

# IOWA GOTHIC: The Villisca Ax Murders

by  
*B. J. Zenor*

Something was wrong. At eight o'clock on a fine June morning Joe Moore had not yet arrived to open his implement store. His clerk had worked for Moore long enough to know that his boss was always on time. It was one of the reasons why the business had grown until it rivaled the successful Villisca Hardware and Implement Store owned by F. F. Jones. Villisca, Iowa was a small town -- too small, really, to support two implement stores. That Moore could make a living from his business proved his acumen and his dedication. The clerk was worried -- worried enough to start for the Moore home.

Meanwhile, Moore's brother Ross talked to Mary Peckham on the telephone in his drugstore. Mrs. Peckham said she was concerned because there were no early morning stirrings at the house next door--Joe Moore's house. Ross Moore thanked Mrs. Peckham for her concern and hung up. Joe always got to the store before seven. Ross quickly slipped off his apron, started for the house. What he would find there put sleepy little Villisca into headlines all over the country.

In 1912, Villisca was a lovely, thriving little community. Nothing had ever happened there that made national headlines. Nestled between two branches of the Nodaway River, located on the Bur-

lington Road, the city's reason for being was the railroad. Platted in 1858, Villisca was actually only a "paper town" until the first train came through Southwest Iowa in 1869. Now it lived up to all expectations -- busy, but with no crime to speak of; bustling, but a nice place to raise children. Best of all, it deserved its Indian name: *Villisca*, pretty place.

As Ross rushed to his brother's home he probably worried about Joe's odd lateness. What could possibly have happened? Ross had seen the family the night before, during the children's exercises at the Presbyterian Church. The family all seemed well. Little Herman had carried off his part in fine fashion, a boy to be proud of. When Ross arrived at the house around 8:20, he found the clerk, E. F. Selley, and Mrs. Peckham waiting outside. The front door was locked, the clerk told him. He couldn't rouse anyone, he said. Ross looked up at the imposing white house. The shades were all shut tightly. The family never shut the shades. Something was wrong.

Several neighbors had gathered about and someone suggested forcing the front door. Ross Moore produced a key ring. He picked out the one that fitted the door. He pushed the onlookers who had crowded around him aside and went in alone. He called a few times and waited, expectantly. No one answered. Everything



looked normal enough. One of the little boys' hats lay on the hall table. Nothing odd in that. He decided to try the downstairs bedroom first. If someone was sick, there was no need going upstairs and disturbing them. When he passed the parlor door, he did see something odd. There was a lady's skirt draped over the glass portion of the door. And the downstairs bedroom door was slightly ajar. He pushed it open a little farther, and when he did, he saw it--a large, quite large, pool of blood.

He couldn't bring himself to look any farther. He turned. He left the house. The neighbors in the front doorway watched him walk out, slowly, carefully. He asked someone to go find Marshal Horton. And bring Doctor Cooper, he said.

Horton arrived and started on the upstairs floor. In the first bedroom he found Mr. and Mrs. Moore lying peacefully in their bed. The covers were undisturbed. There were cloths over their faces. It was when he removed the cloths that he realized the full horror of the scene. The faces and heads of Mr. and Mrs. Moore were brutally hacked beyond recognition. Horton, perhaps needing fresh air, walked over to the window and tried to open it. It was tightly locked. He retraced his steps, and he noticed for the first time a lighted kerosene lamp on the floor near the foot of the bed.

In the second bedroom, next door, he found the children, lying peacefully in their beds, under the equally horrifying undisturbed covers, with the equally horrifying cloths over their faces masking the gaping wounds. They were all there: Katherine, Boyd, Herman, Paul. Their toys lay scattered about the floor where they had left them when they went to bed.

## \$2,000 REWARD

For the arrest and conviction of the murderer or murderers of J. B. Moore and family and Lena and Ina Stillinger at Villisca on the night of Sunday, June 9, 1912, the state of Iowa, Montgomery county, citizens of the city of Villisca, and the adjoining community offer a reward approximating \$2,000.

By authority of the governor the state of Iowa has offered \$500 for each murderer taken dead or alive, the county has offered \$500, and citizens of Villisca have increased the amount by over \$700. The John Deere Implement company of Omaha telegraphed their willingness to subscribe any amount for this purpose, and citizens of Clarinda and other neighboring towns have sent word of a reward fund being raised. It is likely that by the end of the week the reward will total over \$2,000.

## STANDING REWARD

There is also a reward of \$1200 standing for the apprehension of the Monmouth murderers.

Horton studied the scene: the windows were locked, but there was no lamp on the floor to light the murderer's way.

Horton went downstairs slowly. Someone had already told him the Moores had company. That would explain the downstairs bedroom. In the third bedroom he found two little girls. The scene was much the same. One lay as unruffled as the victims upstairs. The other had her arm outflung, as if she had tried to ward off a blow. The arm had been slashed. Both faces were unrecognizable. Two dresses had been tossed on a chair near the closet. He lifted them carefully. Underneath he found two small Bibles, one inscribed to Lena Stillinger, the other to Ina Stillinger. He put them down. He replaced the dresses. The room was hot, stuffy; the windows locked. A kerosene lamp sat on the floor, still lit, now nearly empty. By





Joe Moore



Mrs. Moore

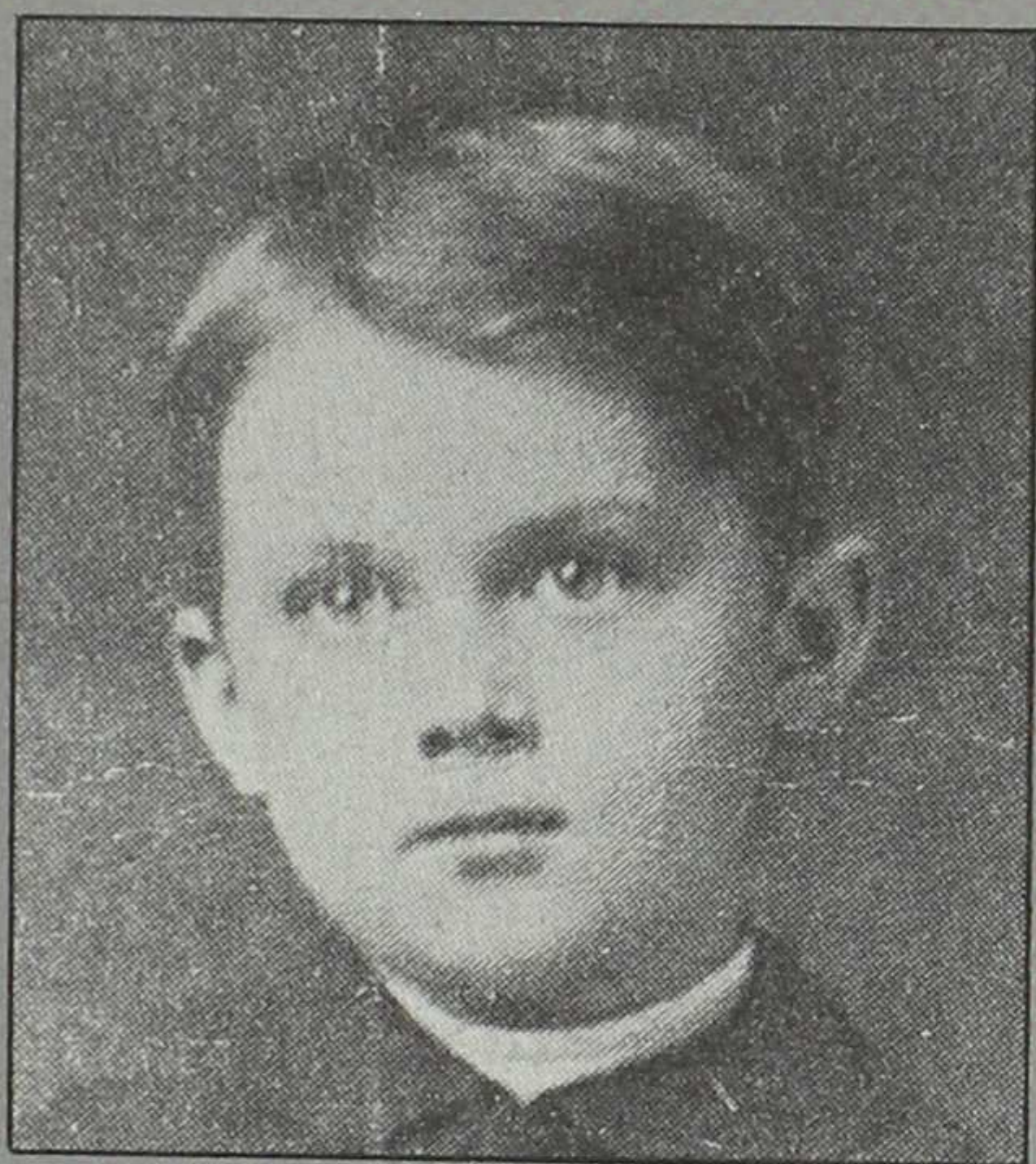


Boyd Moore



Paul Moore





Herman Moore



Katherine Moore



Ina Stillinger



Lena Stillinger

*(photos courtesy Edgar Epperly)*



its yellow glow, Horton noticed a small package half under the foot of the bed--a cloth-wrapped package, six by four inches. Inside he found a portion of a bacon slab. He rewrapped it. Hereplaced it under the bed. He turned to find Dr. Cooper standing in the doorway, and he asked the Doctor to go upstairs. When he turned again to leave a few moments later he saw something he had missed. A hatchet leaned against the wall near the bed. The entire length of the hatchet was covered with blood and with strands of hair.

Except for the dress hanging over the glass portion of the door, Horton found the parlor undisturbed. The dress hung so as to block out any light coming from the house. The pulled shades took care of the light in the rest of the rooms. Further on, in the kitchen, he found bloody fingerprints on a pulled-down shade. On the table there he found a basin filled with reddened water where the murderer had clearly washed his hands. And next to that he found the slab of bacon from which the portion in the guest bedroom had been taken. And there was a smoky smell in the room so he checked the stove. He found several pieces of half-charred paper--legal documents, mostly deeds.

The Marshal and the Doctor left the house together. Horton locked the door and posted several neighbors to guard the home. He called Sheriff Jackson at Red Oak and Coroner Linquist at Stanton. When Jackson arrived at noon, the town was already in an uproar. A thousand people milled about the streets. Villisca, usually lucky if it saw two motor-cars, now was clogged with over 400.

Jackson called out Company F of the Iowa National Guard to restore some order, but there was not much it could

do. The town's official night watchman resigned in disgust. The newspapers, over eager to get information, printed any story they thought their readers would like, sometimes only half-truths and speculation. They added to the general confusion, while Marshal Horton and Sheriff Jackson worked quietly, giving them few statements.

Wild tales circulated in the newspapers of escaped lunatics from the State Insane Asylum at Clarinda and exotic stories of roving bands of Negro tramps. *The Bedford Free Press* claimed to have secret information about a fanatic religious cult based in Denver, a cult demanding blood sacrifices for atonement and sending several messengers of destruction out to slay families in their beds. The murderers looked alike--they were all of average height and wore full, bushy, black beards.

The most frightening part of the cult-slayers story was that they supposedly struck all over the nation. And, it was true that the summer of 1912 was an especially bloody one. There had been ax murders in many towns. The Wednesday before the Villisca murders, Rollin and Anna Hudson had been found murdered at their home in Paola, Kansas. They had been hacked to death in their sleep with an ax. A lighted lamp had been left on the floor. Similar murders had taken place in Colorado Springs, in Ellsworth, Kansas, in Monmouth, Illinois, and in Rainier, Oregon. Some papers placed the number of like crimes as high as one hundred.

For a long time in the Villisca case, no one reading the newspapers could be sure exactly who had been murdered. Mr. Moore's name was often given as Joseph, when in fact it was Josiah. The Stillinger girls were sometimes the Spillinger girls and sometimes the Stillings. The final,



official death count read: Josiah B. Moore, 43; Mrs. Moore, 39; Herman, 11; Katherine, 10; Boyd, 7; and Paul, 5; Lena and Ina Stillinger, 11 and 8, respectively.

**T**he coroner's inquest began on Tuesday, under the direction of County Coroner A. L. Linquist, with a jury of three men. After the coroner's jury viewed the dead, the bodies were moved from the house at midnight on June 10 and placed in the fire station. The fire station was not a large building and the fire-fighting equipment had to be moved across the street into a park to accommodate the bodies.

Mrs. Peckham testified before the jury first. She told how she had become aware of the "terrible stillness" around the Moore house and the restlessness of the livestock. Implement clerk Selley came next. He retold the story of the discovery and said that Mr. Moore, as far as he knew, had no business enemies. Dr. Cooper followed Selley. He gave the unofficial time of death as about five or six hours previous to the discovery, between 2:00 and 3:30 a.m. He said he was sure the killer had not used chloroform or like drug to stun the victims. However, both he and another doctor--F. S. Williams--agreed that it was likely they had been bludgeoned with sandbags, rendering them unconscious so the murderer could, at his leisure, "cut and pound away at them." Several relatives and neighbors testified then. The neighbors all said they might have heard noises, they might have seen shadows that night, but they could not be sure. Harry Moore, another brother, testified that he could not identify the ax Marshal Horton found as Joe's property. Selley swore it was. The inquest left people baffled as ever

and even served to deepen the mystery.

But the first official investigation had not been entrusted to human hands. Shortly after the discovery, word had been telegraphed to Beatrice, Nebraska for Elmer Noffsinger's famous bloodhounds. They arrived on Monday night, before the inquest, aboard Number 12, the Chicago Express. Taken to the house, the dogs sniffed the ax handle. The scent, although 18 to 20 hours old, seemed strong. They went off the east end of the porch, up 6th Avenue north to 2nd Street, turning west on 2nd to 1st Avenue and the opposite end of town. The trail ended at the West Nodaway River where a bloody handkerchief was found. The dogs were taken across the river. When that failed, they were started all over again. But it was no use. The bloodhounds left in disgrace the evening of the inquest on Number 9, the Denver Flyer.

The so-called "scientific experts" were no more help than the dogs. They fought constantly among themselves. Criminology at the turn of the century was a hotbed of controversy. In one camp were the Lombrosoists, named after the Italian criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso. Lombroso thought catching a criminal very easy--all you had to do was look for a certain type. A criminal had very large jaws, high cheekbones, single lines in his palms, and handle-shaped ears. When the Lombrosoists held sway in the investigation, there was a lot of face and feature studying.

Then came the Bertillon experts. The original Bertillon method (referred to as anthropometry) was merely a system of criminal identification. Years before, Alphonse Bertillon, a filing clerk in the Paris Prefecture, noticed all criminals were described as merely tall, average,



or short. He set up a Bertillon card on criminals with such information as exact height, trunk length, head length, ear length and width, color of eye white, etc., the combination of which he thought would never be the same for any two men. He was the first to advocate "mug shots." At a conference in the United States in 1896, it was discovered that 150 police forces and prisons were using the Bertillon method of cataloging. But a few years later a man named Hershel discovered a person's fingerprints were unique, and criminology moved into fingerprinting.

Each system came into play in Villisca. Each adherent argued his system was the best. William McClaughrey from Leavenworth, Kansas had been called in to examine the bloody handprint on the window shade in the Moore home, so he was probably a fingerprint expert, but the newspapers identified him as a Bertillonist, which would have infuriated the crusty Bertillon, still alive in Paris. Until his death in 1914 he refused to believe that "tiny spots on human fingertips" could ever compete with his system.

A consultation with "Aunty" Hamilton, highly-respected Red Oak soothsayer, brought no better results. Aunty did manage to predict the route the bloodhounds would take, impressing everyone, but when she said the slayer was a Villisca citizen she struck too close to home. The *Villisca Review* put it tartly: "...inasmuch as she told all the story by looking at coffee grounds in a cup it is doubtful if the coffee grounds knew any more about how to find the murderer than the authorities do."

After the inquest, several arrests were made, ranging from a frightened hobo to Joe Moore's brother-in-law Sam Moyer. Rumor had it that Moyer and Moore

had feuded over Moyer's treatment of Moore's sister. Moyer was arrested in Mohawk, Nebraska, but he had an alibi and he was released.

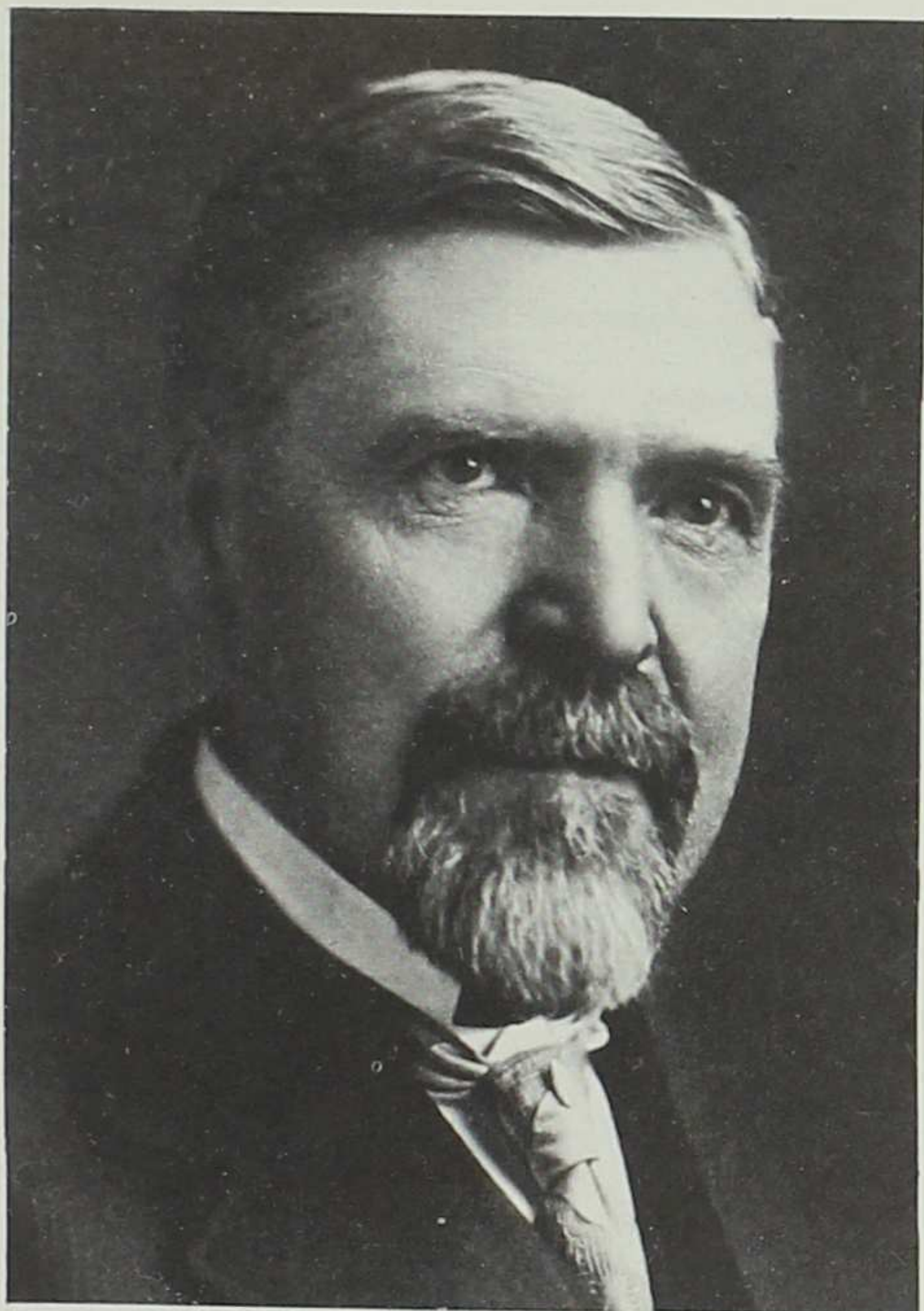
On Thursday, June 13, while the colorful criminologists fought to outdo each other, the victims were buried. Seven thousand people flocked to the little town. The funeral was not quite the family affair the relatives wished. The crowd was too immense for any church or auditorium in the town, so services were held in a little park located on the town square. Covered with floral displays, the caskets were placed in the town hall and remained there during the service. Though the coroner's jury members and the press had viewed the bodies, few of the relatives wanted to "look upon the awful sight," and the lids remained closed. Rev. F. J. Ewing, minister of the Presbyterian Church where the victims had made their last public appearance, delivered the sermon. The bodies were then taken to the cemetery in a procession a quarter mile long. The town's only two hearses carried the adults; separate carriages the children. Also on Thursday, while most of the population attended the funeral, all of the bloody bedding was removed from the house and quietly burned. The house was fumigated.

After the funeral, the visitors began to leave and the National Guard was recalled. The case disappeared from the pages of the newspapers. Interest waned. Even this notice in the *Villisca Review* failed to rekindle it:

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For the arrest and conviction of the murderer or murderers of J. B. Moore and family and Lena and Ina Still-





*F. F. Jones (courtesy Division of Historical Museum and Archives).*

inger at Villisca on the night of Sunday, June 9, 1912, the State of Iowa, Montgomery County, citizens of the city of Villisca, and the adjoining community offer a reward approximating \$2,000.

By authority of the governor the state of Iowa has offered \$500 for each murderer taken dead or alive, the county has offered \$500, and citizens of Villisca have increased the amount by over \$700. The John Deere Implement Company of Omaha telegraphed their willingness to subscribe any amount for this purpose, and citizens of Clarinda and other neighboring towns have sent word of a reward fund being

raised. It is likely that by the end of the week the reward will total over \$2,000.

No one tried to collect the reward. If the local authorities still searched for the solution to the mystery, their lack of success threatened to turn the bloody event into an obscure memory. For almost two years, the ax murders lost their status as good copy.

Then, in 1914, the Burns National Detective Agency assigned a Kansas City detective to the case, and the drama shifted from murder and mystery to indictments, investigations, and court room battles. J. N. Wilkerson worked hard, but he was overly fond of seeing his name in the paper. He thought he found a likely suspect in the person of "Blackie" Mansfield, a packing-house employee. What made Mansfield worthy of suspicion is not clear, but Wilkerson managed to hound the grand jury into investigating. It refused to bring an indictment against "Blackie." The detective, angry at its rejection, dropped a bomb that shocked a great many of the citizens of Villisca.

Wilkerson charged that a Villisca businessman had influential friends who were on the grand jury, and that he used these friends to thwart the indictment of Mansfield. Why should a businessman be interested in the release of a packing-house worker, a possible murderer? Because the businessman--F. F. Jones--hired Mansfield to kill the Moores!

F. F. Jones, a leading light in Villisca, probably could easily have been voted "Most Prominent Citizen." Born in Bath, New York, he had come to Iowa at age 27 and had taught school in Brooks before settling in Villisca. Once there, however, his star had begun to rise. In 1882 a book-



keeper for an implement store, by 1892 he owned his own implement and hardware business. By 1895, he managed the Farmer's Bank. He became a member of the Iowa House of Representatives for three years and a member of the Iowa Senate for two. He was a Methodist and Episcopalian Sunday School superintendent for 30 years and conducted a Bible study program for 25. But though he was very prominent, Jones was not very popular. Many people seemed to envy, to suspect, his quick rise in Villisca.

Wilkerson held mass meetings to raise money for his crusade against Jones. Wilkerson told his audiences Jones was a wicked man. Jones had Moore killed because of the victim's rival implement store. Jones was in fact so evil, he hired a maniac who not only slew Moore, but went berserk and killed Moore's entire family. Many people were convinced by Wilkerson, however pale this argument may seem now. He raised several thousand dollars.

Jones immediately slapped Wilkerson with a \$60,000 slander suit for linking his name with the crime. The court at Red Oak returned a verdict for the detective, which served to spur him on. The case grew so big that Iowa Attorney General H. M. Havner decided to take full charge of the investigation. After Havner took over, the grand jury once again refused to return an indictment against Jones. Wilkerson, stymied, charged Havner with "misconducting" the grand jury investigation in order to protect Jones. Finally, when Wilkerson had spent three long years pushing his case against Jones, the local authorities came up with another suspect, surely one of the most unusual and puzzling personalities in criminal history.



*Attorney General Havner (courtesy Division of Historical Museum and Archives).*

The Reverend George J. Kelly was an enigma wrapped inside a riddle. Coming from England in 1905, he married an American and attended theological seminary in Omaha. Though he never graduated from the seminary and was never ordained in this country, he nevertheless served congregations in Iowa, Illinois, South Dakota, and Nebraska. He was much admired for his fine voice and his excellent sermons. But a darker side of the Reverend Kelly had been slowly emerging.

Kelly was an eccentric in a time when eccentricity was tolerated and even looked upon with secret admiration, but his behavior had begun to alarm his



Sutton, Nebraska congregation. He had gotten into the habit of leaping out at passersby from behind trees and shouting: "They're after me! They think I killed them at Villisca!" Several Suttonites protested rather strongly to the authorities, but by the time the law tried to look up Kelly, he was gone.

In Villisca and Red Oak, the gadfly Detective Wilkerson kept the case open almost singlehandedly. There had been quite a few rumors in that hot summer of 1917 to the effect that an indictment had been handed down by the grand jury in the ax murder case. Only the officials knew for sure and they were not talking. Detective Wilkerson and his accusations had alarmed and inflamed many people. They wanted action on the case, the sooner the better.

Then, the Reverend Kelly suddenly surfaced in Red Oak and gave himself up. Only then did the public discover that the grand jury had indicted him for the Villisca murders. Wilkerson, incensed, held on like a bulldog to his fixed idea. He hired Omaha's Boyd Theatre and presented there a two-hour denunciation of the Attorney General and his methods. Kelly was an innocent dupe, he said. Jones was guilty, and Attorney General Havner was shielding him.

On August 31, 1917 more than five years after the murder, Kelly made a confession. He said he arrived in Villisca the night before the murder of the Moore family and stayed with the Reverend Ewing. Sunday night, they all attended the Children's Day service in which Herman Moore played so prominent a role. After church, Kelly talked with the Reverend Ewing and Mrs. Ewing until 11:30. The June night was especially warm, and the Ewings spent it in a tent

on their lawn. They left Kelly alone in the house. He tried to sleep, but he was overtired and bothered by a whirring sound in his head. Soon he began to feel even sicker. He decided to take a walk to get some fresh air. He left by the front door, he said, and walked across the street to the Presbyterian Church.

Kelly talked of pondering a sermon he was planning called "Slay Utterly," when suddenly a voice told him to "go on." He said he felt himself in the grip of something he could not understand. God was telling him to slay utterly, and he did not know where he was or where he was going. Then, he saw a shadow which the voice of God told him to follow. He was led to the back of a house. Though he did not know who lived there, he heard the voice telling him to slay utterly, and he replied: "Yes, Lord, I will."

At the back of the house he found an ax. He picked it up and continued to follow the shadow. He said he was led to the front door and told: "Go in, do as I tell you: slay utterly." As soon as he entered the door, the voice said: "Come up higher." He climbed the stairs, believing he was climbing Jacob's ladder.

In the first room he saw children lying in bed. The voice said: "Suffer the little children to come unto me." Kelly replied, "They are coming Lord." He began "sending those children somewhere." And then he went to the parents' room and did the same.

Kelly said he grew tired and went downstairs to find a place to lie down. He noticed the downstairs bedroom. Inside he discovered the Stillinger girls. "More work yet," the voice told him, and he continued his sacrifices.

At last he laid the ax down. He returned to the Ewing home. He went back to bed.



He left on the 5:19 train the next day, and he returned to his home in Macedonia, Nebraska at 7:30.

On the basis of the confession, the State Department of Justice decided to go through with a formal trial. On September 4, shortly after midnight, Kelly was brought from the Harrison County Jail, in Logan, where he had been held. On advice of counsel, Kelly completely repudiated his confession. The stage was set for a very interesting trial.

**I**t began Tuesday, September 4, 1917 at 10:10 a.m. Kelly was brought in smiling broadly, followed by his wife. Attorney General Havner immediately asked that new evidence be introduced to support his contention that no "third degree" methods had been used on Kelly to get the confession. Kelly's attorney charged they had. Kelly, still smiling, pleaded not guilty. That ended the first session. Havner, the other prosecution attorney, F. F. Faville, and County Attorney Wenstrand were stopped at the courthouse door by the press. Before the opening of the trial, they had hinted broadly at important new evidence coming up. Now Havner explained the new evidence consisted of several witnesses who would claim Kelly had discussed the murder with them before it was common knowledge.

Wednesday, the defense challenged Judge Boyes as being from out of the district. Boyes said he had been appointed by the Chief Justice of the Iowa Supreme Court and would not budge. Six jurors were examined. Three were released because they said they had formed an opinion. The prosecution briefly lost Havner when he was arrested and charged with interfering in the grand

jury investigation. He posted the \$1,000 bond and went on with the trial.

Also Wednesday, Wilkerson popped up again. He had formed the Iowa Protective Association, mainly for the protection of Kelly. Now, prospective jurors had to be asked if they were members. Wilkerson must have been quite convincing; the president of the Association was the Stillinger girls' father Joe.

Thursday and Friday were taken up with more jury selection. The judge admonished Wilkerson, seated at the defense table, for showing jurors a newspaper photo of Kelly in a friendly pose with a relative of one of the victims. During the questioning of one of the jurors, Kelly began to weep uncontrollably.

The next week was taken up with jury selection. On Thursday, Mr. C. T. Brown became the last juror, joining J. D. Isaac, Samuel Erickson, Carl Nimrod, S. R. Pike, Jess Rankin, Wesley Dodge, Henry Bruce, Helmar Walgrean, James Edwards, George Bass, and E. B. Straight. Havner took time off to go to an agricultural fair six miles south of Red Oak. There, in his position as Attorney General, he took part in a raid on a "Hoochy koochy" show. The net was two gambling wheels and one young Creston girl who was returned to her mother.

Day nine, Friday, brought some more interesting testimony. Several people testified that Kelly had talked to them excitedly about the murders before they were common knowledge. The piece of bacon found at the foot of the Stillinger girls' bed came up. Kelly had been in jail before, and one of his most peculiar habits had been the sneaking of a small piece of food off his plate, wrapping it up, and hiding it upon his person.



In the afternoon of that day, the prosecution brought the ax to court. When Havner carried it by him, Kelly shifted position, but showed no signs of emotion. He sat as he always had, with his left hand pressed tightly against his left temple. Dr. Linquist, the coroner, identified the ax as the one he found standing against the wall in the room occupied by the Stillinger girls. The Bibles by which the mutilated Stillinger girls had been identified were shown. There were tears in Mrs. Stillinger's eyes when the story was recounted. Also the fact that F. F. Jones' son's land adjoined that of the Moores came to light. Hank Horton, the marshal, said it looked as if someone had tried to wipe off the ax--he had discovered lint clinging to it. He also testified the ax was covered in blood and brain matter from handle to head.

The next day, Saturday, was a bad day for Kelly. Mrs. Marquard, a laundry marker in Council Bluffs, said a shirt sent to the laundry with the notation that it should be returned in the Macedonia basket was covered with blood. The agent for the laundry said next that Kelly told him that some of his laundry did not come

back from Council Bluffs. This took place in June 1912. A Mrs. Miller of Macedonia also testified Kelly told her that one of the Stillinger girls had "roused up" and caused the murderer some trouble in dispatching her.

On September 17, a jailer from Sioux Falls, South Dakota stated that Kelly had confessed to the murders while a prisoner there in 1914 and 1915. The jailer quoted Kelly: "I killed those people at Villisca, Iowa--the Moores and the Stillinger girls." Morally damaging testimony came from a Miss Beulah Callaway, telephone operator. At Christmas time in 1912, Kelly made an unusual proposition to Miss Callaway: "Rev. Kelly wanted me to pose for him in the nude so he could paint my picture. He persuaded me for an hour, but I wouldn't do it. He said that the Bible had pictures of nude women and it would be no harm for me to pose for him in that way."

On Wednesday, Mrs. Ewing, the minister's wife, told the court that Kelly's bed at their home had been slept in and there were no bloodstains. Also a court reporter testified Kelly told Havner that he did it because he was insane, and that "I have been insane since a child, that was my mother's testimony." A probation officer from Sioux City stated that Kelly told him he had been confined in the federal hospital for the insane in Washington, D. C. for sending improper letters to a young girl. The attorneys for the defense, Mitchell of Council Bluffs and A. L. Sutton, spent the entire day trying to prove Kelly insane and picturing his confession as forced.

Thursday the defense reinforced the insanity plea. Several witnesses testified Kelly mentioned to them his insanity. "If God wants for me to burn a barn I must

#### Note on Sources

The Villisca Ax Murders story, for some reason, is not extensively covered in Iowa history books. The only popular history book which I could find which mentions it is the excellent section in Don Brown's *Tell a Tale of Iowa* (Des Moines: Wallace-Homestead, 1965).

I relied mainly on newspapers, especially the daily *Des Moines Register and Leader*, the daily *Fort Dodge Messenger and Chronicle*, and the weekly *Bedford Free Press*. Also, to a small extent the *Shenandoah World*. The murders are covered in these newspapers from June 10, 1912 through the end of June. The first trial covered the period from September 4 through September 29, 1917. The second trial was from November 24 through the 26, 1917.

Another interesting source (and probably a very accurate one) is a reprint of the *Villisca Review* that details the murders and subsequent days. There is no mention of the trials, however. Old copies of *Who's Who in Iowa* were valuable for personality profiles. The information about fingerprinting and detective styles is from *A Pictorial History of Crime* by Julian Symons (New York: Crown Publishers, 1966).



do it and if He wants me to slay utterly I have to do that too." (How that must have horrified the jury; all farmers save one.) Friday consisted of more insanity testimony. A Dr. Fitzsimmons said that once, while Kelly was in custody, he had frothed at the mouth and "acted paranoiac." In Winner, South Dakota, another witness maintained, Kelly asked several girls to pose nude for photographs. An official of the Sioux Falls Jail stated that in March 1914, Kelly became convinced he was Woodrow Wilson.

Saturday, September 22 at 10:55 the defense rested its case. Kelly had never been put on the stand. The prosecution introduced new evidence tying Kelly to several fires in Sutton, Nebraska. On Monday, Albert Jones testified he was at home when the murders took place. He had talked to Joe Moore at about eight o'clock, he said, and then he had gone home. Wilkerson, for reasons known only to him, still doggedly clung to the F. F. Jones murder theory. The prosecution, just as doggedly tried to sweep it away.

Tuesday, the closing arguments and addresses were given. J. J. Hess, another prosecution attorney, flavored his remarks with ax-swinging. The defense had effectively argued that the tiny Rev. Kelly--5 feet, 2½ inches--could not have made the ax cuts in the ceiling of the house. Hess tried to show that Kelly could easily have made the marks while swinging the ax. Hess also made sure the jury knew four important points: 1) Kelly told people of the crime before it was generally known; 2) Kelly seemed to know details of the crime that only the axman could have known; 3) Kelly had confessed his guilt while in jail at Sioux Falls; and 4) Kelly had made a voluntary sworn confession.

The next day, Hess concluded with an

impassioned plea: "For God's sake don't turn this man loose where your baby and my baby may be the next victims. He sent eight innocent people to their graves and he wants to send more!" "Put him," said Hess, "behind bars for life." Once again Hess raised the bloodstained ax above his head. Kelly slumped in his chair and covered his face with his left hand, leaving only a small opening through which he stole a glance at the ax. Then his eyes dropped downward and he stared at the floor. Hess went on to call Kelly everything from a degenerate to a religious fanatic.

The speech of the defense was not nearly so interesting, parroting as it did Wilkerson's contention that Havner was using Kelly for a scapegoat. The defense attorney, Sutton, unconsciously was not above conceding the questionable morality of its client: "If Havner can hold up his head after the way he has handled this case he is a bigger degenerate than Kelly!"

Thursday, Kelly once again declaimed his innocence. The grand jury had indicted him on murder in the first degree in the death of Lena Stillinger. The jurors in the murder trial were given a choice: 1) Murder 1st--death or imprisonment for life; 2) Murder 2nd--life or not less than 10 years; 3) Manslaughter--not more than eight years or a fine of not more than \$1,000; 4) Not guilty; 5) Not guilty by reason of insanity.

On the twenty-first day of the trial, September 28, the jury was discharged at 1:25 p.m. for failure to find a verdict. It had cast 22 ballots. The score was always the same--11 for acquittal and one not guilty by reason of insanity. The same day, in a surprise move, the grand jury indicted Havner for oppression in office.

Saturday, September 29, Kelly was

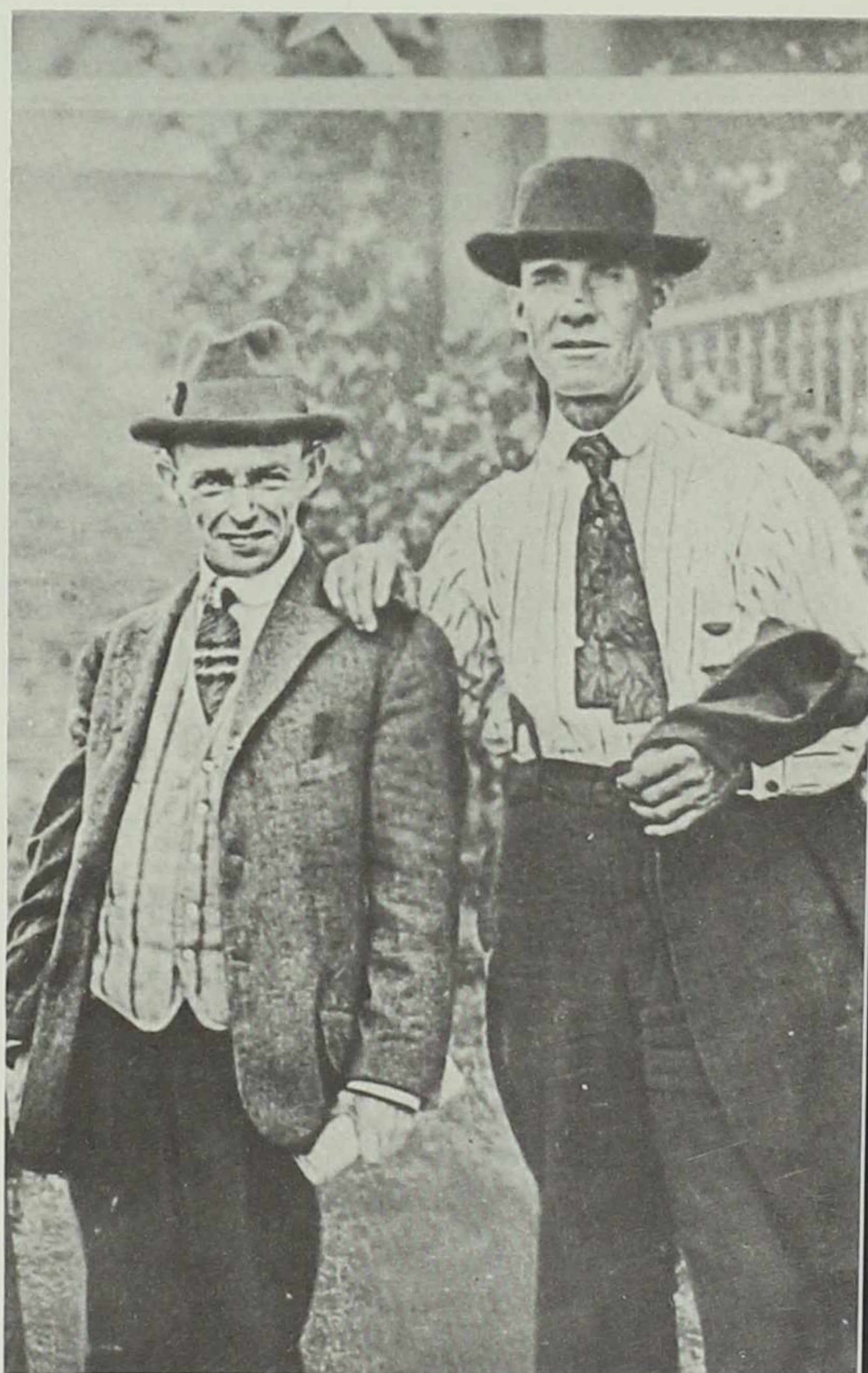


removed to the Logan jail. It was discovered that Juror Brown, the last member chosen, had been the holdout--for not guilty by reason of insanity. He was vilified by the other members of the jury.

The second trial began on November 24, 1917. Havner, the shadow of his indictment hanging over him, once again prosecuted. On Monday, November 26, the jury retired at 4:15 p.m. It returned four hours later with a vote of not guilty. Kelly beamed. He said "Fine, fine." He had a contract to lecture on the Chautauqua circuit and planned to write a book called *A Pawn in the Game*.

It was finally over. Havner went on to become the Republican candidate for Governor in 1920. F. F. Jones rested on his besmirched laurels in his beloved Villisca. Wilkerson, at last, gave up the case and dropped out of sight. Kelly was never heard from again. At the same time the official trial records disappeared completely.

Old wounds heal, but the mystery remains. Was Kelly the guilty one? Lena Stillinger, the only victim cut below the head, must have awakened and tried to fight off her attacker. Kelly told Mrs. Miller one of the girls had "roused up" and caused trouble. How would he know, unless he had wielded the ax? But was Kelly the kind of cool character who would methodically cover all windows and door cracks in the house with clothes and shades to block out the light for passersby? Would he calmly retire to the kitchen, fill a pan with water and wash his bloody hands? The murderer had done all this, and the details of such actions were conspicuously absent from Kelly's confession. Yet Kelly said he had killed the Stillinger girls last, and it was their room where the ax was found. Would an inno-



Rev. Kelly and Detective Wilkerson (picture courtesy Edgar Epperly).

cent person know that? It goes on and on, a vicious, confusing circle.

Or, was the old seeress right when she looked into her coffee grounds for the murderer and found there a Villisca resident? Was the resident F. F. Jones, pursued for years by the Detective Wilkerson? No one knows. Only eight white markers in the Villisca cemetery and the white house in town stand--mute reminders of Iowa's most puzzling crime.

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