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ladies sipped tea, the men plotted murder

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Photouring Florida

By HAMPTON DUNN



THE LADIES SIPPED TEA, THE MEN PLOTTED MURDER

By HAMPTON DUNN

SARASOTA --- Thousands of motorists every day pass the point where U.S. 41 and U.S. 301 merge on the south side of the city --- and never notice a little, old-fashioned white frame house which figures prominently in the history of Sarasota County.

The house, at the corner of Wood St. and U.S. 41, is now known as "the Wood house," but at one time it was owned by Alfred B. Bidwell. And in this house on Christmas Day, 1884, was plotted the murder of Postmaster Charles E. Abbe, an event that took place two days later.

Bidwell was a member and leader of the notorious "Sarasota Vigilance Society," and ring leaders of the group went about their gruesome job of mapping the Abbe murder there in the kitchen of this attractive home, on that holiday, while their ladies poured tea and enjoyed a Christmas party in the parlor! In fact, it was a house-warming party that was going on.

The old-timers in Sarasota were upset at this period by activities of land speculators, or land grabbers, who were displacing many of the "squatters" and homesteaders. In 1881, Gov. William D. Bloxham had sold four million acres of Florida lands, including much of present Sarasota County, to Hamilton Disston, the saw manufacturer for 25¢ an acre. Disposition of this property figured in the disputed land dealing.

Bidwell, as a leader of the Vigilantes, was tried and convicted in the Abbe murder. Twenty Sarasotans originally were indicted, but only nine brought to trial. The Vigilantes sent the Postmaster a rope by way of warning him his life was in danger. On Dec. 27, Abbe was fatally shot while gathering help for his orange grove on the bay front a little north of Cunliff Lane, near Bidwell's store. His body was put in a boat, which was set adrift. The gang was broken up after the trials. It's not known for sure why Abbe was a target for the Vigilantes.

The Bidwell home was bought in 1896 by Luke A. Wood, as a 30-year wedding anniversary gift. He selected it as "the most desirable place in Florida."

