

"The Brandon Teena Story" chronicles the confusion over a victim's sexual identity that caused a rare triple murder in Nebraska to get even more play in the national media. That's what brought the transgendered demonstrators to the Richardson County courthouse, and very probably it's what caused this documentary to be made. But the same events might be better labeled "The Dead-End Lives in a Small Town Story." After watching interviews with John Lotter and Thomas Nissen, viewers might wonder how these roommates and small-time hoods were capable of robbing a sidewalk lemonade stand, much less killing anyone. Smug, pathetic and bumbling, they are the original "dumb and dumber." But the vicious stupidity of criminals is routine. What got the attention of the national media was the tabloid-like life of Brandon Teena.

Judging by the photographs, Brandon made a very cute man; he had a boyish face that made him look much younger than his 21 years. He could fix cars. As one girlfriend claimed: "He shaved, sat like a man, talked about women; he said his favorite woman was Cher." Cher? Yes, alarm bells should ring. But the good folks of Falls City, Neb., (population 4,769) let that clue slip past them. It wasn't until December 1993, when Brandon was arrested for passing bad checks, that people found out the truth: Brandon Teena, who had grown up in Lincoln, the state capital, and only recently moved to Falls City, was really Teena Brandon, a woman with a past and a rap sheet.

"The Brandon Teena Story," which airs on Cinemax tonight at 11 p.m. EDT (with a rebroadcast Aug. 29 at 4:40 a.m.) is a gut-wrenching documentary by Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir, which recounts Brandon's unhappy life and cruel end. Even after they found out her gender, those who knew Brandon still referred to her as "him." If you

watch this film, you will too. Teena Brandon certainly considered herself a man, albeit one trapped in a woman's body. She was attracted to women but didn't consider herself a lesbian. "The changes I'm going through in my life will change me forever. Soon I'll have anybody I want, and give them the love that I have," she said. But she never had that chance.

On Christmas Day 1993 she was beaten and raped by her two "friends," Nissen and Lotter. A week later, after Brandon went to the police and pressed charges, the same two men followed her to Humboldt, Neb., and murdered her, in an idiotic attempt to escape conviction on the rape charges. Also killed with Brandon were Lisa Lambert and Philip DeVine. Fearing for her safety in Falls City after the rape, Brandon had moved in with Lambert, a former friend who lived outside Humboldt, 30 miles away. DeVine, who knew both women but lived in Iowa, was staying there after a fight with his girlfriend's family. Lisa's mother discovered their three bodies on New Year's Eve; Lisa's nine-month-old son was found in the house unharmed. The victims had all been shot numerous times at point-blank range, and Brandon had also been stabbed.

If there is a weak spot in the film, it's the way it glosses over the lives of Lisa Lambert and Philip DeVine and their connections with both murderers and with Brandon. Only in passing do we hear a local TV reporter mention that DeVine had a prosthetic leg and was the boyfriend of Leslie Tisdel, whose sister Lana Tisdel was Brandon's girlfriend in Falls City. Nor is it explained why such a seemingly benighted and bigoted family as the Tisdels would welcome DeVine, an African-American, into their home for Christmas (that is, before they threw him out and he went to Lisa Lambert's in Humboldt). We also don't ever find out that Brandon had lived with Lisa previously, and stolen money from her to buy presents for his girlfriends.

Brandon started dating Lana Tisdel shortly after arriving in Falls City. She became friends with Lana's best friend Michelle, sister of Lana's former boyfriend – John Lotter. She also got to know Thomas Nissen who, though married to someone else was dating Lana's aunt, Melissa Wisdom. Lana was really smitten with Brandon, and after his arrest for fraud, stole money from her dad to bail Brandon out of jail. One problem: at the age of 18 Lana was too young to post bail. So she asked Nissen to go and present the money. He did, and allowed Brandon to stay with him and Lotter.

That's when the trouble started. Why did they turn on Brandon? Acquaintances describe them as nonviolent. But both men had spent time in prison: for burglary, car theft and arson. While incarcerated, according to other inmates, they were part of the "lowest echelon" and subject to sexual abuse and other humiliation. Outside, they couldn't keep a job or keep out of trouble. As Lotter explained: "Have a job and a girlfriend who doesn't get pregnant – you're pretty damn lucky; that's Falls City."

After they raped Brandon they were mocked, and Nissen was called a "faggot," and indeed you have to wonder what their tastes really were, and what desires they might have been sublimating by beating their victim beforehand. Nissen, denying his guilt, says, "Some people get mad and punch holes through the walls. I get mad and go burn myself with a cigarette, something minor like that." Of course, all this begs the question: How was Brandon able to date women? Well, as Lana said, "It was really nice being treated like a lady, instead of like nothing – like dirt." A string of former girlfriends testify in front of the camera that unlike their other boyfriends, Brandon was kind and considerate. And when Brandon asked his girlfriend in Lincoln, Gina, to marry him, she said yes. (Until she found out that Brandon had bought the engagement ring on her – Gina's – credit card.)

Once Brandon's dates began to suspect something wasn't quite right, he would claim to be a post-operative female-to-male. Then Brandon would say he was in the midst of a series of sex-change operations. And finally Teena Brandon would admit that she wanted to change genders, but had not yet started. Some didn't care, others

got angry and broke off their relationships. Among the responses were, "Hermaphrodite? What are you talking about? . . . I had to go home and look it up." Either way, it's not a ringing endorsement for the men of the Cornhusker State.