

1901: 'A murder of the most brutal kind'

Chelmsford has been the scene of relatively little violent crime so it is understandable that the residents were startled — perhaps horrified would be more realistic — when they picked up the Lowell Daily Courier on Monday, June 10, 1901. Emblazoned across three columns on the front page was a story whose headline read: "Headless Body of Young Woman Found in the Woods Two Miles from Chelmsford Centre." The sub-heading was a masterpiece of understatement: "Evidence points to a murder of the most brutal kind."

The facts, as established on that day, were as follows: Elmer Hildreth, superintendent of the town farm, and William Baker, a local farmer, were driving a wagon in search of a stray calf that had been pastured in a field off Mill Road.

Traveling along a winding wood road through the recently cleared woodlot, the two men came upon the partially clad, headless body of a woman beneath a thin pile of brush.

The two men hurried back to town and notified chairman of the Board of Selectmen, Joseph E. Warren, of their discovery. (At that time police responsibilities were handled by the Selectman with the assistance of two constables; the Police Department was not organized until 1928.) Mr. Warren contacted Constable George M. Wright, who in turn notified Constable Melvin Walker and the two constables accompanied Hildreth and Baker back to their gruesome discovery.

Dr. Meigs, the medical examiner in Lowell, was called and he took the next street car to Chelmsford. After viewing the scene, Dr. Meigs had the body removed to a Lowell funeral parlor and called in the State Police. During the following week detectives found the woman's head in the mill brook as well as an ax, which was considered to be the murder weapon, and a white silk scarf presumably worn by the victim. With this added evidence, the victim was identified as

The way it was

By George A. Parkhurst



Mrs. Margaret Blondin, wife of J. Wilfred Blondin, a native of Canada who had worked locally as a carpenter and wood-chopper.

Blondin was named as the prime suspect but it was soon discovered that he had vanished from his Boston home shortly before the body was found. In connection with the international search (since it included parts of the Province of Quebec), the police learned that Wilfred Blondin, or Fred as he was known locally, had emigrated to Massachusetts in search of employment in the 1890's.

It was further brought to light that he was on bail from a Canadian court, convicted of smuggling kerosene oil across the border to avoid the duty. A Lowell employment agency had found him a job on the farm of J. Clark Osterhout at 22 Mill Road, Chelmsford at \$1/day.

When he had accumulated \$100, Blondin would go into Lowell with the money and return without it. What he did with the money was a closely guarded secret, but from the investigation, it became evident that he sent it to Canada in payment of the \$500 fine he had been assessed in the smuggling case.

Having been divorced from his wife in Canada, Blondin married Margaret. They resided in Lowell for a while and then moved to Boston where they were living at the time of the murder.

Throughout the summer of 1901, the papers carried daily stories on the search for the fugitive. He was thought to have been seen in several cities along the eastern sea-

board and even in California. A posse scoured hundreds of acres in the Gaspé peninsula in eastern Quebec for more than three weeks only to find a case of mistaken identity. It was not until February, 1902 that Blondin was arrested in New York City when he walked into a police trap.

In the past, he had worked as a steam engineer, so when a job was offered in this field, he applied for an engineer's license at the New York licensing office under an assumed name, not noting his picture on a "wanted" poster on the wall. On the pretext of needing more time, Blondin was told to pick up his license in a day or two. The Boston authorities were waiting for him when he returned. Although admitting his true identity under interrogation, he denied having committed the murder, claiming that he left Boston to avoid the persecution he anticipated as a logical suspect. He was arraigned on March 26 but it was several months before the trial opened.

Evidence was presented that Blondin, in a fit of rage over his wife's refusal to give him money, attacked her. He then stuffed her body into a large trunk which he took to North Billerica by train. After supervising the careful removal of the trunk from the railway car, he borrowed a horse and wagon from a former Chelmsford employer and drove to the woodlot off Mill Road. There he hid the body and dumped the trunk into the mill pond where it remained undiscovered until some time after the trial.

The defense argued that the murder was not premeditated but was committed in a fit of anger. For this reason Blondin was convicted of second degree murder and sentenced to life imprisonment in the State Prison at Charlestown. He died there in 1910 of pneumonia.

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