

Pro and Contra in Sepia Black

by strannikov

Once a homicidal deed has been performed, a murderer can be expected to vent.

Although rash confessions overheard in saloons, muttered over pool tables or card tables, or exhaled carelessly in remote back alleys do sometimes anticipate courtroom ranting and raging, speaking of the deed comes to murderers perfectly naturally. The uninitiated construe this as an occupational hazard, but those in the know can attest that it's part of the job description, as essential a consequence to the deed as an execution often is deemed a logical consequence of a capital sentence.

This does not go unremarked in the professional journals, however. The monthly editions of Murderers' Morgue and N. Y. Murder Registry (based in Chicago and New York City, respectively, both enterprises well into their second centuries of publishing success) are embarrassingly full each month, their pages and supplements thick with vicious remarks denouncing the regular apprehensions of murderers guilty of the most thoughtless indiscretions.

The belief expressed in these journals seems generally that the arrest of murderers constitutes a professional embarrassment, even though professional jealousies among the murdering set seem to account for many anonymous tips to police investigators. From decade to decade, editorial opinion swings and sways as to whether the fault of volubility resides chiefly with the practitioner or with the generally lawless company he keeps.

One case appearing in the professional journals at least once every decade is cited to argue both sides of the matter. For the public that fails to subscribe to the print editions of these journals (readers can understand that no online edition of either has been

launched), the illuminating history of Trent Wasskins is here offered. (Lethal controversy persists to this day between the staffs of the two leading journals as to which scribe with which journal contributed the original account and which modified the other's account to its alternate purpose.)

Trent Wasskins of Pennsylvburg, Ohio (the one between Cleveland and Toledo), began his professional life as an enterprising home pest exterminator. Although he'd moved to Toledo just prior to setting up business, among his clients he somehow failed to advertise his visceral disgust with and deep loathing for toy dogs, especially weepy-eyed toy poodles.

He'd been in business barely two years, by which time Toledo police had assembled evidence of Trent's reasoned dispatch of at least twenty-nine toy poodles: his earnest zeal inflamed, he'd further deprived his customer base of at least sixty-seven chihuahuas, up to three Pomeranians (a scarce breed in the area already), and apparently one most unfortunate Shih Tzu. He'd found it both tempting and easy to dose exposed canine food bowls with the lethal chemicals of his trade. By the time his first court date arrived, disconsolate former customers and aggrieved former dog owners had taken to shoveling fresh and not-so-fresh roadkill into rotting piles at the foot of his driveway and into the back of his pest extermination service truck each night in the hours before sunrise.

His pro bono attorney and an agreeable court psychologist argued for mitigating circumstances: while off at summer camp in his youth, his dead widowed mother's toy poodles had gnawed generously on the woman's undiscovered carcass for almost twelve days before her death was discovered (heart attack). Rebuked by the court with a stern suspended sentence, Trent was obliged to return to the relative anonymity of rural Pennsylvburg County, many of whose residents now viewed him with such distrust that he could not re-establish what had been a thriving pest extermination business. Only after persistent badgering from high school chum Gordo Pogue did Trent reveal his innermost criminal ideations over

the bottle of vodka Pogue plied him with. Soon, Pogue had blabbed Trent's extracted confession over the rest of Pennsylvburg County.

Once Trent learned of Pogue's treachery, he extended his zeal against the interests of toy dogs to include homicidal fury: yet, possessed of innate patience and at least the requisite minimum for cunning, Trent shut himself up in a shack out in some quiet woods to experiment with the deadly chemicals still in his possession.

Still unknown outside of Toledo and Pennsylvburg County, he began visiting public libraries in neighboring Murdestown and Eerievale Counties to read up on fine points never addressed in his high school chemistry class. Not only did he manage to filch a copy of the Physicians' Desk Reference from a beckoning shelf, he filled notebooks with copious notes from numerous biochemistry manuals: his behavior on these occasions was powerfully adapted to corroborate existing suspicion had any librarian been alert to his recent past.

Months later, armed with powerful new appreciation for the marvels of chemistry and neurotoxins, Trent renewed his lapsed acquaintance with Pogue, inviting him out to the remote shack to share bottles of home-distilled vodka and the prospect of setting up a lucrative bootlegging trade. Unbeknownst to the traitorous Pogue, Trent had also adopted the trustworthy maxim that the best person to murder is a friend and, in default of a friend, a mere acquaintance, because in either case suspicion would be disarmed.

Pogue was never seen again, though hardly missed, as Trent settled him into a shallow grave even deeper in the woods beyond the lonely shack. From Pennsylvburg County Trent also disappeared and made his silent way to the Cleveland area, later expanding his westward range to take in the suburbs and municipalities ringing Detroit.

To keep a short tale brief, suffice to say that Trent's criminal deeds broadened in scope: he became yet another victim of the shocking tendency of a taste for murder when immoderately indulged. From murder you often soon proceed to petty larceny (witness the filched PDR): once you get there, in sad progression

come grand larceny, Sabbath-breaking, drunkenness, and procrastination, before the awful climax terminates in neglect of dress, non-punctuality, and undifferentiated peevishness. Many a man has begun with dabbling a little in murder and thought he would stop there, until one thing leads to another in such short order that within only a few years he's become disreputable.

After three years and some three dozen victims along the Cleveland-Detroit corridor (Gordo Pogue and Pennsylvburg County excepted, respectively), Trent Wasskins fell into deep disrepute when apprehended leaving the lair of his Cleveland fence, to whom he'd just sold items of antique jewelry recently acquired.

In the cruelest of ironies (given his acknowledged talent for chemistry), after conviction Trent was executed by lethal injection for the murder his traitorous fence had alerted police detectives to (simply in order to receive a light sentence of his own).

Debates on the pages of the professional journals almost immediately ensued. Most conceded the timeworn complaint that the criminal justice system remains inherently biased against those accused of capital crimes. Thereafter, most commentators blamed not Wasskins himself but the stoolie fence who implicated him: their argument was buttressed by the fact that Wasskins' murder of Gordo Pogue did not come to light until a year after Wasskins' execution, suggesting that Wasskins' only fault may've been a propensity to associate with blabbermouths. A contrary opinion developed among a principled and vocal minority, however, since at his trial it was found that Wasskins had confided to his Cleveland fence gruesome details relating to the homicide for which he was executed: had Wasskins not been so forthcoming, so the argument went and so it goes, the fence might not have been alarmed enough to alert police. By this reasoning Wasskins came to be blamed justly for failure to appreciate the indiscretion of his own demeanor.

With concern for completeness, this narrative ends with the epilogue well known in the annals and chronicles of homicide: in the long years he spent on Death Row, Trent repeatedly offered to help treat any prisoners seeking relief in the prison infirmary. After

the extra-judicial deaths of two lifers came to the attention of the prison's warden, Wasskins was reproached with the offer to become instead the chief assistant to the prison's executioner, an offer he steadfastly refused.

Just because a man's morals are bad, that's no reason why his tastes should not be respected.

END

