

A PRIVY MURDER MYSTERY

HUNT'S HONEY HOLE - THE TRUTH BE TOLD

A Fictional Story by Jack Klotz

See "Hunting Hunt's Honey Hole" this issue

THE PROBLEM

The story of the dig at the Hunt mansion was largely left untold, mainly due to pending legal issues, as well as advice of legal counsel. The basic explanation is: there was a human body discovered at the bottom of the pit. The truth of the matter here is difficult to tell, partly because the deceased had been disposed of nearly 150 years ago. Another reason it was left untold is that the clues were few and far apart and research has been slow and sketchy at best. Lastly, and perhaps the most important, or the least important depending on one's viewpoint on conspiracies these days, is the value of circumstantial evidence.



Gore-Hunt-Catlett House, 1011 Lyon Street, Hannibal, Missouri



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leg bone. I have admonished my dogs for gnawing on such bones during an excavation, yelling at them, "Hey now! Stop that! That could have been a soldier's leg!" Of course, I was fooling around while having fun with the dogs and never did for a moment think it truly was a human leg bone.

The same thing occurred with this dig, minus the dogs, with myself thinking it was likely another horse bone. Smaller bones began to appear from under a huge limestone block, similar to those used for foundations. As I moved the heavy chunk onto its side, I discovered bones splintered into dozens of pieces. A short distance in the last corner of the pit yet to be dug was the smoking gun, the bullet-holed cranium! That's when I knew I had a problem. My mind froze, along with the icy stare my latest "find" sent back to me! When it sunk in as to what I was looking at, I jumped back and landed on my butt. I think I let out a "YIKES!" but it could have been in my head, I was that rattled.

The thought briefly occurred to me to simply get up and out of the hole, fill it in and get the Hell away as fast as I could. It was, after all, completely dug out and no more undug portion left for

The factual evidence and events surrounding the Hunt family fortune that is locally known are somewhat persuasive, yet difficult to link to the earthly remains. One thing is clear, it was a murder. The bullet hole in the cranium was evidence enough that even a novice such as myself could figure it out. The rest is the job of the forensic investigators to piece together. My issue is trying to explain what I was doing digging up human remains and why did I continue when I discovered the bones? In my defense, I have dug hundreds, maybe thousands of bones in privies over the years. Some of the bones have been huge, especially in privies from the civil war era. It appeared they ate horse meat during the lean years of wartime and some of these huge bones were the size of a man's



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old bottles. Certainly, none worthy of me being linked to a dead body! No, this was a nefarious issue and needed a proper looking into. I convinced myself I had done nothing wrong and therefore had nothing to fear. Alerting the authorities was the proper thing to do. Tipping over one of my rope buckets, I sat down and made the call and nervously awaited their arrival. I had tried to explain with some amount of detail about the issues of the body, but it seems the dispatcher had different training than I had expected. Two cop cars arrived in seconds with sirens and lights flashing.

The first to arrive got out with his gun drawn and pointed at me and yelled, "Step away from the shovel!" All I could see was the muzzle aimed directly at me that looked like a cannon! I stammered, "Whaaaaat?" "Step away from the weapon, NOW!" As I stood up, my legs decided not to cooperate, and I fell over backward. That seemed to signal I was trying to escape and the younger cop that had arrived in car #2 sprang into action and tackled my fallen self and snapped the cuffs on me before I knew what happened. "I'm innocent! I was the one who called it in!" I pleaded. "Yeah, if I had a nickel for every time I heard that one I wouldn't have a mortgage." claimed the senior officer. "No. You got it all wrong. I can explain. Well, some of it anyway." As I told my tale of the reason for being there and how I came to discover the body, the younger officer climbed down the ladder to the 10-foot depth of the privy. The older officer named Smitty watched from the edge as the younger one confirmed what I had described. "Guess we better call the boys at CSI, huh?" he called up. "Yeah, I guess. And you still have some explaining to do at the station," Smitty directed towards me as he released me from the steel cuffs. "We'll need you to follow us to the station and give a written statement to the facts of the matter." Indeed! The facts of the matter.

What I know are the basics I have previously described. That is what they got, even though I felt I had been thoroughly grilled as if I were a burger at a mad cow disease convention! I finally

rolled out of the station after midnight feeling more than "well done." The spatula they used on me didn't tickle either! Well, that's not true as they never laid a hand on me, but I wouldn't have minded if it had gotten me out sooner! Now free, I was homeward bound and grateful I wasn't guilty of anything. If they had kept me for another hour, I might have confessed to being the milk money thief in the third grade which, if I was, I don't recall. The only benefit I got out of the ordeal was knowing CSI had to fill in the hole when they were done with it.

Their investigation lasted a couple of short weeks. Apparently, because of the length of time since the crime had been committed, they determined the only crime that could be proven was the illegal dumping of a body; therefore, no murder investigation was forthcoming. The rationale was if it was a homicide, the perpetrator was long deceased by now and therefore DNA testing was a moot point as well as costly and time consuming. For such a small town, it was simply cost prohibitive. At least I was completely cleared and exonerated of any wrongdoing. But I was now left with a haunting feeling. I have always believed the lure of bottle digging was the magical feeling of finding buried pirate treasure and being the first to hold a bottle since being thrown away by the original owner. I mean, Jesse James might have drunk from this bottle, I would convince my 10-year-old self. Now I felt a need, no, more an obligation, to try to unravel this mystery to attempt to restore the magic to my beloved hobby. If I failed, I felt as though I would be doomed for my remaining lifetime to play Bingo and bowling, neither of which I do well with. Whenever the square B 9 gets called I want to jump up and exclaim, "Thank you, doctor! I knew it wasn't cancer!" I then awake with cold sweat rolling off my worried brow. Such nightmares!

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THE RESEARCH

My research began where it usually does, in the archives at the local library. Fortunately, what I needed had been digitized and was accessible from home. I started with the business directories that dated back to when the house became the Hunt property in 1860. Josiah Hunt had been a busy man and was likely so from a young age as it was clear he came to town "well off." In 1858 he was first listed as a land commissioner for the newly-formed railroad company in town. By 1866 he was partnered with C. O. Godfrey as land and insurance agents with their office in the First National Bank. By 1871 Godfrey was president of Central Coal Mining Co., while Josiah was listed as president of the previously-mentioned bank, as well as school board president and mayor

of the city! He had been mayor since 1868 as shown in one final listing in 1873. It comes as no shock to my mind that he is noted as having passed away “unexpectedly” in 1874. He had way too much on his plate and likely stressed himself into an early grave. If my murder theory has any validity to it, he simply added the final straw that done him in.

A half-brother to Josiah, William A. Hunt, along with his wife, moved to town in 1869, purchased a lot and built a fine two-story home. Here, William quickly fell in with the “upper crust,” having a head start from being related to the most respectable pillar of the community. William was listed in 1871 as “Cashier Savings Bank, res cor Broadway & Maple Ave.” By 1873 he was still listed as a cashier which held a much more important position in those days than now. He was also listed in business with a John Evans and a Frank Ray as Commission Merchants, having something to do with steamships. Still, Josiah was listed working as before but now partnered again with his old associate Mr. Godfrey in the coal business.

By early 1874, disaster struck the younger William and, later that same year the elder Josiah. In January it was discovered that William had absconded with 20k in gold from his bank, never to be seen or heard from again. The theft was quickly discovered and a “widespread manhunt” ensued. Early in October that year, Josiah reportedly dies “unexpectedly” with no reported resolve to the disappearance of his brother or the stolen loot. The \$20k in those days would have been equivalent to about \$470,000 in today’s value, well worth the risk at the time. William’s wife eventually returns east as their property had been confiscated and put into bankruptcy, leaving her destitute. The bank where William had been entrusted with their capital, as well as reputation, was no longer; in its place was the Farmer’s & Merchant’s Bank.

A (possible) SOLUTION

In considering the facts, coupled with some logical ideas, it would seem reasonable that the young William Hunt may have sought out help from his elder relative, perhaps a plea to hide him out for a time until the heat and the search died down. Even though “thief” and “mayor” were related, it would seem unlikely a search of the honorable Josiah Hunt’s property would be appropriate. It may be likely at some point a heated argument ensued and became violent, ending the young man’s career as a rookie thief. But what to do with the body? The oversized outhouse, a mere 30 feet from the back door, would make for a perfect dumping ground under cover of darkness. It would hide a multitude of sins—such as any stink. Just toss in another bag of lime! Or two! But how to get the body in the hole? Surely he would not squeeze through the size of a toilet seat!

A simple solution may not occur to today’s mind-set of an outhouse construct, but many were built with a hinged seating arrangement to dispose of items larger than what was originally intended. (I once dug out a rather large parlor stove at the bottom of a privy and was perplexed for a while.) In this arrangement, an adult body could easily be discarded. Also, a simple pry bar could resolve the issue of the seat blocking the attempt of a “burial at pee.” Stripped of any clothes or identification, even if discovered, it would pose several problems for any hard conclusions. How-

ever, with no witnesses, who is going to climb 10 feet down into a fresh poo-pit on a hunch? Not me, even for a green Ravenna flask!

Then the question arises. What about the money? Josiah had several speculative investments he could have padded with the dough. Also, the widow seemed to manage quite well after his demise without taking in boarders, a common hedge against poverty when the breadwinner passes, not to mention unexpectedly! It was seven years before the directories mentioned the widow taking on any boarders who turned out to be a well-to-do grocer who just happened to live across the street! Or perhaps not... The said grocer had been listed at three fictitiously-numbered addresses that in previous and later directories never matched up with anyone else but him.

In the years between the time Josiah passed, his widow is never listed as his widow, as was the custom, until she accepted as a boarder, the grocer. In the 1881 directory, NOW she is listed as widowed and the grocer has no wife listed, as was also the custom. At best it just looks bad, at the worst the two appear to have something to hide. I would be led to think the grocer moved in covertly soon after her husband’s untimely demise.

For whatever reason, (most likely the grocer’s inability to measure up to the man the widow had been married to), things didn’t blossom. That didn’t stop the ever-persistent grocer. It appears, for another 20 years forward, the grocer remains, along with the widow and her daughter who was 11 years of age when her father died. There are other relatives of the grocer, likely brothers and their wives who join the happy clan until, in 1903, two major changes in the directory listings occur. The first change is the widow and her daughter are no longer at their homestead but now are listed at a boarding house one block away! The second shocker in the same directory is the grocer now has a wife! One might infer the two matriarchs didn’t get along, but it doesn’t quite explain the return of the widow and her daughter to their home by the next directory listing where they live until their last days! Lastly, it turns out the grocer married the widow’s sister! About 10 years earlier, the widow was oddly listed as “boarding” at her own home. This was a typical directory designation to describe one who was temporary or transient. Then it dawned on me that perhaps the grocer had married at that time to her sister, effectively giving him ownership rights by marriage, since women for the most part were prohibited from owning property in most places. This would effectively place him in a position to rule the roost. Now, whether either of these two main characters had anything to do with the missing relative, gold, or body in the backyard, nobody will know. Dead men don’t talk, this much was true.

The bones from the privy were incinerated after the incident had been closed. A DNA sampling would have likely provided some answers. Then again, perhaps not. The widow never remarried or had any more children, her daughter never married and, as far as history is concerned never conceived any children. It does appear to be the end of the genetic branch of this family tree, leaving nobody left with whom to compare the DNA. This is sort of the truth, best as I can tell it, without getting into trouble! I’m still smarting from that spatula abuse!

