

Judge Crater, call your office

By: R. Marc Kantrowitz April 21, 2023

The saga started on Aug. 6, 1930, a steamy Wednesday night in New York City. Despite the heat, Judge Joseph Force Crater was, as always, nattily attired in the hip style of the recently ended Roaring Twenties.

DETECTIVE DIVISION
CIRCULAR No. 11
SEPTEMBER 17, 1930

POLICE DEPARTMENT
CITY OF NEW YORK

BE SURE TO FILE
THIS CIRCULAR
FOR REFERENCE

Police Authorities are Requested to Post this Circular for the Information of Police Officers and File a Copy of it for Future Reference.

\$5,000.00 REWARD



The CITY of NEW YORK offers \$5,000 reward to any person or persons furnishing this Department with information resulting in locating Joseph Force Crater

Any information should be forwarded to the Detective Division of the Police Department of the City of New York, 240 Centre Street, Phone Spring 3100.

JOSEPH FORCE CRATER
JUSTICE OF THE SUPREME COURT, STATE OF NEW YORK

DESCRIPTION—Born in the United States—Age, 41 years; height, 6 feet; weight, 185 pounds; mixed grey hair, originally dark brown, thin at top, parted in middle "slicked" down; complexion, medium dark, considerably tanned; brown eyes; false teeth, upper and lower jaw, good physical and mental condition at time of disappearance. Tip of right index finger somewhat mutilated, due to having been recently crushed.

Wore brown sack coat and trousers, narrow green stripe, no vest; either a Panama or soft brown hat worn at rakish angle, size 6½, unusual size for his height and weight. Clothes made by Vroom. Affected colored shirt, size 14 collar, probably bow tie. Wore tortoise-shell glasses for reading. Yellow gold Masonic ring, somewhat worn; may be wearing a yellow gold, square-shaped wrist watch with leather strap.

EDWARD P. MULROONEY,
Police Commissioner

Phone Spring 3100.

With a double-breasted suit, high-choker collar, bow tie, spats and Panama Hat, he fit right in with the crowd he wished to associate with: the high-living businessmen, politicians, show people, chorus girls and gangsters. He held his own. Unattractive though tall and distinguished, he was a well-known and highly successful lawyer who had just realized his dream.

Despite his young age of 41, Crater had recently been named by Gov. Franklin D. Roosevelt to fill a temporary opening on the city's prestigious trial court. With his sights set on turning the job into a permanent post in the fall, he spent much of the summer at his vacation cabin in Maine with his wife, Stella.

On Saturday, Aug. 2, he unexpectedly announced to Stella that he had to return to Manhattan the next day "[to] clear up a few things" and "straighten out a few people."

Stella thought little of his departure, as he had similarly left in the past to tend to matters he typically did not share with her. He promised to return shortly to celebrate her birthday on Aug. 9.

The two had married in 1917, within days of Stella getting a divorce, which Crater helped secure. To all, the marriage seemed loving and supportive. Perhaps like many wives in those days, she knew little of her husband's business and personal dealings. Indeed, she wasn't even invited to his judicial swearing-in and certainly was not privy to his widespread philandering, particularly with chorus girls and a longtime mistress.

Ambitious, he knew that to achieve money, success and stature he would have to enter the dirty world of Tammany Hall, the highly corrupt arm of the Democratic Party. When Crater joined, the organization was moving away from its many organized-crime-like endeavors to a seemingly more genteel "honest graft."

Such scams included sweetheart deals, inflated license fees, shaking down jobseekers, and tipping off insiders to future government plans. Kickbacks and bribes oiled the smooth running of the various schemes with seemingly legitimate businessmen and lawyers ensuring that everything looked legal. Tammany quickly learned that Joe Crater possessed a brilliant legal mind and welcomed the young attorney, who rose quickly up the ranks.

Change, however, was in the wind, spearheaded by the press, some honest politicians, and a fed-up public, now in the throes of the depression and tired of graft and government mismanagement.

On the last day he would ever be seen, Crater was busy but acting mysteriously. Despite the court being on summer break, he went to his judicial chambers that morning, which surprised his assistants, Joe Mara and Fred Johnson.

Uncommonly serious, he entered his chambers, closed the door, and was heard shuffling and going through papers, many of which ended up in the trash. At one point, he emerged and asked Mara to cash two checks totaling \$5,100 (worth approximately \$90,000 today) in large denominations.

Mara did as ordered and returned with the money, which Crater shoved into one of his pockets. He then took two packed legal briefcases and a few folders and, with Mara, left. During the cab ride to his apartment, Crater remained atypically quiet and at times nervous. Mara carried in the briefcases and folders and left.

At 6 that evening, Crater traveled to a Broadway ticket agency, which his friend Joseph Gransky ran, and asked Gransky to reserve one ticket for a show that evening. Gransky thought it strange, as just a few weeks earlier, on July 25, the two had traveled to Atlantic City where they met two women and another couple and engaged in a days-long party, seeing a preview of the show along the way.

After arranging for the ticket, Crater wound up at another nearby hangout, Billy Haas's Chophouse on West 45th Street, located in his beloved playground, hedonistic Times Square, which seemed immune to the Prohibition laws and other norms of rectitude. There "Good time Joe" could play.

Upon entering the restaurant, Crater bumped into and reluctantly joined a lawyer friend, William Klein, a giant in theatrical law. Klein was eating with 22-year-old showgirl Sally Lou Ritz, who danced in a nearby revue. Earlier that summer, Crater had taken his longtime mistress, Connie Marcus, to the show, known for its nudity and salacious content. Marcus was surprised at how familiar Crater seemed with some of the performers.

During the meal, Klein found Crater "very nervous and disturbed" while Ritz described him as "somewhat depressed." The three finished and left the restaurant. Crater bid his companions farewell, got into a cab, and drove off.

When Crater did not return to Stella, she was initially unconcerned, believing he was detained on business. That quickly changed, though, when she learned that her husband had not shown up for the opening of court. Not wishing to jeopardize his judicial renomination, she discreetly sought his whereabouts. The police were finally notified nearly a month after his disappearance.

On Sept. 4, the story ran on the front page of the New York Times: "WIDE HUNT IS BEGUN FOR JUSTICE CRATER, MISSING FOUR WEEKS." Under that banner ran a smaller one: "Drew \$5100 From Banks When Last Seen, Two Days After [Federal attorney] Tuttle Made Ewald Charges."

The charges alluded to involved an allegation that former Magistrate George Ewald was named to the bench only after paying \$10,000 to Martin Healy, a Tammany district leader. At the dinner celebrating the 1927 event, then-attorney Crater gave the keynote congratulatory speech.

Five thousand missing-person posters flooded the nation. In October, a grand jury, which Stella refused to attend, convened. After 95 witnesses and 975 pages of testimony, the jury found it had no clue where Crater was or whether he was alive or dead.

As the police chased often fruitless clues, the public salivated over the lurid tales of a bigwig leading a notorious secret life.

Why did Crater that previous spring sell \$16,000 worth of stock and withdraw \$7,000 from his bank account (cumulatively worth more than \$400,000 today)? Did it go to buy his judgeship? And what of his close relationship with Gov. Roosevelt, who was not only running for re-election but eyeing the White House?

That Crater was also closely associated with Sen. Robert Wagner added to the political intrigue.

On Aug. 5, one Lorraine Fay, a young, well-dressed, bleached blond, met with NYC attorney Samuel Buchler and told him of an affair with Crater against whom she now wanted to sue for breach of promise to marry. When the Tammany-connected Buchler asked her to return the following day with proof, she never did. Fay was never located, and Buchler was later disbarred for defrauding clients.

As showgirls often supplied the air that Crater breathed, they were sought out and questioned, all to no avail. Sally Ritz spoke with the police and quickly left town, going to Ohio to care for her ailing father, as she explained.

Showgirl June Bryce, who had been with Crater on Aug. 5, also dropped out of sight. Stella's attorney later alleged that Crater was murdered by Bryce's mobster boyfriend, who was blackmailing the judge over his relationship with Bryce.

Vivian Gordon, a con artist extraordinaire and sex worker, mixed with many influential people. Crater's jacket was reportedly found in her apartment. After agreeing to testify about graft and payoffs, Gordon was murdered on Feb. 20, 1931. Her killing electrified the city.

In the end, Tammany Hall was essentially neutered, Mayor Walker resigned, and the police department's reputation was dirtied.

En route to the electric chair (for killing Gordon) Harry Stein stated that he and others bribed Crater to give a reduced sentence to a confederate. When Crater reneged, they killed him.

In 1954, Harry Krauss, a retired butcher in his mid-80s who was dying, told of owning a second house in Westchester County that he let the politically connected George Ewald, Martin Healy and Joe Crater use to host women and prostitutes. At one point, the three men reportedly brought \$90,000 in cash from a crooked city deal and buried it in the backyard.

When Krauss returned to the home the week Crater disappeared, he found it in shambles, with broken liquor bottles and glass and blood throughout. His caretaker brother-in-law was not present and would never be seen again. The area in which the money had been buried was dug up.

A week later, Krauss received a phone call to meet with Ewald and Healy. At the meeting, he was told that there might be some trouble involving the police. If so, he should clam up and deny he ever knew Crater, which he did before the grand jury.

He added that Crater was dead and buried in Bronxville. That Krauss had a poor reputation and often walked on the wrong side of the tracks with the wrong people detracted from his tale. Still, the police investigated but came up empty.

In 2005, an old woman died in Queens. When her relatives went through her effects, they came upon a note she had written. In it, she related that her late husband told her that a police officer and cabbie friend admitted picking up Crater outside the Chophouse, driving him to Coney Island, and killing and burying him under the future site of the Aquarium. Once again, the police unsuccessfully probed.

We have come no further today than the grand jury did in investigating Joseph Crater's fate in 1930. What forced him to return to New York City to "straighten out a few people"? Was he killed because he knew too much? Did he commit suicide for some of the same reasons? Did he run off with one of his many lady friends to start a new life? Why was he so nervous and out of sorts? Was he being blackmailed? Or did he just rile the wrong person who took murderous umbrage to something he did?

What we do know is that, in all probability, we will never know.