

## 1 Tragedy and Luck

They had been watching the house on Ninth Street since midafternoon, awaiting the killer's return. Cincinnati Police Detectives Bulmer and Witte were prepared to wait all night if necessary, but it was nearly ten o'clock, and they began to fear that Scott Jackson, the wanted man, might not return that night. They worried too, that the show at Robinson's Opera House, a few doors down, would be ending soon, and the crowd would fill the street just as they were about to arrest their man. Despite its name, Robinson's was a variety theater, playing vaudeville, not opera, and their audience was far from genteel. When they learned who was being arrested, they could become unruly—emotions ran high over this crime, and Cincinnati residents did not always trust their institutions to mete out justice. Matters could turn violent. It had happened before.

Scott Jackson's crime was particularly heinous. Just four days earlier, on the first of February 1896, the decapitated body of a young woman was found in the Kentucky Highlands, four miles south of Cincinnati, across the Ohio River. The entire Ohio Valley was in turmoil over the seemingly impossible task of identifying a headless corpse. Despite a rigorous search of the area, the head remained missing, and without it, identification seemed unlikely. But miraculously, earlier that day, February 5, a telegram from Cincinnati detectives in Greencastle, Indiana, proclaimed that the girl had been positively identified as Pearl Bryan of that city and her killer was likely Scott Jackson, known as "Dusty" in Greencastle, now a student at the Ohio College of Dental Surgery.

The college told the police that Jackson was living at 222 West Ninth Street, and detectives Bulmer and Witte hid in the shadows outside that address awaiting his return.

Reporters from Cincinnati's major newspapers, who would never be far from the action, waited with them.

Shortly before ten o'clock, the detectives received word that Jackson was seen leaving the Palace Hotel, just a few blocks away on Sixth Street, and was believed to be on his way home.

A shadowy figure turned the corner from Elm to Ninth. It was too dark to make out the face, but the build matched the description in the telegram sent from Greencastle: Slender, about 5 feet, 7 inches tall. He was hardly menacing but a cold-blooded killer nonetheless, desperate and possibly armed.

Bulmer hushed the newsmen and waited, motionless, in the dark of the alley to see if his subject made his way to number 222. The man stopped in front of the house and looked up, as if checking for a light in the second-floor window, then he continued walking down Ninth toward Plum Street. Bulmer quietly rushed after him, motioning Witte to follow.

"Your name is Jackson, isn't it?" Bulmer called, "I want you."

Startled, Jackson cried, "My God, what is this for?"

Bulmer did not respond. The two detectives took Jackson firmly by the arms and walked him across Plum Street to the massive stone building that housed City Hall and the Central Police Station.

The arrest of Scott Jackson was a monumental achievement—in less than a week, the impossible case of the headless corpse in the Highlands had been solved. In days to come, the Cincinnati Police would be praised for their excellent detective work, but, in truth, police work had little to do with it. All the breakthroughs in the case had come from outside the force, and Jackson's arrest had been the result of an extended streak of good luck.

The discovery of the body itself had also been a stroke of luck. A young boy found the body the morning of February 1, 1896, less than twenty-four hours after the murder was committed, but it could have easily remained undiscovered for months. The headless corpse lay in a secluded section of woods in the Kentucky Highlands, south of Newport, not far from Fort Thomas, where the Army stationed about 300 soldiers. The intersection of Highland Avenue and Alexandria Pike formed an arrow pointing south with a wooded area between the roads. Along the Pike was a rail fence and behind that was a narrow path, overgrown with bushes. At one time, the path had been used by John Lock, the property owner, as a shortcut to his farmhouse. The body lay at the edge of a clearing in the woods along the path. Within walking distance of Fort Thomas, the spot was well-known to the soldiers who went there for secret trysts with prostitutes or sweethearts but never on a rainy, winter night. It would likely be another three months before any couple would venture there.

On his way to work at John Lock's farm that Saturday morning, 14-year-old John Huling got the shock of his life when he took a shortcut down the path and spotted the headless woman lying on her side down an embankment. Above the shoulders was a ragged edge of freshly cut flesh and bone. Blood was everywhere, saturating the ground beneath her, and even above the body, the undersides of privet leaves were spotted with blood as if they had been sprayed from below. Blood that soaked into the top of her dress was still wet; she had been murdered sometime during the previous night.

The boy frantically ran to tell his boss, and after seeing the body himself, John Lock took his wagon to Fort Thomas and used the fort's telephone to contact the Campbell County Sheriff's office. News of the discovery traveled quickly through Newport, Kentucky, and across the Ohio River to Cincinnati.

Reporters were the first to arrive, taking note of all they saw while corrupting the scene with their footprints in the mud near the body. Ruth Gottlieb of the *Covington Record*, one of the region's few female reporters, added to the confusion with footprints indistinguishable from those of the victim.

Mobs of curiosity seekers arrived soon after, eager for an exciting Saturday morning viewing a headless corpse. They went to work gathering souvenirs—clumps of bloody earth and privet leaves—corrupting the scene until the arrival of Campbell County Sheriff Jule Plummer, who took charge right away. Sheriff Plummer was lean and lanky with a drooping mustache and a gruff manner, recalling the Wild West sheriffs of dime novels. Seeing the potential hazard of the gathering crowds, Plummer wisely spread the word that the county would pay \$50 to whoever found the missing head. The people then moved away from the one place they knew the head was not.

When Cincinnati Police detectives Cal Crim and Jack McDermott arrived, the lawmen drove reporters away from the body as well. Standing out of earshot, they discussed the situation with Sheriff Plummer and planned their investigation. Crim and McDermott often worked together in Cincinnati, but only a crime this shocking would send them across the Ohio River to aid a Kentucky sheriff.

The Cincinnati detectives looked so much alike they could be brothers. Both were big, barrel-chested men with close-cropped hair and full mustaches. Jack McDermott, the older of the two, was quieter but more in tune with the politics of the police force and the city. Cal Crim was a man of action and did most of the talking. He had been practically raised by the police department. Crim arrived alone in Cincinnati as a ten-year-old orphan, and the policemen who found the boy took him under their wing until he joined the force at age sixteen.

Crim and McDermott were good at what they did, but they were not the kind of detectives who solved mysteries. In Cincinnati, murder was a simple thing—an escalated quarrel, a domestic dispute, a robbery gone wrong—some everyday confrontation taken to extreme, usually fueled by alcohol. Get the straight story, and the killer’s identity would be obvious. Crim and McDermott were used to getting the information they needed by force, or, more often, the threat of force. Their intimidating presence alone was usually enough to uncover their suspect and get him to confess. But force would not work in this case. They were not clear on how they would ever find the killer.

The lawmen examined the scene and canvased the neighbors, but they put most of their energy that day into finding the head, the only sure way of identifying the body. In addition to the civilian searchers, Sheriff Plummer brought in a team of champion bloodhounds owned by Arthur Carter of Indiana, considered the most effective tracking dogs in the region. Six men were currently behind bars due to the dogs’ tracking abilities. A seventh, Indiana murderer, Bud Stone, had been hanged a month earlier.

Arthur Carter and the bloodhounds, Jack, Wheeler, and Stonewall, arrived at Lock’s farm just before sundown, but Carter did not like what he saw. The noise of the crowd was making the dogs skittish, and even in the dark, it was apparent that any possible trail had been compromised by people stomping through the muddy ground. He saw little chance of success, but the Sheriff said to press on anyway and handed him a piece of the dead woman’s clothing. After two tries, the dogs led Carter to the edge of a reservoir and began to howl. In the days that followed, the reservoir was completely drained in an unsuccessful search for the head.

John Lock heard nothing the previous night to disturb his sleep, but the detectives learned some of his neighbors had. Mrs. O’Neil, wife of the drum major at Fort Thomas, thought she

heard a scream around midnight but decided it must have been animals fighting. Mrs. Hubert Cave said she and her husband had heard screams and cries for help around 4:00 a.m. She had been preparing his breakfast as he got ready for the early shift at work. She usually went back to bed after he left, but that day, she was too shaken to sleep.

Taking these stories at face value, the lawmen built a possible narrative of what had transpired the previous night. The girl and her killer arrived near Lock's farm sometime before midnight, when it began to rain. The rain was constant after that, but the ground was dry under the body, so the murder must have occurred before the rain started. From the footprints, they surmised that the murderer and his victim walked together to the clearing. There he turned on her, attacking her with a knife. She fought back, letting out the scream that Mrs. O'Neil heard, but she was overpowered and knocked to the ground. He stabbed her in the neck and left her for dead.

Several hours later, he began to worry about the consequences of the girl being identified, so he returned to the scene with the express purpose of cutting off her head to remove all possibility of identification. He straddled her and set his knife to the task, but she had only been unconscious, not dead, and the shock of the blade revived her. She screamed in terror—the cries heard by the Caves. In a frenzy, the killer continued his work removing the head while the girl was still alive.

When the work was done, the killer took her jewelry and anything else that might lead to identification. He also removed her corset and made sure it contained no hidden papers. He then wrapped the head in her coat and took it away with him. It was all conjecture, though, and it brought them no closer to the identity of the victim, or her killer.

In Newport, Kentucky, public opinion said that the victim must have come from across the river, a Cincinnati prostitute murdered by a soldier from Fort Thomas—as if any evil in Kentucky had to have come from out of state. The fort categorically denied the possibility that the killer was a soldier. Cincinnati brothels, though, were quick to supply names of missing girls - Fanny Palmer, Mamie Utter, and a girl identified only as Molly, not seen since Friday.

Like most American cities at the time, Cincinnati treated prostitution as a necessary evil. The current administration, controlled by the political machine of “Boss” George B. Cox, did not tolerate streetwalkers but sanctioned and taxed the bawdy houses, even providing routine medical examinations for the girls. The classiest brothels were located on Vine Street, Over-the-Rhine, the raucous entertainment district north of the Little Miami Canal. Brothels closer to the city center, on George and Longworth Streets, offered their services to those on a tighter budget. Approaching the river, through neighborhoods like Rat Row and Bucktown, price and quality diminished rapidly. The lowest, rankest cribs were on Front Street, the first street up from the Ohio River. Visible from the other side of the river, it was the reason Newport thought first of Cincinnati prostitutes.

Newport took a more provincial view of prostitution, and the Kentucky girls who serviced the fort tended to be more independent and less visible than their Ohio sisters. They worked the Midway, a half-mile strip of Highland Avenue near the fort, crowded with saloons, dancehalls, and card rooms. They were joined by non-professional local girls who enjoyed a dance and more with a soldier. Some of these girls were missing as well. Most notably, Mary Riggles, who was last seen Friday night at a Midway dancehall called Reidmatter’s arguing with her boyfriend. They left together, and neither had been seen since. As these names came into circulation, they were investigated by reporters, and one by one, each was found alive and safe.

On Monday morning, Campbell County Coroner Walter Tingley, together with Dr. Caruthers of the Ohio Medical College, performed a post-mortem examination on the headless body. They could not conclusively determine the cause of death, but what the post-mortem did reveal resulted in a complete reassessment of the victim's profile and provided a motive for the crime. Contrary to early estimations, she was not middle-aged, but was a healthy young woman in her early twenties. She had a slight deformity on her feet – her toes were connected, almost to the tip, with a web of skin. The police were hopeful that this would help identify the body, or at least debunk false claims. But the most dramatic finding of the post-mortem forced both the police and the press to reassess the girl and rewrite her story—at the time of her death, she was five months pregnant.

Sensational as it was, this information was no help in identifying the headless corpse. But the police, with the aid of a few outsiders, were about to continue their run of good luck. If finding the body the morning after the murder had been a lucky break, what happened next was close to miraculous. The victim's clothing had no identifying marks, but inside her shoes was the imprint of a shoe store—Louis & Hayes, Greencastle, Indiana, followed by a series of numbers: 22 11 62358. Sheriff Plummer sent a telegram to the store with a description of the boot and the information inside it. The manager responded that indeed this pair of boots had been sold at their store, but there was no way to determine to whom. Their best guess for a customer who turned up dead in Kentucky was a member of an acting troupe that had passed through Greencastle the previous fall.

The shoes appeared to be another dead end until Louis Poock, a Newport shoe merchant, took it on himself to measure the woman's foot and examine her boots. The numbers 22 and 11, Poock knew, were the shoe size under the French System, a method of measurement favored by



shoe dealers because it obscured the conventional size, allowing the salesman more leeway when fitting a difficult customer. A size of 22 11 would correspond to size 3B—a tiny shoe for a grown woman. The toes of the boots were stuffed with moss, indicating that the victim could have fit into a smaller size.

It was a well-made, cloth-topped boot with laces up the front—an expensive boot not likely purchased by an itinerant actress. Pooch reasoned that the customer would have taken much care before deciding on such a purchase, and certainly, the salesman would remember this sale.

Prior to opening his own shoe store, Pooch had spent nine years as a salesman traveling for the shoe trade, and he knew his business. From the stitching, he recognized that the shoe was not from the East Coast but was probably manufactured somewhere nearby. After visiting several Cincinnati shoe dealers, Pooch determined that the shoes were manufactured by Drew, Selby, and Co., in Portsmouth, Ohio. Pooch went to Portsmouth and visited the factory where he learned that the boot was part of an order sent to Louis and Hayes in Greencastle the previous September, and the order, lot number 62458, had included only one pair in that style and size.

Then a second, unrelated clue pointed to Greencastle. Word had reached Cincinnati that a young Greencastle woman, Mrs. Pearl Kesterson, had left her husband in September and run off with Francis J. Cooper, an army recruit assigned to Fort Thomas. Her family hadn't heard from her in several days. The shoes alone may have been enough to send the investigators to a small town in central Indiana, but a second story out of Greencastle clinched it.

Just before dawn on Tuesday morning, February 4, three Ohio Valley lawmen and at least as many reporters stepped off the train on the platform of the Vandalia depot in Greencastle, Indiana. They had left Cincinnati the previous afternoon and had hoped to arrive before

midnight, but a blizzard had caused havoc throughout the state, and a derailed freight train had delayed them six hours.

The men checked into a hotel and grabbed what sleep they could before Greencastle came to life that morning. When the workday began, Detective Jack McDermott paid a call on Greencastle City Marshal William Starr, then he went in search of information on Mrs. Kesterson. In the meantime, Crim and Plummer, along with the reporters, descended on Louis and Hayes shoe store hoping to identify the girl who had purchased the boots.

Their work at the store turned out to be slow and tedious; the store kept records by customer name rather than date. Many of the store's customers were out-of-town students of DePauw University in Greencastle. They would mail in their orders, which the store could fill more readily if their details were already at hand.

Crim and Plummer checked each customer record looking for purchases between September and January, the most likely time for the sale. Then the style and size of each purchase was checked against the order list Poock had obtained from Drew and Selby. It was a laborious process, plowing through the big ledgers, and the hours went by slowly. By closing time, they had found all but three pairs from Poock's list, but none in a size 3.

From time to time throughout the day, a reporter or one of the lawmen would leave the shoe store and make their way to the Western Union office near the public square. They sent news of their progress back to Cincinnati and learned what was happening back home.

While progress in Indiana was interminably slow, the Kentucky investigation was still at full speed. Someone had identified the body as Francesca Englehart, a woman who had recently married a Dr. Kettner of Dakota. The doctor had allegedly murdered his new bride after she

learned he already had a wife out West. Police had not yet interviewed Kettner, and the identification would later prove false.

It looked as though identifying the victim by the shoes would prove futile as well. Then the investigators received another stroke of good luck. Late that evening, the manager of the Greencastle Western Union office, A. W. "Gus" Early, approached a Cincinnati reporter who had come in to wire his paper. He said he had some information he thought might be useful to the police. Operators had full knowledge of telegraph messages sent and received in the office. Early said a telegram had been sent earlier in the week by Fred Bryan to a party in Indianapolis inquiring whether his sister Pearl had arrived safely. The response came later the same day saying that Pearl had not arrived; moreover, she had not been expected.

The reporter was not impressed. They had been tracking down missing girls for days, and here was another. But Early had more to tell. He was friends with Pearl Bryan, and her cousin, Will Wood, had told him that Scott Jackson had been courting Pearl on the sly and had taken matters too far. Wood said that Pearl was pregnant, and he was going to send her to Cincinnati, where Jackson was to procure an abortion for her.

At first, Early had not given much credence to the story. He knew Wood to be a liar and a troublemaker who enjoyed spreading malicious rumors about Greencastle girls, including his cousin Pearl. But since the arrival of the police from Cincinnati, Early had given the matter more thought; maybe the reason Pearl was not in Indianapolis was that she had gone to Cincinnati. Early was very much afraid the headless girl in Kentucky might be Pearl Bryan.

The reporter immediately passed this latest information along to the lawmen. Late as it was, they went to the home of Mr. Spivey, the shoe clerk, and persuaded him to reopen the store. They needed to check the records for Pearl Bryan. Spivey was incredulous. The Bryans were one

of the oldest and most respected families in the county, and Pearl was well known and highly regarded in Greencastle. The murdered girl could not be Pearl Bryan. But the men insisted, and Spivey reopened the store so that they could check.

The books he showed them earlier had mostly contained DePauw students, women from outside of Greencastle, who were far more likely than a local girl to be found dead in Kentucky. When they opened the book to the name of Pearl Bryan, there it was, the missing pair, ladies' cloth-top, button, size 3, 'B' last, sold to Pearl Bryan for \$2.50 on November 18, 1895.

By now, it was after midnight, but any delay would only put more distance between the police and the killer. Sheriff Plummer, carrying a satchel containing the victim's bloodied clothes, hired a wagon to take them to the Bryans' home outside of town. The rattling of the wagon coming up the long drive woke those inside the house and lights came on in the windows before Sheriff Plummer reached the door.

An elderly man with a long gray beard answered the door, and Plummer asked if he was Alexander Bryan, father of Pearl Bryan. When the man said he was, Plummer, as gently as possible, delivered the terrible news.

Alarmed by the late-night visit, family members in their nightclothes gathered in the front room. Pearl's father and mother, an older sister, Mary, older brother Fred and younger brother Frank, stood in shocked silence and disbelief.

Sheriff Plummer turned to Pearl's mother and said he had a difficult task to ask of them; he wanted them to identify the dead girl's clothes. Piece by piece, he pulled each article of clothing, coated in dried blood, from the bag and showed it to the family.

Mrs. Bryan immediately began sobbing, "My Pearl, my Pearl."

There was no doubt they were Pearl's clothes; her sister could even tell them when and where each item had been purchased. The green checked dress, now stiff with bloodstains and mud, had been made by her mother for Pearl's sister Jennie, who had died of tuberculosis the previous summer. After that, Pearl had worn it as a dressing gown. Looking up wildly, Mary grasped desperately at the slightest straw of hope. Could there have been a mistake? Could Pearl have loaned the clothes to someone else?

Sheriff Plummer then told her that the murdered woman had toes connected almost to the tips by a thin web of skin.

"My God, it is Pearl!" Mary cried, "We used to tease her about those when she was little."

Pearl's mother broke into hysterical sobbing while the rest of the family tried to comfort her amid their own anguish and sorrow.

The following day when Mr. and Mrs. Bryan had regained their composure, they agreed to meet with reporters. Before answering their questions, the Bryans were anxious to learn all they could about the investigation and whether their daughter's head had been found yet.

"We don't want her grave pointed at as the grave of a headless woman," said Alexander Bryan. "Our sorrow is more than we can bear, yet we would rather stand over the grave of an innocent daughter lured to her ruin than that of her betrayer and assassin."

When asked about Scott Jackson, the Bryans said they were acquainted with him through their grandnephew, Will Wood, who occasionally brought him to the house, but if Jackson had been courting Pearl, it was without their knowledge. They spoke in the bitterest terms of Will Wood's treachery and made it clear that they held him equally responsible for their daughter's death.

When the news hit town the morning of February 6, Greencastle residents were shocked. They had followed the Fort Thomas tragedy in the newspapers, as much of the country had, but no one suspected for a moment that the victim might be one of their own. Pearl was well-known and popular in Greencastle, and the whole town was in mourning. Stores remained closed for the day, and townspeople gathered in the square to find solace in each other's company, sharing their grief and anger.

The only thing preventing a lynching in Greencastle that morning was the absence of anyone to lynch—Scott Jackson was in Cincinnati, and Will Wood had decided, a couple days before, to visit relatives in South Bend, Indiana.

Will Wood's father, The Reverend DeLoss Wood, Presiding Elder of the Methodist Episcopal Church, assured the lawmen that his son had nothing to do with Pearl Bryan's death. He had been in South Bend staying with his uncle since the previous week. But the detectives had gathered enough information in Greencastle to arrest both Scott Jackson and William Wood, and they were afraid that Wood, like Pearl Bryan, may have gone to Cincinnati instead of his stated destination. They sent this telegram to the Cincinnati Chief of Police, Colonel Phillip Deitsch:

February 5, 1896. Arrest and charge with murder of Pearl Bryan, one Scott Jackson, student at Dental College, about 24 years old, 5 feet 7 or 8 inches high, weighs about 135 pounds, blonde, nearly sandy mustache, light complexion, may have beard of about six months growth, effeminate in appearance. Positive identification of clothing by family. Arrest if in Cincinnati, William Wood, friend of Jackson. Charge as accomplice. About 20 years, 5 feet 11 inches, light blond hair, smooth face, rather slender, weighs 165 pounds.

Then, taking Rev. Wood at his word, detectives Crim and McDermott, accompanied by Sheriff Plummer, took the next train to South Bend. They hoped to bring Will Wood back with them to Cincinnati. With three states now involved, extradition was likely to become an issue, so they made sure that Ohio and Kentucky were both represented.

Upon receipt of the telegram in Cincinnati, Colonel Deitsch contacted Judge Gregg, who issued arrest warrants for both Scott Jackson and William Wood. With Jackson's arrest imminent, Deitch and Mayor John Caldwell stayed late in the mayor's office. When they received the news that Jackson was in custody, the Mayor and the Chief were ecstatic. They had the killer and tomorrow Will Wood—either an accomplice of Jackson's or a witness against him—would arrive in Cincinnati. In less than a week, the impossible case was closed.

But the authorities had celebrated too soon. In coming days, the unfolding story would become increasingly complicated, with each new revelation prompting ever more questions and multiplying the possible answers. Instead of leading to certainty, the coming investigation would add increasing doubts as to how Pearl Bryan had met her terrible death, some of which would never be resolved. Scott Jackson's arrest was not the end of anything; it was only the beginning.