

# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

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## Murder: A Persistent Pursuit

[Within the past year Judge Harold Viator of Linn County suggested that County officials should send some of their most important legal cases to the State Historical Society in Iowa City for safekeeping, preservation, and possible use in its publication program. W. Howard Smith, president of the Society, phoned the Superintendent and urged him to contact all 99 Court Houses immediately. About six counties already have indicated they would follow Judge Viator's suggestion when lack of space requires further consolidation of records. The following stories are by Judge John W. Tobin of Vinton, recently retired judge of the 17th Judicial District. The first story, a case tried in November of 1897, appears in Iowa Reports, Volume 109, pp. 717-746, *State of Iowa vs. Frank A. Novak, Apellant*. The Editor]

Frank Novak was genial, respected, and a leader in the small town of Walford in the southeast part of Benton County, Iowa. For several years he had been a partner in a general store which was the center of the community's activities.

Late in the night of February 2nd, 1897, the store burned to the ground. In the basement of the ruins searchers found the badly charred remains of a human body burned beyond recognition. At first it was assumed to be that of the proprietor, Frank Novak, who had disappeared, and the body was claimed by his family.



However, Edward Murray, a heavy drinking bachelor who lived with his sister a couple of miles out of town, and who had been in Novak's store much of the evening of the fire, was also missing, and his family likewise claimed the body. The two men were about the same size. An insurance company announced it was withholding payment of life insurance in the then large sum of \$27,000, which had been taken out by Novak only a short time before.

The county attorney, who had assumed office only the preceding month, ordered a coroner's inquest. In the three-day hearing behind closed doors he presented evidence which satisfied the coroner's jury that the body was not that of Novak and was, in fact, Murray's remains.

The insurance company retained the Thiel Detective Agency of Chicago to try to locate its insured policyholder—Frank Novak—and C. C. Perrin, known among his friends as "Red," was assigned to the task. Perrin had little more than a photograph and physical description of the man he sought—and a record of never giving up.

By interviewing farmers along the route, Perrin was able to trace his man overland from Walford to Iowa City. There railroad records, and the memory of the ticket agent, led Perrin to Omaha. In those days purchasers of long distance tickets were required to autograph stubs retained by the railroad company. By systematically checking



thousands of such stubs, Perrin found that a man who signed as "Frank A. Norris" had purchased a ticket to Portland. Perrin, with the instinct of a bloodhound scenting his prey, gambled that Frank A. Norris and Frank A. Novak were the same person. Clues discovered at Portland led him to embark for Alaska.

Great excitement prevailed in Alaska in 1897 with the report of rich gold finds in the Canadian Klondike. Perrin once more played a hunch that Novak would join in the frantic dash for the gold fields and he headed in that direction. By painstakingly questioning everyone he met along the way, Perrin was able to follow the course "Norris" had taken and doggedly pressed on. Out of Sitka the steam launch which Perrin had rented was swamped. After a thirty-four mile hike in a blinding snowstorm, his Indian guides led Perrin to the summit of the fearsome Chilkoot Pass. A perilous descent brought him to a lake where a raft was built for the hazardous trip to Dawson City—600 miles away. Enroute down a river Perrin was spilled overboard, and, clinging to the raft, was dragged several miles in the icy water. Again, shooting a treacherous rapids (which, according to the Indians had never been navigated) their unwieldy craft capsized. They finally reached the calmer waters of Lake Bennett.

There fate played a mean prank on Perrin. While crossing this lake his sailboat passed a



scow loaded with men who also were bound for the Klondike. Perrin could have been saved 600 miles marked by frequent near-disaster, and weeks of anguished labor and unbelievable danger. Instead he had to undergo sleepless nights tortured by vicious Yukon mosquitoes that made bloody masks out of human faces; whirling between sheer cliffs, floating down a terrific torrent which tore their boat apart at the infamous White Horse Rapids; and finally, a close escape from a forest fire. All this could have been saved had he but known that one of those men on the scow on Lake Bennett was Frank Novak (alias Frank Norris) the man he sought.

But, ignorant of that fact, Perrin pressed on and, after further discouraging experiences on the Yukon River he finally reached Dawson City, Canada, the metropolis of the Klondike. Checking all of the saloons and gambling halls of that wild town soon established that "Norris" had not been there. The fact was that at Lake Bennett "Norris" and the others on his scow had learned of another route and they did not reach Dawson City until more than a week after Perrin.

Unaware that each day brought his quarry closer, the relentless Perrin continued his seemingly hopeless quest of the elusive Novak. His persistent checking of the dives finally paid off.

It was the night of July 12, 1897, in a bawdy dance hall saloon in that remote gold mining camp



in the Canadian Klondike that a heavily bearded man was playing a violin for the dancers. Hearing a voice close by his side the fiddler turned in his chair, the violin still under his chin. Standing at his side were two members of the British Northwest Mounted Police who had just served upon him a requisition for his arrest, issued by the President of the United States. Directly in front of him stood a stern visaged man with an auburn drooping mustache—"Red" Perrin. The bearded man addressed him, "You are mistaken. My name is A. J. Smith. My home is near Cincinnati, Ohio, and I have never been in Iowa." His accuser replied: "You are Frank A. Novak. You are accused of killing a man by the name of Edward Murray in Walford, Iowa, and I am arresting you on the charge of murder." The detective had completed the assignment which he had undertaken back in Iowa the preceding February. "Red" Perrin "got his man."

The following week Perrin and Novak were aboard the next steamer headed south for Seattle. They arrived back in Vinton eight months after the fire which had left a disputed body in the ashes of what had been the general store in Walford.

JOHN W. TOBIN