

'Ghosts' Haunt Scenes Of Rural Tragedy In Slashings Country

**Dudgeon Neighbors Shun
Homestead Tract, Where Al-
leged Murder Was Committed.**

BY JAMES P. POWERS,

Free Press Staff Correspondent.

White Cloud, Mich., June 6.—A partridge wings away in bullet-like flight. A startled pheasant scurries off into the brush. Deer often wander from the woods from the woods to graze at the edge of the clearings.

Such is the locale of the Dudgeon farm and the neighboring Terwilliger barn in which the victim of Newaygo county's—in fact, western Michigan's—most sensational crime was found hanging.

Haunt of Wild Things.

For 30 miles north to Baldwin only an occasional break appears in what was once a mighty forest. There are a few scattered and isolated clearings, the forlorn hopes for better things in life of impoverished settlers.

For 30 miles the terrain stretches away—a haunt of wild things, a desolation of sand and stumps and second growth—just a waste.

In the midst of a virile growth of young trees, half hidden as if there were mortification in its memories and a reluctance to bare them to light, was the Dudgeon home until fire of mysterious origin razed it three nights ago.

Disreputably it stood, a rectangular two-story frame building of rough pine boards and a ragged tar paper covering that wind and weather have shredded and torn away in many places, exposing gaps in the planking and decay in the interior. Two square rooms downstairs, two upstairs to which access is gained by a narrow stairway that could not closer approach the perpendicular, and still be a stairway, divided the inside.

Is Dismal Spot.

Darkened by the low-hanging boughs from the surrounding trees, the rooms were as dismal as the outside. A breeze rattling the loose and rotting boards of the walls stirred conjecture as to how the place could be made habitable, a place of domestic cheer, when the gales and snows of winter battered at the doors and closed to travel the rutty dirt road that snakily winds away to the nearest town. Nobody had lived there for two years, since the Dudgeons went to prison. It has lived its life as

It is whispered that the Dudgeon home fire may have been set by neighbors fearful that they might come back to live there.

Father-in-Law Dies.

The Hodells lived a score or so miles away near the village of Grant. Romie was an itinerant sort, who gained his living by hiring himself and his stump pulling machine to farmers who wanted to clear acreage. It was on his travels that he became acquainted with the Dudgeons and finally married Meda in 1921.

It was in February of 1922 that David Hodell, who had been living with Romie and Meda, died. He was aged and his death caused little comment at the time. In May, the death of Romie occurred.

He was found hanging in the Terwilliger barn. But strangely, his feet were resting on the floor of the loft. His knees were flexed. An autopsy discovered his neck not broken, but revealed that the back of his head had been mashed.

Death Notes Found.

Then two notes, ostensibly written by Romie Hodell, were found in an unused stove. They indicated suicide. They read as follows.

Medy: When you read this I will be no more. Don't look for me as you will never find me until it is too late. You know I told you I would rather be dead than see you go wrong. One who loves you. Doc.

"Dearest Medy: I cannot write words to the effect that I want to but tell my mother not to feel bad for me or you either. I left a note in my book for you, but my emotion has changed since then so I am writing you this. Please don't marry Carl Salors, my last request. One who gives his life for you. Doc."

Tells Murder Story.

But the countryside, already holding the Dudgeons in disrepute, refused to accept the suicide theory as the complete story of the death of Hodell. A score or more in mob spirit one day several months later seized upon Lee Dudgeon and Herman, his brother. A noose was tightened around Lee's neck. Later he showed the marks to others.

He told a story of murder. He said Robert Bennett, a hired man, had killed Hodell and had compelled himself and his brother, Herman, to help take the body to the Terwilliger barn.

State police came to White Cloud and investigated. They

gales and snows of winter battered at the doors and closed to travel the rutty dirt road that snakily winds away to the nearest town.

Nobody had lived there for two years, since the Dudgeons went to prison. It has lived its life as a place of human lodging. It has been a place shunned, a place that occasional travelers hurried past at night, a place of unnatural death, and haunted, it is said, by returning spirits.

It was in this abandoned house that Romie Hodell is declared to have been murdered by his wife, Meda, and her mother, Mrs. Alice Dudgeon, in May of 1922.

It stood only a jog of less than a mile down the road and through a depressing swamp from the Terwilliger barn, where Lee Dudgeon, Meda's brother, is accused of having taken the body of Hodell, while life still lingered, and there suspended it from a rafter as if death had been caused by suicidal hanging.

The barn is in the center of a clearing of several acres, fringed by a dense second growth of timber. To call it a barn is to dignify it unfairly. Built apparently just as rough shelter from inclemency for horses or cattle, it more properly might be called a shack. Four horses, crowded inside, by the side would fill the interior. A man of ordinary height can easily reach the floor of the loft.

The loft is about eight feet high, a place where hay could be stored. The boarding of the walls fail to join and sunshine lights the inside in a liticed fashion that indicates moonlight would produce ghastly effect.

Barred Neighbors Cattle.

For years the Dudgeon family lived in this environment after coming north from Indiana. In this solitude there is only one other farmhouse within a radius of several miles—the Dudgeon boys, Lee, Wilmer and Herman, and their sister Meda, grew up. Schooling and contact with others were theirs only in meager measure and gradually they came to be looked upon by the countryside as a surly solitary tribe.

Some residents of this vicinity suggest some resentment against the Dudgeons grew out of the fact that they fenced in several hundred acres of the farm, thereby barring that area to promiscuous grazing by neighboring cattle.

The Dudgeon boys were arrested several times, Lee once served a short term for assault. Whenever anything untoward happened, the rural finger of suspicion pointed to the Dudgeons. They were not liked.

STOMACH SUFFERERS

NOTICE!

Here is a new free book entitled "The Inner Mysteries of the Stomach," written by a physician specialist who has studied the workings of the human stomach and vital organs for over thirty years. It is finely illustrated with X-Ray photos revealing facts regarding the most probable cause of your troubles that have been ignored by doctors for years! If you value your health and

he told a story of murder. He said Robert Bennett, a hired man, had killed Hodell and had compelled himself and his brother, Herman, to help take the body to the Terwilliger barn.

State police came to White Cloud and investigated. They decided to take the Dudgeons from the White Cloud jail to the cells at Big Rapids, in Mecosta county, contained in a more substantial structure and one that would withstand a mob.

Brother Breaks Down.

Lee was the first one taken. He was driven at night past the Terwilliger barn, and there saw "spirits," state police testified. He broke down, they said, and confessed that he had had a fight with Hodell a few days before the body was found, that Meda first had hit her husband with a rolling pin and that the mother had struck a second blow. The body still quivered, he said, when he carried it out and with the help of Bennett and Herman took it to the barn.

Then similar confessions were made by Herman, Meda and Mrs. Dudgeon. Ghosts or as the defense now claims, a trooper draped in white sheets, appeared to startle each of the Dudgeons.

Poison Found in Body.

Herman's confession raised suspicion that the death of the father-in-law had not been natural. The body was exhumed and poison found. Meda was tried and convicted of having done the poisoning, because, it was testified, "the old man was a bother." Her mother was convicted of the murder of Romie and also given a life sentence. Lee was given two-and-one-half years to 15 for manslaughter. His brother Herman and Bennett were freed.

For months the legal fight waged. It is estimated by county authorities that the cost of the Dudgeon of \$20,000. Last year, Newaygo cases to Newaygo has been upwards county's share of the state tax was \$35,000. It is not a wealthy county, more than half of it being so-called cut-over lands. The Dudgeons, possessions early went for lawyers' fees. A counsel in one of the previous trials is understood now to hold title to the abandoned farm or ranch as it might be termed. They have no money to fight for their liberty.

Club Women Help.

The appeal of Mrs. Dudgeon and Lee to the supreme court was financed from a varied of sources. Several Detroit club women, believing the Dudgeons had been "railroaded," several Big Rapids citizens and others contributed the necessary wherewithal for the appeal.

Today they are standing retrial, and Newaygo county is paying the bills both for prosecution and defense. Even the foes of the Dudgeons thereby are paying for the defense, paying to see justice done. Both Frank Wetmore, of Hart, Fred Everett, of Big Rapids, the defense counsel, were appointed by the court. William J. Branstrom, for 12 years Newaygo prosecutor, is directing the prosecution as special prosecutor.

Were Model Prisoners.

The mother and son have been model prisoners since they have been held at White Cloud. Quietly and stoically they have done chores around the county jail and patiently, stolidly filed in and out of the courtroom on the days their retrials have been in progress. Sel-

tion of fact that is for the jury to determine.

Unusual Legal Points.

In addition to the questionable final disposition of the confessions, several unusual legal points have obtruded into the present retrials. First, medical testimony has been that the wound on the neck of Hodell's body was caused by a blunt

ist who has studied the workings of the human stomach and vital organs for over thirty years. It is finely illustrated with X-Ray photos revealing facts regarding the most probable cause of your troubles that have been ignored by doctors for years! If you value your health and wish to be free from stomach disorders and troubles arising therefrom, write for a copy of this wonderful new book! Its free distribution is aiding the authorities to decrease the appalling high death rate due to ignorance, wrong diagnosis and neglect of unsuspected, serious stomach disorders that have kept people doctoring without relief for weeks, months, and in some cases years. Any reader of this paper can obtain a copy of "The Inner Mysteries of the Stomach," absolutely free by sending letter or postcard requesting it, to department below. Address Dr. F. R. Ward, Dept. 55-D, 241 West 72nd St., New York, N. Y. —Advertisement.

Were Model Prisoners.

The mother and son have been model prisoners since they have been held at White Cloud. Quietly and stoically they have done chores around the county jail and patiently, stolidly filed in and out of the courtroom on the days their retrials have been in progress. Sel-dom have they shown any apparent interest in the testimony of the various witnesses, the "ghost" stories, or the reading of their sensational confessions.

Their fate rests virtually entirely upon the legal points as to whether their confessions are eligible of admission as evidence in court. If they were obtained through coercion, "ghostly" threats, or physical violence, the state supreme court has held that the trial judge should exclude them. If they are voluntary they should be admitted. If there is doubt as to whether they were voluntary or involuntary, regardless of their truth, their value as evidence is a ques-

determine.

Unusual Legal Points.

In addition to the questionable final disposition of the confessions, several unusual legal points have obtruded into the present retrials.

First, medical testimony has been that the wound on the neck of Hodell's body was caused by a blunt instrument, that it was sufficiently severe to have caused instantaneous death, although there might be a few muscular convulsions, or so-called quivering of the body afterwards.

If the medical testimony, so far unimpeached or questioned, is to be accepted at face value, Hodell was dead when Lee Dudgeon suspended him in the barn, assuming that he did so. Dudgeon could not have murdered a dead man. As a blood relative of Mrs. Dudgeon and Meda Hadel, the law presumes that he would be sympathetic if they had committed murder and does not hold him criminally guilty of any offense if he merely aided in concealment of crime for which they were responsible.

Already in Jeopardy.

Should his case go to a jury? This is one of the many legal questions that have arisen.

Secondly, assuming that a conspiracy existed among the Dudgeon family to commit the murder of Hodell, a presumption that the prosecution has attempted to prove, Lee Dudgeon already has been tried for murder. He was convicted of manslaughter. If tried again, he could not be convicted, according to Michigan law, for any crime more serious than manslaughter, that verdict having been passed once.

And then, not a legal point, but a natural question of human sympathy, if Lee should go free because of the quirk of law that absolves a blood relative of complicity in crime under certain conditions, even if he has a guilty knowledge, and Mrs. Dudgeon is convicted, would the fact that she struck the second blow or that she was selderly and her son of supposed guilty knowledge free, suggest to the jury a recommendation of leniency? Or, possibly, a conviction for manslaughter instead of murder with a life sentence, ac be-

fore. Manslaughter carries a years' limit.

Detroit Judge on Bench.

Most of the legal points, involving what should go to jury and what should not, waded upon by a Detroit jurist Harry J. Dingeman.

The present proceedings proceeded more expeditiously, any local observers predicted. Jury in this expectedly hostile community was secured in two days. True, they were mostly far from distant sections of the country but such quick time had not figured.

The state virtually has completed its case, and several defense attorneys, simply because their names were on the original informant papers, already have been called to the state, but purposely so the defense could question them.

The case is expected to conclude during the ensuing week.

RAYL'S HARDWARE

Will Close at
1 o'Clock
Saturday

During July and August

THE T. B. RAYL COMPANY