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Who Killed William Dean? A Tale of Spies, Swindlers and Politicians

In August of 1918, Dr. William Dean was murdered. His killer or killers tied up his body and submerged it in a rain cistern on his Jaffrey, N.H., farm. For the next 100 years people have tried to figure out why he was killed, and by whom.

There is no shortage of possible solutions to the question of who killed William Dean. The case led investigators through a tangle of suspects that included his wife, a friend and a World War I-era German spy ring.

The Germans Are Coming

Had Dean's murder not been set against the backdrop of World War I, finding his killer might have been far simpler.

In 1918, Americans were on alert, looking for German spying operations. Tensions had been building for years, as American relations with Germany frayed even before the country entered the war.

In April of 2017, New Hampshire militia spotted an unknown aircraft circling the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard -- which was furiously turning out naval vessels for the war effort. The militia fired on the plane, but it flew off into the night. Police conjectured the plane could not have gotten far and must have been operating out of an airfield somewhere inland in the state.

In Jaffrey, N.H., summer residents and year-rounders alike were taking the warnings about German spies to heart. Late into the evenings they took note of lights flashing from nearby Mount Monadnock, and from other peaks - including the hilltop farm William Dean owned.



William Dean (1908)

Neighbors suspected the lights were

secret signals flashed by German spies, communicating with each other across the mountains.

And they reported these suspicions to the federal Bureau of Investigations, a precursor to today's FBI.

The Night of the Murder

On August 13, 1918, the last day of William Dean's life, a couple of unusual occurrences happened. Early in the day he asked a neighbor who was on her way to Boston if she would get in touch with the police for him. He had information for them. He didn't say what it was.

Later in the evening he was visited by his friend, Charles Rich, the local political kingpin. Rich was a judge in Jaffrey as well as a banker and politician.

Rich would later say he visited William Dean to ask how to treat an injury he had just received when his horse kicked at him, leaving him with a black eye and head injuries.

Dr. William Dean had stopped practicing medicine and had long retired. He lived as a gentleman farmer. Nevertheless, he advised Rich on his injury and Rich returned to his home at about 10 p.m.

Roughly two hours later Dean, 63, left his house and went to the barn on his property. Unlike most farmers who milk their cows at first light and dinnertime, Dean milked his single cow at the unconventional hours of midnight and noon. Upon entering the barn, he was attacked, beaten, strangled, bound up and carried to a cistern on the property.

Dr. Dean's wife Mary worried about her husband. The next morning, when a hired hand arrived to begin mowing, she asked him to look for her husband. He was dead, she feared. She even speculated he was under water.

Mary was 68 and losing her faculties. But her immediate conclusion that her husband was dead raised suspicions. When Dr. Dean's body was discovered, suspicion fell on Mary, who was also Dean's cousin.

But there were two obstacles to the case against Mary. There was no evidence that she was at odds with her husband. While she was not completely rational, probably suffering from dementia, she was never known to be violent. And, she was physically not a likely suspect. Smashing her husband's head, strangling him and carrying him to a cistern were beyond her abilities.

Spies in the Hills

With the case against her seeming unlikely, townspeople turned their attention to the potential spy in their midst: Laurence Colfelt.

William Dean needed money, though not inordinately so. He and his wife had moved from their large house to a smaller bungalow on their property. They rented the large house to Laurence Colfelt and his family.

Colfelt was a New Yorker who lived on a trust fund. It wasn't unusual for people from elsewhere to come to Jaffrey, but it was unusual for them to spend the winter. Colfelt's lack of any work and lack of local ties made people suspicious of him.

Rumors circulated that he was German, or at least had German sympathies. Might he be a leader of the spies flashing signals to one another in the New Hampshire mountains? Might he, or other spies, have killed Dean because he had caught on to the spying operations in the hills?



William Dean's House

William Dean was not pleased that Colfelt was not farming the property he rented, and he asked the family to move on. Shortly before the murder the Colfelts moved to Greenville, but the town was awash in rumors that Colfelt was angry with Dean.

Colfelt, though, was far away when William Dean was murdered.

The Banker/Politician

The man who had probably the biggest target on his back in the murder investigation was Charles Rich, the banker and friend of William Dean.

The morning Dean was discovered murdered, Rich had a fresh black eye and bruises on his head. His explanation was that his horse had kicked at him and knocked a board he was carrying, striking him in the head. Many in town doubted the story.

Though William Dean and Charles Rich were friends, there was one other odd occurrence that implicated Rich. The day Dean's body was found, an employee and friend of Rich's visited Mrs. Dean and cleaned up the barn where her husband was murdered. Perhaps he obliterated evidence in the process.

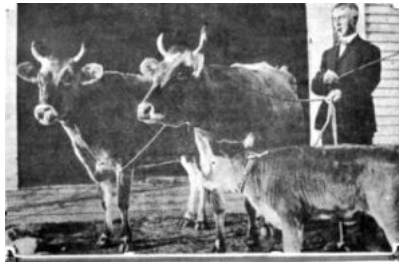
Could Dean and Rich have fallen out over some business dealing? Was Rich the person Dean wanted to talk to the police about?

With no clear suspect in the murder, the town sent for Pinkerton detectives to help investigate. And as they came up dry, another character appeared in town to assist in the investigation.

William Dean's brother was concerned that the investigation appeared stalled and so he asked a friend of his wife's to look into the case. The investigator was widely known for relying on psychic methods of investigation, so he first came to Jaffrey under an assumed name to avoid publicity. Soon he revealed his real name: Wilhem de Kerlor.

The Psychic Detective

Wilhem de Kerlor was a con artist. He lectured about psychic phenomena, worked the vaudeville stages as a psychic and traveled Europe, attempting to put his psychic abilities to work solving crimes. He found a wealthy wife, Italian fashion designer and adventuress Elsa Schiaparelli. The two were run out of England because of de Kerlor's fortune-telling schemes. They washed up in America in Greenwich Village in 1916.



William Dean with his oxen

When de Kerlor heard of the Jaffrey murder, he saw it as a chance to make a name for himself and his newly formed "Bureau of Psychology." A natural showman, de Kerlor developed a theory that the injuries to Rich's face were caused by a garden tool that was found in Dean's barn.

Federal agents had suspected de Kerlor of harboring pro-German sentiments, but when Dean's brother decided to dismiss him from the case, the town of Jaffrey hired him to continue his investigations. Town selectman Edward Boynton was convinced Rich knew more about the murder of William Dean than he was letting on. That is roughly where the murder inquiry ended.

The Cold Case

A grand jury empaneled to investigate the case concluded that Dean was murdered, but the members of the jury could not determine who did it.

The closest thing to a trial in the case was a \$10,000 libel lawsuit Rich brought against selectman Boynton. The suit aired the issues surrounding the murder, but got nowhere. The trial raised the issue of the flashing lights, but with the war long over no one was chasing German spies any more. Rich's movements were chronicled in detail, and his defenders and detractors each told the details of his personality.

In the end the jury concluded that Rich had not been libeled, but it did not answer the question of who killed William Dean?

Mary Dean died shortly after the murder. The psychic investigator de Kerlor died in 1928, shot in a Mexican bar fight. And around Jaffrey, the murder played on people's minds for decades. Boston reporter Bert Ford wrote an investigative book, *The Dean Murder Mystery*, that favored the German spying angle as the cause of the murder.

In town, the open rift between Rich and his enemies flared from time to time, but Rich remained a local political power until his death.

Meanwhile sleuths, both amateur and professional, have spent countless hours trying to solve the mystery of who killed William Dean. They haven't gotten there . . . yet.

Thanks to: The Dean Murder Mystery, Bert Ford; Elsa Schiaparelli: A Biography, Meryle Secrest and the Dean Murder Project.



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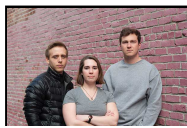
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