

## Crime and Crinoline

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Knives attached to finger rings were among the devices used to pick pockets in hoop skirts during the crime wave of the 1860's. In its years of growth from frontier fort to modern city, Fort Wayne, Indiana, saw crime reach an all-time peak during the two post bellum years, 1865 to 1867.

The Civil War was over, but the spirit of adventure was still in the air. Young sports who had mastered poker, casino, chuck-a-luck, while sitting in on the game by torch-light on the skirmish line, were still just as reckless as upon the eve of battle.

It was during these years that Fort Wayne became noted as a gambling town and headquarters for as desperate and skillful a gang of three-card monte men, pickpockets, and confidence men, as could be found in the country. Outside of the members of the gang, nobody knew more about their rise and fall—especially their fall, which was sudden—than the railroad men. The local press also gave enthusiastic support to the final purge.

Fort Wayne, an important railroad town, had become a natural rendezvous for slickers coming from all directions—New York, Chicago, Detroit, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Cleveland, and Canada. Some of the largest gambling games in the United States were maintained there. One of the saloons kept its faro game in full blast so that thousands of dollars sometimes changed hands in one night, a lot of money in any man's town!

Another resort, the keno rooms of Tim McCarthy, billiard champion of Indiana, netted about twenty thousand dollars during the three years of its existence. Many prominent local men were said to be patrons of the place. For keno, the experts say, is not a gambler's game, but one played mostly by amateurs with no chance to win.

Fort Wayne proved to be a paradise for these adventurers. Times were flush, money was plentiful and the spirit of speculation was keen. One notorious gambler, who had paid twenty-five dollars to learn a card trick from Johnny White, an expert sport, in Snake Creek Gap, Georgia, made Fort Wayne his headquarters. Years later when he was converted in a great temperance rally at the Princess Rink, he told all,

to the great surprise and consternation of many of his friends and neighbors. The next day, the saloonkeepers—to a man—cut him dead on the street. Much of the information about these lush days of crime in the sixties comes from this ex-gambler's shocking revelations.

As a gambling center, Fort Wayne drew its gang, thoroughly organized and numbering about thirty operators, from the ranks of the most expert in the United States. Ed Ryan, leader of the underworld, and king of confidence men, was tall, blonde, and terrific with the ladies. During the years when he and his gang carried on in this vicinity, they exerted a potent influence in local politics and were feared by politicians. They even gained tacit support from many merchants and businessmen who profited by their lavish patronage.

If the politicians were indifferent, the press was not. The *Fort Wayne Gazette* carried a report on an incident in Chicago which should have proved a warning to all unwary travelers.

**PICKPOCKETS AT RAILWAY DEPOTS**—Besides the hordes of confidence men who swarm at our railway depots on the arrival of trains from the country, members of the light-fingered gentry can be found who ply their nefarious business with more or less success. No sooner do the passengers alight from the cars than a rush is made by the pickpockets into the midst of the crowd and, while apparently in search of a friend or hurriedly making inquiries, are in reality sounding the depths and contents of people's pockets. Passengers should invariably avoid these busy-looking gentlemen and give them a wide berth. A few evenings ago, Conductor, J. P. Ames arrived with his train at the Pittsburg and Fort Wayne depot in Chicago. The passengers stepped to the platform and in an instant some half-dozen well-dressed young men who had been awaiting the train's advent, "mixed up" with them and elbowed their way here and there, creating great confusion. Ames spotted them at once as pickpockets, and made a jump for the one nearest him, whom he saw thrust his hand into a lady's pocketbook. The thief struggled desperately, and in the encounter cut the conductor's hand very severely with a ring on which is affixed a small sharp spring blade, an instrument used by professional pickpockets with which they slit dresses, coats, etc. so as to gain access to pockets. Ames was so badly injured that he was compelled to let the fellow escape.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the unfavorable publicity, conditions at railroad depots continued to get no better.

The gang operated for the most part on the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago Railroad, between Valparaiso and

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<sup>1</sup> Fort Wayne, Indiana, *Gazette*, December 12, 1867.

Lima, and the Wabash Railroad between Fort Wayne and Peru. Their headquarters were a saloon near the depot in Fort Wayne. Secret trap doors made this hide-out a veritable inferno where many a poor victim is said to have been drugged, and robbed of his last penny. The crooks resorted to all sorts of expedients to "raise the wind," from the simple process of picking pockets, up to the most cleverly contrived and skillfully executed confidence games.

The fall of 1865 netted these operators an especially rich harvest. The State Fair, attended by twenty thousand people was held in Fort Wayne that year. Many of these visitors fell into the hands of the cunning thieves and were robbed. When a train arrived, several would jump into the cars and begin picking pockets. As fast as they had finished with a man, they would chalk a cross on his coat, so that the "boys" would waste no time on him. He was picked clean. The accomplices would then "skin the leathers"—that is, take the money from the wallets—and throw the empty purses on the roof of a shed at the rear of the robbers' saloon. So successful were they, that at the end of the Fair week, these pocket-books when gathered and buried by the "understrapper," or accomplice, were found to fill a bushel basket. Upon examination, the fellow found sixty dollars overlooked by the crooks, who were not even interested in such small change. For them it had been more than a "Fair" week!<sup>2</sup>

Now Ed Ryan, according to my informant—the converted gambler—claimed a monopoly in his line. But as in every paradise, the serpent eventually raises its ugly head, Ryan's paradise was no exception. Rival crooks began to muscle in. At one time, the gang leader was considerably put out by the arrival of Dennis Marks, notorious confidence man and city slicker from Chicago. Marks came with a flock of birds-of-a-feather to feed in the field Ryan claimed as his own. Ryan resorted to a common stratagem to drive his rival vulture from the field. The scarecrow he set up was an accomplice known to the initiated as Hoosier Brown.

One winter afternoon, the rival gangster was taken for a ride in a sleigh. The pair drove toward the county asylum—or poor farm—and on the way they met with a battered

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<sup>2</sup> Mason Long, *The Life of Mason Long, the Converted Gambler* (Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1883), 56-57. The account of the story related here follows the longer narrative of the book.

old customer carrying a caved-in satchel. An artful old hayseed, chin whiskers and all!

"Here comes a good bloke!" whispered the Chicago sharper. "Let's tackle him!"

They stopped the sleigh and accosted the pedestrian.

"Hallo stranger, where d'ye come from?"

"Wall, I cum from down yonder where I jes sold my farm, 'nI kind thought I'd go north of town a few miles and buy me another one, sence I got the cash money right yhere in this yhere satchel to pay fer it."

Marks' eyes glistened as the fellow tapped his satchel. Since making up with strangers on the road was a good old Hoosier custom, the farmer was invited to jump right in the cutter and ride to town. The three went to a saloon and the drinks were passed. Then Marks attempted to swindle the greenhorn with the old-fashioned lock game. He bet the stranger one thousand three hundred dollars he couldn't unlock it. After appropriate hesitation, the fellow took the bet, and the money was placed in the bartender's hands. The victim then opened the lock with ease, grabbed the two thousand six hundred dollars and started for the door.

"Stop that bloke, he's got my sugar," shouted the villain, thus foiled.

Whereupon Hoosier Brown, for as they say in the melodrama, "it was he," drew a revolver, pointed it at the head of the Chicago thief, and said with appropriate gestures, "That money's mine. I won it and I propose to keep it."

The native Hoosier sharpers thus found themselves in sole possession of the Fort Wayne area. In time, however, public sentiment was aroused. For one thing, the railroads passing through Fort Wayne experienced a heavy falling off in passenger travel. Detectives were employed, but they did no good. The gang was too much for the big Chicago crooks; how could a small town detective hope to cope with it? The Fort Wayne *Gazette* carried the following story:

#### ROBBERY, PURSUIT OF THE THIEF, GREAT EXCITEMENT.

The most exciting event of the winter, at least in the line of accident or adventure, occurred this morning at the depot. The parties to the affair were Mr. Tucker, a citizen of Whitley County, and Ed Ryan, the notorious blackleg of this city. Mr. Tucker was in the city on business collecting money. He went to the depot this morning to take the early train for Columbia City and while going into his car, was stopped by some fellows of the baser sort who told him the car he was

about to enter was a ladies' car, and he could not go in. They crowded round him and in the confusion Ryan (so says Mr. Tucker) put his hand over his (Tucker's) shoulder from behind, and quickly jerked from his vest pocket his pocket-book. Mr. Tucker instantly turned, caught Ryan and demanded his money. But the latter broke away and ran for Carey's saloon north of the depot. Tucker followed in hot pursuit, firing at him twice, with a revolver, once as they passed the office of the express company, and again as Ryan neared the door of the saloon, the shot passing through the window and within two inches of Ryan's head. In the saloon, Ryan had a few seconds of rest, during which as reported by a boy subsequently arrested, he took out the money and burned the pocket-book. Meanwhile Tucker passed round to the corner or rear of the saloon and when Ryan chased by policemen and citizens, came out of the back door, took after him again, firing twice as before, one shot cutting a hole through his clothes and the other taking effect in the neck. Ryan fell and while getting up or attempting to do so, his pursurer gained on him and took another deadly aim, but failed to shoot, as the weapon missed fire. By this time policemen interfered so that further shooting was impossible. The ball from the last shot lodged in the neck, checked in its force some by a large button. Ryan was immediately brought down to the lockup, accompanied by Mr. Tucker. The ball was extracted from his neck by Drs. Meyers and Thacker. The excitement at the depot was intense, a strong disposition being manifested to lynch Ryan on the spot. The blacklegs evidently waked up the wrong passenger this time. Mr. Tucker is a plainly dressed man of about fifty-five, a prominent citizen and once sheriff of Whitley County. He is neither a coward nor a greenhorn. Ryan will be tried tomorrow before a Justice of the Peace. We understand he offers to compromise the case by the payment of \$600. The stolen pocket-book contained about \$400. We have no room today for comment.<sup>3</sup>

The rest of the story gathered between six o'clock that night and the morning after, was continued in the next week's issue of the *Gazette*. Four or five hundred Pennsylvania shopmen gathered in force. First, they went to Carey's saloon and told Haynes, the saloonkeeper, to move his family and furniture before night as the building was not likely to stand until morning. Haynes was arrested and lodged in jail as an accomplice. The family was removed, and somehow, nobody knew quite how it happened, the building just took fire. Two steamers and a hand engine and a hook and ladder truck went up to be ready for emergencies. But none occurred. The building was allowed to burn down amid the cheers of the populace. In spite of a high wind, the building was the only one destroyed by fire. It is said that other members of the

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<sup>3</sup> Fort Wayne, Indiana, *Gazette*, February 19, 1867.

gang were warned by a "committee." At any rate, no thieves were about there that evening. They were as scarce as black-birds in January, according to the *Gazette*. It was as safe in that vicinity as a kirkyard, the account continued, and stated further that they certainly caught a Tartar in Mr. Tucker of Whitley County.<sup>4</sup>

The hastily organized vigilance committee met at the courthouse that night to see that their powers were rightly used. It was a good thing for the gangster that his cell was well-guarded. The trial of Ryan was so well-attended that the benches broke under the weight of the spectators. Pale and haggard, Ryan spoke in his own defense. Had he ever harmed a citizen of Fort Wayne? Had he not given freely to charitable enterprises, supported widows and orphans? Groans and hisses from the crowd greeted his speech. Then the defendant continued in a more practical vein. Besides, he said, the reported theft of three hundred dollars was too small to cause such a fuss. Not fewer than four hundred spectators witnessed the final scenes when the verdict—Guilty!—was received with hearty cheers. Ryan took it rather badly they say. Bail to the tune of five thousand dollars was provided. But when the next day dawned, Ryan's cell was empty. The bird had flown the coop, or rather ridden on horseback, with his spurs going jingle, jangle, jingle, and leaving behind him a trail of broken hearts.<sup>5</sup>

On August 6, 1867, news reports stated that Ed Ryan, the fugitive, was heartily sick of his residence in Canada. He was tired of waiting and watching, and he wanted to go home so badly that, rather than remain an exile in the Queen's Dominions, he declared "if convinced the authorities at Fort Wayne would not give him more than two years' penitentiary service, he would come over and give himself up."<sup>6</sup>

After several arrests and escapes, Ryan was brought to Fort Wayne, secured a change of venue and was tried in Wabash. Tradition states that he served but two of his four-

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, February 26, 1867.

<sup>5</sup> Long, *The Life of Mason Long*, 60; Charles M. Comparet, *Memoirs of Fort Wayne*, unpublished manuscript, contains this sentence about Ryan: "Strange as it may seem most of the young ladies in town were in love with him."

<sup>6</sup> Fort Wayne, Indiana, *Gazette*, August 6, 1867.

teen years' sentence, and he died some years later in Chicago in a tavern brawl.<sup>7</sup>

Without their leader, all members of the gang dispersed and came to various bad ends; which proves conclusively that while crime does not pay, it affords never a dull moment.

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<sup>7</sup> Long, *The Life of Mason Long*, 60-61.