

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## An Early Grave Snatching Incident

Late at night on December 29, 1870, a wagon drawn by a span of mules left a livery stable in Iowa City. Three men, their bodies muffled against the crisp winter air, were riding in the wagon. They drove to the outskirts of Iowa City. Near the new Rose Hill Cemetery they stopped, tied their mules, and taking tools from the wagon, trudged into the cemetery. Here, a few hours before, an old woman had been buried. When the men returned to the wagon they were carrying a heavy, awkward burden. Loading it into the wagon, they returned to Iowa City and drove directly to South Hall which housed the laboratory of the newly established medical department of the State University of Iowa. One of the men had a key to the door. They removed their burden from the wagon and carried it into the building. The mules and wagon were returned to the livery stable. Iowa City slept on.

On the next morning, Friday, December 30, Dr. Boucher, professor of anatomy in the medical

department, bought materials for the preservation of laboratory specimens. If the druggist knew that Dr. Boucher had found it difficult to teach anatomy to his students because he had almost no laboratory materials, he was not thinking of it then. Nor did he know that in August, a month before the medical department opened for its first session, Dr. Boucher had written to Governor Samuel Merrill asking whether the unclaimed dead from the state penitentiary might be sent to the medical department. The Governor had not approved. Neither did he know that during the first session students had complained that they could not learn human anatomy by studying cats and dogs and one alcohol hardened and badly dissected cadaver. If anyone noticed that Dominick Bradley was sleepy-eyed that Friday morning, it is not recorded. Bradley, part time janitor of the medical department and driver for Dr. Boucher, possessed a local reputation which was none too good. Rumor linked his name with crime and prison sentence in another state. Even the keeper of the cemetery was unworried. Thus Friday passed, and evidence of unusual activity in South Hall aroused no comment.

On Saturday morning, the keeper of the Rose Hill Cemetery made his rounds. The newest grave looked as if it had been molested. Frightened by the discovery he hurried to inform the members of the cemetery board. A member of

the City Council joined the members of the cemetery board that afternoon to go out to investigate. Bringing shovels along, the men dug into the grave. Almost at once a shovel struck a broken piece of the coffin — evidence enough of what had happened. In the trampled dirt someone picked up a pocket-notebook — it bore the name D. Bradley. A messenger was at once sent to notify the relatives of the dead woman.

Because of Bradley's connection with Dr. Boucher, suspicion fell immediately upon the medical department. By five o'clock that afternoon, the relatives appeared in the office of the county attorney to swear out a warrant for the search of the medical laboratory. But it was Saturday night and New Year's Eve, and the procedure was slower than it should have been. The warrant was not turned over to the sheriff until ten o'clock that night.

In the meantime, news of the "grave snatching" and the impending search of the medical department laboratory had spread like prairie fire through Iowa City. The Secretary of the University Board of Regents, whose duty it was to look after the business of the Board between sessions, had left town that afternoon and could not be reached. No member of the Board could be found, but there was one man who was, according to his own testimony, ready to meet the emergency and save the medical school from possible ruin. That

man, John P. Irish, had, as a member of the Board of Regents, been instrumental in establishing the medical department. Although no longer a member of the Board, he did everything in his power to support the department against its attackers. When excited students came to his room in the old Clinton House with the story of the impending search of the laboratory, Irish realized that if the body were found in the laboratory, the incident might well destroy the department. Thinking only of getting the evidence away from the University, Irish sent one student to the livery stable to secure a horse. The others he sent to the laboratory with instructions to wait there until the first returned with the horse, then to pass the body out the west window to the horseman. The rider was instructed to take the cadaver out of Iowa City and hide it in some secure place. These instructions were quickly followed and in less than half an hour, from his room in the Clinton House (located on the edge of the campus less than a block from the laboratory) Irish heard the clatter of a horse's hooves on the floor of the wooden bridge which spanned the Iowa River just west of the campus.

Meanwhile, after the warrant had been delivered to the sheriff, that officer decided that he could not legally serve it until daylight. Accordingly a group of excited townspeople organized a guard to patrol the University grounds during

the remainder of the night. Hardly had the sound of the horse's hooves died out before this self-constituted guard came noisily to the University campus. Nothing escaped from the medical building that night.

The next morning, New Year's Day 1871, the laboratory of the medical department was searched, but the search revealed only the inadequate facilities for teaching anatomy. One cadaver was found, but it was completely dissected, and, from its appearance, seemed to merit the name given it by the students of the department — Moses. All evidence pointed to the medical department, or some members of it, as being guilty, but the body had not been found. Dominick Bradley's pocket-notebook had been found near the grave. The druggist remembered that two days before Dr. Boucher had procured materials for the preservation of laboratory specimens. The demonstrator of anatomy, Mr. North, admitted that another cadaver was being prepared for dissection in the medical laboratories. Where it had come from and where it had gone he could not say. Despite this evidence, no one connected with the medical department would admit knowing anything about the grave snatching. Dominick Bradley had disappeared. Dr. Boucher protested his innocence. The few medical students who had remained in Iowa City for the holidays had suddenly vanished. Dr. Peck, Dean of the

medical department, expressed pained surprise — no doubt genuine — that the outrage had occurred and offered to do all that he could to help recover the body. In the face of the conspiracy of ignorance and silence, the searchers were almost helpless. Everyone connected with the case was convinced that the body had been in the laboratory, and that it had been removed and hidden somewhere in, or around, Iowa City. Accordingly searching parties were organized and sent out, but the night rider had covered his tracks well. The searchers returned empty handed.

Already indirectly implicated in the crime, John P. Irish again entered the affair. While the searching parties were scouring the countryside, Irish sent word to Dr. Kimball, who was acting for the relatives, offering to assist in recovering the body on the condition that no attempt would be made to prosecute the offenders. Irish's offer was gratefully accepted for at the time the only thought of the relatives was to recover the body and restore it to the grave. Returning to his office, Irish wrote a letter, a copy of which he sent by messenger to each member of the medical faculty and each medical student in town. In this letter he stated that a body had been taken from the Rose Hill Cemetery, that evidence pointed toward a member, or members of the medical department as the guilty parties. No attempt would be made to prosecute if the body were immediately re-

turned. In order that the guilty individual might conceal his identity, a coffin would be placed in the alley behind the undertaker's establishment shortly before midnight. It would be brought in shortly after midnight, and the body must be in it.

While Irish was thus preparing the way for the return of the body, another citizen, A. B. Harris, learned that no prosecution was intended if the body were promptly returned. Shortly after getting this information, either by design or accident, he met a member of the medical department. To him Harris related what he had heard. The professor, who remained unnamed, knew of no one who might have been implicated, but gave assurance that he would do all he could to spread the information. Two hours later a "stranger" came to Harris offering to direct him to the body on the condition that he go alone, return alone, ask no questions, and maintain absolute secrecy; Harris demurred, insisting that he had no desire to go on such an unusual mission without company. The stranger, however, refused to do anything unless his directions were scrupulously observed. Finally Harris decided to go. Accordingly the stranger gave him the directions which he was to follow.

After getting a horse and wagon, Harris drove out of Iowa City over the rough frozen ground. West of town, at the place specified, he found a second "stranger" waiting for him. This man di-

rected Harris to a place about three miles west of Iowa City. Here, a short distance from the road and buried in a strawstack, the body was found. With the help of the stranger, Harris got the body into the wagon and returned to Iowa City. The stranger, however, accompanied him only to the place where he first appeared, and there, after bidding Harris goodnight, he disappeared into the night. Harris drove on to Iowa City. In the alley behind Dixon and Roe's undertaking establishment he found the coffin. After placing the body in it, he went to the front entrance and announced to the waiting group of men that the body had been returned. The coffin was brought into the building. One glance showed that dissection had been begun. Without further examination the lid of the coffin was fastened down and in the early morning of January 2, 1871, the body was taken back to the cemetery from which it had been carried four days before.

But the story of Iowa City's first grave snatching does not end with this dreary and silent midnight trip. The damage done by Dominick Bradley and his two companions was not easily mended; the people of Iowa City were not prone to forget the outrage. The evidence was clear that Bradley had robbed the grave. It also appeared that Dr. Boucher and several medical students had agreed to pay Bradley the sum of ten dollars for his night's work. To most people this

meant that the medical department of the University had deliberately fostered the act, and whether justified or not, they criticized the medical department. Furthermore, although the promise had been given that no attempt would be made to prosecute the offenders, warrants were sworn out for the arrest of Dominick Bradley, Dr. Boucher, John P. Irish, and two students of the medical department, I. L. Potter and A. B. Nichols. On February 10, the accused were examined in Justice Dodder's court, and all, with the exception of Irish, were bound over for trial in the May term of the District Court. When the grand jury met, no indictment was returned — not even against Bradley who had signed a confession claiming entire responsibility for the act. But even then the case was not closed. John P. Irish was suspected by many of having had a part in the affair. For more than a year afterwards, Republicans attempted to blacken his character by reference to his "grave snatching" proclivities. Irish, prominent in the Democratic party, both in Johnson County and the State, suffered from this abuse. Although Dr. Boucher resigned his professorship ("because of the pressure of his private practice," he asserted in his letter of resignation) and shortly afterwards moved to California and died, the medical department was severely criticized not only by those who held the department directly responsible for the outrage, but also by those who

welcomed an opportunity to attack the Dean and the State University. From January until June, the Iowa City papers hurled charges and counter-charges at one another, the medical school, and the University. Letters to the editor from irate and outraged citizens poured in and were printed. So bitter did the vituperation become at one time that the *State Press*, edited and published by John P. Irish, devoted almost half of its weekly space to the topic. Newspaper gossip and quarreling ceased only after a group of eighty-three business and professional men — including the entire City Council — inserted a notice in the papers in which they lamented that the culprits of the act had not been brought to justice and demanded, for the good of the University and of Iowa City, that the newspapers drop the subject once for all. So the incident was finally closed leaving bitterness and ruined careers in its wake, and bequeathing a long enduring popular prejudice against the medical department and its students. But for a few years memory of the act itself was kept alive in the lurid game of "grave snatching" which the little girls of Iowa City played with their dolls.

The next General Assembly passed a law which allowed the medical department of the University to secure the unclaimed dead from the state prisons.

VERNON CARSTENSEN