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The American Tragedy Murder

By Grant Frobisher

On July 31, the body of twenty-six year old Freda McKechnie of Edwardsville turned up in Harvey's Lake at Myers Grove, near Sandy Beach. Two teenagers in a rowboat, Nathan Schoenburn and his girlfriend, saw the body floating face down; it was also spotted from the shore by a five year old girl, Betty DaCosta.

Shortly thereafter police arrested Robert Allan Edwards, age twenty-three, also of Edwardsville, and charged that he had bludgeoned the pregnant McKechnie with a blackjack in order to be free to marry the younger, wealthier and prettier Margaret Crain, a native of upstate New York.

Theodore Dreiser had published the most monumental of his novels, An American Tragedy, in 1925. He based it on an actual case that had unfolded in the vicinity of Herkimer, New York, between 1905 and 1908. A murdered woman, Grace Brown, was found with a bruise on her forehead in Big Moose Lake. Investigators learned that she and a man named Chester Gillette were lovers, that she was pregnant by him, and that he wished to marry another, and wealthier, woman. Gillette was found guilty and electrocuted at Auburn Penitentiary in March 1908.

The All-American looking Robert Edwards, better known as Bobby, was a young man whose aspirations for a college

degree had been sidetracked by the Depression. He had to drop out of Mansfield State Teachers' College and take a job as a mine surveyor with the Kingston Coal Company. At Mansfield he had met Margaret Crain of East Aurora, New York, the sister of a prominent clergyman; after graduation she became a high school music teacher in Endicott, New York.

The two considered themselves engaged, and Crain gave Edwards $125 for a down payment on the purchase of an automobile.

Although he visited Crain frequently, Edwards also sustained a relationship with Freda McKechnie - their parents were friends. The relationship was an intimate one, and McKechnie discovered that she was pregnant in late July 1934. Doing what was then the "honorable" thing, Edwards promised to marry her. Since she apparently loved him deeply, McKechnie's last days were among the happiest of her life.

On the evening of July 30, Edwards and McKechnie drove to Harvey's Lake for a swim. What happened there constituted the heart of the courtroom confrontation between the prosecution and the defense when the trial opened on October 1, 1934. Edwards admitted hitting McKechnie over the head with a blackjack, in shallow water, and of dumping her body in the deeper part of the lake. DA Thomas Lewis charged premeditation - that Edwards planned to murder McKechnie so that he could marry Margaret Crain. In support of this allegation, the prosecution presented medical evidence indicating trauma from a blow to the head as the cause of death. Included too was the testimony of Dr. Stanley Freeman, the prison physician, about his conversation of August 4 with Edwards, which Judge W.A. Valentine allowed despite the defense's objection that it was privileged (confidential) information. According to Dr. Freeman, Edwards had confessed that he had killed McKechnie because

he had another girl and because "he thought he could get away with it." In a second conversation on August 17, Edwards told Dr. Freeman that he had planned the murder while driving McKechnie to Harvey's Lake on July 30. Warden William B. Healey disclosed that Edwards had made essentially the same confession to him.

To underline the charge that Edwards had committed murder to free himself to marry "the other woman," Assistant DA J. Harold Flannery read excerpts from letters written by the accused to Margaret Crain. A gifted amateur actor with a beautiful voice, Flannery's delivery was extremely effective. Edwards turned pale, several women left the courtroom, and others became very fidgety while the letters were being read. In them Edwards addressed Crain as "Mamma," "Darling," "Honey," "Darling Wife," and "Momet" - the last a children's mispronunciation of the name Margaret. Among his expressions of passion were the following: "It would kill me to lose you;" "I love you, Momet dearest, above all in the world;" and "The colliery fires are cold compared to our love." There were 172 of these documents, which the prosecution deemed not only "erotic" but incriminating.

[Apparently to spare further embarrassment to Crain the trial was halted at Edwards' request and] Edwards pleaded not guilty to first degree murder. Since he had confessed to bludgeoning McKechnie, his defense had to be, and was, a convoluted one. In his version of events, McKechnie had just stepped into a rowboat when she passed out. Edwards tried to revive her but was unable to feel a pulse or heart beat. In a panic, he returned to shore and then to his automobile where he saw the strap of the blackjack he carried for self-defense. His testimony follows:

> It occurred to me that if there was some mark on Freda's body, it might make her death look like an accident, and I would be left out of it. I knew Freda was pregnant. I knew she was not allowed to swim

and that she was not supposed to be with me.

When I returned to the boat she was in the same position. She had not revived. I could do nothing. I put her head over my left arm and struck her on the back of the head with the blackjack. I didn't even realize what I had done and I carried the body out to water up to my chest and let it drop....

It took the jury only four-and-a-half hours, on October 6, 1934 to find Edwards guilty of murder and to recommend the death sentence. On November 30 the court en banc refused him a new trial, and on December 3 he was officially sentenced to death. Defense attorney Frank A. McGuigan announced that the Edwards family lacked the money to carry an appeal to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.

Edwards was not without his sympathizers, including a number of character witnesses who testified on his behalf at the trial. Margaret Crain and he had had a tender-hearted meeting in jail on August 3, 1934, shortly after his arrest. But she soon cut herself off completely from the case, except to provide the letters which played a key role in Edwards' conviction. She rebuffed three defense requests to testify.

More than a thousand people in Wyoming Valley appealed for a commutation of Edwards' sentence. However, the most eloquent of all the supporters of clemency was Theodore Dreiser himself. The most obvious authority on American Tragedy-type cases, Dreiser arrived in the Valley on September 7, 1934, on assignment from the New York Post and The Mystery Magazine. Within days he had interviewed people in Edwardsville and visited Harvey's Lake, accompanied by his secretary, who took copious notes. He returned to the area in early October to cover Edwards' trial. On one occasion, in fact, Judge Valentine admonished him for making (unconscious) facial expressions in front of the jury when the pathologist responsible for the autopsy was being cross examined.

Dreiser was a left-winger critical of many aspects of American society. The real tragedy in An American Tragedy was the national obsession with money; and one of the quickest ways of acquiring it was to marry it. Fortune-hunting was a disease which occasionally resulted in murder. Within this context, Dreiser thought Edwards less a callous killer than a victim of pathological social pressures.

Edwards, Dreiser wrote in the New York Post of October 5, 1934, was certainly not the "brutal, soulless sensualist" portrayed by the prosecution. With money he would have gone back to college and solidified his relationship with Margaret Crain. As for the letters, they were nothing but "the emotional blather of a boy of twenty-one." He himself, Dreiser admitted, had written such letters at that age.

Dreiser actually forwarded copies of his sympathetic analysis to Pennsylvania's governor and pardon board. Unfortunately for the condemned man, the recipients were unmoved. At 12:35 a.m. on May 6, 1935, while reciting a prayer, Robert Edwards died in the electric chair at Rockview. Whether he was a calculating murderer, or, as Dreiser believed, the product of a reprehensible system of moral values, is still a matter of opinion. Until the crime, his life was ostensibly normal, his two-timing behavior to the contrary notwithstanding. Ironically, about one year before his arrest, Edwards had wondered aloud to a Plymouth acquaintance about the feelings of a man facing execution. It was an experience that ultimately would become his reality.