

How Detectives Trailed Clues in Phagan Murder Case



Reading from left to right, top row: Detectives W.F. Harper, John Black, Harry Scott. Bottom row: W. T. Chewning and Bass Rosser. Group picture is of Chiefs Beavers and Lanford escorting Frank from police headquarters.

By BRITT CRAIG.

Anybody but a detective would have given up his job if the boss had ordered him to catch the murderer of Mary Phagan. Nobody but a detective would have undertaken such a task with a conscientious view of ultimately carrying out the order.

There are two things absolutely necessary to the success of a criminal investigator—patience and persistence. Without both, the detective ceases to be a detective and becomes a humbler. Then, too, there is something else that is just as essential. It's labor, unflinching, labor, the kind that reeks the ditch-digger's forehead with sweat and wrinkles the brow of the clerk.

If you were to ask the successful detective to find a needle in some particular haystack, he'd take the job. First, he'd ask if the needle was really there. Convinced that it was, he'd convince you it could be found, and forthwith set about to find it.

He'd go at it logically, of course, like all good detectives go at their work, and his search for the elusive needle would be by sorting out every straw in the stack—examining them one by one until he had inspected every single straw or had found the needle. If it failed to be found, he wouldn't go buy another needle and say "Here's the one that was in the haystack;" he'd say it couldn't be found.

And, very likely, it couldn't be. There are no such things as Sherlock, Holmeses or Nick Carters—that is, outside fiction and the stage. The average detective is only a plain, ordinary individual, with common horse sense, an insight into human nature and a liberal aptitude for hard work. For instance, John Starnes, solicitor Dorsey's right-hand man, used to work around the car barns, and John Black, for whom Harry Scott could not have

done without, once was a cooper in a brewery.

Detectives Minus Disguises.

There is no air of mystery about them, and nothing that smacks of occult science. If you didn't know them and met them on the street, you'd suspect they were just everyday business men on the way home or to work, with no other missions in life than the maintenance of a happy home and the keeping of a respectable job. They don't wear false whiskers and smoke pipes and inspect you with an uncanny eye. They're merely ordinary folks, with ordinary thoughts and talents.

No undertaking has been more stupendous than the assignment to catch Mary Phagan's slayer, which Chief Lanford gave to his men that tragic Sunday morning. Nothing appeared more difficult, more baffling. It was as though instructions had been given to find out who built the Sphinx or dug Mammoth cave.

There was nothing on which to work except the two lone clues—the murder notes and the fact that the body had been found in the National Penell factory. More desolate prospects have never been faced by police headquarters. The chief's men set out on the case like starting for the rainbow's end—which is fit but incongruous comparison.

But it is the job of a detective to find anything that's findable. Mary Phagan had been murdered by somebody. That somebody was somewhere. He could be found some way or other, and it happened to be up to headquarters to find him. The public arose in a unit and said so, and, being as the public was headquarters' bread and butter and boss, they had it to do. Therefore, when the chief called John Starnes, Bass Rosser, Bill Harper, John Black and Pat Campbell into consultation that morning and said, "Boys, get out and get that man,

whoever he is," the quintet answered in chorus, "All right, chief." Which meant a whole lot more than it sounds.

Public Clamor for Action.

They began on a case that was as empty as a dream. An impatient public clamored for vengeance. As public are prone to act, it yelled and howled for the murderer, insisting that the detectives go right out and round him up, as though man-killers were to be brought in like cows being brought from the pasture.

It meant work, work, work—worlds of work without cease. It means persistence and patience and endurance. A detective must have stamina as well as anything else, and plenty of it. He has to have it. It is absolutely necessary. His determination is a kind that spurs him on with assurance that if he works long and hard enough he eventually will "bring home the bacon."

When the newspapers spread word of the tragedy to every inch of ground that represents Atlanta, and its horror began to ferment in the public mind, clues seemed to spring up from everywhere. They came to headquarters by telephone and messenger. They floated down in every conceivable way, deluging the place with more clues than the place knew what to do with.

A hundred persons had seen Mary Phagan just before her death. A hundred more had seen her that night. Everybody seemed to know something or other about Mary and her death. Word came that she had been seen in all parts of the city, when, in truth, her body had lain cold and rigid in the basement blackness.

Thousands had stories to tell, suggestions to make, theories to advance. Atlanta in general, it seemed, was selfishly desirous of having something to do with the Phagan case and of helping the detectives find her murderer.

It served to handicap the detectives the more.

Sorting Out the Clues.

Every available clue was run down with infinite thoroughness. The sequel was found to every story. Plausible theories received as much attention as the murder itself. Nothing was overlooked. Thousands of miles were covered within the city limits. The truth was learned of every tale that reached headquarters, matter not how inconsequential it proved to be. Detectives worked night and day, and slept only when they had to.

Each man seemed to feel a personal responsibility for the murder. He felt it his individual duty to bring her slayer to bay. It is one of the instincts of the police detective—by that, the good ones are meant. A bad detective is a cancer in a department.

The floundering of the slayer didn't mean so much science or magic as it meant labor and thoroughness. It was a plow-mule kind of labor, and thoroughness the kind the government expects of its servants. There was no "laying down," no quitting the job, no letting go this or that merely because it looked empty or unnecessary.

For days and days that seemed endless, the detective department floundered in a bewildering sea of countless clues that sprang up as though at the word of a genie. Every single one needed proportionate attention. In their raw state, one was prospective of meaning as much as another. Forgetting Phagan clues was similar to following a strange woodland path. Nothing was known of the end until the end was reached.

It required walking from one end of town to the other, hunting folks and questioning them, shadowing them and finding them. It required everything that constitutes work—rapid work—and the man who spitefully said the detective bureau resembled a collection of truck-horses didn't miss it far, at that, although he didn't mean it that way.

Two Men—Which?

Finally matters assumed manageable shape. Things began to look clearer, more comprehensible, and

clues began to diminish with time. It became possible to wipe away the moss and tangle-growth and get a straight hold on the case. Affairs moulded themselves into definite form, and, as a result of purely patience, persistence and truck-horse labor, have narrowed themselves down to two men—Leo Frank and Jim Conley.

The one the confessed—the other the accused.

Which is graphically reminding of that Biblical passage pertaining to the sweat of the brow earning the bread.

Of all the men who worked in the Phagan investigation, Harry Scott, field manager of the Pinkertons, was undoubtedly the most successful. It was he who engineered the third degree which exacted the confession from Conley. He was retained by the accused, Frank, on the Monday following the murder's discovery. A few hours later Frank himself was arrested.

Scott operated in co-operation with the police department through John Black. He assisted in the third degree under which the factory superintendent was placed, and superintended much of the work created at police headquarters.

Scott has been a criminal investigator for seven years, during all of which time he has been associated with the Pinkertons. He entered the profession upon leaving college. He is a native of Pennsylvania, and in Philadelphia was assistant superintendent of the Pinkerton offices.

Two years ago he was transferred to Atlanta, where his position is virtually that of assistant superintendent. He is only 27 years old, and is married. Greater credit, perhaps, has been accorded him in the Phagan case than any other operative.

Headquarters' Star Man.

The reputation of John Black, the headquarters' man who was associated with Scott, is too well and widely known for comment. He is headquarters' star investigator, although his detective experience dates back only four years. He was promoted from the rank of patrolman after having been in the department two years. He is 40 years old, and is the father of a family. Prior to joining the police

force he was a cooper in employ of the Atlanta Brewing and Ice company. He was a partner of George Bullard in the solving of the famous Druid Hills murders which sent two to the scaffold, and was associated with Bullard and Scott in ferreting out the Gilsey diamond robbery, for which three were convicted.

Black also co-operated with Scott in obtaining the Conley confession. He was an invaluable aid to the Pinkerton man, and received similar credit for success achieved in the Phagan investigation.

John Starnes and Pat Campbell, who appear as prosecutors of Leo Frank, have been detailed to the case since a few hours after the body had been found. Starnes was summoned at daybreak from his home, and reported for duty at the scene of the discovery. In fact, he was first to begin work on the mystery.

He and Campbell have been associated with the solicitor general following the close of the inquest. The silence and smoothness of their operations and perfect "teamwork," counted with the results obtained, created a regard for their services which caused the solicitor to retain them throughout the investigation.

Hint of Secret Evidence.

They were completely detached from headquarters, and interviewed probably more witnesses than any other figures in the investigation. It is hinted that the prosecution possesses weighty evidence which has never escaped the solicitor's office. If this be the case, Dorsey has practically admitted that credit should be laid at the door of Starnes and Campbell.

Starnes is suave and polite. He is the most immaculate attaché to Atlanta's detective department, and has the appearance of a modern business man. Before entering the police department, he was connected with one of the city's car barns. His age is 39, although he doesn't look a day over 40.

Eight years ago he was promoted from patrolman to detective duty, after having been on the force less than two years. Campbell is three years younger. He is an ex-saloon

keeper, and has been in the department four years, two of which have been devoted to detective service.

S. L. Rosser, the headquarters detective, is the investigator who obtained the famous Monteen Stearns affidavit in which she testifies to visit she made to the pencil factory at 12 o'clock on the tragic Saturday. Finding the office empty at that time, Frank swears he was sitting at desk.

Rosser is a man of 40, with two years of police experience. He is promoted to the detective bureau years after enlistment. He was merely attached to the Donald camps, in a clerical capacity, to which he had risen from the rank of guard. At present he is the only man working on the case directly from headquarters.

Many "Third Degrees" Workers.

Bill Harper, who has gained a considerable reputation as criminal investigator, was a conspicuous figure throughout the Phagan mystery. He is one of those to which New Lee is the first suspect. He is a department partner of John Black and is 45 years old. He has been connected with the bureau for six years, having been promoted after four years of police duty.

W. T. Chewning, who, with his partner, J. N. Norris, obtained the sensational Formby affidavit, is the man associated with the investigation who achieved higher uniform rank than that of patrolman. He is five years as sergeant, after which he was elected to the bureau.

He is 43 years old, and, before coming a policeman, was a barbershop trade. He and Norris were conspicuous figures in the case, and, at the time so much interest was being centered in that particular phase, were in command of the squads who searched Marietta and surrounding territory for the "Mysterious Get-Rod" who was rumored to have been at the factory with Mary Phagan.

All these men will testify before coming Frank trial, and then you will be able to see for yourselves just how they look like—these detectives who solved the Phagan case.