

The headless-body murder mystery

By: [R. Marc Kantrowitz](#) August 27, 2015



Why is it that some murders rivet attention while others are relegated to anonymity and oblivion, sharing the scattering ashes of their victims?

Frequently, it all comes down to the mood of the press. And when, on June 26, 1897, a chopped-up body with a missing head — followed by subsequent doses of other body parts, adultery and abortion — landed in the laps of newspaper rivals Joseph Pulitzer of the New York World and William Randolph Hearst of the New York Journal, newspaper fortunes soared.

Grisly discoveries

The sun was spitting heat when two 13-year-olds decided to take a dip in the East River. One noticed a red-and-gold-wrapped package bobbing in the waters and swam out to fetch it. Upon unwrapping the bundle, two arms attached to shoulders and a muscular chest reached out to the shocked lads.

A day later, near the farmlands of the Bronx, a father and his two sons trudged through the dense woods to pick fruit and escape the heat. Edgar, 8, ran far ahead and soon found himself at the bottom of a deep drop, by a retaining wall. There he excitedly discovered a large container, nearly 100 pounds, dressed in red and gold. It contained the midsection of a man.

At the morgue, the gathered body parts fit neatly together as did the match of the red and gold wrappings. The medical examiner quickly opined upon examining the body that the victim had been stabbed. One other trait oddly stood out — soft and smooth hands, so unlike those of the male workers of the day.

Media sensation

The press quickly jumped on the story and, possessing far more money and resources than the police, led the investigation of the unknown, legless and headless body.

Hefty rewards offered by rival papers resulted in large numbers of people trudging through the morgue in an attempt to make an identification. The press also doggedly pursued leads, harassed witnesses and published whatever came to mind so long as it mesmerized readers.

As Hearst told his reporters, “The public likes entertainment better than it likes information.”

Shoe-leather reporting

Ned Brown, a 19-year-old cub reporter from New York University, made a major breakthrough upon realizing that a muscular male with soft hands perhaps worked in one of the popular local steam houses, massaging those who wished to indulge themselves or perhaps conquer a lingering hangover.

Brown travelled to some establishments asking whether any such employee had recently dropped out of sight. He quickly was supplied with a name, William Guldensuppe, and the woman with whom he supposedly lived, the midwife Augusta Nack.

Brown travelled to Nack’s apartment and, pretending to be a salesman selling soap, spoke with her. When she wasn’t looking, he swiped a picture of Guldensuppe.

Soon the press and police were all over the midwife Augusta, who made money providing abortions. She also was in the midst of leaving New York for her native Germany. She had been married to Herman Nack, who had been replaced in her marital bed by their one-time boarder William Guldensuppe, who in turn had been replaced by another boarder, Martin Thorn, a local barber.

Showing his displeasure at the turn of events, the enraged masseur unmercifully beat the overmatched barber, who swore vengeance.

As Nack was being questioned, the police sought to break her, dramatically pulling out two hideously severed legs that had just been fished out of the local waters. When asked whether they looked familiar, Augusta’s cool reaction stood in stark contrast to the heat surrounding her: “How should I know?”

The evidence piled up. Witnesses had her buying the red and gold coverings, renting a cottage in the outskirts of the city and securing a buggy to get there shortly before the severed body parts turned up and Guldensuppe went missing. A search of her apartment revealed a hidden saw, a butcher’s knife and a gun.

All that was needed was the one who had undoubtedly aided in the killing.

Betrayal

Martin Thorn laid low, talking to no one other than a friend, to whom he unwisely shared the sordid story:

He and Nack rented the death house and surrey, in which Nack and Guldensuppe travelled. Upon arrival, the unknowing victim was guided upstairs where a gun, a knife and dismemberment awaited. Over the next 24 hours, he and Nack disposed of the body parts. The head was laid in plaster and dumped in the ocean, never to be found.

But then, to Thorn's chagrin, his one-time lover Nack — who had hissed to him in an earlier court appearance, "Schweig still!" (say nothing) — flipped.

All the stops

Not even Thorn's attorney — the famed, corpulent and outrageously attired William Howe, of Howe & Hummel — could get him off, despite Howe's "no head-no foul" defense. Attired in a black yachting cap with his initials set in gold and a scarf ablaze with diamonds and other jewels, Howe destroyed Nack on the stand with his typical withering cross.

The trial ended, though, perhaps favorably for the state, when a juror fell ill (there were no alternate jurors back then). Learning from their shortcomings, the prosecutors didn't call Nack at the second trial; instead they marshalled the circumstantial evidence that was as heavy as Howe and just as formidable.

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Epilogue

On August 1, 1898, the electric chair dealt Thorn his final blow. For her cooperation, Augusta, the one who helped hatch and carry out the murderous plan, pled to manslaughter and served nine years.

Upon her return to New York, Nack was immediately recognized by those who had devoured the crime a decade earlier. Meanwhile, the circulation of Hearst's Journal leaped from 300,000 to 1.5 million as he exploited his readership's quest to be entertained, on this case as well as scores of others.

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Judge R. Marc Kantrowitz recently retired from the Appeals Court. He can be contacted at rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net. The above column is based, in large part, on "The Murder of the Century" by Paul Collins. Cait Murphy's "Scoundrels in the Law" on Howe & Hummel was also a resource. The title comes from a Collier dime novel.