

# **“The Killing and Transfiguration of Harry Morris”**

by

**James Redman**

---

## **FOREWARD**

by

**Douglas A. Hedin**

**Editor, MLHP**

A longer version of the following article was published in the *Republican Eagle*, a daily newspaper in Red Wing, Minnesota, on August 22, 23, 24 and 25, 2001. That series was condensed and published later in the *Great River Review*, a semiannual journal of The Anderson Center for Interdisciplinary Studies, also located in Red Wing.

If it is legal history, it also contains elements of social history. It tells us much about the culture of the underworld in the Midwest in the 1920s and early 1930s, and like all good articles encourages us to draw distinctions between that period and our own. It tells the story of how one man, a witness for the prosecution in a criminal proceeding, used extreme measures to escape his past, to save his own life by attempting to become someone else.

“One’s personal identity is a curious thing,” James Redman writes. “Our analysis of each other, when conducted on an individual basis, always begins with a single, primary point of reference—the other person’s name. Without a name, one person cannot really be distinguished from another as an individual. Our name is our own individual and frequently unique label — the tag, the banner of identity. Without it, we do not exist. As criminals have long recognized, to change one’s name is to change one’s person.” And so, in Fitzgerald’s novel, James Gatz, a poor, ambitious North Dakota teenager, transforms himself into the mysteriously wealthy and destructively ambitious Jay Gatsby. So also, on a two lane highway near Red Wing in

August, 1931, James Allen Camden tried to lose his identity by planting his glasses and some personal papers on the body of Harry Morris. He aimed to start life over by taking that of another—and perhaps one other besides.

If this article professes to be a “true account of a murder,” it also is one of great imagination. It has considerable narrative strength. Had it been written sixty years ago, it would have been the basis of a film noir script.

James O. Redman, the author, was born on January 10, 1947, in Red Wing. He received a B.A. from the University of Minnesota in 1969, and his J.D. from the William Mitchell College of Law in 1975. He was a partner in a Minneapolis law firm, Bassford, Lockhart, Truesdell & Briggs, later named Bassford Remele, where he specialized in insurance law. He has written numerous articles on insurance law for legal publications. He retired in 2006, and resides in Red Wing.

“The Killing and Transfiguration of Harry Morris” appears on pages 52 through 70 of the Spring/Summer, 2000 issue of the *Great River Review*. The MLHP has reformatted this article, and the original page breaks have been added. The article that follows is complete. The author’s punctuation and spelling have not been altered. ■

# GREAT RIVER REVIEW

Issue 32

Spring/Summer 2000

## The Killing and Transfiguration of Harry Morris \*

JAMES REDMAN

*“Tis but a night, a long and moonless night,  
we make the grave our bed, and then are gone.”*

Alexander Pope

What follows is the true account of a murder. It was, as far as I know, the only gangland style killing to occur in southeastern Minnesota during the heyday of prohibition and the days leading into the depression. On its own, without going beyond the newspaper stories of the day, the murder of Harry Morris, in its own right, might be a good template for the era’s numerous gangland murders. A gangster is assassinated by other gangsters after a one-way ride. Accounts such as these were commonplace throughout the prohibition era and this is precisely why the murder of Harry Morris never received any attention after Harry’s body was interred in Oakwood Cemetery in Red Wing.

The authorities never even came close to solving Harry Morris’ murder—not that they tried very hard. The contemporary accounts reflect a perfunctory crime scene investigation and some involvement by the newly formed State Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, and that is where the matter ended. According to the authorities at the time, without a witness their investigation could proceed no further. Crime detection was limited to the abilities and motivations of the local sheriff. Cooperation between law enforcement agencies was less than nonexistent; the City of St. Paul, for example, was under the de facto control of a loosely organized syndicate engaged in a number of rackets — bootlegging, gambling, prostitution, protection —

---

\* © James O. Redman. This article is reprinted with the permission of the author.

where the notorious O’Conner system guaranteed police immunity to criminals who engaged in no traditional felonies within the city limits. Unless non-metropolitan authorities had an eyewitness or a [53] confessing felon in custody, therefore, the crime would go unsolved. Given the ineffectual state of law enforcement, it is not hard to understand the absence of any public outcry to apprehend Harry Morris’s killer. Morris, it was known, was a professional criminal specializing in bank robbery. Who killed him — no one really cared.

If for no other reason than he was unique as probably the only gangster era hoodlum to be killed in this part of Minnesota, however, that fact alone would make the story an interesting historical footnote. But there is much more. All these decades later we have detailed information about organized crime, the gangs, how they operated, their hierarchies and the personalities of the members. We also know the effects on the syndicates caused by the repeal of prohibition, the onset of the depression following the stock market crash of 1929, and, perhaps, have a little more curiosity due to the unique nature of the death of Harry Morris. Having said these things, our inquiry must then go a bit beyond the simple recitation of the obvious facts and delve a bit into some aspects of the case that show us something entirely different than the simple murder of a professional depression era bank robber. What we will encounter are some curious and, I hope for you, some thought provoking questions — because what I would like you to ask yourself as you read this can only be answered by each of us in our own souls — what can cause a person to engage in premeditated murder? Fear, greed, sexual desire or jealousy? What about the total redemption and transfiguration of your identity? All of these factors played a part in a very real and concrete sense in the murder of Harry Morris. In the case of the killing of Harry Morris, all of these things happened — a case where through the converging of events, the victim was also the killer and the killer went free. [54]

## I.

On August 17, 1931, several fishermen were en route from the small rural town of Red Wing in southeastern Minnesota to nearby Lake Pepin, a distance of less than 10 miles following the southward flow of the Mississippi River. It was about 5:00 a.m., and sunrise was approaching. Traveling along Highway 61 about 3 miles south of town, they encountered the corpse of a man on the side of the highway. The fishermen immediately

telephoned the Goodhue County Sheriff in Red Wing, Lenus Olson.

At about the same time, a man dressed in golfing clothes stopped at a nearby cafe. The well dressed stranger was headed toward Red Wing on Highway 61 in a car with Illinois license plates. He, too, reported the presence of a body on the side of the highway — a suicide, he thought. The stranger ordered coffee and donuts and left. The cafe owner, like the fishermen, called the Sheriff.

Sheriff Lenus Olson, Red Wing Police Chief Nels Severson, and patrolman Clarence Anderson drove to the scene accompanied by a local undertaker, county coroner Russell Edstrom. The victim's body was still warm. He had been dead only a couple of hours.

A witness later reported seeing a large black sedan, possibly a Packard, parked at the crime scene at about 2:00 a.m. The car was parked on the side of the road in a southerly direction, away from Red Wing and the Twin Cities and toward Wisconsin and Chicago. A man was seen standing next to the parked car and another was observed inside. The man standing by the car waved the witness on so he made no further observations. [55]

## II.

As the sun rose, the four officials began their investigation of the crime scene. The body was on the shoulder of the two lane highway next to a guardrail. In the distance was a gravel quarry and immediately next to the road was a cornfield. The closest farms were some distance away (the residents had not heard anything untoward that night) — the highway ran through a wide valley between tall river bluffs.

Next to the corpse of the victim was a suit vest and suit coat, both torn and bloodied. The victim lay in a pool of his own blood. Clutched by its muzzle in the victim's right hand was a 45 caliber automatic pistol from which four rounds had been fired. Across the pavement lay a 38 caliber revolver. Both weapons were smeared with blood.

The victim was an unknown adult white male, approximately six feet two inches tall and weighing an estimated 180 pounds. He had dark hair sprinkled with some gray and had brown eyes. He looked to be in early middle age — 35-40 years old. His suit appeared to be of high quality and

expensive, as were the decedent's shoes. The labels on the suit had all been removed.

On the victim's body was a small notebook, some driving glasses in a case, an expensive Hamilton watch and a large man's diamond ring. In his pockets were two loaded magazines for the 45 automatic in the victim's hand, as well as a large sum of money, over \$550. The victim had a partially emptied pack of cigarettes and a matchbook advertising the Colonial Hotel in Devil's Lake, North Dakota. The body had two visible gunshot wounds: one grazing the head from the front and the other through the chest. Clearly, this was no suicide.

In searching the crime scene more generally, the investigators determined that the murder had been witnessed by a third person. In the adjacent cornfield, the authorities discovered the footprints of a woman leading from the crime scene. The tracks [56] led away from the highway crime scene through a cornfield and stopped from time to time. At one point, the woman had set down a heavy twelve inch square object into the soft soil leaving a distinct impression in the ground. Eventually, the woman's tracks led back to the highway where the woman apparently reentered the automobile with the murderer after the killing had been completed. The authorities noted that the woman wore shoes that were about a size 6.

The victim's body was transported from the crime scene to Edstrom's mortuary in Red Wing for an autopsy. While Edstrom was going about his duties with the deceased, Sheriff Olson had the opportunity to examine the items found at the scene.

The 45 pistol was a standard Colt automatic sold in large numbers both to the public, as well as to the military. The 38 revolver, a Smith & Wesson, was also a common handgun. However, some of the victim's other personal effects proved to be more revealing. While the Hamilton watch, the diamond ring and the cash on the body, as well as the victim's clothes, could not be traced, the driving glasses and case, as well as the small notebook, proved to be more helpful.

The notebook on the victim's body was made with a red leather binding and contained rather cryptic handwritten notations. On one page were written the numbers \$58.38 and \$78.93. On another page appeared figures followed by initials, "\$108.00-S.W; \$468.24-B; \$404-G; \$148.65-C; \$606.00-W" and the

figures 7147 and \$115.00. These notations, the police believed, were consistent with someone involved with bootlegging or gambling. Inside the cover of the notebook the name “Jerry” was written in pencil.

It was the eyeglasses and case found in the victim’s suit coat pocket that were the link that resulted in the initial identification of the murder victim. The glasses had been prescribed three weeks before by an optometrist in south Chicago to a J. A. Camden, a resident of Chicago’s south side. According to the optometrist when contacted, Camden’s physical description matched that of the murder victim. Camden, it seemed, had represented himself to [57] the optometrist as a traveling salesman who had needed the spectacles for driving at night.

While the identity of the owner of the glasses was being established, Coroner Edstrom was completing his autopsy of the body at his funeral home. The victim had an athletic physique and appeared to be of northern European ancestry. He was uncircumcised — a gentile. He had been shot twice, once by a grazing soft nosed slug which creased his head from front to rear. The second bullet was of a non-expanding, hard nosed variety consistent with the 45 Colt automatic found clutched in the victim’s hand. The second bullet had entered the victim’s back near the shoulder blade and exited through the lower front part of the victim’s chest. The head wound had followed a violent physical fight where the victim’s coat and vest had been torn off. The bullet that had pierced the victim’s chest had not gone through the coat or vest. The head wound, Edstrom concluded, had been inflicted first with a soft nosed slug from the 38 Smith & Wesson revolver which had brought the victim to his knees, and the killer had then shot the victim from behind with the victim’s own 45, causing a rapid but not instantaneous death. (The victim had, in his death throes, grabbed the 45 by the muzzle, where it was found by the authorities.) Also evident on the body were several bruises and contusions consistent with the fatal physical confrontation leading up to the shooting.

While the local sheriff was attempting to identify the victim with the help of the newly formed Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, photos of the corpse were circulated within the Minnesota law enforcement community, along with the victim’s fingerprints and physical description. Meanwhile, information from Chicago continued to be forthcoming. Chicago newspaper reporters announced that Camden was an important associate of none other than Al Capone and deeply involved in the Capone

rackets. On Tuesday, the day following the discovery of her husband's body in Minnesota, Mae Camden was detained by the Chicago police while withdrawing [58] \$2,500 from the couple's safe deposit box in a Chicago bank. Mae was kept in custody until Thursday and then released.

Camden and his wife had last come to the attention of the Chicago police some six weeks before the murder. Mae Camden had appeared at a south Chicago police station and reported that she had been kidnapped in the couple's car and kept overnight. The hijackers had tried to rob her husband who was then in the possession of a large amount of money, some \$30,000; money, she said, which had come from some collections her husband had made as a result of some liquor deals. When the hijackers approached their car, her husband, Mae said, had bolted with the money. When picked up by the police following the Minnesota murder, Mae reported that she knew little about Camden's subsequent activities, only having seen him once since the abortive hijacking attempt. The Chicago papers further noted, however, that Camden had some more serious trouble. He had recently been called to testify before a Chicago federal grand jury where the word was that he had "squawked," not a good portent with the mob. Camden, it was reported, had been put "on the spot" — gangland parlance for someone targeted for assassination by the mob.

Mae's interrogation with the Chicago police revealed that she and Camden, while living together for five years, had never married. In her statement the day following the murder, she reported to Chicago chief of detectives John W. Warton that she was 35 years old and had been born in Denver. Mae said Camden's full name was James Allen Camden and that he was a bootlegger. Camden, she said, had left for Canada two weeks before driving a Ford automobile, and she had not seen him since. Mae stated that Camden had never been in Minnesota, had no enemies and had received no threats. The couple, she said, had traveled a great deal and, while together, had lived in half a dozen cities along the west coast, in various locations in the deep south, as well as major cities in Canada. [59]

### III.

The murder of a gangster near a small midwestern town caused no small stir in the community. The victim's body was placed on public display with the thought that a witness to the crime might come forward. Hundreds, if not thousands, of local curiosity seekers appeared at the Edstrom funeral home



to file past the gangster's body — mostly women and children. No new witnesses were forthcoming.

With the spreading of the news of the gangland killing came the usual onrush of rumors and false reports — one of which, however, being more than a little intriguing — a local banker reported seeing two well-dressed men with an equally well-dressed woman in a Red Wing restaurant on Sunday night, immediately prior to the killing. One of the men, who looked like the decedent, appeared to be anxious and impatient, wanting to leave the restaurant, while the other man and the woman were apparently enjoying their dinner and were in no hurry to leave. Finally, the impatient man placed a five dollar bill on the table and the threesome left together.

Following the circulation of the victim's photograph, a new and startling development occurred. J. A. Camden was positively identified by none other than the Minneapolis Chief of Police as a well-known bank robber, not known as J. A. Camden but as Harry Morris.

#### IV.

Harry Morris was a career criminal well known to the authorities in several Midwestern states including Minnesota, Iowa and Wisconsin. Described as a soft-spoken southerner and a gentleman bank robber, Harry, it seemed, was in the habit of using many aliases. In addition to being known as Harry "Slim" Morris, he was also known as Harry "Slim" Ballard, "Slim" Moran, and [60] "Slim" Ryan. He was once detained in a raid on a Chicago speakeasy in 1927, the Ledo Inn, when the authorities, including a St. Paul police detective, were looking for a safecracker by the name of Art "Wicky" Hanson. At that time, according to the St. Paul cop, Morris gave his name as "Art Mason."

According to the Chicago Tribune in reporting the murder on Tuesday, August 18, 1931, at the time of his Chicago arrest, Morris was carrying a pistol and identified himself as a gambler.

Morris/Camden had been a known associate of another murdered Twin Cities gangster, Jimmy Barrett, whose death in 1927 in St. Paul followed by three days the killing of his wife and sister. Barrett's murder was said to have been to have ended a gang war that had claimed the lives earlier of

twelve other thugs in the Twin Cities area.

Morris's physical appearance and demeanor matched those of "Camden," mild mannered, cultured and refined — a "one woman man" devoted to his attractive wife. Morris, while a known professional bank robber for instance, would not threaten women or children. In fact, a former confederate told a St. Paul news reporter that Morris had once refused to allow his gang to rob a bank because it was staffed by female tellers. Morris was suspected in participating in a recent bank holdup in Staples, Minnesota, with four other gunmen where an estimated \$15,000 in cash plus an unspecified amount of securities was taken. It was clear to the authorities that "Camden" was just one more alias Morris had been using.

Morris and his wife lived at the Edgcumbe Court Apartments in St Paul, then a reputed residence for professional bank robbers. Located at the intersection of St. Clair and Lexington Avenues (where it still stands today), the building was also the residence of at least two other experienced professional bank robbers, Charlie Harmon and Frank "Jelly" Nash. Nash, while known as the "Gentleman Bandit," had not only been involved in numerous bank holdups, but was also known to have been involved in several murders of competing hoods, dumping the bodies in [61] distant counties where the lack of police cooperation kept him a free man. Nash was later killed, accidentally, in the infamous Kansas City Massacre where several police officers and FBI agents were shot to death by Pretty Boy Floyd. Floyd was attempting to free Nash from the custody of the authorities at the time.

Harmon, who with Nash, abruptly moved out of the Edgcumbe Court apartments following Morris's murder, told acquaintances that he was moving back to his native Arkansas. Instead, he quietly moved to another address in St. Paul.

Morris was also an associate of Harvey Bailey, a bank robber of considerable underworld renown. Morris and Bailey combined in 1928 to hold up the Olmsted Bank and Trust in Rochester, Minnesota. Bailey years later, after his release from Alcatraz (where he was a charter inmate along with Al Capone), attributed Morris's murder to "Slim's" habit of kidding other gangsters. Morris, Bailey stated, was always "on the rib." Gladys Sawyer, wife of Twin Cities crime kingpin Harvey Sawyer, was equally unconvincing when she surmised that Morris met his end after an argument

at a local St. Paul speakeasy, the Hollyhocks, with “Old Charlie” Fitzgerald, a hood later involved in the notorious Hamm kidnapping as a member of the Barker-Karpis gang. Fitzgerald, however, was an elderly man who would not have been a match for Morris in a physical confrontation.

## V.

The Minnesota law enforcement community was near the end of its brief investigation. Unless the woman whose tracks were near the crime scene could be found, there was no living witness to the crime. As the investigator for the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Investigation noted, chances for a witness to survive to testify were slim. Gangland, he said, leaves no witnesses. He was right. [62]

The police could go no further. The mystery woman was not to be found. Mae Camden was released by the Chicago police on Thursday and did not appear for her husband’s funeral in Red Wing the next day. While thousands turned out to witness what they hoped would be a gaudy gangland funeral (it wasn’t — the eulogy was given by the local Salvation Army Chaplain), no gangsters were in evidence in the closely monitored service. Morris was buried in Red Wing’s peaceful Oakwood cemetery under a marker simply stating, “Harry Morris - August 17, 1931.” The money found on the victim’s body was used to pay for his own burial.

On Friday morning, the same day as Morris’s burial, the body of a woman was found near Kenosha, Wisconsin, just north of Chicago. The victim was a well-dressed and groomed attractive young woman, raped and strangled the night before. She was wearing no shoes but, the police noted, her feet were the same size as the footprints of the woman in the cornfield on Monday near Red Wing’s murder scene. The female murder victim, however, turned out to be a false lead. She was identified as Anne Patterson, a “nightclub frequenter” from Chicago. She had been with her husband, Frank Patterson, in 1926 when he was apprehended for unspecified criminal activities, but Anne was never charged with any crime. Frank had been sent to prison for three years. Anne Patterson’s murderer was never identified or apprehended.

The murder of Harry Morris was unsolved and soon forgotten by a population desensitized to gangland killings and confronted by the Great Depression. It was another of the innumerable killings of organized crime

which was never solved and only superficially investigated.

## VI.

The British author Aldous Huxley once wrote: “It is like the question of the authorship of the *Iliad*. ... The author of the poem [63] is either Homer or, if not Homer, somebody else of the same name.” The sudden, violent demise of the gangster who we now know as Harry Morris, other than momentarily diverting the attention of the public during the doldrums of the depression, resulted in no substantial police investigation. Clearly, in what was the pre-FBI Midwest, cooperation between different jurisdictions was less evident than between news reporters — not that anyone much cared who did the deed. What did it matter? A gangster murdered by other gangsters left one less felon to threaten society.

Other than the contemporary news accounts, no official records remain of the murder investigation that followed Harry Morris’s murder. While newspaper stories have been called the first draft of history, other resources are now available to assist us in analyzing what happened on that warm August night and to allow us to see through the artifice that prevented the authorities from recognizing the obvious and identifying Harry Morris’s murderer, for the identity of the murderer was known to the police all along.

One’s personal identity is a curious thing. Our analysis of each other, when conducted on an individual basis, always begins with a single, primary point of reference—the other person’s name. Without a name, one person cannot really be distinguished from another as an individual. Our name is our own individual and frequently unique label — the tag, the banner of identity. Without it, we do not exist. As criminals have long recognized, to change one’s name is to change one’s person. With a change of name, what used to be Harry Morris becomes “Slim” Moran. A simple but effective disconnect — invent a new name, invent a new person. A simple illusion, but one that came to be used against Harry Morris — used as a sword and not a shield to prevent the identification of his murderer.

To change who we are to others, to terminate identities that tie people to their recognizable persona in routine social discourse, all we need to do is to relabel ourselves, and the Harry Morris underworld had perfected this phenomenon to an art form [64] by 1931. So, from Harry Morris to “Slim” Ballard as the need, location or felony demanded, the individual changed in

his local society — unless someone who had labeled him differently in another locale should catch him in his lie.

Career criminals like Morris certainly made a habit of frequent name changes. In 1931, there were no social security numbers and no driver's license numbers. In short, no centralized history for an individual. Identities could be easily altered. It was ridiculously simple. With a change of residence, one could also change names. The twenties and thirties were turbulent times — embarrassing mistakes could be erased with a stroke of the pen. Have a brush with the law? An unhappy marriage or family obligations? Creditors too annoying or feel a need to terminate a disadvantageous ethnic or national origin? The solution was in the label. Change your name and the past truly was history, and someone else's at that.

This leads us to the premise — Morris, Moran, Mason, Ryan, Ballard and Camden as one and the same individual, one professional crook who would casually change his identity to “avoid prosecution.” It was that simple. One body identified adding a tag of identity to numerous others buried in the same grave.

A more careful analysis of the times, the newspaper accounts and modern studies of St. Paul and Chicago organized crime in the twenties and thirties, however, leads to some unsettling questions barely beneath the surface of the simple, observable facts.

## VII.

The turbulence of the roaring 20's was no better exemplified than in Chicago. In the mid-20s, Al Capone swiftly became the virtual dictator of the underworld and the rackets of bootlegging, gambling, vice and protection. Prohibition had been a bonanza for the gangsters who kept a steady supply of beer and liquor flowing to innumerable speakeasies in the Chicago area. Protected [65] from the authorities by a network of graft and payoffs, the racketeers employed literally hundreds of people in their illegal activities. Capone's syndicate was loosely modeled after the mafia of his parents' native Naples. The Capone organization, unlike its Sicilian counterpart, was, for its day, an equal opportunity employer. One need not have been of Italian ancestry to participate. While Italians from the Little Italy neighborhood of Chicago's South Side certainly played an important part in the Capone gang, members of many other ethnic groups in Chicago

were also members and participants and included most of the ethnic groups in America. Race, creed, or ethnic origin were not discriminating factors (except when it came to gender — women could only participate on the fringes of the mob as wives, girlfriends or worse, as residents of one of Capone's brothels). Counted among Capone gang members were Poles, Irish, Russians, Germans, Swedes, Czechs, Bohemians, Jews, and African-Americans.

Like Morris, even Capone himself was not immune from the convenient shifting of identity through the use of an alias. When helpful, Capone went by the name "Al Brown." Capone's brother, Ralph "Bottles" Capone, was also variously known as James Carroll, James Costello, Jr., James Carter, James Carson, Harry Roberts and Harry White.

Endemic within the Chicago syndicates, of course, was the custom of eliminating one's opponents or even one's own associates or erstwhile allies if they were perceived to be disloyal. Statistics of the time reveal that between 1922-1926 in Chicago alone, 215 gangsters were murdered by other gangsters while the Chicago police accounted for the killing of 160 "booze runners and racketeers." Murder followed the generating of huge amounts of money. During 1927 alone, Capone's empire generated revenues estimated at approximately \$60,000,000 for bootlegging, \$25,000,000 for gambling, \$10,000,000 for vice and \$10,000,000 from other rackets such as protection money.

But there was discrimination in the underworld based on the status of one's criminal specialty. While professional criminals [66] were in a different class from the usual criminal classes, the professional criminals themselves also drew distinctions amongst themselves. The Capone rackets were considered (by the questionable standards of Capone himself) to be victimless crimes, a step above such violent activities as bank robbery. Indeed, Capone once boasted, "I have taken many a man out of the holdup and bank robbery business." He further claimed to be employing 300 young men paying them \$150 to \$200 per week.

Other gangs in Chicago were less selective of their membership. The notorious St Valentine's Day Massacre of 1929 where Capone operatives assassinated seven members of the Bugs Moran gang in North Chicago included Moran gang members variously experienced as bootleggers, along with at least one safecracker and a bank robber (who was also Moran's

brother-in-law).

Gang warfare caused profound shifts in where the hoods chose to live, how they identified themselves, and with whom they continued to be associated. Following the St. Valentine's Day slaughter, for example, literally hundreds of hoods abandoned Chicago, at least temporarily. The number of names and identities that were changed can only be the subject of speculation. The hoods moved, not to avoid arrest and prosecution, but to avoid the dangers of gang warfare.

But the Capone empire — regardless of its notoriety and power — was relatively short-lived. In 1929, Ralph “Bottles” Capone was indicted on seven counts of federal income tax evasion. He was later convicted, and his case was on appeal when the federal authorities began to question gang members about Al Capone's income in the early months of 1931.

On March 13, 1931, Capone himself was secretly indicted by a federal Grand Jury in Chicago for income tax evasion. By April, a new Grand Jury was empaneled by the U. S. Attorney in Chicago to obtain even more thorough indictments. While secret from the public, Capone had, through bribery, obtained a pipeline into the Grand Jury's proceedings and knew about the pending [67] indictments, as well as the fact that one of his own suppliers, free lance bootlegger J. A. Camden, had testified.

On June 5, 1931, Capone was formally indicted on 31 counts of federal income tax evasion. Due to be subpoenaed for Capone's trial as a key witness for the prosecution, was Camden. Camden could help the federal government prove that Capone had received large amounts of unreported and untaxed income from his criminal empire.

Following his public indictments in early June, the Capone mob marshaled its troops to defend “The Big Boss.” Large sums of money needed to be collected, not only for Capone's legal defense, but also for graft and bribes that might be applied within the law enforcement and judicial communities. Capone's lieutenants set about these vital tasks, and it was in the course of these desperate activities that the attempt was made to “hijack” Camden with what was today's equivalent of half a million dollars.

## VIII.

It was about this time that Camden must have begun the planning and execution of his plot to escape the deadly wrath of the Capone mob, as well as to collect enough money to see himself through for the indefinite future. Camden and Capone still needed each other. While knowing of Camden's "duplicity" with the Grand Jury, Capone still had to have Camden to keep the syndicate's wheels running as the "society contact man" while sufficient funds were collected to buy Capone out of his legal problems. Camden, in turn, needed time to perfect his disappearance and flight.

By June of 1931, Camden was "on the spot" and knew it. Camden's plans began to result in desperate but clever and calculated actions before Capone had him assassinated. Mae Camden's report to the police was a smokescreen then for the couple's plan to avoid not only the authorities, but the fatal attentions of the mob itself. Camden's plot included Capone's money and the convenient [68] illusion of his own death. All he had to do was find a fall guy, one who, in death, could become J. A. Camden. The fall guy was another criminal who had a conveniently long list of aliases. Camden had perhaps met in Chicago at the Ledo Inn in 1927, a St. Paul bank robber by the name of Harry Morris.

In retrospect, it is hard to believe that the authorities in Minnesota could have so easily been misled into believing that J. A. Camden was just another of Harry Morris's long list of aliases and that the murder victim was one and the same person. Camden/Morris could not have been a longtime St. Paul bank robber, an independent bootlegger working the U.S. Coasts importing liquor for Capone as Mae Camden maintained, or a well-placed Capone mob "fixer" as otherwise reported.

By having risen to a position of significance with the Chicago mob, Camden was clearly experienced, not only with the mob's bootlegging and other rackets, but also with the application of well-placed graft and bribes to people in positions of authority in Chicago. Camden was not a part-time mob soldier, he was a professional liquor supplier to the mob. He handled large amounts of mob money and maintained strong links with people in authority. This status could not have been attained through a sporadic temporary attendance to mob affairs. Camden simply could not have been accepted as a large scale liquor supplier with Capone if he were spending large blocks of his career slumming as a bank robber; simultaneously



holding long associations with the St. Paul professional, but loosely knit, bank robbery fraternity. The two professions, Chicago syndicate operative and bank hold-up artist, were as dissimilar to members in the underworld as professional race drivers and citizens who drive to church on Sundays. In short, Morris and Camden could not possibly have been a single hoodlum simply using additional aliases. While it is true the two men shared some physical similarities and both were members of the professional criminal classes, all similarities ended there. The simple act of planting some items of Camden's identity on his victim's body was effective enough to fool the authorities in both [69] Minnesota and Chicago, and perhaps, if he were lucky, the Camden/Morris synthesis of identities was an adequate illusion to fool the Chicago mob as well.

## IX.

If, then, it is true that Morris's murder was part of a ruse by Camden to escape from the Chicago U. S. Attorney, as well as the Capone mob while in the possession of enough of the mob's money to set him up for life, what enabled Camden to link up with Morris, somehow get his confidence and then kill him and plant a false identity? Could the link have been accomplished with Mae Camden's assistance? Because the authorities never distinguished Morris from Camden, we can only speculate, but certain clues from the old news reports that are available lead to some tantalizing possibilities. We know, for example, that both Camden and Morris were married to attractive women. We further know that Morris was reported to have been having an affair with a mysterious woman in Wisconsin prior to his murder. Further, we know that Morris had been seen in one of Capone's Chicago nightclubs in 1927 where he and Camden could have become acquainted. Was this where "nightclub frequenter" Anne Patterson also became acquainted with Morris, Camden, or both of them? Was murder victim Anne Patterson really Mae Camden? When the heat was on, did Camden solicit his attractive paramour Mae Camden to seduce Morris to set him up for the later killing — to be the planned decoy for Camden's escape and disappearance? Could it have been Mae Camden who was seen with Morris and Camden in the cafe in Red Wing early on the night of the murder? Was it Mae who left her tracks in the cornfield when the fatal conflict on Highway 61 began? Finally, as the only witness to the murder and as the one person who could sell out Camden's scheme to the Chicago mob, Camden's only real threat, but a very real and ominous one — did Camden murder his own accomplice outside [70] of Chicago later that same

week (where she was later identified under an earlier alias and never connected with Camden)? Or, was she murdered out of passion — after coming back to the car after the murder not knowing who would be the driver? Did the professional bank robbers, Charlie Harmon and Frank Nash, hastily leave the Edgumbe Courts apartments they shared with Harry Morris after his murder — not out of fear of being blamed for Morris’s murder, but because they knew their friend’s death had something to do with the Chicago mob and they didn’t want to be next?

All the facts then seem to inevitably point to a simple but clever ruse, executed almost perfectly — the violent end of Harry Morris indicates that he almost caught on in time to save himself. Camden, who Capone had “on the spot” for talking to the Grand Jury, stole large amounts of mob money and then, through the cooperation of his sultry and worldly paramour, set up his old acquaintance Harry Morris to be the surrogate for Camden’s corpse. Poor Harry’s body, through some planted eyeglasses and a memo book, was assumed also to be J. A. Camden — and the mob, through the newspapers, was so informed and deceived. Mae Camden, the bait that led to Morris’s death, was then coldly murdered a few days later by Camden as part of his plan or an afterthought to eliminate the last living witness to his plot. Camden then, no doubt, set up yet another identity in another part of the country where he had the funds necessary to see himself through to the end. So, did anyone ever really kill J. A. Camden? Did his children or grandchildren ever know this story?

J. A. Camden merged his identity with Harry Morris and, in so doing, ceased to exist in the eyes of the world. It is like the tone poem of Richard Strauss — “Tod und Erklarung”— “Death and Transfiguration.” Transfiguration, however, without either contrition or redemption.



**Posted MLHP: January, 2008**

