

On Losing One's Head

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Several years ago Erik Larson wrote *The Devil in the White City*, a book that remained high on the *New York Times* best seller list for many months, and still continues to sell in paperback. A work of history, it reads in places more like a novel. Those of you who have read it will remember that it weaves together two stories: an account of the planning and construction of the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, popularly known by its architecture as the Great White City, and the curious and disturbing story of Herman W. Mudgett, a druggist/real estate promoter who, under the pseudonym H. H. Holmes, murdered over a dozen lodgers in a gothic castle that he built to accommodate visitors to the Fair. Reading the book reminded me that Cincinnati has had its own share of sordid murders. Just in the last half century, we have been confronted with Donald Harvey, the so-called "Angel of Death," who killed at least 34 people in the 1970s and 1980s, mostly patients at Drake Hospital. While Harvey was committing his crimes, Alton Coleman and Debra Brown, in 1984, made Cincinnati one of their fatal stops as they carved a path of death across the Midwest. And in 1956 the never-solved murder of Hyde Park socialite Audrey Pugh shocked the community. However, in the nineteenth-century, capital crimes were less common, and for that reason the most violent ones rocked the complacency of the Victorian world.

Perhaps the best known nineteenth-century Cincinnati murder is the 1874 so-called "Tanyard Murder," made famous by journalist Lafcadio Hearn. In that case, a saloon keeper named Andreas Egner, along with his somewhat dim-witted son and a recently fired tanyard worker named George Rufer, stabbed Herman Schilling to death with a six-pronged dung fork. They then flung his body into the tanyard furnace in hopes that it would be completely incinerated. Egner blamed Schilling for knocking up his daughter, a buxom, saucy teenager who wore suggestive clothing and served drinks in her father's saloon; while George Rufer blamed Schilling for the loss of his job. The dim-witted son went along because his father told him to. The murder was brutal, stupid and ill-planned. The three partly intoxicated men, after stuffing the body in the furnace, went to another saloon without cleaning up the remaining evidence. The partially consumed

body was discovered the next morning, along with bloody clothing and the dung fork, and the three men were arrested within a few hours. All received life sentences.

A decade later an Avondale couple and their foster daughter disappeared, causing great alarm in the community. Police investigators eventually discovered that they had been killed for the forty-five dollars the murderers received when they sold the bodies to a staff member of the Medical College of Ohio. The staff member, who was apparently not part of the plan, then cut up each body into five parts, selling each part to a student for five dollars—a sort of corporal sub-letting which profited him a grand total of thirty dollars. Thus were three lives lost.

The Tanyard murder was a crime of drunken anger; the Avondale killings were committed solely for profit. But the murder I want to focus on this evening seems to have had more to do with the killers' total lack of moral character.

Although it was not a dark and stormy night, it was a cloudy, chilly Saturday morning in northern Kentucky, the first day of February in 1896, when Jack Hewling, a young farm hand, headed for work. As he crossed through an old orchard on the farm of James Lock, just off the Alexandria Pike and close to the recently completed streetcar to the Highlands District, now known as Fort Thomas, he spotted a female body amidst broken shrubbery and trampled grass. Since this general area was known as a trysting place for soldiers from the nearby military fort, his first thought was that it was a drunken prostitute sleeping off her evening's labors. When he looked more closely, the lack of a head suggested otherwise.

After quickly notifying Mr. Lock, the two men ran to the military post, less than a half-mile away and the location of the only telephone in the area, and reported the situation to Colonel Melville Cochran. In short order, Campbell County Sheriff Jule Plummer took charge of the case. Under the not unwarranted assumption that the unidentified victim might be from Cincinnati, two Cincinnati policemen were sent to the scene. Detectives Cal Crim, who later founded a well-known detective agency, and Jack McDermott arrived at the scene of the crime later that afternoon, only to discover scores of gawkers and relic hunters tramping around the area. This along with afternoon rains destroyed any chance for clues. The next day, Sunday, a trio of bloodhounds, brought in from Indiana, turned up a scent trail that led directly to a nearby water reservoir. On

Monday morning, under the supervision of Sheriff Plummer, and with hundreds of curious observers lining the edge, the reservoir was drained, at a cost of \$2000. No head was found. Indeed, nothing was found.

The murder site drew ghoulish visitors for several weeks, so many that extra streetcars had to be placed into service. Souvenir stands popped up, selling stones, tree branches, drawings, and postcards; while James Lock, a grocer by trade, set up a refreshment stand on his property where lemonade, sandwiches, and cookies could be purchased. Lock even “moved” the murder location so that visitors would not have to navigate the steep hill. This also protected his orchard from being destroyed.

In the meantime the body had been taken to a Newport undertaker where the county coroner determined that it was that of a young woman in her 4th or 5th month of pregnancy. This suggested a motive, but all attempts at identification came up empty, even though the body was available for viewing by the general public. Not even the services of a spiritualist provided any answers, although she did state that the head had been buried and would never be recovered. Rumors concerning the unidentified body quickly surfaced: rumors of a strange Newport woman who had not been seen for several days, of “a missing Chicago girl,” and of a certain Bessie Leile who was supposed to have had several admirers at the fort. All of these proved unfounded. Concerned friends and relatives offered the names of over a dozen “missing” young women, but within days all were accounted for. The most promising theory involved a Dr. Conrad Kettner, whom the press described as a “traveling physician,” which I don’t think referred to house calls. Kettner and his wife had abruptly disappeared from Newport some months earlier when he was accused of bigamy by a South Dakota woman whom he had neglected to divorce. His medical background suggested he had the tools and knowledge for decapitation, and the body seemed to fit the general description of his “second” wife. However, Kettner and “wife” were finally tracked down in Michigan.

As news of the horrendous crime spread, leads came into the sheriff’s office. One concerned citizen reported that he had observed on the night of the murder a stranger, carrying a small suitcase, boarding the eastbound C & O train at Brent’s Station, a seldom used stop opposite Coney Island. Another report described two suspicious-looking men seen boarding the Fort Thomas streetcar that night who seemed anxious to

catch a steamboat about to depart. And in Ludlow, Kentucky, a man was arrested as he washed blood from his clothes. It turned out that he had bloodied his nose in an accident. Many leads, no solutions.

Initial newspaper headlines had referred to Jack the Ripper and the “Ripper Murderer,” and both police and reporters first concluded that the victim was a loose woman, perhaps even an army “camp follower.” Given the victim’s pregnancy, they now began describing her as “a young and trusting girl” seduced by a ruthless lover, a theme that fit easily into the era’s notions of romance and melodrama. A more thorough post-mortem examination, conducted by Dr. Robert Carothers of the Ohio Medical College, discovered traces of cocaine in the victim’s stomach, further supporting the seduction theory. He also concluded that the victim had been alive when her throat was cut and that the cut was clean except for a jagged area at the front of the throat.

The victim’s bloody and torn clothing, consisting of a Mother Hubbard dress of light blue and a new white corset, proved no help in identifying her. However, her size 3 shoes opened an interesting line of inquiry. A Newport shoe salesman, one L. D. Pooch, identified the foot ware as a product of Drew, Shelby & Company of Portsmouth, Ohio. It was quickly determined that the black cloth top button shoes had been part of a small order sent to the Lewis and Hayes store in Greencastle, Indiana, located some forty miles west of Indianapolis. On Tuesday evening, February 4, Sheriff Plummer and detectives Crim and McDermott, along with several newspaper reporters, arrived in Greencastle by train. After consulting with the store owner, it was determined that the shoes had been purchased by a Pearl Bryan. The next day the three men stood at the door of the farmhouse of Alexander Bryan, just outside of Greencastle, where a sobbing Mrs. Bryan recognized the clothing that the sheriff had brought along as belonging to the youngest of her twelve children. She went on to describe her twenty-three year old daughter Pearl’s webbed toes and a small scar on her right hand that confirmed the identification. Discussion about male friends quickly brought forth the names of William Wood, Pearl’s 19-year old second cousin, and Scott Jackson, Pearl’s beaux and a student at the Ohio Dental College in Cincinnati.

Newspapers described Jackson as being 27 years old, about five feet, seven inches tall, with a lithe, wiry build, sandy mustache, and blond hair. At least one paper thought

he resembled H. H. Holmes, the false name used by the Chicago World's Fair murderer. Jackson was born in Maine, the son of a sea captain. After his father's death, he lived with his mother in New Jersey and worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad. Arrested for embezzlement, he avoided trial by testifying against his supervisor. By the summer of 1895 he was staying with his mother in Greencastle where she lived with a daughter, the wife of DePauw College Latin professor, Dr. Edwin Post. While staying in Greencastle, Jackson became close friends with Will Wood. It was Wood who introduced him to his cousin, and Jackson soon became a regular caller at the Bryan home where Pearl became infatuated with the handsome young man with polished manners. Shortly after Jackson left in October for Cincinnati to attend the Ohio Dental College, Pearl discovered her pregnancy. Although she dared not tell her parents, she finally confided in her cousin. He notified Jackson of the situation. Jackson apparently first supplied Wood with some herbal potions to induce a miscarriage. None worked. He then advised Wood to have Pearl come to Cincinnati where he would take care of the situation. As he informed Wood, he had lined up an experienced chemist—"an old hand at the 'biz'"—who would perform an operation. On Tuesday, January 28, Pearl Bryan arrived at Cincinnati's Grand Central Station, located on West Third Street, apparently expecting to have an abortion.

With these two names in hand, the police officials sent a telegram to Cincinnati requesting the arrest of Scott Jackson and, if also in the city, of William Wood. The three law officers then left for South Bend, Indiana, where Wood was supposed to be staying with an uncle. Cincinnati police immediately staked out Scott Jackson's listed residence, a boarding house at 222 West Ninth Street, next to Robinson's Opera House, Jackson's listed residence. After seven hours, and just when police were concluding that the suspect had left the city, a man fitting the description was reported at the Palace Hotel. Police followed him down Ninth Street and observed that he looked closely at the upper windows of the boarding house before slowly moving on. They then arrested him and took him to the mayor's office for questioning. Jackson admitted knowing both Pearl Bryan and Will Wood but denied any knowledge of her recent whereabouts . . . or of her death. He went on to state that on the Friday night in question he had been studying in his room, that he had not been in Newport lately, and that he was completely unaware

that Pearl Bryan had come to Cincinnati. Despite his denials, Jackson was arrested and a strip search revealed scratches on his arm, blood spots on his undershirt, and two used carriage tickets for the Newport bridge. That night he calmly asked the jailer on duty if Walling had been arrested yet. When this information was passed on to the detectives, they immediately went to the Ninth Street boarding house and arrested twenty-one year old Alonzo Walling who shared a room with Jackson.

Walling was described as being five feet, nine inches tall, with dark hair, heavy eyebrows and hazel eyes, and a neatly-trimmed mustache. Although a native of Mt. Carmel, Indiana, he had lived for a number of years with his parents in Hamilton, Ohio. There is much less information available about him, and, as we shall see, newspapers quickly concluded that Jackson was the principal conspirator and that Walling was primarily a willing assistant. A hypnotist, brought in to elicit more information from the two men, concluded that Jackson himself had hypnotic powers, leaving the impression that Walling may have been manipulated into assisting the “demonic” Jackson. This view was enhanced by the results of a Bertillion examination, a system that claimed to identify criminal personalities through facial and other body measurements. This supposedly scientific process, a sort of updated phrenological application, indicated that Jackson had the “natural cunning to plot and plan,” and concluded that he was “a natural monster, or monstrosity.” On the other hand, the examining officer determined that Walling’s measurements showed him to be merely “a commonplace criminal,” “void of any ability of cunning to plot and plan and meantime, William Wood was taken into custody in South Bend and brought to Cincinnati for interrogation. Although he admitted arranging for the herbal abortion, it eventually became clear that he was not involved in the murder and knew nothing about it. Eventually he was released.

Newspaper accounts reflected the sensationalism that came with the case, and neither reporters nor editors seemed much interested in facts. No rumor or half-baked assumption went unreported, some even gaining headline status. As the story moved off the front page, almost daily the papers reported rumors that were “certain” to break the case—all proved false. During the four days following the discovery of the body, the press had speculated freely about the identity of both victim and murderer. But after the

arrest of Jackson and Walling, and the popular acceptance of their guilt, the focus shifted to the questions of how the two men had carried out the grisly task, which one was the instigator, and what had happened to the head. Both suspects denied any knowledge of the crime, at least initially, although soon both Jackson and Walling began to implicate the other.

There is little doubt that Scott Jackson carried out the actual murder. His romantic relationship with Pearl Bryan was well known, and William Wood's testimony, along with several incriminating letters, made this clear. Following numerous leads, police continued to turn up evidence that linked both men to the crime. Particularly damning was Jackson's coat, found in a sewer at the corner of Richmond and John Streets, which had bloodstains on it and, in one pocket, tansy seeds, an herb believed to induce miscarriages, and two bloody handkerchiefs with the monogram "P.B." A neighborhood saloon owner turned in an empty valise, later identified as belonging to Pearl Bryan, which Jackson had left with him. It also revealed bloodstains, and police believed it had been used to carry the head away from the crime scene. At the dental college, Walling's locker produced a pair of muddy, bloodstained trousers which both men claimed belonged to the other. Jackson eventually told authorities where some of Pearl Bryan's clothing had been dumped into a sewer by Walling. Walling denied knowing anything about this. Police also discovered the victim's hat just off the Alexandria Pike near Newport where it had been weighted with a rock wrapped in a handkerchief belonging to Scott Jackson.

Without a confession by either man, the last days of Pearl Bryan remain obscure. However, based on trial records, witness interviews, and newspaper coverage, we can piece together most of the story. After Pearl Bryan arrived by train on Tuesday, January 28, she stayed at the Indiana House. During the next three days Jackson apparently tried to convince her to have a surgical abortion, perhaps now to be performed by Alphonso Walling. About this time, Scott Jackson conferred with a physician who lived in the same boarding house about the properties of cocaine, and on Thursday he purchased a small amount from H. C. Uhlen, a Sixth Street druggist. On Friday, January 31, the day of the murder, employees at the John Church Co., enjoying their lunch break, overheard the three arguing, along with Bryan's tearful announcement that she was going to take a

train home and tell her brother of her problems. Later that day, either Jackson or Walling rented a carriage for the evening. Some time around 7 o'clock the three—Bryan, Jackson and Walling—were seen eating in a back room at David Wallingford's Saloon, and one employee testified that he saw Jackson place something in Pearl's sarsaparilla. Police concluded that this is when Bryan ingested the cocaine.

Somewhat later the three were observed entering a carriage, the elderly black driver later identified as a George Jackson. Fearing that he would be implicated in the crime, George Jackson did not come forward until two weeks after the murder. His story was that he had been returning from watching a drill of the Caldwell Colored Guards when a man claiming to be a doctor offered him \$5 to drive him and his ill patient to her home in Kentucky. He agreed to this. With the so-called doctor sitting next to him and the moans of the "patient" coming from inside the coach, George Jackson headed through town and across the Central Bridge. After wandering through the gloomy streets of Newport, then south along the Licking Pike for about two miles, the driver became suspicious and attempted to leave the carriage. The "doctor," later identified as Alphonso Walling, threatened him with a pistol. Finally, after taking a circuitous route through the farmland south of Newport, they arrived at an isolated spot on the Alexandria Pike (U.S. 27 today), Walling and another man helped the semi-conscious girl out of the carriage and into a dark grove of trees. When the driver heard sounds of a struggle, and fearing for his own life, he fled the scene. "I got home at four o'clock," he stated, "and went straight to bed."

Scott Jackson and Walling, after killing Bryan, then returned to Cincinnati, abandoned the rented, now muddy carriage in front of the livery on Second Street, and walked to their lodgings on Ninth Street. During the next two days they apparently disposed of various incriminating clothing and Pearl Bryan's head. About this time, Jackson also wrote a letter to William Wood, living in South Bend. After acknowledging that he had "made a big mistake," Jackson requested that Wood forge a letter from Pearl to her parents, stating that she had gone to Chicago and they would not hear from her for a while. Wood was to mail this letter from Indianapolis, but South Bend authorities intercepted Jackson's letter before it was delivered.

During the five days immediately following the murder, Jackson and Walling kept to their regular routines: meals at various neighborhood establishments, classes at the dental college, a visit to a barber on Monday where Jackson had his beard shaved off, and, no doubt, careful readings of the daily newspapers. But then came Wednesday and the news from Greencastle. The two men must have felt excruciating pressure before police arrested them that night.

After six weeks in the Cincinnati jail, and after it was officially determined that Pearl Bryan had died in Campbell County, the prisoners were moved to Newport on March 17. This much anticipated event resulted in a wild dash across the city. Followed by numerous vehicles and the press, the black police wagon, with bell clanging, and pulled by four horses, raced east along a crowded Eighth Street, down Broadway to Second Street and across the toll bridge to the Newport Court House, where an estimated one thousand people waited in hopes of getting a glimpse of the now notorious prisoners. According to an *Enquirer* reporter, the ride took less than 10 minutes. Six days later the two men were arraigned and granted separate trials.

Scott Jackson appeared before the court first. Prosecutor L. J. Crawford, in playing to the community's strong feelings, brought in a headless mannequin, dressed with Pearl's bloodstained clothing, and placed it next to the witness box. This unusual procedure brought an understandably sharp objection from the defense. After considerable discussion, Judge C. J. Helm ruled that the dummy must be removed; although the clothes were later entered as evidence. The prosecution scarcely needed such theatrics—perhaps it was an election year. All the defense could muster was Scott Jackson's testimony that Walling had engineered the deed, and that William Wood was the father of the baby. This failed to move the jury. The evidence was overwhelming, and on May 14 the jury, after deliberating less than 2 hours, returned a guilty verdict. Six days later, Judge Helm sentenced Jackson to be hanged. On that same day, Walling's trial opened. Although it lasted a few days longer, the evidence and arguments were similar, except that Walling testified that Scott Jackson had committed the deed. The result was the same. Of course, both defense attorneys appealed, but to no avail, and finally the date set for the executions arrived.

It had rained for three days, sometimes heavily, but March 20, 1897, saw bright sun and clear blue skies, heralding the first day of spring. A large crowd gathered early around the Newport Court House, no doubt envying those who had been able to secure tickets to sit or stand in the area around the newly-erected scaffold. This would be the first public hanging in the area in over ten years . . . and, as it turned out, the last. Shortly before the scheduled 9 o'clock time, the crowd heard Scott Jackson singing hymns, including "In the Sweet Bye and Bye." No sounds came from Alphonso Walling's cell. At three minutes before the hour, a murmur swept through the crowd. Scott Jackson had asked to speak to the Reverend J. H. Lee, the minister in attendance. He told him that Walling was NOT guilty of murder, a statement that might gain for Walling a delay or even a commutation of his sentence. The Reverend Lee informed the authorities that Jackson had something to say. Sheriff Plummer then asked Jackson if he would state that Walling was not there when Pearl Bryan died. After a long pause, Jackson stated, "I can't say that. That's a trap." In other words, it would amount to a confession on his part. Governor William Bradley, informed that Jackson seemed close to a confession, requested more information. Everyone waited to learn if Jackson would either confess or reveal the whereabouts of the missing head. For two hours messages flew between Newport and Frankfort, but without more information from Jackson, the governor remained unmoved. At last, just after 11 o'clock Jackson simply said, "I have nothing more to say." At 11:32 the two men were marched to the scaffold where Eb Fauth, identified as an "experienced" executioner from Lexington, adjusted the ropes. Both men loudly proclaimed their innocence. Reporters noted that Walling looked at Jackson as if expecting something more. Jackson remained silent. Black hoods were placed over their heads and the knots adjusted. At 11:40 the traps were sprung. But the ropes failed to break their necks, and observers were treated to the sight of the two men twisting for several minutes with their legs jerking and bodies twitching. At 11:55 they were pronounced dead.

Jackson's body was immediately removed, taken across the river for cremation, and his ashes sent to his mother in Greencastle. Later they were buried next to his father's grave in Maine. Walling's remains were sent to Hamilton, where his mother lived, and he was eventually buried in Mt. Carmel, Indiana.

Although Pearl Bryan's life ended on January 31, 1896, she survives in legend.. Her death inspired at least six ballads, entering into that long established tradition of folk music about young women murdered by their lovers.

“Poor Pearl! Poor girl,
She thought she was going right,
She had no dream of murder,
On that dark and stormy night.”

Thus Pearl Bryan lives on in songs, songs that cared little for historical accuracy but rather chose to fit her into a formulaic melodrama of the ruined, innocent girl, a faithless lover, and a crime of passion. Think “Pretty Polly,” “Banks of the Ohio,” and “Knoxville Girl.” Although there is some evidence to suggest that Scott Jackson had not been Pearl's only lover, and that she willingly traveled to Cincinnati by herself to have an abortion, public opinion wanted to see her as a naïve country girl taken advantage of by a false-hearted lover. And it was this image that eventually conformed to the folk ballad tradition:

“Oh, what have I done, Scott Jackson,
For you to take my life?
You know I always loved you,
And would have been your wife.”

She thought it was the lover's hand
That she could trust each day
Alas! It was a lover's hand
That took her life away.

Her murder also became part of a local legend that involves Bobby Mackey's nightclub, a popular spot on Kentucky State Route 9, just south of Newport. This is the Licking Pike, the route of Pearl Bryan's last ride. The club sits on the site of a former slaughterhouse. According to this story, available on-line, in 1896 the abandoned plant was used by a secret group of occultists, which included Scott Jackson and Alonzo Walling. Supposedly, the two men had decapitated Pearl Bryan in order to use her head in some bizarre ceremony, and they would not reveal this information (even though it

might have saved their lives) because they feared Satan's wrath. Pearl's ghost and other victims account for the ghost stories still tied to the location. However, there is no evidence that either Jackson or Walling had anything to do with the former butchering ground or that they ever dabbled in the occult. In all likelihood, the head was removed simply to make identification of the to conceal." Newspapers found all of this very convincing. In the body impossible and that it was either thrown into the river or destroyed in the furnace of the Ohio Dental College.

Pearl Bryan is buried in Greencastle, her grave covered by a simple granite block. Although her head was never found, occasionally people still place Lincoln pennies on her stone, head's side up of course.

Thank You