

The Witwer Files: Based on a True Story of Family, Murder, and Justice

D. L. Dennis

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Details of a gang-infested small town in Illinois bring historical richness to this fictionalized family memoir.

Even in small-town Illinois in 1913, gangs presented a problem for local residents. To clean up Hillview, the mayor hired Charlie Witwer as marshal and his brothers as deputies. What happened defies explanation and changed the close-knit Witwer family forever. D. L. Dennis has taken a family story and turned it into a book that is part fiction and part memoir. Crafting the stories that he heard growing up with his grandparents, Charlie and Lucy Witwer, and his three uncles, and adding conversation and some events, *The Witwer Files* is a story of gang violence, lawlessness, and the importance of family.

When Charlie Witwer and his three brothers take a journey from Mexico, Missouri, to White Hall, Illinois, the trip impacts all of their lives. During a stop in Hillview, a gang of young men harasses the brothers and starts a fight. Soon the local boys take off, yelping as they run down the street. Because of this event, the mayor hires the brothers to keep the peace. As they do their work, a level of animosity grows in the town until, one day, Charlie kills the leader of the gang in self-defense and stands trial for his actions. After a great deal of time and stress, he is found not guilty, but the damage to him and his family is irreversible.

In the introduction, Dennis discusses how he learned about the story of his grandfather, Charlie, and credits his family and the residents of Hillview for their additions to the story, as well as their photographs. The details about the family and the town and its residents take up a large portion of the book. Each brother is introduced, and the siblings' move to the town is relayed in great detail. The amount of detail leads to a pacing problem. The actual shooting does not take place until more than three-quarters of the way into the book, and Charlie's courtroom story is given only a few pages. While the details of the Model T, their house, and the jail in Hillview are interesting, the repetition and overemphasis on them slows the pace of the story.

Dennis explains that the style of conversation he employs throughout the story is close to the way he believes people spoke at the time, but the dialogue and lack of consistency further encumber the pace, as is evident in this line: "They been drinkin', an' we don't need ta git in a fight ... I need ta talk ta the mayor tomorrow." Also disruptive to the flow of the story are some minor grammar and spelling errors.

Despite its flaws *The Witwer Files* is an interesting piece of family history.

LYNN EVARTS (October 11, 2013)

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