

OPINION

Leopold and Loeb: a match made in hell?

By R. Marc Kantrowitz

On May 21, 1924, 19-year-old Nathan Leopold was out on a mission with his lover and equally brilliant partner, Richard Loeb. When they spotted Loeb's 14-year-old cousin, Bobby Franks, walking home from an after-school basketball game, they offered him a ride. The Franks family never saw their son alive again.



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HISTORY

Leopold and the slightly younger Loeb both heralded from Kenwood, a wealthy neighborhood in the south side of Chicago. When the two met at the University of Chicago, each filled a void in the other.

Leopold, short and unattractive in his early years, never had many friends; indeed, he was often bullied in school, and he had been sexually abused by his nanny. He grew to be an egotistical and unpleasant young man.

At the opposite end stood the charming and attractive Loeb, whose father, Albert, was vice president of the hugely successful Sears and Ro-

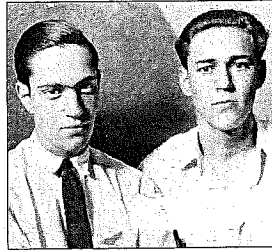
buck. Loeb could be the life of the party when he successfully hid his oddness. Daydreams of crime, especially committing the perfect one, relieved him from the daily pressures of study and expectation.

Despite their differences, they shared some similarities. Both were Jewish, albeit atheists, breezed through school at early ages and followed the teaching of Nietzsche, who espoused the "superman" theory.

Believing themselves to be intellectual "supermen," they were not subject to the same laws as normal, mentally inferior men. When they became lovers, Leopold was the one far more infatuated.

The ill-fated kidnap-murder had been meticulously prepared, minute by minute, over the course of six months. Plans were made to exact a ransom. They created a false identity in order to rent a car and cover their tracks. Their sole spontaneity was whom their victim would be. That poor soul was to be chosen randomly from an affluent neighborhood.

Judge R. Marc Kantrowitz sits on the Appeals Court. He can be contacted at rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net. Katherine Hart helped research the above column, which is based primarily on "For the Thrill of It: Leopold, Loeb, and the Murder That Shocked Chicago" by Simon Baatz.



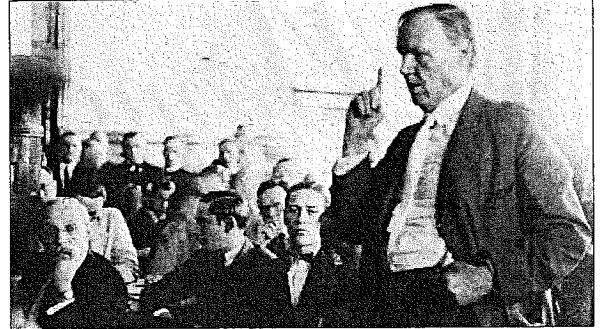
ABOVE: Nathan Leopold (left) and Richard Loeb

AT RIGHT: Clarence Darrow

After Bobby Franks entered the car, he was struck with the taped end of a chisel, the idea being that a single blow would render him unconscious. In fact, he put up a violent struggle, ending with blood soaking the vehicle's interior. After he was finally subdued, the duo drove to a pre-arranged location on the Illinois-Indiana line, about an hour or so away, stopping en route for hot dogs and root beer, casually eaten while the victim lay stuffed dead in the car.

Leopold, a seasoned bird watcher, knew of a culvert in a little traveled section of a state park, Wolf Lake, where the body could be deposited. Under the dark of the evening, they plunged the corpse head first into the culvert. It failed to entirely sink. Try as they might, and after shoving it in as far as they could, the boy's feet still poked out.

During the struggle, Leopold felt the sensation of something falling



and hitting the ground. He searched but saw nothing, and he and Loeb fled.

Despite the desolation of the area, a workman happened upon the body a day later. The police arrived and searched the area, coming across a pair of tortoise-shell glasses with a highly unusual hinge mechanism. Soon, they had the names of the three people in Chicago who had purchased such glasses. And not long after that, they had a confessing Leopold and Loeb.

The prosecutor had a hanging case and was shocked when defense counsel Clarence Darrow, arguably the most famous attorney in the United States in 1924, had his clients plead guilty. Darrow placed his faith in the sentencing hearing.

Two thousand people arrived at the courthouse, hoping to hear the

arguments. Darrow, as always, was masterful, arguing that the wealth of the defendants and the lack of motive had sensationalized the case. To execute two teenagers would be to look to the past and not the future, he asserted.

"[W]e can learn by reason and judgment and understanding and faith that all life is worth saving and that mercy is the highest attribute of man," an emotional Darrow said, while women in the courtroom wept.

Given the ages of the defendants, both under 21, the judge spared their lives, sentencing the two to life plus 99 years.

Epilogue

Loeb was killed by a fellow prisoner in 1936. Leopold served 33 years. When he died in 1971 at the age of 66 in Puerto Rico, he had a framed picture of Loeb in his home.

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