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May 13, 2015

THIS WEEK:

1912 Axe Murders in Villisca Remain Unsolved

BACKGROUND:

The Villisca axe murders occurred between the evening of June 9, 1912, and early morning of June 10, 1912, in the town of Villisca in southwestern Iowa. The six members of the Josiah Moore family and two house guests were found bludgeoned in the Moore residence. All eight victims, including six children, had severe head wounds from an axe. A lengthy investigation yielded several suspects, one of whom was tried twice and acquitted. The crime remains unsolved.

Villisca Axe Murders

The Moore family consisted of parents Josiah, 43; Sarah, 39; and their four children, Herman, 11; Mary, 10; Arthur, 7; and Paul, 5. They were an affluent and well-liked family in the community.

On June 9, 1912, Mary Moore invited the Stillinger sisters, Ina, 8, and Lenae, 12, to spend the night at the Moore residence. That evening, the visiting girls and the Moore family attended the Presbyterian church where they participated in the Children's Day Program, which Sarah Moore had coordinated. After the program ended at 9:30 p.m., the Moores and the Stillinger sisters walked to the Moores' house, arriving between 9:45 and 10 p.m.



The next morning, Mary Peckham, the Moores' neighbor, became concerned after she noticed that the Moore family had not come out to do their morning chores. Peckham knocked on the Moores' door. When nobody answered, she tried to open the door and discovered that it was locked. Peckham let the Moores' chickens out and called Ross Moore, Josiah Moore's brother. Like



The house of Josiah and Sarah Moore, where the murders took place.

Peckham, Moore received no response when he knocked on the door and shouted. He unlocked the front door with his copy of the house key. While Peckham stood on the porch, Moore went into



Josiah and Sarah Moore

the parlor and opened the guest bedroom door, where he found Ina and Lena Stillinger's bodies on the bed. Moore immediately told Peckham to call Hank Horton, Villisca's primary peace officer, who arrived shortly thereafter. Horton's search of the house revealed that the entire Moore family and the two Stillinger girls had been bludgeoned to death. The murder weapon, an axe belonging to Josiah, was found in the guest room where the Stillinger sisters were found.

Doctors concluded that the murders had taken place between midnight and 5 a.m. The killer or killers began in the master bedroom, where Josiah and Sarah Moore were sleeping. Josiah received more blows from the axe than any other victim; his face had been cut so much that his eyes were missing. The killer(s) went into the children's rooms and bludgeoned Herman, Mary, Arthur, and Paul in the head in the same manner as their parents. Then, the killer(s) moved downstairs to the guest bedroom and killed Ina and Lena.

Investigators believed that all of the victims except for Lena Stillinger had been asleep when murdered. They thought that she was awake and tried to fight back, as she was found lying crosswise on the bed, and with a defensive wound on her arm.

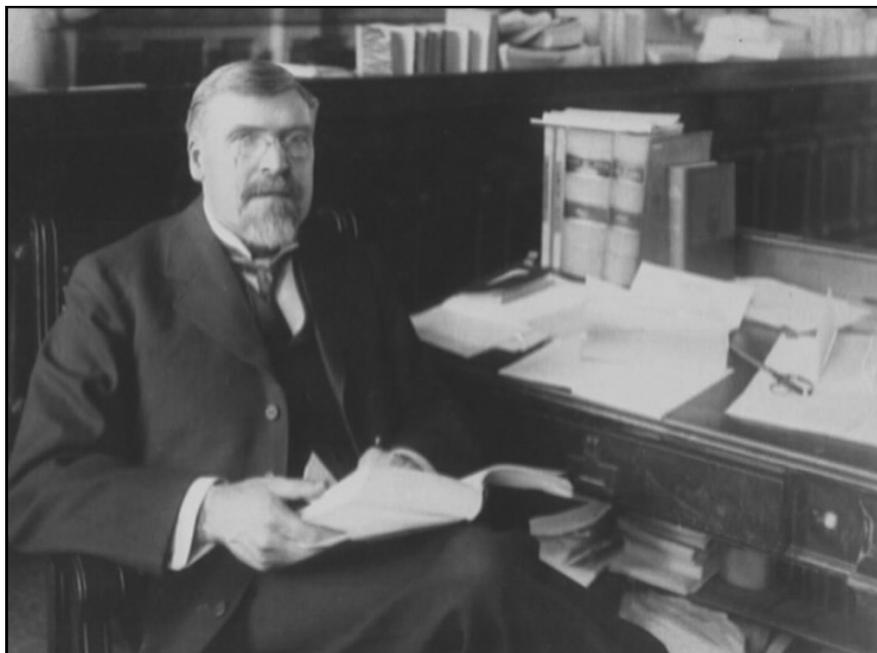
Over time, many possible suspects emerged, including Reverend George Kelly, Senator Frank F. Jones, William Mansfield, Loving Mitchell, and Henry Lee Moore. George Kelly was tried twice for the murder. The first ended in a hung jury, while the second trial ended in an acquittal. Other suspects in the investigation were also exonerated.

The Murders Ruined an Iowa State Senator's Career

Iowa State Senator Frank F. Jones was a confident and aggressive businessman and politician. That was to end on the night of June 9, 1912. When the Villisca killer's eight victims were discovered the next morning, community suspicions immediately focused on Jones, which would ultimately destroy his public career and tarnish his private life.



There were at least two compelling reasons to believe that Jones had harbored a hatred of Josiah Moore. First, Moore



Senator Frank Jones

had worked for him for seven years, becoming the star salesman of Jones's farm-equipment business. But Moore had left in 1907—dismayed, perhaps, by his boss's insistence on working long hours, six days a week—and set himself up as a head-to-head rival, taking the valuable John Deere account with him.

Second, Moore was also believed to have had an affair with Jones's vivacious daughter-in-law, a local beauty whose numerous affairs were well known in town. By 1912, relations between Jones and Moore had grown so cold that they began to cross the street to avoid each other, a brazen sign of hatred in such a small community.

Even though never convicted of any crime, and exonerated regarding the murders, during the decade that followed the crime, Jones found himself harassed by rumors, sullied by accusations, and embroiled in litigation. These charges forced him from public office and his businesses, darkening his retirement years. His

austerity and self-righteousness prevented him from acknowledging these many attacks, but it was obvious to any observer that his hopes and dreams for the future had vanished.

Suspect—William Mansfield

Few people in Villisca believed that a man of Senator Jones's age and eminence—he was 57 in 1912—would have swung the axe himself, but in some minds he was



James Wilkerson

certainly capable of paying someone else to wipe out Moore and his family. That was the theory of James Wilkerson, an agent of the renowned Burns Detective Agency, who in 1916 announced that Jones had hired a killer by the name of William Mansfield to murder the man who had humiliated him.

Wilkerson—who made enough of a nuisance of himself to derail Jones's attempts to secure re-election to the state Senate, and who eventually



William Mansfield

succeeded in having a grand jury convened to consider the evidence he had gathered—was able to show that Mansfield was the type of person who could have committed the 1912 murders. In 1914, Mansfield was the chief suspect in the axe murders of his wife, her parents, and his own child in Blue Island, Illinois.

Unfortunately for Wilkerson, Mansfield turned out to have a solid alibi for the Villisca killings. Payroll records showed that had been working several hundred miles away in Illinois at the time of the murders, and he was released for lack of evidence. That did not stop many locals—including Ross Moore, brother of Josiah, and Joe Stillinger, father of the two Stillinger girls—from believing in Jones's guilt.

Suspect—Andrew Sawyer

Every transient and otherwise unaccounted for stranger was a suspect in the murders. One suspect was Andrew Sawyer. No real evidence linked Sawyer to the crime, but his name came up often in grand jury testimonies.

According to Thomas Dyer of Burlington, Iowa, a bridge foreman and pile driver for the Burlington Railroad, Sawyer approached his crew in Creston at 6:00 on the morning the murders were discovered. Sawyer was clean-shaven and wearing a brown suit when he arrived. His shoes were covered in mud and his pants were wet nearly to the knees. He asked for employment and, as Dyer needed an extra man, he was given a job on the spot.

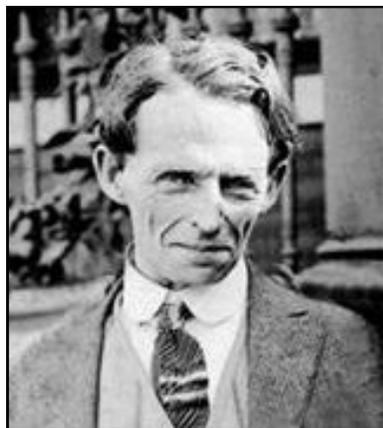
Dyer testified that later that evening when the crew reached Fontanelle, Iowa, Sawyer purchased a newspaper and went off by himself to read it. The newspaper carried a front page account of the Villisca murders and, according to Dyer, Sawyer "was much interested in it." Dyer's crew complained that Sawyer slept with his clothes on and liked to be by himself. They were also uneasy that Sawyer slept with his axe next to him; he often talked of the Villisca murders and whether or not a killer had been apprehended.

Sawyer reportedly told Dyer that he had been in Villisca that Sunday night and had heard of the murders. Afraid of being taken as a suspect, he had left and gone to Creston. Dyer was suspicious and turned Sawyer over to the sheriff on June 18, 1912.

Sawyer was dismissed as a suspect in the case when officials learned that he could prove he had been in Osceola, Iowa, on the night of the murders. He had been arrested for vagrancy there, and the Osceola sheriff recalled putting him on a train (to send him away) at approximately 11:00 that evening.

Suspect—Reverend George Kelly

Kelly was a traveling minister in town on the night of the murders. Kelly was described as peculiar, reportedly having suffered a mental breakdown as an



George Kelly

adolescent. As an adult, he was accused of peeping and several times asking young women and girls to pose nude for him. On June 8, 1912, he came to Villisca to teach at the Children's Day services, which the Moore family attended on June 9, 1912. He left town early that afternoon, hours before the bodies were discovered.

In the weeks that followed, he displayed a fascination with the case, and wrote many letters to the police, investigators, and family of the deceased. This aroused suspicion, and a private investigator wrote back to Reverend Kelly, asking for details that the minister might know about the murders. Kelly replied in detail, claiming to have heard sounds and possibly witnessed the murders. His known mental illness made authorities question whether he knew the facts because of having committed the murders, or was imagining his account.

In 1914, two years after the murders, Kelly was arrested for sending obscene material through the mail. He was sent to St. Elizabeth's Hospital, the national mental hospital in Washington, D.C. Investigators speculated again that Kelly could be the murderer of the Moore family.

In 1917, Kelly was arrested for the Villisca murders. Police obtained a confession from him; however, it followed many hours of interrogation and Kelly later recanted. After two separate trials, he was acquitted.

Suspect—Henry Lee Moore



Henry Lee Moore, also a suspected serial killer (who was not related to the slain Moore family), was also convicted of the axe murder of his mother and grandmother several months after the murders in Villisca. Henry Moore can also be considered a suspect, yet the case remains open.

Henry Lee Moore

Suspect—Sam Moyer

At the inquest, it was reported that Sam Moyer (Josiah's brother-in-law) often threatened to kill Josiah Moore; however, upon further investigation, Moyer's alibi cleared him of the crime.

The Small Victims

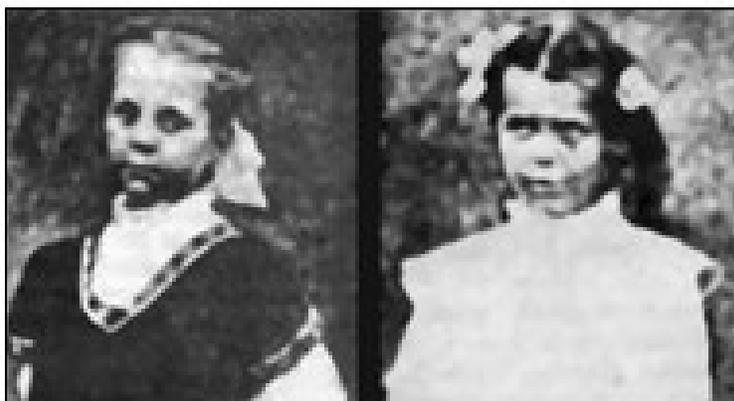


Herman

Mary

Arthur

Paul



Lena Stillinger

Ina Stillinger

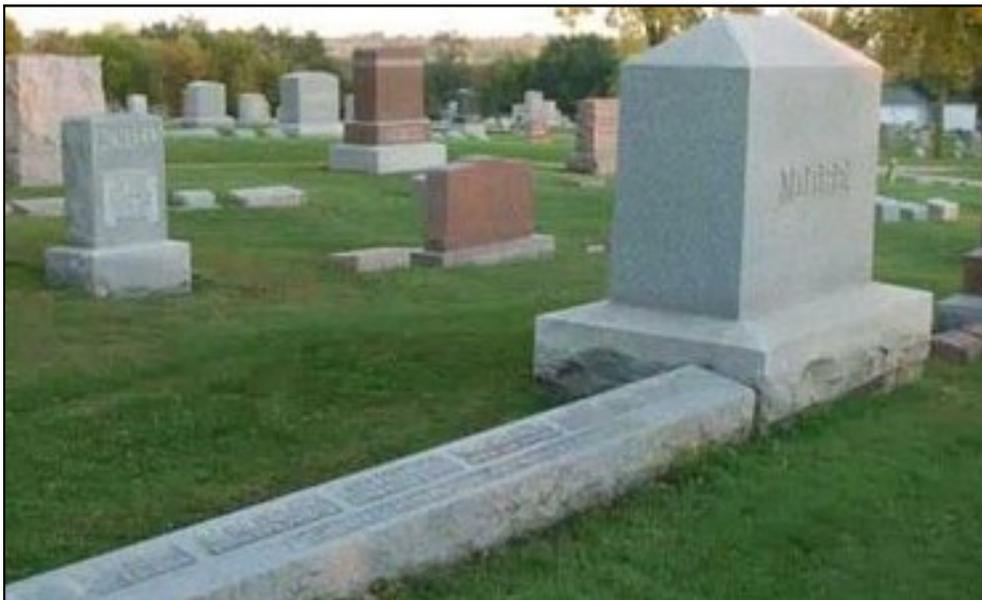
The Moore-Stillinger funeral services were held in Villisca's town square on June 12, 1912, with thousands in attendance. National Guardsmen blocked the



The Moore/Stillinger funeral procession

street as a hearse moved toward the firehouse, where the eight victims lay. Their caskets, not on display during the funeral, were later carried on several wagons to the Villisca Cemetery for burial.

The funeral cortege was 50 carriages long.



The Moore family plot at Villisca Cemetery

The following sources were used for this compilation:

The Villisca Axe Murder House Website

Wikipedia

Iowa Cold Cases Website



The Stillinger headstone at Villisca Cemetery