

John A. Bartelloni

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Topics in Literary Fiction

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Almost the Perfect Crime: The Green Forest Nudist Camp Murders

The look on the face of Metropolitan Police Department Detective Sgt. Harold C. Huffman is one of incredulity. His eyes are narrowed as he views the grinning defendant being booked who has just admitted to having lured his wife from her parents' domicile in the District of Columbia to view a non-existent recently purchased summer home in Fairfax County and then executing her on the grounds of a nudist colony to which he had belonged (Streets). To a single, shallow grave he consigned his wife's body and that of their infant daughter who was buried alive (Wolter and Beck).

In response to a reporter's inquiries, family members described the accused killer as "a curious mixture of genius and failure, braggart and coward, creative artist, and lonely melancholic." He was an aspiring poet and novelist, yet published only one work, a paean to Rudolph Valentino printed in a Washington newspaper at the time the actor died in 1926 when the defendant was a student enrolled at the old Central High School in the District (Bradlee).

In his mind, Charles Holoher, 40, might have planned the perfect crime. As a resident of the District, he was aware of the murder of Pearl Corens who had been slain in nearby suburban Bethesda, Maryland by her husband Henry Corens, an automobile painter, in March, 1945 (Fredericks 11). The severed head of Pearl Corens had been discovered near Herndon about four

miles from Money's Corner where the bodies of Frances Garner Holober, and June Holober, wife and daughter of Charles Holober, respectively, would be found February 27, 1949 beneath the pines of the Green Forest Nudist camp to which he belonged ("Infant").

While planning to kill his wife and daughter, Charles Holober expected to avoid the mistakes of Henry Corens. He had borrowed the car of his sister Adele Itkin for the drive to the rural countryside in the Dranesville magisterial district of Fairfax County, but he surely had not expected to get the vehicle stuck in the mud on a dirt road outside the nudist camp (Fredericks 11). According to Fairfax County Sheriff John Taylor, one of two law enforcement officials who accompanied Holober on an October, 1949 trip to Fairfax from the Southwest State Hospital in Marion, Virginia where he had been under observation, Holober had maintained, that this "bad break" was what had kept him from having committed the perfect crime. Police learned his whereabouts because Holober needed assistance in retrieving the car. They were thus able to tie him to the crime scene ("Holober Back").

Charles Holober maintained that he never had loved his wife, the former Frances Garner whom he considered his social inferior. After she became pregnant by him, Holober agreed to marry her and give their child his name by doing so. He, however, refused to live with her. Feeling hounded by her many phone calls and trapped by her expressed wish to live with him in his parents' home, Holober resolved to kill her (Maxwell 84).

According to Charles Holober, on the evening of February 24, 1949 his wife had left the car mired in mud and walked away carrying their daughter after an argument. He claimed to have spent the night in the vehicle in the hope that she would return. At daybreak, he then hitchhiked to Washington and reported her to the Missing Persons' Bureau in the District which

prompted a search of the area by five Fairfax police officers who found no trace of the missing woman and her daughter (“Posse”). On Sunday, February 27, Fairfax County police accompanied by Boy Scouts from Falls Church and two Metropolitan Police detectives combed the grounds of the nudist camp. There they found the bodies of Frances Garner Holober and her daughter June. Officials at the site initially believed that Mrs. Holober had been beaten and surmised that the child had been buried alive (“Infant”).

Following the discovery of the two bodies, Charles Holober confessed to Metropolitan Police that he had shot his wife twice at the Green Forest nudist camp.. He confirmed that his daughter had been buried alive because the Luger automatic with which his wife had been killed jammed when he went to shoot the child (Wolter and Beck).

After being transported to Fairfax County to be held accountable for the murders, Holober repeated to police officials there how he had killed his wife and buried his daughter alive. Bond was set by Trial Justice Harry Lee Carrico, later to serve as Chief Justice of the Virginia Supreme Court, at \$50,000, an impressive sum in 1949. Surprisingly, after having boasted about the murders, Holober asked to see the bodies of his wife and child, but the request was denied. He admitted, “I have done a terrible thing and will have to pay my debt to society (Lyons and Davis).”

Nelson Podolnick, M.D., Coroner for Fairfax County, conducted autopsies on the bodies of the deceased woman and child who had been identified officially by Irving Garner, father of Frances Garner Holober. Reports on the cause of death for June Holober are missing from the case files at the Circuit Court of Fairfax County, but Podolnick did rule the death of Frances Garner Holober a homicide. He cited as the probable anatomical cause of death as gunshot

wounds of the head and heart. Podolnick then forwarded two bullets to the Fairfax County Police to be used as evidence at trial (Podolnick).

Coroner Podolnick subsequently released the bodies of Frances Garner Holober and her daughter June to the Goldberg Funeral Home in the District of Columbia on Ninth Street, N.W. To avoid “humiliation of the dead,” funerals for Jewish people are held as quickly as possible. As a result, the mother and daughter slain by Charles Holober were buried on the day following the examination by Dr. Podolnick . According to published reports, June Holober was buried clasped in the arms of her mother (“Mrs. Holober”).

A mere eight days elapsed in the time between when Charles Holober thought he had committed the perfect crime and the presentation of the case to the Fairfax County grand jury. Fairfax County law enforcement officials convened the grand jury more than two weeks early as the regular session did not begin until March 21, 1949. As a result of this decision, Holober was not afforded a preliminary hearing in Trial Justice Court (“Grand Jury”).

Commonwealth of Virginia v. Charles Holober was assigned to be heard by Circuit Court Judge Paul Brown, one of the chief lieutenants in the strongly disciplined political organization headed by U.S. Senator Harry Byrd which dominated the Democratic Party in Virginia until the late 1960s. Opponents of this organization disparagingly referred to it as the “Byrd Machine;” allies of the senator referred to it as the “Organization.”

Brown was not considered a legal scholar. Yet attorneys throughout Northern Virginia regarded him highly (Fairfield). Indeed, his tombstone at Saint Mary of the Sorrows Catholic Church in Fairfax Station reads, “A man’s man and a lawyer’s judge.”

Brown's initial handling of the case against Charles Holober suggests that he had formed an opinion before the case even went to trial. Well aware of the notoriety generated by the murders, in early March, 1949 the jurist wrote to Joseph Blalock, M.D., Superintendent of the Southwestern State Hospital in Marion and maintained, "This case, of course, has aroused considerable sentiment and in my opinion it should be disposed of as speedily as possible (Brown: Letter)."

Brown had written to Dr. Blalock upon committing Charles Holober to Southwestern State when the sanity of the defendant had been questioned. Contrary to the expressed wishes of Judge Brown that the case be resolved expeditiously, Holober remained in Marion until early October when he was returned to Fairfax to stand trial ("Holober Back"). Attorney T. Brooke Howard of Alexandria, in revealing he would represent the accused, announced he would argue that Holober had been insane when the murders occurred ("Insanity Plea"). The declaration was bold considering that Dr. Blalock had advised Judge Brown "As a result of our observation we beg to report that he (Holober) is not insane (Blalock)."

Brooke Howard had inherited the case after former state senator Frank L. Ball opted against defending Holober at trial ("Holober Ruled"). Although Ball had been the seatmate of fellow Democrat Harry Byrd when their paths crossed briefly in the Virginia General Assembly, he strongly opposed the objectives of the Byrd Machine (Savage). Ball was allied with Francis Pickens Miller who had finished second in the August 2, 1949 Virginia Democratic gubernatorial primary aptly described as "a four way free-for-all (Hester)." During the campaign, Senator Ball and his wife Marie held a reception for Miller in their historic North Arlington home, the Fairfax Glebe. Included in this soiree were residents of nearby Hall's Hill, the African American enclave on both sides of Lee Highway (Savage). One could hardly imagine that Paul Brown, whose

majestic estate Brimstone Hill located at Donovan's Corner (the intersection of Ox Road and what is now known as Burke Lake Road in southern Fairfax County) had been the site of many similar political gatherings, would invite African Americans to attend a function in his own home.

In his letter of withdrawal to Judge Brown, Senator Ball gave no reason for his decision (Ball). By doing so he foreclosed upon the possibility that an anti-Byrd partisan would represent the defendant Holoher at trial before an important member of the dominant political faction in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

After six months of examination in the Southwestern State Hospital, Charles Holoher was found sane and fit to stand trial ("Holoher Ruled"). His attorney Brooke Howard felt strongly, however, that at the time of the offenses the defendant lacked the capacity to distinguish right from wrong. In early October, Howard indicated that he would prove that Holoher was not sane by submitting "competent medical testimony" ("Insanity Plea").

Commonwealth of Virginia v. Charles Holoher was initially set to go to trial on December 13, 1949 ("Trial of Holoher"). The case was continued until January 9, 1950 because prosecution witness Francis S. Chance, one of those who had examined the accused while he was confined at Southwestern State Hospital, had taken ill and was unable to testify ("Murder Trial").

At trial, Commonwealth's Attorney Hugh B. Marsh called three psychiatrists to buttress his contention that Charles Holoher had been sane when he murdered his wife and daughter. Brooke Howard summoned three other mental health experts to support his argument that Holoher had been insane at the time of the offenses. One defense witness, Benjamin Karpman, M.D., chief psychotherapist at Saint Elizabeth's Hospital, testified that the defendant still had an

“irresistible impulse” to kill and was unworthy of trust. He added that Holober, whom he diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic, was unlikely to benefit from treatment (“Holober Still”).

On Friday, January 13, 1950, the jury reached its decision. Reading a handwritten note aloud to the Court in the presence of defense and prosecution counsel, Floyd Brinkley, foreman of the jury, declared, “We the jury find the defendant guilty of murder in the first degree and his punishment shall be death (Brinkley).”

Upon hearing the verdict, Brooke Howard immediately moved that the Court set it aside. Judge Brown denied Howard’s motion and sentenced Holober to be executed in the State Penitentiary on Feb.15, 1950 (Brown: Commonwealth). Later in January, Brown stayed the execution in response to a petition by Howard who intended to request a new trial for the defendant from the Virginia Court of Appeals (“Holober Execution”).

Charles Holober, according to his attorney Brooke Howard, had been denied a fair trial because Judge Brown had made remarks that introduced bias to the jury, the verdict of the jury was inconsistent with the evidence, and the instructions to the jury did not include the possibility that the accused could have been found innocent (“Holober Plea”).

When the State Supreme Court heard the appeal of Charles Holober on November 20, 1950, Howard questioned if the lower court by examining defense witnesses and commenting upon the evidence had denied the defendant a fair trial, whether the instructions of Judge Brown to the jury were incomplete and thus constituted reversible error, and by ignoring medical testimony regarding the sanity of Holober, the jury demonstrated prejudice against the defendant. In response, Assistant Commonwealth’s Attorney Henry J. Wickman requested that the verdict

of the lower court be upheld because three psychiatrists had vouched for the sanity of Charles Holober at the time of the murders (“D.C. Hacker’s”).

On January 15, 1951, the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals unanimously reversed the decision of the lower court. Citing the behavior of Judge Paul Brown, Justice C. Vernon Spratley maintained that he “took a more active part in the examination of witnesses than was proper.” Spratley contended that “Some of (Brown’s) remarks and questions reflected his views as to the quality of the evidence, and hence were likely to have influenced the jury in the decision they reached (“Holober is Granted”).”

Before a retrial could be held, Judge Brown directed that Charles Holober be committed once again to the Southwestern State Hospital. Brown took this action after he received a report from a panel of psychiatrists appointed by Governor John Battle to examine Holober in Richmond while he had been awaiting execution. Judge Brown did not make public the report, but implied that the defendant was indeed insane (“Holober Again”).

Charles Holober remained at Southwestern State Hospital until the fall of 1966 when he was brought back to Northern Virginia to stand trial a second time (“Man to Stand”). With Judge Paul Brown again presiding and hearing the case without a jury, Charles Holober was found not guilty by reason of insanity of having murdered his wife Frances Garner Holober. At trial both Commonwealth’s Attorney Ralph Louk and T. Brooke Howard argued that Holober had been insane in February, 1949 when he committed the offenses. Judge Brown agreed with their contentions and ordered that the defendant be returned to Southwestern State Hospital for further observation (“Retrial Frees”).

In the summer of 1968, two state psychiatrists found Charles Holober “safe and sane.” In a subsequent response to a habeas corpus petition filed by Brooke Howard, on August 28, 1968 the Circuit Court of Fairfax County ordered him released (“Slayer of Wife”).

Relevant Sites: Then and Now

In February, 1949 when Charles Holober brought his wife and daughter to the Green Forest Nudist Camp at Money’s Corner in rural Fairfax County, the District of Columbia was the center of economic activity in what is now known as the Washington Metropolitan area. Much has changed since then. Suburban counties in Maryland and Virginia experienced explosive growth in the 1950s and 1960s. Although the District of Columbia dismantled its trolley system in 1962 (the terminus was in Glen Echo, Maryland), the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority initiated light rail in 1976. In 2014 the Silver Line is expected to bring the service to the Dulles Corridor which includes Money’s Corner.

Below are sites mentioned in “Almost the Perfect Crime: the Green Forest Nudist Camp Murders.”

B’nai Israel Congregation Cemetery

5401 Saint Barnabas Road

Oxon Hill MD

Grave site services for June G. Holober and Frances Garner Holober were held here on March 1, 1949. Later, Isadore Holober and Bertha Holober, parents of Charles Holober, and Irving Garner and Belle Garner, parents of Frances Garner Holober, were also buried in the same cemetery. The tombstones for the senior Holobers are separated from those of the other parties mentioned by a space which could be the unmarked grave of Charles Holober who is believed dead.

Fairfax County Courthouse

4000 Chain Bridge Road

Fairfax, VA

Now known as the Fairfax County Historic Courthouse, this building was the venue for both Holober murder trials over which Judge Paul Brown presided. During the first trial, Chain Bridge Road was known as Payne Avenue. In the early 1960s addresses in the City of Fairfax were renumbered and several roads were renamed. For example, University Drive, which had been the original main entry to the campus of George Mason College of the University of Virginia (now George Mason University), was originally known as Mechanic Street. Circuit court trials are no longer held in the Fairfax County Historic Courthouse; the seat of the Circuit Court of Fairfax County has been moved to another edifice at 4110 Chain Bridge Road.

Green Forest Nudist Camp

Money's Corner,

Fairfax County, VA

Money's Corner is seen on many old maps as the area bounded by SR 673, Lawyers Road; SR 665, Fox Mill Road; and SR 602, Sixty Foot Road. Other than being widened in some places, Lawyers Road has remained largely unchanged since 1949. Fox Mill Road has been re-routed at Money's Corner. Sixty Foot Road has been renamed Reston Parkway and extended southward after which it assumes the designation of Lawyers Road until it reaches West Ox Road. The three buildings and the swimming pool of the nudist camp have been removed, and the area in which they once stood is now the Reston South commuter parking lot. The remaining acreage encompassing the Green Forest Nudist Camp was subdivided for homes in the planned community of Reston.

Jewelry Shop of Isadore Holober

1214 7th Street, N.W.

Washington, D.C

In the days following the April, 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, jr., riots broke out in cities across the United States. Washington, D.C. was not spared; many predominately African American neighborhoods went up in flames. Buildings in the 1200 block of 7th Street, N.W., where Isadore Holober, father of Charles Holober, had operated his jewelry

shop in which his son had been employed intermittently were damaged considerably. Stores in this block never reopened. Several years after the disorders the District of Columbia government leveled all of these structures and replaced them with a park. Later, the United House of Prayer for All People constructed the McCollough Court affordable housing complex which currently occupies the entire block on both sides (Newton).

Residence of Irving Garner

931 New York Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C.

Frances Garner Holober never shared a home with her husband Charles Holober. Instead, after their “shotgun” marriage, she continued to live with their daughter June and her parents in a modest home nine blocks from the White House at 931 New York Avenue, N.W. (“Trial Set”). The dwelling owned by her father was described as “a walkup flat above a business concern (Maxwell).” The entire block is now occupied by the 901 New York Avenue building, a sleek and impressive edifice managed by Boston Properties. Current tenants include political consultant Ann F. Lewis, and the law firms Goodwin Proctor and Finnegan Henderson Farabow Garrett & Dunn.

Residence of Isadore Holober

1216 Shepherd Street, N.W.

Washington, D.C.

In October, 1949, a few short months before *Commonwealth of Virginia v. Charles Holober* went to trial, Isadore Holober, father of Charles Holober, suffered a heart attack and died. He was buried at B’nai Israel Cemetery near the grave of Frances Garner Holober and June Holober, his daughter-in-law and granddaughter (“I. Holober”). The home of Isadore Holober in which his son Charles lived in a filthy attic apartment is in the Columbia Heights neighborhood on a quiet row of houses between 12th and 13th streets, N.W. The current owner reports that he purchased the property in 2010 and lived in the now renovated attic apartment until December, 2013. He has no knowledge of the Holober family (Berseth). Both the front and back yards have been paved over; a high fence obstructs view of the latter. One resident of Shepherd Street acknowledged that the proportion of African American residents has declined considerably in the 25 years he has lived there (Kirkpatrick).

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Notes on “Almost the Perfect Crime: The Green Forest Nudist Camp Murders”

I first encountered Charles Holober in an online essay by Brian Conley who had written about the legend of the Bunnyman. Conley discussed three murder cases which might have evolved into the tale of an evil man dressed in a bunny suit who murdered anyone unfortunate to cross his path. One of those cases was that of the Holober murders. I have spent much of my life in central Fairfax County and what is now the City of Fairfax. I knew the origin of the Bunnyman legend had nothing to do with murder which Conley acknowledges in his account. The notion that two homicides had taken place in a nudist camp in what became the planned community Reston, however, stuck in my mind. As someone with a longtime interest in local history thanks to Mary Kay Garwood, my fourth grade teacher at Layton Hall (now Daniels Run) Elementary, I was stunned to learn that such a place had existed in Fairfax County. Later I learned that actually there had been another similar enterprise somewhere in Pender on West Ox Road between what is now Fair Oaks and Money’s Corner.

In developing this piece, I kept in mind “The Case of the Scattered Dutchman” by A. J. Liebling which had been published in The New Yorker on September 24, 1955. Liebling’s article, a charming recapitulation about an 1897 murder, looks back after many years and reflects upon a New York City that had changed greatly since the crime under discussion. I tried to reconstruct similar dynamics in my essay.

Finding a letter from Frank L. Ball to Judge Paul Brown in the case files at the Circuit Court of Fairfax County altered how I planned to write about the Holober murders. Although I only met Senator Ball once (at a football game at then D.C. Stadium, now RFK Stadium), members of his family have been close to mine for decades. His daughter Barbara Ball Savage has known my mother, the former Anne Blair, since their years at Washington-Lee High School in Arlington. Mrs. Savage and I speak regularly; we are both fans of the Washington Nationals. My late father Henry Bartelloni was a football teammate, fraternity brother and the best friend of Walter Savage, husband of Barbara. At the Mass of Christian Burial for Walter Savage, my father read from Ecclesiastes. I myself count Corinne Savage, granddaughter of Frank Ball, as a cherished friend. We attended Virginia Tech together where she was known for her brains and beauty. In the years since I matriculated at George Mason University, she has supported firmly my pursuit of a B.A. in English.

Frank Ball and other anti-Byrd Democrats helped make the Commonwealth of Virginia the fine place in which it is to live today. Their vision was one of inclusion rather than that of the suppression and exclusion practiced by the Byrd Machine. As J. Elwood Clements, an ally of Senator Ball and Francis Pickens Miller and later the Sheriff of Arlington County, told his wife Bette after he returned from military service, “I fought one dictator (Hitler) over there. I wasn’t about to come home and deal with another (Harry Byrd) here.” Sheriff Clements was the father

of my good friend Kuiper “Rowdy” Clements. Bette Clements, after her children were grown, returned to school at GMU, graduated in 1979, and was a member of the Board of Visitors there from 1991-95.

Upon reading the letter of withdrawal from Senator Ball to Judge Brown, I decided to discuss briefly the political climate of 1949 and how a trial judge could ignore the law as it was practiced in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Barbara Savage said some nice things about the late T. Brooke Howard who represented Charles Holober in both trials before Judge Brown. I would have liked to speak with Blair Howard, co-counsel with his father at the second trial, but did not make telephone contact with him.

