

Dr. Slice, Dice and Sauté

By R. Marc Kantrowitz



He was a catch. Of medium height and build, he was handsome in appearance and dapper in dress, and he exuded wealth. He was a doctor no less, and he was young, in his late 20s. His affable manner was one that neither man nor woman could resist. When he focused his attention on someone, it was as if that person were the only one in the room.

At least that's what his innumerable murder victims thought.

Herman Mudgett grew up in a joyless environment on a farm in New Hampshire. A good student, he ultimately wound up in medical school in Michigan. Within a few years he was in Chicago, after having made money scamming life insurance companies by faking the deaths of insured cohorts.

En route to his new home, he read about a great detective in England: Sherlock Holmes.

It was a hot day in August 1886 when the nattily dressed H.H. Holmes, nee Herman Mudgett,

Judge R. Marc Kantrowitz sits on the Appeals Court. He can be contacted at rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net. The above column is based, in large part, on "The Devil in the White City" by Erik Larson.

stepped off the train in south Chicago. Ambling down 63rd and Wallace, he noticed a pharmacy, Holton Drugs. Soon he owned the business, signed over to him by its elderly owner, who disappeared shortly thereafter.

The newly named H.H. Holmes Pharmacy proved successful. Patrons, especially younger women, overran the store. As the money flowed in, Holmes turned to his next grand adventure.

Using a false name, as he never intended to pay any of his creditors, he purchased the large empty lot across the street and built a mammoth structure, shortchanging all but a few who worked for him. Those few included the alcoholic Benjamin Pitezel, who was married with five children, and Charlie Chappell, who was most handy with a knife.

The first floor of "the Castle," as it came to be known, housed various retail establishments. The 36 rooms on the third floor served as a hotel, bringing in the many young women Holmes craved.

It was the forbidding second floor where many met their fate. An amalgam of oddly twisted, mysterious and hidden rooms, 35 in all, snaked through six corridors. There were dark rooms, a hanging room, a death room and the piece de resistance — a gas chamber with a nearby shaft in which bodies were sent hurtling to the basement.



H.H. HOLMES

LAW 'n HISTORY

Once there, an assortment of devices lay in wait, Holmes deciding the manner in which to dispose of his latest victim. Would he cremate her? Slowly and meticulously dissect her? Or merely chop her up and casually toss the remains into a lime pit.

Ned Conner, his wife, Julia, and their 8-year-old daughter, Pearl, had moved to Chicago and found work in Holmes Pharmacy. Ned admired the charismatic Holmes while Julia simply desired him. Soon Ned was divorced.

When Julia announced she was pregnant and they would have to marry, Holmes appeared overjoyed. However, he declared that having a child under such scandalous circumstances was out of the question. An abortion, at his skilled hands, was their only op-

tion.

On Christmas Eve, in the Castle, Holmes administered the chloroform that he always kept in large quantities. Soon Julia drifted off, reassured by the soothing words of her soon-to-be husband that all was well and together they and young Pearl would joyfully celebrate Christmas.

As a holiday spirited Holmes calmly explained to others that Julia and her daughter had left town to attend a family function, he awaited the arrival of Charlie Chappell, his former laborer, whom he had summonsed. When Chappell, who had mastered the ability to strip flesh from bone, arrived, the two ventured to the basement.

The dissection Holmes had earlier started was masterly completed. So much so that a local medical school jumped at the opportunity to purchase the pristine skeleton of what had once been Julia Conner.

As for Pearl, Holmes had earlier tossed her butchered remains into the lime pit.

Women innocently ventured in and then violently left Holmes' life. Emeline Cigrand, a lovely 24-year-old blond employee, disappeared as did Minnie Williams and her sister, Anna.

Prior to killing the short, plump and bland Minnie, Holmes conned her out of her very attractive inheritance. With the opening of Chicago's World Fair, many guests, females mainly,

stayed in the conveniently located Castle. Many never returned home.

In the end, pressures mounted. Creditors and relatives of the missing were now asking too many questions. Holmes fled, taking Pitezel with him.

Soon, an old life insurance scam was resurrected. They would insure Pitezel and then fake his death. Pitezel's wife was in on the deed. Holmes added a twist. Why get a body that looked like Pitezel's when he could simply kill Pitezel and use his? And to add to his pleasure, why not kill three of Pitezel's young children along the way.

Holmes now had gone too far. Through the cunning of a dedicated police detective, the crimes were solved. The naked bodies of Alice, 15, and Nellie, 11, were found buried in a basement in Toronto. Nellie's feet had been cut off. Three months later, the mutilated body of 8-year-old Howard was found stuffed in an Indianapolis fireplace.

Epilogue

Reviled by a nation that closely followed his notorious trial, Holmes was mourned by few when he was hanged for Benjamin Pitezel's murder. Earlier, he admitted to having killed 27 people. The number was probably far greater. Of those who did miss him were his prison guards, who had found the glib and model prisoner to be irresistibly charming.