the well was very strong and could be smelled for some distance.

The bodies of the two unfortunate men were brought to Wheatland, when an autopsy was held by Coroner Corry, and the bodies prepared for burial at the Pepper mortuary.

The body of Mr. Swartz was shipped last night to Pleasanton, Nebr., and interment, being accompanied by Mrs. Swartz and two children.

It has not been announced when the Starrett burial will take place. Mr. Starrett is survived by a wife and five children, and we understand the family is in very moderate circumstances. Mr. Swartz only recently joined the Modern Woodmen Lodge, it is stated, and carried an insurance policy for \$2,000.