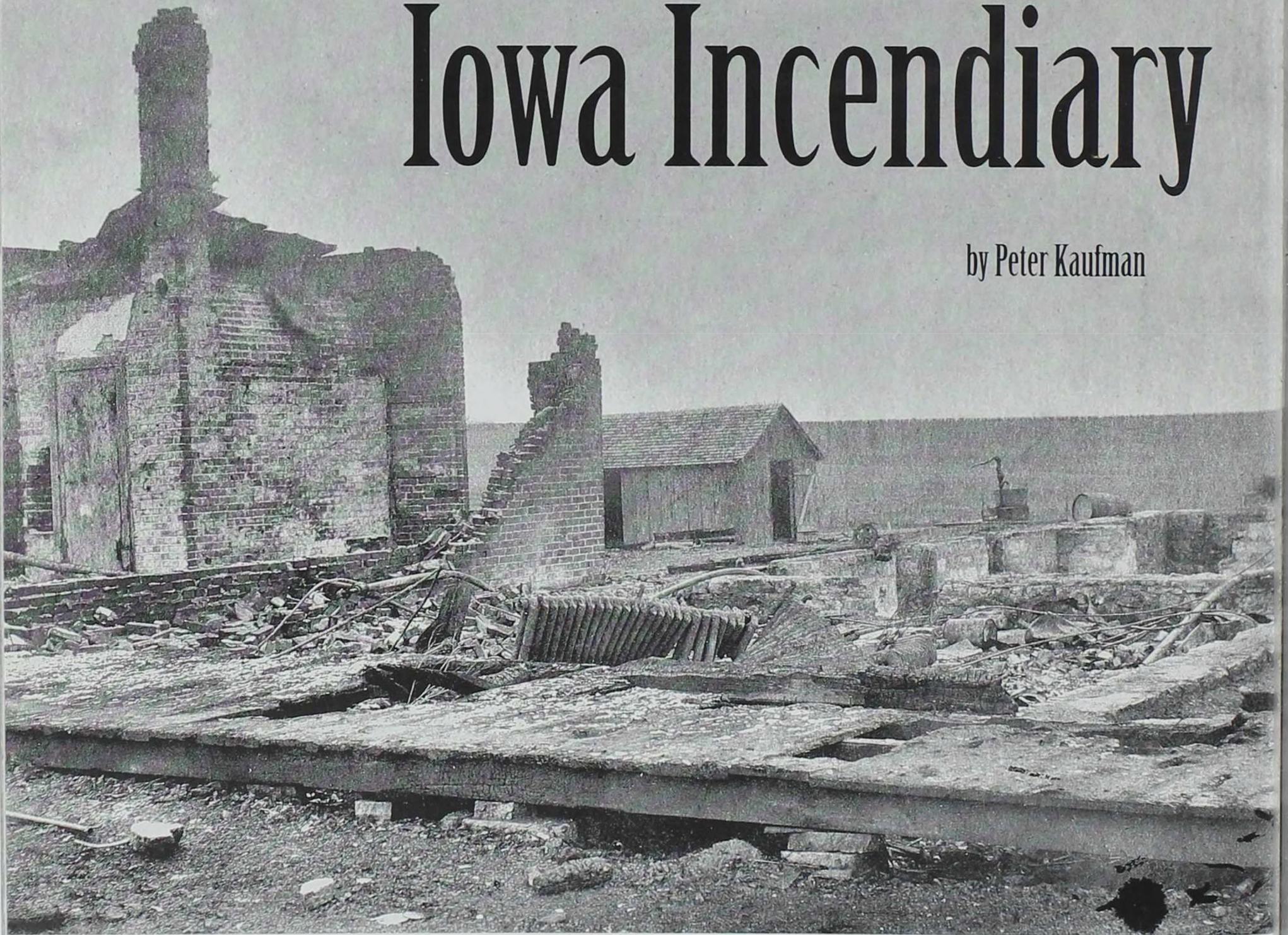


Iowa Incendiary

by Peter Kaufman



Frank Novak had the golden touch. At least that's what most people thought in Walford, Iowa, in 1897. To everyone who knew him, the 32-year-old Novak *was* Walford, since he functioned as the community's postmaster, business organizer, and head of civic activities. A native of the area, he had grown up on a farm, attended a commercial school, and, according to later reports, "with a little assistance from his father he opened up a business and it became prosperous and he made one advancement after another."

Novak owned the only bank and dry goods store

in Walford (population, a hundred or so), and he was active socially, his name appearing regularly in the newspapers in Cedar Rapids. It seemed that he could do no wrong, as "everything he touched seemed to turn to money."

In short, Frank Novak could spin the world as fast or as slowly as he chose. Never satisfied with his station in life, and despite some recent business setbacks, this son of Bohemian immigrants was always searching for new endeavors, and he made no secret of his lifelong goal—to acquire a large fortune.

So it was not surprising that by March 1897, Novak

had journeyed to Alaska and was on the Chilkoot Trail, struggling in the deep snow with hundreds of prospectors on their way to the Yukon River and the Klondike gold fields. But there was one difference between the Iowan and the other men on the frozen trail, and it had nothing to do with gold. Frank Novak was suspected of murder back in the Hawkeye state and was making a desperate attempt to disappear in this land of uncharted mountains and roaring rivers. He wanted to vanish and begin a new life under an assumed name, and he was positive that no one would ever find him in this vast territory.

The Walford businessman didn't know it, but someone was already on his trail. It was Novak's personal nemesis, a man who had already traveled more than four thousand miles in search of his prey. The pursuer was still hundreds of miles away, but time and distance meant little to him. Like a clockwork man, this indefatigable tracker was wound up and would stop at nothing to capture Novak, whom one newspaper called "the most daring and villainous criminal Iowa has ever had within her borders."

The puzzling story of Frank Novak began on February 3, 1897, in the village of Walford, located in the southeast corner of Benton County. At about 1:00 a.m., saloon keeper Martin Loder was awakened by his wife's shouts that a fire had broken out at the Novak & Jilek dry goods store down the street. Loder dressed quickly, told his brother-in-law to wake the Novaks (who lived across from them), and raced through the blowing snow to the two-story wood and brick building. The first floor and basement were engulfed in flames. He tried several times to break through the front door, but was driven back by the intensity of the fire as well as the coal gas fumes.

Loder assumed that the store owner, Frank Novak, was trapped inside. In the past year the store had allegedly been robbed, and recently Novak and his brother-in-law, Charles Zabokrtsky, had taken turns sleeping on a cot in the store to prevent another burglary. It was

Novak's turn that night, and, in fact, Loder had seen Novak behind the counter just a few hours earlier, getting ready to close down the store.

The townspeople battled the flames in a frantic race to save the store and stop the fire from spreading. As they pumped water from a nearby well and shoveled snow on the fire, clouds of steam rose into the frigid night air. But the blaze was too strong, their efforts too weak. They finally gave up and looked on helplessly at the ravenous flames, which licked and consumed the building with such ferocity that across the night skies an angry red glow was visible a dozen miles away in Cedar Rapids.

By the following morning, all that remained was the basement foundation and a ragged brick wall, standing like a sentry over the debris. Lars Norland, a farm equipment dealer from nearby Norway, was squirting water on the smoldering wreckage in the basement when he noticed what appeared to be a bone sticking out of the ashes. He played the water over the object and washed away a thick layer of ash and debris, revealing part of a human torso lying on the wire springs of a narrow metal cot. Martin Loder and several others picked their way through the smoking rubble and carried the remains over to a storage shed. All that was left of the corpse was a torso and head. The latter was burned to the bone and the exposed skull appeared to have been fractured.

Returning to where they had found the cot in the wreckage, the searchers discovered, amazingly intact, four small items: a pair of pocket scissors, a penknife, a piece of dental bridgework, and a metal identification tag. Several people claimed that these personal items belonged to store

owner Frank Novak.

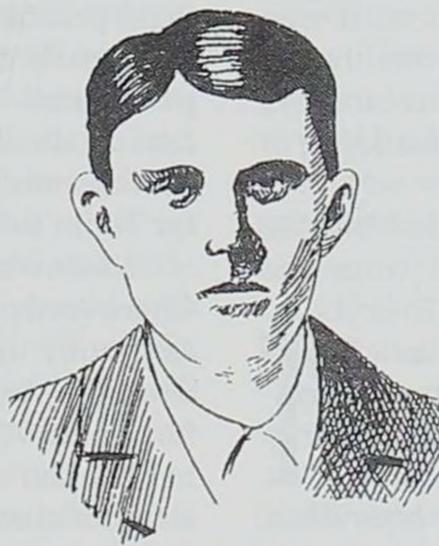
But Edward Murray, a young farmer who had had several drinks with Novak that night, was also missing. Murray was later characterized as a "hard-drinking Irishman" and yet a "good-natured [and] harmless fellow." He was not known to be a close friend of Novak's.

A storm of controversy swept through the little town. While many were certain that the body was



Frank Novak

NOVAK: COURTESY THE AUTHOR, MURRAY: CEDAR RAPIDS GAZETTE, FEBRUARY 2, 1897



Ed Murray



"Searching for the other body in basement ruins." Two days after the Walford store burned down, this sketch of the scene of the fire appeared in the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*.

Novak's, others argued just as strongly that it was Ed Murray's. A handful believed that Murray had murdered Novak and robbed the store. To others, it was clear that Novak had killed Murray. Yet another theory was that both men had died in the fire—that burglars had robbed the store and then set fire to the building to destroy the evidence.

In short, the scene in Walford was chaotic. "Intense excitement prevails," shouted a headline from the February 5 *Cedar Rapids Daily Republican*. "Everybody has his own theory and wild stories [are] in circulation [and] hundreds and hundreds of people, farmers from miles around the little burg [are] driving into town to view the ruins and hear the latest news." It was, another paper concluded, a "mystery boundless and fathomless."

People picked through the coals and wreckage, speculating as to who had perished in the flames. In-fighting broke out between the two anguished families—Novak's and Murray's—as each set of relatives claimed that the remains should be turned over to them for funeral preparations. The anxiety in the little town was so palpable it was reported that Novak's father attempted suicide by swallowing poison.

Amidst all this tension, Michael James Tobin, a young attorney with a sterling reputation, appeared in town. Born in 1865 in New York to Irish immigrants,

Tobin had graduated from Cornell College in Iowa and Columbia Law School and then established a fledgling legal practice in Vinton, the Benton County seat. Still in his early thirties, Tobin had just been elected county prosecutor. The Walford incident would be his first case as an elected official. In one of the many ironies woven into the story, Frank Novak had campaigned for Tobin's election.

Meanwhile, the Benton County coroner, Dr. C. B. Chenoweth, ordered an inquest. A coroner's jury heard testimony from several witnesses, including Nellie Shea, Ed Murray's sister. Shea, a widow who lived on a farm near Walford, was positive that the remains were her brother's. Scraps of fabric wedged in the corpse's armpits matched a shirt she had given him for Christmas a few years ago. She recognized the pattern of white crescent moons and stars on a blue background. She also noted that on the corpse were remnants of a St. Joseph's cord. Murray, as a Catholic, had worn such a cord around his waist.

Wencil Ruml, a well-known physician from Cedar Rapids, examined the remains and noted that although the brain had been scorched, he had discovered a fist-sized amount of baked blood clotted inside the left portion of the head. Tobin pressed the physician as to whether a blow to the head might have resulted in this clot before the fire and could have been the cause of

death, but Ruml said that because the rest of the skull was so badly burned, it was impossible to reach that conclusion.

Then a 19-year-old dental assistant named Louis Hasek was called before the coroner's jury. After scrutinizing the upper and lower jaw, he noted that the left upper bicuspid and incisor were missing. The skull could not be Novak's, Hasek stated. He was certain beyond a doubt that in his examination a few weeks earlier, Novak still had had those teeth. And while Hasek had no explanation why Novak's bridgework was discovered under the cot, he was adamant that this was not Novak's skull.

After three days of testimony, Tobin was convinced that it was Ed Murray—and Murray alone—who had died in the fire. The county attorney's next step was to determine what had happened to Frank Novak.

Tobin did more digging and discovered that Novak had recently taken out \$27,000 in life insurance through five different insurance agencies and that he was deeply in debt from playing the Chicago grain market while running up heavy gambling losses in Cedar Rapids.

Tobin now had a theory and a motive. He believed that Novak had concocted a plan to murder someone of a similar height and weight, burn the body beyond recognition, and disappear. If he could get away with it, his wife would receive all of the insurance money for herself and their two sons, and he could begin a new life elsewhere, freed from his financial burdens.

Despite this new information on Novak's debts and insurance policies, something still didn't quite add up, especially to those who knew him well. "But why," an acquaintance wondered, "did he not protect local creditors, settle outside claims the best that he could and go on with business? The people of Walford thought everything of him and would have stood by him to the end." Still convinced that Novak had planned the whole insidious scheme, Tobin moved forward.

The county attorney was not alone in his suspicions; Travelers Insurance Company also believed that a scam was being perpetrated. Travelers hired Thiel Detective Agency to find Novak if he was still alive.

G. H. "Gus" Thiel was the company's president, a former Civil War spy and a Pinkerton man who had left Allan Pinkerton's well-known detective firm and founded his own competing company in 1873.

Thiel now dispatched several detectives to Iowa, where they diligently chased down each lead. The county sheriff had already telegraphed descriptions of Novak to officials in major cities and seaports, and, in fact, a report came in that Novak had been seen in Bal-

timore boarding a ship for Europe. This proved to be false, and the focus quickly returned to Iowa.

Thiel's men combed eastern Iowa, following up on reports of possible Novak sightings. Carrying photographs of Novak, they interviewed people in Walford and the surrounding area and discovered that a man resembling Novak had traveled south through Homestead and Holbrook on the afternoon after the fire, and that he had paid a young farmer for a 20-mile wagon ride to Iowa City.

A Thiel detective picked up Novak's trail at an Iowa City depot. After interviewing several conductors, he learned that on the night of February 3 a man matching Novak's description had purchased a ticket to Omaha, signing it as "Frank Alfred." More of Thiel's men joined the chase and followed Novak's trail from Nebraska to Portland, Oregon, and then up the coast to Vancouver, British Columbia. Thiel's agents now believed that Novak was using other aliases, including "J. A. Smith," which had appeared on another train ticket in nearly identical handwriting. Discovering that Novak had arranged passage on the *Al-Ki* steamer, the agents guessed that he was now working his way up the Alaskan coastline to Juneau.

They were right. The "Iowa incendiary" had picked the Yukon, thinking that he could safely assume a new identity there.

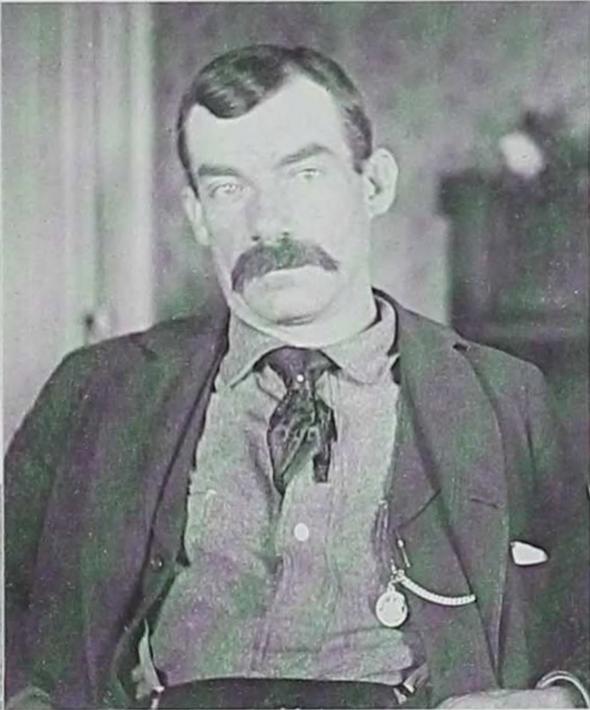
When the agents asked their boss about the next move, Thiel abruptly called them off the hunt. Although pleased with their progress, he now had someone else in mind, the perfect man for the next part of the chase. His name was C. C. Perrin—part bloodhound and part rattlesnake.

Tall, with a square jaw, auburn hair, and a thick red mustache to match, "Red" Perrin grew up in the Southwest and had a reputation as a hard-bitten deputy sheriff in the Arizona Territory. A veteran of the Apache Wars with the scars to prove it, Perrin had also worked as a security agent at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair and recently had tracked down a Chicago embezzler in Mexico.

Now the Arizonan was in for the adventure of his life. He was handed a photograph of Novak and, as one reporter put it, "told to find the original."

Perrin first traveled by train to Ottawa for extradition papers. By the time he reached Vancouver, Novak had a six-week head start. Most other men handicapped by Novak's long head start into the Alaskan wilderness might have simply turned around, but Perrin had no "give up" in him. He caught a steamer heading up the Inside Pas-

COURTESY THE AUTHOR



Detective Red Perrin

sage to Sitka, where he hired a Norwegian carpenter named Knudson to help him in the long journey ahead. The two men followed Novak's trail north through the Alaskan panhandle, traveling by boat up the stormy Lynn Canal from Juneau to Dyea, where they engaged seven Indians to help pack their goods over the rugged Chilkoot Pass to Lake Lindeman.

There Perrin and Knudson set up camp. They hiked five miles be-

fore they found wood suitable for building a boat, then cut the timber and floated it down to the lake. Having Knudson along was an excellent choice, as his carpentry skills were needed for a boat. They whipsawed logs, nailed the wood together, and sealed the hull with oakum and pitch. Then they set off down the Yukon, battling the deadly White Horse Rapids, where they nearly lost their provisions and came close to drowning. They endured swarms of mosquitoes and powerful headwinds while fighting off hunger and fatigue.

Five weeks and 600 miles after breaking camp at Lake Lindeman, the two ragged and exhausted men beached their boat at Dawson City. Ironically, despite all of the hardships on the trail and the river, the pair had made such good time that they had unknowingly passed Frank Novak aboard a scow on Lake Bennett.

Single-minded and relentless, Perrin was closing in. Unfazed by the mad merry-go-round of the gold rush town and the riches that surrounded him, he scoured Dawson City, showing Novak's photograph to dance hall girls, Indians, gamblers, and greenhorns—whom the old prospectors called *cheechakos*. No one had seen the man. Perrin also alerted Inspector Charles Constantine of the North West Mounted Police that he was searching for a murder suspect.

Ten days later, on July 12, Perrin spotted a man sitting in a scow tied up at the riverbank. At about 5'9" and 180 pounds, with a full beard of reddish-brown whiskers, the man matched Novak's description. Perrin approached him.

"Hello, Novak, I have followed you a long time but I caught up with you."

"You are mistaken. My name is J. A. Smith."

"It is, is it? Well, you are accused of killing a man by the name of Ed Murray in Walford, Iowa, and that is why I have had you arrested and am holding you under arrest now, but if you can identify yourself as being J. A. Smith, why, we will turn you loose."

The bearded man vehemently denied everything and said that Perrin was making a mistake. He was not from Iowa but was born in Cincinnati and had lived for some time in Chicago. But when Perrin grilled him about Chicago, the suspect could name only a few streets and knew little else about the city.

"You claim to be J. A. Smith," Perrin said, taking out an envelope and asking him to write that name on the paper.

The bearded man complied. Perrin reached into his pocket and pulled out an old letter that Novak had written. He compared the handwriting and said, "These signatures look very much alike."

Novak said slowly, "They certainly do."

Without "the batting of an eye or twitching of a muscle," Novak listened to Perrin read the arrest warrant and then was marched to the Mountie headquarters, where the post physician compared the suspect's mouth with Perrin's written description of Novak's teeth. Amazingly, Inspector Constantine had found a man in Dawson who was from the Cedar Rapids area. This man positively identified the suspect as Frank Novak. Back in Iowa the two had belonged to the same fraternal lodge.

There was no doubt. Perrin had the right man.

It took six weeks of travel from Dawson City before Perrin and Novak finally reached the Midwest. At 2:30 a.m. on September 2, Train No. 2b of the Burlington, Cedar Rapids and Northern Railway pulled into Vinton, Iowa. Waiting patiently for them with about 50 other Iowans was M. J. Tobin.

As county attorney, Tobin now faced two problems. First, the case centered on circumstantial evidence alone, and it would be difficult to obtain a conviction without direct proof. "This will be a desperately fought case, as all the evidence is of a circumstantial nature," he had written to the president of Travelers Insurance. "Novak's case is one of the most heinous in the history of crime in Iowa and the state proposes to convict him of murder . . . because we believe him guilty."

Tobin was also worried about the defense attorney who would be sitting across from him; Novak had quickly engaged Thomas Hale Milner of Belle Plaine. Milner—like Tobin, a graduate of Iowa's Cornell College—had been in practice for about 20 years. A fiery,

FRANK NOVAK FOUND

Insurance Swindler and Murderer Captured at Last.

TRACKED TO FAR-AWAY KLONDIKE.

Sharp Work Done by a
Daring Officer.

Headlines in the *Cedar Rapids Daily Times* announced the dramatic events in the Yukon to readers in Iowa.

red-headed dynamo and a formidable courtroom opponent, Milner was known for his "fierce" attacks.

Milner also apparently relished colorful phraseology. In his advertisements he referred to himself as "quick as a hippopotamus and gentle as a sunstroke . . . I am ready day or night—Sundays excepted—to try a lawsuit. It is my Eden, and in it perpetual flowers bloom, for me. Better is a dry morsel and contentment therewith than a stalled ox with contention. Give me the stalled ox and clothes or I perish. To get them I must have business. References given. Always ready."

Both Tobin and Milner knew that they needed additional legal firepower. For Tobin, the choice was easy. He picked Earl L. Boies, son of former Iowa governor Horace Boies, to help develop the prosecutor's strategy. Also a Cornell graduate, Boies was a polished, eloquent orator—"a Titan in intellect," according to a colleague—and in fact would give the final summation in the case.

On the defense side, Milner had sought a solid legal jurist. He selected a well-known retired judge, John J. Ney, a law professor at the State University of Iowa. Both Boies and Ney would make important legal contributions to the case.

The trial began on November 9, 1897, nine months after the fire. Throughout the trial, Novak's father and Murray's father sat only three feet apart, both near the jury. Spectators and reporters packed the stuffy, cramped little courthouse in Vinton. Reportedly more than half of the attendees were women, many of whom sent a steady stream of candy, flowers, and cakes to Novak's cell. The accused man had an easy time of it in jail, reading, playing cards, talking with friends, savoring the home-cooked meals from Sheriff Metcalf's

CEDAR RAPIDS DAILY TIMES, AUGUST 26, 1897

wife, and granting an occasional interview with a reporter.

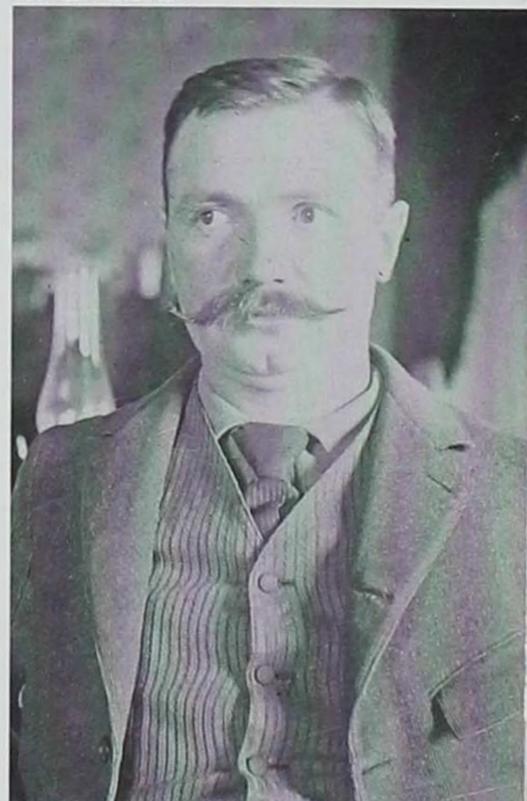
From the start, Milner's main defense strategy was based on his old tactic: "Deny everything and ask for proof." He also placed special emphasis on Novak's version of what had happened the night of the fire—that he had placed a bottle of whiskey laced with morphine behind the counter, with the hope that burglars would likely drink it. He left Ed Murray for a few minutes, and when he returned he noticed that Murray was acting strangely. Novak assumed that the young farmer had unwittingly drunk from the spiked whiskey bottle. He helped the groggy young man to a cot and fell asleep himself. When he woke up, the store was on fire. After searching for Murray through the dense smoke, Novak panicked and fled, thinking, as Perrin later put it, that "the best thing to do was to fall off the earth for awhile."

The defense also contended that the gases released by the burning coal and wood may have caused Novak to act irrationally and wander around the countryside in a stupor. From the witness stand, L. W. Andrews, a professor of chemistry at Iowa State College, supported this theory. Someone exposed to these gases, Andrews said, would be "more or less dazed" and not in full control of his mental faculties.

Milner and Ney had another ace up their sleeve—a maneuver to discredit Perrin, the prosecution's star witness. In later July, after Novak was arrested by the Mounties, he had made a confidential confession to Red Perrin as they left the Yukon. Perrin had promised Novak that he would keep the confession a secret until the grand jury convened in Iowa. But as soon as they reached Vinton, Perrin allegedly broke his word to Novak and told Tobin about the confession. Milner claimed that this showed that Perrin couldn't be trusted and that any testimony from him was highly suspect.

Milner now made it his job to rattle the detective, and he began with Perrin's lengthy diary, which had appeared in a number of newspapers and was serial-

COURTESY THE AUTHOR



Frank Novak, after he was captured by Red Perrin in the Yukon.

ized in *The Travelers Record*, published by Travelers Insurance Company under the tantalizing title "The Diary of Detective Perrin: Adventures in the Klondike While Searching for Novak, the Murderer and Insurance Swindler." Milner saw Perrin's diary as nothing more than a bid for publicity and fame.

"You wanted to come in the form of a conquering hero and publish that yourself, didn't you, Perrin?" Milner asked.

"Yes, I was looking for all kinds of notoriety, that is right," Perrin said with more than a hint of sarcasm.

"And you wanted your employer to know you had obtained it, didn't you?"

"Oh, he knew that all right enough."

After two weeks of testimony, the final summations began, drawing hundreds of people to the courthouse. Many were turned away. The crowd was so dense that it took the sheriff and his prisoner a quarter hour to fight their way to their seats.

For the prosecution, Tobin described the case as "clothed in mystery deep and profound" and reviewed the testimony. He discredited Milner's ad hominem attack against Perrin: "This cross-examination was not made to break down his testimony. It was made to prejudice you in your minds against that detective." He argued that Perrin had disclosed Novak's confession to Tobin as a "duty," not "treachery."

Arguing that Novak had dealt a fatal blow to Murray's head and then set fire to the store, Tobin said dramatically, "For money, for \$27,000, Ed Murray was hurled into eternity and his poor body burned beyond recognition."

Speaking for the defendant, Ney stated that no evidence pointed to a murder conviction. He assailed the prosecution for failing to establish a motive. Novak was "in the full tide of his prosperity," he reminded the jury. "Murder? Bosh." Milner made the same point: "That he would sell the love of a beautiful wife, and the



Defense attorneys Thomas Milner (left) and John Ney, as portrayed by the Cedar Rapids Gazette during the trial.

kisses of two lovely children and separate himself forever from them for the purpose of collecting the little insurance policies. Why, gentleman, it is a libel."

Ney tried to dismiss the idea that Novak's flight to the Yukon was proof of his guilt. "You cannot convict a man because he has not the bravery to face circumstances," he said. "What could he do; what could he do? He had to do one or the

other of two things; one to come back and the other to flee and get away. Not from a sense of guilt, but from a sense of fear of being accused."

Prosecutor Boies countered: "When [did] it become necessary for innocence to shield itself by flight and behind names that were assumed? . . . When did it become necessary for innocence to invent stories that stand here demonstrated to be false?"

In a masterful summary for the prosecution, Boies described Novak's story as "teeming and reeking with lies and falsehoods." Would the jurors, he asked, "turn loose upon this country, unpunished, a man guilty of such a crime?"

The jury retired to deliberate at 11 a.m. They returned with a verdict after 11 that night. Since the jurors could not agree on first-degree murder, they voted for murder in the second degree and recommended ten years of hard labor. After some consideration, Judge G. W. Burnham decided that this was too lenient and sentenced Novak to life imprisonment.

"The condemned man sank back in his chair," one newspaper reported, "and a ghastly pallor overspread his face. He nervously clutched at the edges of the table and fixed his eyes toward the floor."

Many Iowa newspapers were astonished by the verdict. "We venture to say that ninety-nine percent of those who followed this trial were disgusted with the outcome," wrote a Cedar Rapids paper. "The verdict lacks the first hint of consistency," stated another. Others believed No-



Prosecuting attorneys M. J. Tobin and Earl Boies.

vak should be freed. Some felt that the second-degree verdict was a poor compromise by the jurors. For his part, M. J. Tobin always insisted afterward that one of the jurors had been bribed.

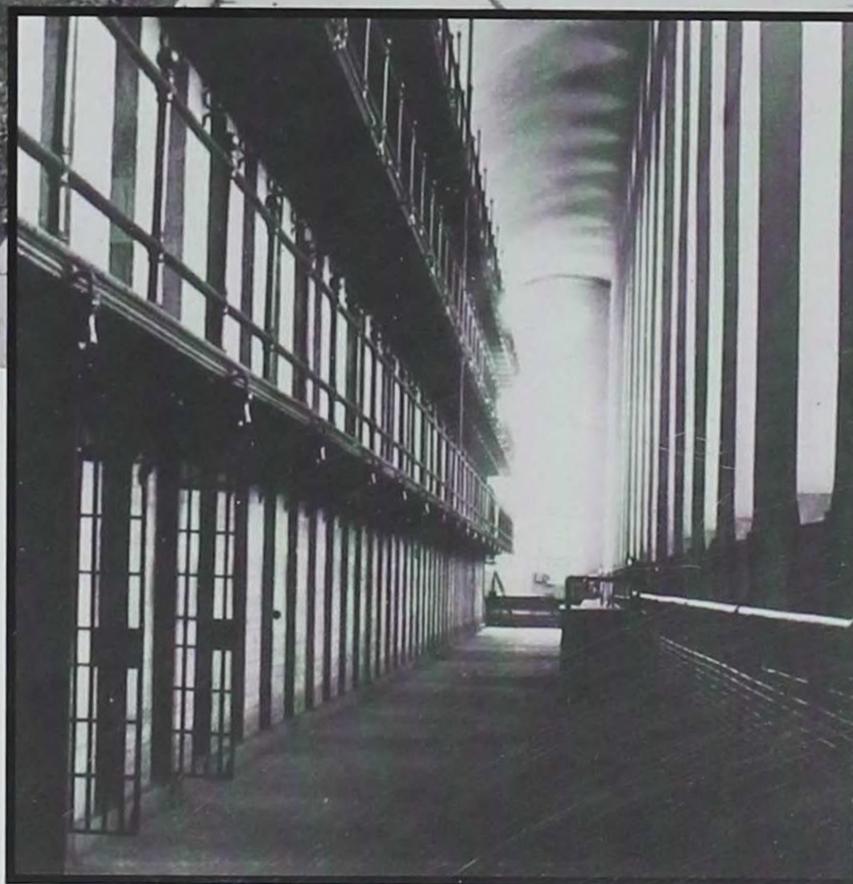
Defense attorney Milner immediately filed an appeal, but Novak could not post the \$18,000 bail, and so, on the evening of December 30, 1897, while the rest of the state was preparing to celebrate the New Year, Novak traveled by train with Sheriff Metcalf to the State Penitentiary in Anamosa.

After a rough start—he was placed in solitary confinement for assaulting another prisoner—Novak settled down and gradually accepted life at the penitentiary. He lost his appeal in 1898. A few years later, he became interested in photography while assisting the prison photographer in snapping pictures of all incoming convicts. Later on, he took photos documenting life in the prison and even was allowed to shoot landscapes outside of the penitentiary walls. Evidently, he became quite an accomplished photographer, so good that the *Anamosa Prison Press*, a newspaper published by the inmates, featured many of his pictures and mentioned a statewide photography contest that he had entered. Novak even took a studio portrait of Governor Albert B. Cummins when he stopped by the penitentiary in 1905.

Perhaps it was during that visit that Novak made an impression on Cummins. More than likely it was the incessant lobbying by Tom Milner, combined with the efforts of a *Cedar Rapids Gazette* editor named F. W. Faulkes, who was convinced Novak was innocent.

In 1908 Cummins commuted Novak's sentence from life imprisonment to 25 years, and, with time off for good behavior, the former "Iowa incendiary" calmly walked out of Fort Madison on September 4, 1911, a free man. He had served 14 years of his sentence.

Once again, many Iowans were howling mad. One incensed newspaper reader who called himself "Yours for the Truth" wrote a long letter detailing the facts of



The exterior of Anamosa Penitentiary at the turn of the century, and one of the cell blocks.

the case and blasting Novak's distortions. The writer argued that "the crimes of the [James &] Younger Gang in Minnesota were not as dastardly as the one committed by Novak."

The successful prosecution of the Novak case brought local prominence to Benton County Attorney M. J. Tobin. Propelled by his victory, he opened a law office in Vinton; three of his sons became lawyers and joined the firm later. He became a leader in the community, served on the board of di-



COURTESY ANAMOSA STATE PENITENTIARY MUSEUM

Frank Novak (fifth from left) played violin in the Anamosa prison orchestra, c. 1900.

rectors of the State Bank of Vinton, and was active in the Republican Party as well as various state and local issues until his death in 1945.

The indomitable Red Perrin also had a successful career. As a result of his diary being excerpted in several newspapers, he became known as a famous detective and worked as Gus Thiel's right-hand man. He courted and married Mary Agnes Murray, a cousin of Ed Murray's, and eventually rose to the position of assistant manager of Thiel Detective Agency's New York office. Perrin died in a train crash in upstate New York in 1911, leaving behind his wife and their two-year-old daughter, Helen.

The remainder of Frank Novak's life is somewhat murky. While he was in prison, his wife, Mary, filed for a divorce and was granted one in 1904. After he was released from the penitentiary in 1911 at age 47, Novak stayed in the town of Fort Madison for several months, attempting to sell prison photographs. Newspaper accounts later noted that he had looked into opening a photography studio in St. Louis, Des Moines, or Iowa

City. Then in 1913, a marriage notice appeared in the *Cedar Rapids Republican*, listing the wedding of Ella Johnson of Cedar Rapids to a man named Frank A. Novak, a "banker and prominent real estate broker in Chicago." That was the last known time his name appeared in any newspapers. According to an account by M. J. Tobin's son published in 1970, after Novak was released from prison, he "led a quiet and uneventful life."

More than 110 years have passed since the Novak story whipped eastern Iowa into a froth. Today, a traveler driving down Route 151 South passes through Walford, now a sleepy little bedroom community of Cedar Rapids with a dozen or so small businesses. The old Milwaukee Road branch line still cuts through Walford but is now operated by the CRANDIC rail system. In the summer, one can stand by the old tracks, just a few dozen feet away from where Frank Novak's store used to be and listen to the corn grow in the blistering Iowa heat.

Five miles from Walford is another small settlement, Norway, and just outside of town on a steep hill is St. Michael's Cemetery. A gravel road neatly bisects the graveyard, with "Catholics buried on one side and everybody else on the right," according to one local citizen. On the left side—the Catholic side—is a three-foot, gray marble obelisk. The years have aged the grave marker, and it now lies broken in the tall grass next to its base.

Buried by the fallen stone, along with his brother, are the remains of poor Ed Murray, an innocent man who by fate, providence, or just plain bad luck, was absolutely in the wrong place at the wrong time. ❖

Author Peter Kaufman lives in Cincinnati, Ohio, and is writing a book about the Novak case.

NOTE ON SOURCES

Travelers Insurance Company in Hartford, Connecticut, provided copies of these items: M. J. Tobin to Dr. J. B. Lewis, Oct. 20, 1897; "Investigation of Alleged Death of Frank Novak"; and "Testimony Before the Coroner's Jury," State of Iowa, Benton County.

Other archival sources include the following: Captain Charles C. Constantine, "Report," July 26, 1897, 1897 Inventory No. 13-12m Extradition Files R188-42-8-E, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa; Mary M. Farley and Marcella E. Dillon, comp., "Biography of John F. Farley," scrapbook, p. 21, Special Collections Division, Georgetown University Library; John Tobin to Dr. William J. Petersen, Jan. 14, 1971, John W. Tobin Papers, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries; and F. W. Faulkes to Governor Albert Cummins, Jan. 14, 1903, State Archives, State Historical Society of Iowa (Des Moines).

Regarding court documents, the State Historical Society of Iowa, Special Collections (Iowa City) holds these documents: "State of Iowa vs. Frank A. Novak," court transcript, filed April 19, 1898; and the appellant's argument and brief, appeal by Thomas Milner. "In The Supreme Court of Iowa, January Term, 1899, Appeal from Benton County District Court, The Appellee's Argument and Brief" is in the author's possession.

The author interviewed Pat Erger (July 26, 2007) and Karl Fischer and Patricia Tobin Fischer (Aug. 11, 2007).

Newspapers and periodicals include these: *The Travelers Record*, Travelers Insurance Co., Sept., Nov., and Dec. 1897, and Jan. and Feb. 1898; *Anamosa Prison Press*, Dec. 23, 1905; *Chicago Times-Herald*; *New York Times*; and several Iowa newspapers, including *Daily Iowa Capital*, *Cedar Rapids Daily Republican*, *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette*, *Marion Register*, *Marshalltown Times-Republican*, *Vinton Eagle*, and *Waterloo Courier*.

Secondary sources include Pierre Berton, *The Klondike Fever: The Life and Death of the Last Great Gold Rush* (New York: Knopf, 1972); James Clark Fifield, ed., *The American Bar: Contemporary Lawyers of the United States and Canada* (Minneapolis: James C. Fifield Company, 1918); William B. Haskell, *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Gold-Field, 1896-1898* (1898; repr. Fairbanks: University of Alaska, 1998); Frank Morn, *The Eye That Never Sleeps: A History of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Harley Ransom, comp., *Pioneer Recollections: Stories and Pictures ... of Benton County* (Vinton, Iowa: Historical Publishing Company, 1941); Jean Newland Swailes, comp., *Belle Plaine, Iowa, 1862-1962* (Belle Plaine: Belle Plaine Century Corporation, 1962); *The Sybylline* [Cornell College yearbook] (Mount Vernon, Iowa: Edson Fish, 1888); John W. Tobin, "Murder: A Persistent Pursuit," *Palimpsest* (Oct. 1970); and John W. Tobin, *Tobin Tales* (Iowa City: Penfield Press, 1986).

Manuscript annotations are in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files, State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City).

How to Research a Murder

Voltaire once wrote that "a historian has several duties. Let me remind you of two of them: the first is not to slander; the second is not to bore." A third duty that he failed to mention is "to leave no stone unturned." In researching the strange story of Frank Novak—one with more twists and turns than a New York subway ride—this duty was particularly important.

As an aside, my own interest in the Novak story stems from a longtime fascination with the Klondike Gold Rush, a passion I developed while working in a cannery on Kodiak Island, Alaska. At the time, there wasn't a lot to do on "The Rock" except work, fish, and read. One book I discovered there was *The Klondike Fever* by Pierre Berton. The author, who was raised in Dawson City, wrote a brief but riveting account of Novak's flight to the Klondike and subsequent arrest by Red Perrin.

After I decided to write a book about the Novak case, my first action was to post e-mails on several genealogical websites, asking if anyone knew anything about or was related to Frank Novak of Walford, Iowa, who lived in the late 19th century. I received several responses, including one from Novak's great-granddaughter.

I contacted several organizations in Iowa, including historical societies in Benton and Linn counties and chambers of commerce in Cedar Rapids and Vinton. I wrote to both Iowa state penitentiaries, where Novak was incarcerated—in Anamosa and Fort Madison. The staff at Anamosa State Penitentiary Museum was particularly cooperative in providing details of his stay there.

My next step was to contact public libraries in Cedar Rapids, Norway, Anamosa, Vinton, Belle Plaine, Fort Madison, and several other Iowa towns. Each librarian I talked to was friendly and made a number of suggestions regarding available resources. In fact, the Vinton librarians put me in touch with several of M. J. Tobin's descendants, who provided a great deal of information, including a tattered scrapbook that Tobin's wife, Lucy, had assembled more than 60 years ago.

The web can be a useful research tool for any writer. In this instance, www.newspaperarchive.com was vital. This online resource includes dozens of Iowa newspapers, many dating into the mid-19th century. (The site also provides access to hundreds of non-Iowa papers.) Searching by name, date, or topic, I tracked down contemporary newspaper coverage of the crime and the case. The State Historical Society of Iowa Libraries subscribe to the website, as do some public libraries. Personal subscriptions are affordable. By Googling "Travelers Record Perrin," I accessed Perrin's accounts of his trip to the Yukon and capture of Novak.

Finally, on three research trips to Iowa, I visited many of the communities integral to the story and spoke with local historians and residents whenever possible. In Iowa City I made extensive use of State Historical Society of Iowa collections, including "State vs. Novak," a 1,600-page typed transcript of the trial. The staff members there, as well as those in Special Collections at the University of Iowa Libraries, were most helpful in my research efforts.

—Peter Kaufman