

Blues Alley
Special Rabbit Hole Edition
"Body & Soul - Part 1"
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Nashville TN

On the afternoon of May 22nd, 1917 W.C. Handy witnessed a severed head being tossed into a crowd on Beale Street.

It was one of the reasons he packed up shop and left Memphis for New York City.

But, who's head was it? And what did Handy's leaving Memphis cost the city?

Over the next few decades American culture would change dramatically, and Memphis, which had been at the forefront, was increasingly left out.

Did the city's racism, which by their own admission viewed a third of the population as vicious, cost them a larger role in the growing industry of American music?

Could Memphis have become a sister Music City USA, along side her neighbor Nashville?

All good questions... and they're all connected... on this Rabbit Hole Edition of Blues Alley.

Bodies and Souls - Part I

In 1923, George Dewey Hay, a beat reporter for the Memphis Commercial Appeal was assigned the job of announcer and editor at WMC the paper's new venture into radio. Hay announced the stations arrival with a steamboat whistle he called Hushpuckena. A sounder that would remain with the station into the 1990s.

Shortly after the station went on the air, Bessie Smith sang live from the WMC studios in deeply segregated Memphis.

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It's one of the earliest instances of integrated radio programming in America.

But, George Hay - soon left Memphis, for Chicago where he became announcer of Sears new radio station WLS.

Hay also began hosting a "down home" radio show at WLS called the National Barn Dance, a program that received a booming response in letters and telegrams.

But Hay wouldn't stay long at WLS either.

After winning the award as the nations top radio announcer, Hay headed back south, this time to Nashville, two hundred miles east of where he started in Memphis.

The National Life and Accident Insurance company in Nashville, had started a radio station of their own, with the call letters WSM - which stood for the insurance company's motto - We Shield Millions.

WSM had made George Hay their radio director, hoping to appeal to a more down home audience, one that National Life was targeting as customers.

The day after Christmas, 1925, Hay kicked off a new version of the National Barn Dance he had in Chicago. His Nashville program would soon become known around the world, as the Grand Ole Opry.

Early on it became apparent that the Opry had a little problem.

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The regular cast of musicians were out playing gigs - or back home working regular jobs all week, and some of them didn't make it back in time for the weekly broadcast.

So in the early thirties, the stations then General Manager Harry Sloan, started the WSM artist services bureau, a booking and PR agency that allowed the shows performers to promote themselves as stars of Opry, booked appearances, and importantly for WSM, controlled the schedule so as to guarantee that the artists were back in Nashville, for the live Saturday night show.

Artist Services quickly raised the quality of the Grand Ole Opry.

And, that consistent caliber of performance soon landed them a Saturday night slot on NBC's national radio network, and Country music was off to the races.

Within a generation, the Artist Services Bureau had blossomed into what we know today as the music industry. Hundreds of independent and national booking agencies, publishers, record companies and recording studios sprang up in a neighborhood along 16th and 17th avenues in Nashville, all in support of the exploding Country music business.

That neighborhood is known today as music row, and Nashville became known as Music City USA.

Ironically, WSM's Artist Service Bureau was exactly the same idea that Handy had implemented, twenty years earlier in Memphis. But Handy's musicians didn't buy into the idea, the way the Opry crowd did.

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By 1917 or 18, Handy was contemplating, packing up shop in Memphis and heading for New York.

His band had broken in to factions and had to have police protection to keep them from killing one another at a parade in Atlanta.

The musicians it seemed wanted to go home, for no other reason Handy surmised, than they missed the party on Beale Street.

Disheartened, the band leader conceded to their wishes, and cancelled their upcoming gigs.

As the smug, and victorious, musicians gathered on the railroad platform to head home, Handy announced he wasn't going with them. He was quitting the band business. In fact he was quitting Memphis altogether.

It was a change that had been brewing for a while, and it was more than just the betrayal of his band that clenched his decision, it was the racism and violence facing black men in the south.

It was that disembodied head - on an otherwise beautiful May afternoon - on Beale Street.

But it wasn't just that single day either. Tensions in Memphis had been rising since the end of April.

At 6 AM, Monday morning April 30, 1917, fifteen year old Antoinette Rappel hopped on her bike and headed off to Lescovi's store to meet the wagonnet - what functioned in 1917 as a school bus - transporting students from the countryside - to Treadwell High some ten miles further west.

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Her route to Lescovi's, meant Rappel had to cross the Wolf River, and in 1917 there was a long bridge on Old Macon Road one of the main routes into the city from the east.

Today - all that's left of the old road is an overgrown patch of decaying asphalt, weeds and water moccasins - but a century ago it was a bustling thoroughfare. In fact - this particular stretch of Old Macon was only rendered obsolete - in the late 50's by Interstate Forty - which runs parallel about a mile to the south - and is still - the main route into Memphis from the Eastern United States.

Antoinette Rappel crossed the long bridge every day - once on the way to school, and again on the way home.

This day however, April 30th, 1917, that didn't happen - because Antoinette Rappel didn't come home.

Her mother, Minnie Woods, assumed Antoinette had just decided to spend the night with her Aunt and Uncle, the Wilfongs. Who lived near the bridge, much closer to her school.

When Antoinette didn't come home Tuesday Minnie became alarmed, driving to the Wilfong home and nearly fainting when she was told Antoinette hadn't been there since Saturday.

After learning her daughter had never arrived at school on Monday morning - a search party of family and neighbors was quickly organized.

They found no sign of the young girl on Tuesday night. Yet her mother. Minnie Woods, still didn't call the police.

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Wednesday morning Antoinette's uncle Will Wilfong, along with Kelly Puryear, Dr. H A Johnson, and W.W. Cant began a second search.

An African American farmer they located, told them he had seen Antoinette enter long bridge on her bicycle Monday morning, but no trace could be immediately seen of the girl on either side - an accident was looking increasingly unlikely.

So the search party, led by Wilfong, took to the underbrush near the Wolf River.

Almost immediately they noticed the bushes had been trampled down, and few steps further they found Antoinette's bike leaning against a tree. According to their statements, the seat was "twisted to one side," and the flowers she'd picked for her teacher that morning were still in the basket.

Then, a little deeper in the woods, they found her body.

This account, describing the scene in detail, is directly from the Memphis Evening paper that day, and warning it's graphic.

"On the ground three feet away was a dark splotch of congealed blood and several distinct imprints of an ax blade, where it had missed it's mark and buried itself deeply into the turf.

The weapon appeared to have been swung with powerful force, as some of the gashes were six inches deep, and all filled with blood which had coursed into them in small rivulets.

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A trampled bouquet of flowers, which Miss Rappel had gathered in her front yard Monday morning for her teacher, lay nearby, their scattered blossoms stained with blood.

Lying on her back, with arms and limbs outstretched, and with clothing torn and disheveled, the headless trunk of Miss Rappel's body was found.

Near her right foot was the severed head, it's golden tresses clotted and tangled, with blood. The wide staring blues eyes bore a frozen expression of horror."

~ Memphis Press Scimitar May 3rd, 1917.

The press account, slightly contradicts the search party's statement about the flowers still being in the basket. But the rest of the article seems consistent.

The biggest inconsistency was that Antoinette's mother still hadn't called authorities when the body was found.

When asked why, Minnie Woods told police that she thought her daughter had run off to join the Red Cross war effort, something she had been talking about for a while.

Now that it was an official police case, Shelby County Sheriff Mike Tate began an all-night search for the killer.

Meanwhile the coroner, Dr. Cunningham, was performing an autopsy.

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Cause of death was determined as "A gash about two inches long upon the top of the head, inflicted with some sharp instrument, which cut through the skull into the brain..." Her head had been severed post mortem.

Dr Cunningham also ruled that "an outrage had occurred." The term, "an outrage," was 1917 code, for rape.

The use of the word outrage was no accident - as the entire purpose of the claim was to incite revenge.

The black community knew this all too well - from long, bitter experience. Ida B. Wells - the legendary black journalist and civil rights activist had - decades earlier - detailed how police incited lynchings, by charging black suspects with the rape of a white woman - whether it happened or not.

Even though they didn't yet know who the killer was. All of this shocking news had the blood up among the white denizens of Memphis.

Every person in Rappel's neighborhood was interviewed in hopes that someone - had seen something!

But no one had.

At the crime scene, a search revealed tire tracks on a blind road, and a man's handkerchief, about 200 feet from the body.

City police from Memphis, were brought in to assist. But they lacked jurisdiction as the crime had occurred in the county - and was therefore Sheriff Tate's domain.

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In contrast to the Sheriff, Memphis detectives Hoyle and Brunner believed the killer was an acquaintance. If she had been grabbed - they pointed out - her bike would have been found tossed aside - on the ground - not leaning up against a tree, the flowers still in the basket.

There was also a white "dairyman's or barber's coat" that had been found about 35 feet from the scene.

The evidence didn't matter, an outrage had occurred - and two days later - as Antoinette Rappel was laid to rest by her family and classmates - Sheriff Tate was rounding up the usual suspects.

All of them black.

On the afternoon of May 3rd, deputies responded to reports of a deaf-mute near National Cemetery - who was trying to sign a message that something horrific had happened over by the long bridge.

The deaf man - an African American named Dewitt Ford couldn't speak, hear or write, so police - and the press - simply referred to him as "The Dummy."

When deputies took him to the scene - along Macon Road, Ford stopped on the bridge and drew a picture of the bike, the severed head and the location where the murder occurred.

Officers - many who'd been to the scene - claimed it matched exactly.

Escorted to the spot where the body was found, Ford pointed to the log he'd been hiding behind when the murder was committed; he motioned to his chin, indicating that the killer had a beard;

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and then promptly led authorities to a black man named Dan Armstrong indicating - with a throat slash that - here - was the killer!

Armstrong was arrested, and a triumphant Sheriff Tate, announced to the press that he had got his man.

Authorities however, were dismayed to discover that their prime suspect had an alibi.

Mr. Stockley a - "reliable white man" who owned a wood cutting business along the Wolf River could place Armstrong miles away at the time of the murder.

The Sheriff's case against Dan Armstrong was falling apart.

Still the Sheriff thought Dewitt Ford the deaf mute man - was key to the whole case, believing that his motion of a throat slash referred to the girls head being severed.

Memphis police detectives Hoyle and Brunner however, were convinced that Ford was indicating that the killer was a barber, which coincided with the white coat they had found near the body.

Memphis police were certain the killer was a white man, who knew the victim, while Sheriff Tate was convinced of the exact opposite, and set out to prove it.

The press reported that "Every negro within a radius of several miles... has been questioned - their cabins - ransacked."

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When deputies came to the cabin of a woodcutter named El Person, he couldn't produce his axe, an axe his wife had just described to authorities, as "new and having a burned handle."

Mike Tate had already decided, that the killer had likely thrown the murder weapon in the river, or one of the canals that fed into it.

Conveniently for the Sheriff, El Person lived near one of those canals, and the crime scene.

While there was no real evidence, things didn't look good El Person.

It was a week after the horrific crime - and the Shelby County Sheriff, as well as a growing cadre of amateur detectives - all remained baffled.

May 6th - a gaggle of amateur sleuths found what appeared to be a - blood stained ax hidden in the bushes about a half mile away from the scene. Caught on the handle were two threads - one blue the other white. Upon investigation however, it turned out to be another red herring.

Dan Armstrong - in spite of an iron clad alibi - was still in jail!

So too, was Dewitt Ford who had done nothing, but report the murder.

The public, demanding answers, was growing restless with the pace of the investigation - threatening to take matters into their own hands.

Sheriff Tate had to make a move.

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Because he couldn't show them his axe, El Person was brought in for questioning, then released and followed by deputies.

Tate was hoping he could trick Person into leading police to the missing murder weapon.

But it didn't work. Person was brought back in again, for "behaving strangely," and released a second time.

Still no axe - and no other evidence either.

On his third arrest however, things changed. During this interrogation Detective Hoyle reportedly noticed blood on Person's shoes. It was all the evidence they needed.

On Tuesday morning May 8th 1917 - the Memphis Commercial Appeal announced a break in the case!

El Person had confessed - first to authorities - then again to the press - a few minutes after midnight.

The statement Person read to reporters was printed on the front page of the morning paper. It read...

"I was at the bottom cutting cane for pea sticks - when I saw the little girl come down the road leading her wheel. She leaned the wheel against a tree and stepped back. I sneaked up behind her and brought the ax down on her head. The first blow didn't not knock her down, and she turned and fought me."

After letting the image sink in for a moment Person continued. "Then I split open her head with another blow. She fell.

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In fear that she would recover and tell - I cut off her head and threw it into the underbrush."

~ Memphis Commercial Appeal May 8, 1917:

Person went on to describe how he ran - panicked - to his cabin - pausing only to toss his ax in a nearby canal.

Sheriff Tate was convinced he had the right man this time, and when they dragged the 10 foot deep canal they dredged up what appeared to be a new, blood soaked, ax - with a burned handle.

Reports were also circulating however, that the well written confession that El Person read to reporters, had been beaten out of him.

A possibly coerced confession and an axe from a public canal, was all the evidence police had, and it was circumstantial.

Sheriff Tate wanted some insurance.

It couldn't have been to assure the conviction, a black man even accused of killing a white woman, in 1917 Memphis, meant certain execution. Tate's insurance was likely playing to the press and the public.

What he chose as supporting evidence was a sensational, and suspect, process called optography - the concept that the final image a person sees in life - is forever preserved - as a photograph on their dying retina.

Optography had been posited and almost immediately dismissed by renowned French criminologist Alphonse Bertillion - who invented among other legitimate procedures - the "mug shot," and ballistics.

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An entire system of criminal investigative technique had been named after the Frenchman. Detectives were certified as Bertillion Criminologists.

But the great man had himself had dismissed optography as nonsense.

Regardless - Sheriff Tate ordered the exhumation of the Antoinette Rappel's body, and in spite of assurances by leading physicians that a result was impossible, a Bertillion Chief criminologist named Paul Waggoner claimed to have captured the image of a "full-faced, large figured man," on the dead girl's retina.

The Shelby County Police Chief expressing "great satisfaction," called it "one of the few instances in the US where the object last beheld by a person meeting a terrible death was successfully reproduced from the eyes of the dead by scientific photography."

Sheriff Tate claimed - to have himself seen the face of El Person in the "horrified frozen eyes" of Antoinette Rappel!

But in the last line of its story about this investigative technique, the Commercial Appeal was careful to clarify that - "The photograph of course is of microscopic size, and is a mere shadow picture," referring to it as another slight clue.

So why, would the press undermine their own story?

Because in 1917, every serious criminologist, and medical professional, knew the process was irrational and irresponsible nonsense.

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It had only remained in the mind of popular culture as the denouement of "The Kip Brothers," a popular mystery novel by Jules Verne.

Yet this was the investigative technique that Sheriff Mike Tate chose to solidify his case against El Person.

Predictably, the absurd claim - hailed by authorities as evidential proof - only served to inflame an already hypergolic white community.

Things in Memphis were about to get out of hand!

It had been a week since Antoinette Rappel's grisly murder, and somewhere between 1500 and 2000 men women and children had tramped through the crime scene - everyone with a different take on how the crime had occurred.

Once El Person's confession was reported however, a mob mentality took over the city.

Fearing vigilante violence Sheriff Tate had Person moved out of town.

Accompanied by Detectives Hoyle and Brunner, Person was whisked 80 miles east to Jackson - and then on to Nashville.

The move had come just in time. By one o'clock in the afternoon, a crowd began to assemble. It soon grew to over 500 people and surrounded the Shelby County jail, the mob leaders demanding Person's location.

Tate tried to convince them that Person was already imprisoned in Nashville. It didn't work. The mob - many of whom had bunked off work at the Binghamton car factory - now decided he was actually at the city jail in Memphis.

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They headed downtown, and surrounded that facility. Memphis Police Chief Perry, tried to convince them that Person wasn't being kept in his cells.

The mob didn't believe him, so they went to the courthouse to appeal to the to attorney general.

When a telegram from Brunner and Hoyle stating that they had arrived safely with Person at the Nashville jail, was read to the crowd, the posse believed it was a ruse.

Convinced, they'd been robbed of their chance at vigilante justice, they dispersed for the night, vowing however, they'd be back tomorrow.

The next day 300 of them returned.

They still refused to believe Chief Perry's insistence that Person wasn't in his jail, so Perry led a delegation of mob leaders on a tour of the facility to prove it.

But this mob wasn't about to be denied.

The vigilantes, armed with shotguns, put up roadblocks, and began searching every car in and out of Memphis. They even stopped and searched trains.

But it was all to no avail. El Person was safely ensconced in the Nashville jail.

Then at 7:35 in the morning on Wednesday, May 16th, Sheriff Tate returned from Nashville by train, stopping in Arlington, TN thirty miles east of Memphis. He was met by a mob of 100, demanding to know if he'd brought El Person with him.

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Tate insisted he hadn't, stepped into a waiting car full of deputies, and sped away - "the throttle wide open, and dust flying," as the Commercial Appeal put it.

The armed band split in two, one part held up the train to thoroughly search it, while the other sped off in pursuit.

Across a swath of West Tennessee, an old fashioned car chase ensued, albeit a bit backwards, in this chase - the posse was chasing the lawmen.

And that's when - Sheriff Mike Tate vanished.

Find out what happened next - on part two of body and Soul, a special Rabbit Hole Edition of Blues Alley.

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