

Crime Detective Magazine

presents

Crime Puzzle At Sugar Hollow

By Will Ericson



Why was this “man without an enemy” lured into the wilds and then forced from his car and murdered in cold blood?

It was Memorial Day, 1945, and 14-year-old William Rice of Pennsylvania’s Sugar Hollow country was going fishing. It was about six o’clock in the evening, and the youth had quite a way to trudge, to get to Jayne’s Pond where the fish bite best.

Suddenly the boy’s eager steps halted, and his eyes became glued to something

in his path a few yards away. Could that dark form lying half-buried in dirt and debris be the body of a man? Gingerly, William approached the gruesome, blood-spattered object, saw that it *was*

a man, and turned to run back home as fast as his legs could carry him.

When he reached Harvey’s Lake, the peaceful little mountain resort where he lived, he puffed his way into the presence of Police Chief Fred B. Swanson, to whom he gasped the story of what he witnessed.

Chief Swanson did not seem too surprised upon hearing the lad’s tale; for he and his deputies had been scouring the countryside most of the day for Charles Randall, who had been reported missing. He had a hunch that “Chick” Randall was found at last - but found dead!

“Can you lead us to the spot where you saw the body, lad?” Swanson asked.

“Sure, chief,” came the boy’s quick response. “I know this country with my eye’s closed.”

Within half an hour, Swanson had assembled a posse consisting of Sheriff James Wynd of Tunkhannock, Major William Clark, head of the State Police detachment at the Wyoming County Barracks near Wilkes-Barre, and Sergeant Harmon B. Davis, an experienced highway officer.

Taking the boy William along as guide, the officers started out in cars through the wild and lonely area known as Sugar Hollow, which nestles at the foot of the Blue Mountains.

"There are some pretty desolate spots around here," commented Major Clark. "I'd hate to get lost in this section; a man could go for miles without seeing a house."

"Here's the place!" shouted the boy. "Pull up here." The patrol cars promptly stopped, and officers and men piled out. Looking at the prostrate body lying just a few feet in front of his car, Chief Swanson recognized the lost man he was seeking - Chick Randall.

Gently, the chief turned over the corpse and looked at the face of the man he knew well. A nasty gash ran across the forehead, and the skull had been pounded with some blunt, heavy object so that not only was the flesh a mass of bruised pulp, but the bones of the head were almost completely demolished.

Swanson turned away. "This is terrible," he groaned. "What am I going to tell his wife? She's been worried sick - thought her husband got lost, or possibly met with an accident."

"Say, this guy's been shot up plenty," commented Major Clark, bending over the corpse. "He's got as many holes in him as a sieve."

Sergeant Davis was examining the land surrounding the body. "Looks like there's been a scuffle," he said. "The dirt has been disturbed all around here."

Swanson nodded. "That could be - or the marks may have been made by the victim as he was dying. Wonder if he was shot first or bludgeoned."

It was obvious that whoever had murdered Chick Randall had wanted him good and dead; either the clubbing or the shooting

would have finished the unfortunate man - but *both* seemed to indicate a crime of horrible vengeance.

Swanson was the only one of the policemen who had known Chick Randall personally and the chief could think of no likely reason for the outrageous crime.

"Chick was a mild-mannered fellow," he told his associates. "Operated a boat concession at Harvey's Lake and did right well with it. Got a nice wife and a couple of kids, too."

A car was parked about 20 yards away, and Swanson recognized it as belonging to Randall. Examination showed it to have been undisturbed; there was no sign of bloodstains, no scuffed upholstery. It seemed obvious that Randall had either been forced out of the car and into the thicket, or had gone of his own free will and then been the victim of a surprise attack.



But what business would Randall have had in that area? His wife, when she informed Swanson of her husband's disappearance, had said that he had been on a boat-buying mission in Sugar Hollow. It seemed strange to the officers that he would have taken business trip on a holiday, unless something very special had come up.

"I think I had better have a talk with Mrs. Randall," said Swanson. "She might know something that will help solve this case. I'll go back and break the news to her; you boys scout around and see if you can find a clue or two."

The chief of police found Mrs. Randall waiting for him. Her eyes were dry but fearful; her voice strained and anxious.



Swanson hated the job he had to do; but telling folks about relatives who had been killed or murdered was part of his business, so he braced himself for his task.

Strangely, the woman had anticipated the tragic happening, and before the chief could speak she was saying, in a colorless monotone; "You don't need to tell me you found my husband - dead!"

Swanson nodded.

The widow covered her face with her hands, and her body swayed slightly. "I knew it!" she moaned. "I could just feel something like that had happened; he's usually back from such a trip so very promptly!"

Swanson led the stricken women to a chair and motioned her into it. "I hate like the very devil to do this," he began in a soft and sympathetic voice, "but I'll have to ask you a few questions."

Mrs. Randall smiled wearily. "Of course," she managed to say. "I'll do all I can to help."

"You said on the phone earlier today that Chick was going after a boat. Do you know *whose* boat?"

She shook her head. "No, he didn't mention any names. Just said he heard some fellow had one for sale and he was going over to see about it."

Swanson thought it odd that the man would go boat-buying on Memorial Day, because his concession did terrific business on every holiday. But when he expressed his curiosity aloud, Mrs. Randall merely shook her head. "I'm sorry I can't help you on that," she said. "I suppose it must have been an extremely attractive offer to make him rush off so, today of all days. He only said something about a man in Sugar Hollow wanting to sell a boat and that he'd go get it and be back in an hour."

She told Swanson that her husband had left at ten in the morning, and when he hadn't returned after several hours had passed she became worried and phoned headquarters.

To questions as to whether or not Randall had any enemies, people who would like him out of the way, or with whom he may have argued, the widow could give no answer. She told Swanson that Chick had taken with him quite a bit of money.

"Do you think someone tried to rob him, and when he resisted - they shot him?" she sobbed.

Swanson thought it quite probable. He had gone through the dead man's pockets and had found no money, which seemed to indicate that Randall had been robbed; but whether robbery had been the motive or merely an afterthought, the chief couldn't say.

“You may rest assured that we will do all we possibly can to find your husband’s assailant and punish him to the extreme,” Swanson told the sobbing woman.

Back at the scene of the crime, officers were following the scent. The lad who had first discovered Randall’s body informed the men that the property on which the crime had taken place belonged to a Bill Brown, who lived about a mile away, so Davis and Wynd, with a couple of troopers, trudged through the dust and up to the door of the mountain cabin where Brown resided. In answer to their knock, a tall, lanky, red-haired fellow appeared.

When Brown heard about the murder his jaw dropped open in astonishment. “So that’s what I heard this mornin’,” he exclaimed.

“*What* did you hear?”

“Shots- five or six of them- from down in the Hollow.”

Brown explained that although he had heard some shots he paid no attention because he thought it might be somebody doing a little target practicing - or perhaps killing a rabbit for dinner.

“You own a gun, Brown?” Davis asked.

Brown nodded. “Sure,” he answered. “But I ain’t fired it in ages.”

It took two minutes to discover that Brown was telling the truth about the gun; it hadn’t been fired recently. However, that didn’t clear the mountain man of suspicion. More than one person could have been involved in the killing, and it was just possible, thought Davis, that Brown was an accomplice. Maybe that man needed money and saw an easy way to get it; or maybe he had considered Randall a trespasser and he didn’t like people on his property. On a hunch, Davis said: “I’d like a look at your boat, if you don’t mind.”

Brown was dumbfounded. “What’re you talking about? I haven’t got a boat!”

Obviously, this was not the man trying to put through a deal with Randall. When Davis told him the story of the boat-concessionaire’s mission, Brown shook his head.

“Don’t know anybody around here’s got one of them things.” Then he scratched his head and seemed to be pondering. “Come to think of it,” he drawled, “old Jim Guthrie, he’s got a boat - or used to have one.”

The investigators determined to have a talk with Guthrie and asked Brown for directions to his house.

On the way to Guthrie’s house, Clark and Wynd discussed the case. “Could be this Jim Guthrie is our man,” said Clark. “He could have used his boat as an excuse to get Randall up into this section and then set an ambush.”

“Yeah,” came the answer. “But why?”

Clark shrugged. “How can we know? Maybe they were having a private feud nobody knew about, or maybe Guthrie saw a quick way to earn a little cash - and *keep* his skiff.”

“You boys are crossing bridges again,” put in Davis. “Why not save the talk until we get to the house and find out something?”

But they didn’t learn much; Guthrie wasn’t home, and his wife was unable to produce any information other than her husband had a job in Philadelphia and was in the habit of coming home every third week for the week end.

Yes, she said, her husband owned a boat and was probably thinking of selling it. Or perhaps he had sold it already; she wasn’t quite sure.

She gave the officers the address of her husband in Philadelphia, and the name of the shipyard at which he worked.

Thanking her, they sped back to Harvey's Lake to report their findings to Swanson, and also to phone Pennsylvania police in regard to Guthrie.

The chief was on the telephone when the men barged into his office. When he hung up the receiver, he greeted his men and then explained; "Just got Coroner Sheldon's report; he said Randall was shot first and then clubbed - just to make a good job of it. Sheldon found no less than twelve bullet holes in the man's body."

"Whew!" Davis gasped.

"He wasn't shot that many times," Swanson said. "Each bullet seems to have made two holes, according to the coroner. The slugs entered the back and went clean through the body and out the front. Not a single bullet seems to have been found in the corpse."

The three officers looked at each other, aghast."

"Then we'll never be able to find the murder weapon!" they chorused.

Swanson explained that the coroner had decided, from the appearance of the bullet holes in Randall, that a revolver had been used - probably a .45. "This is going to make solving this murder a little difficult," he ended, "but we've cracked harder cases. Well, what new have you boys to report?"

The investigators told superior about their discoveries - how they had interrogated Bill Brown and were still considering him a likely subject; how they had gone to Guthrie's house and found out about his boat, and job in Philadelphia.

After Swanson had heard the story, he put through a call to the Philadelphia police to try to locate Jim Guthrie and hold him for questioning.

Early the next morning Chief Swanson was back at his office waiting for a report from the Philadelphia Police Department and Davis and Wynd were at Harvey's Lake for whatever information they could pick up.

Davis, thinking aloud, said: "Seems funny, this killing. It was such a professional job - almost like a gang's work. Doesn't seem likely that one of these natives would slaughter Randall, does it?"

Wynd looked thoughtful. "But what kind of gangs run around here in these mountains?" he asked. "They'd be a little out of their element, wouldn't they?"

And the two lapsed into silence.

But after chatting with a few men who had known Randall, the idea of the gang grew in the minds of the detectives.

"Sounds like nonsense - that story about Chick's going out after a boat," growled one old-timer. "If he wanted a boat so danged bad, why didn't he get it *before* Memorial Day instead of waiting until the last minute? He could have been pulling in money here from early morning until late at night, instead of gallivanting off to Sugar Hollow."

"Chick didn't leave nobody in charge of his boats," another said. "People who didn't know no boats were running were standing around waiting. No sir, I don't think Chick went out of business. Whole thing sounds phony to me."

Wynd raised an eyebrow. "Seems likely the guy may have gone away against his will; perhaps at the point of a gun."

“Could be,” Davis conceded. “Maybe we can find someone else around here who can throw some light on the subject.”

They did find someone else - an acquaintance of Randall’s, who scoffed at the story the investigators told him.

“Why, I don’t think Chick was very interested in making money,” he said. “His business has been going to ruin lately, just because he didn’t pay it much mind. I don’t see how he could have been breaking even lately.”

Had Randall been getting an income from some other source? Perhaps from some dishonest business - cleaning up in a racket? He might have made a mistake and stepped on somebody’s toes and had to be eliminated.

It was a possibility, so Davis and Wynd rushed back to the chief’s office and reported their theory.

Just then the phone rang; it was Philadelphia police reporting on Guthrie. Swanson listened intently, asked an occasional question, and jotted down notes on a pad. When he hung up he turned to the two men, a gleam in his eye.

“There may be something in that hunch of yours about Guthrie, boys,” he began. “They’ve located him at work in the shipyards and have discovered that he owns a boat, knew Randall, and was absent yesterday. Being engaged in war work, he didn’t get the holiday off, but it seems he went ahead and took it, anyway. The fellow said he was at home, sick, so police are checking on that angle. They’ll phone us back when they know definitely.”

Davis looked excited. “If he wasn’t at work yesterday, he might have come to Sugar Hollow, killed Randall, and then gone back to Philadelphia and reported to work this morning, without anyone knowing. Perhaps he didn’t even let his wife know he had come home!”

“Well, we’ll soon know,” said Swanson. “Hope those cops in Philly don’t keep up in suspense too long; I’d like to find out something on this case....”

So, looking more optimistic than they had since the case broke, the three investigators settled down to await the call that would either clear Jim Guthrie or lead to that man’s arrest.

When at last the telephone jangled, Swanson fairly flew to answer it. But as he listened to the voice at the other end, the expression on his face turned from anticipation to chagrin. When he hung up, he shook his head slowly from side to side, and looked grimly at Davis and Wynd.

“We can throw our present Suspect No. 1 out the window, boys,” he said wearily. “Police have checked Guthrie’s alibi, and he was telling the truth; he was sick at home yesterday, and didn’t leave his room all day. His landlady and other roomers swore to it.”

Sheriff Wynd uttered a long sigh and leaned back in his chair. “I give up,” he moaned. “We’ve got a murder; but we’ve got no suspects.”

“And no murder weapon,” complained Davis.

“No bullets,” put in Swanson.

Just then a couple of troopers came in to report that a thorough questioning of Sugar Hollow residents had been fruitless - no one around the place seemed to have reason to dislike Randall - and not one person owned a boat.

“That’s the last straw,” muttered Wynd. “No *motive!*”

The three looked at each other vacantly, and from somewhere in the room came the ticking of a clock - steadily, monotonously....

Suddenly Swanson sat bolt upright in his chair. “Say!” he almost shouted. “Reports seem to indicate that Chick hadn’t been tending

to his business so well lately; if that's so, maybe it doesn't mean he had outside income at all; maybe it means he didn't give a damn anymore."

"You mean he may have been worried about something, chief?"

"Yes, or it may be that he was very unhappy - domestic trouble, or something sad that was happening to him; something that wasn't generally known."

"Yeah," said Wynd. "Maybe we ought to have another talk with his wife."

"And the neighbors," Davis added.

"Neighbors sometimes know more than wives do!"

So the investigators plunged into their work with renewed enthusiasm. They talked to every neighbor of the Randalls, and even to people who lived further away but who had at one time or another come in contact with Chick and his wife. And the things they discovered were amazing.

"Oh, the Randalls didn't get along well at all," blurted one woman. "They did a lot of quarreling, they did - and I hear that, once, Randall hit his wife!"

At another house they were told; "There was a bachelor over at Loyalville who used to call on the Randalls quite often; friend of the family, he said, but if ask me, I think he was an admirer of Mrs. Randall."

Another neighbor supplied the name of this "bachelor over at Loyalville." It was Kenneth Ferrell.



Two more days of visiting, listening, questioning, chatting, worming their way into neighbors' confidences - and then the

officers had a pretty good picture of the situation. In investigation of Ferrell, the police learned that he was a 31-year-old lumberman who lived with his parents and was apparently quite well fixed, financially. Also, he did very well socially, it seems. He had been an admirer of Mrs. Randall, according to neighbors, for the past two years, and arguments between the husband and wife were frequent but not violent.

"Then things really got bad," gloated one loquacious old woman. "They had a terrible fight and Randall up and struck his wife!"

Apparently, all the unpleasantness had been between man and wife, with Kenneth Ferrell managing to avoid the "scenes".

Authorities nodded their heads knowingly. The old triangle game, they decided.

Then police discovered something interesting. A neighbor claimed she saw Randall's car leaving the house at ten in the morning on Memorial Day, and shortly behind it followed another auto. The woman was not able to identify the car, but said she had seen it several times before at the Randall house. "I didn't see who was in the car, or if there was more than one person," she concluded.

Meanwhile, Kenneth Ferrell was located and brought into the office of District Attorney Trembath, at Tunkhannock.

Ferrell was rather good-looking in a smirking sort of way; dark hair, white teeth, a hard-smiling mouth, and savage black eyes that seemed to shoot sparks of rage. He denied knowing anything at all about murder of Randall. He said he was a friend of both Chick and his wife - and he dared the police to prove differently. "We intend to try just that," remarked Trembath. "We have reason to believe that you were a friend to Mrs. Randall, all right."

"Do you always have to make up these melodramatic theories whenever there's a murder?" Ferrell asked. "The accusations you

people are making are perfectly ridiculous. Supposing I did admire Mrs. Randall. What about it? In fact I admit that I admired her. She's a fine woman. But what's all this got to do with killing Chick? You guys better turn up something stronger than this. You can't pin a murder rap on me!"

Ferrell denied that he had been near the Randall house on Memorial Day. He said he had stayed home most of the day and then had killed a few hours at Harvey's Lake.

"A few hours? I wonder if that's all you killed!" muttered Swanson under his breath.

Investigators were dispatched to Loyalville to get a description of Ferrell's automobile; if it turned out to be the same car a neighbor saw at Randall's house, the dark-eyed lumberman would have some explaining to do.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Randall was questioned about her reported romance with Ferrell. "That's ridiculous!" she shouted, losing her calm and suave demeanor that had been prevalent before. "Ken was a friend of our family. Of course people are saying things... People always do, the gossips... There's no truth in any of it!"

Seeing they were unable to get anything more out of a woman, no matter how hard they tried, the police had her confined to a cell.

Results of the law's work started popping; Major Clark came into headquarters with a .45 caliber revolver. "We found this in the home of one of Ferrell's relatives, chief!" he blurted. "Cozy little murder weapon, eh?"

Swanson smiled. "Good work! I think this is going to help crack this case. In any event, hearing Ferrell's explanations of it should be interesting."

But the lumberman merely shrugged when confronted with the evidence, and claimed he never saw it before.

"That's not the way we heard it," pounced Trembath. "Your own kinfolk have confessed to the fact that you left it there."

Then Sergeant Davis returned from Loyalville - with Ferrell's car. Soon three persons were found who were willing to testify that this same car was the one seen in front of the Randall house Memorial Day morning, and that it was the one which followed Chick's car when that unfortunate man went off "boat-buying" at 10 o'clock.

Confronted with this evidence, Ferrell and Mrs. Randall broke down and gave their confessions: Ferrell had come to the Randall house shortly before ten a.m. the day of the murder. To get Chick to accompany him out into the wilds of the Sugar Hollow region Ferrell had invented an enthusiastic story about a friend of his who would sell his boats cheaply - provided he could get a buyer right away.

Then, out in the wilds of the unsettled country, Ferrell had forced Randall from the car and ordered him into a thicket, where he promptly shot his victim in the back, then bludgeoned him "just to be on the safe side - so he wouldn't live to give me away."

Mrs. Randall denied that she had anything to do with the murder. "When Ken came back and told me he had killed Chick, I couldn't believe it. I didn't know he was going to do it. I'd never have dreamed of anything like that!"

Then she covered her face with her hands and started in to a moan out her story.

Her story hardly rang true, pointed out Chief Swanson, especially since neighbors had seen Ferrell's car at the Randall house the very night before the killing. That was when they laid their plans

to get rid of the unwanted husband, the investigating officers concluded.

“You figured that by calling me about your husband’s absence - in that worried, frightened voice - would keep me from suspecting you,” accused Swanson. “And it did - but not for long.”

On June 6th, 1945, both Mrs. Randall and Kenneth Ferrell were arraigned before Justice of the Peace Francis Allen at Tunkhannock, and were held without bail.

On June 12th, Judge Edward Farr heard the recital of the evidence produced by investigators, and then immediately remanded the two defendants to jail.

Six days later, both were indicted by a Wyoming County grand jury. The bill against Mrs. Randall named her as being an accessory after the fact, and compounding a felony. Ferrell was charged with premeditated murder.

Ferrell was brought to trial in October 1945. Mrs. Randall testified for the State. Because of her aid to the State, the accessory charge

against her was dismissed.

The jury found Ferrell guilty of murder with the recommendation that he be imprisoned for life. Thus ending this enigmatic Pennsylvania murder mystery.

Editor’s Note: The names Jim Guthrie and Bill Brown are fictitious, to avoid embarrassment to innocent persons involved in the case.

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