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Doc's trail of blood ended in Toronto St. James gravesite a tragic link to serial killer Dr. H.H. Holmes

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Abstract (Abstract): [Holmes] later returned to the station, just west of today's Union Station, to meet the wife of his associate, [Benjamin Pitezel]. The woman did not know it, but Holmes had already murdered her husband in Philadelphia.

Holmes' bizarre juggling act had to do with a racket that had served him well since his days as a medical student. Back then, a fellow student had insured himself for \$12,500, naming Holmes as beneficiary. A body was procured, the insurance company paid up, and the two rascals used the cash to finance their studies. Chicago Tribune photo Known as "murder castle," the Chicago building, top, once housed a store owned by Dr. H.H. Holmes, shown left and the subject of a new book, *The Devil In The White City*. He killed six people in the store's basement, part of a spree that claimed 27 lives, including [Alice Pitezel] and Howard Pitezel, above. Alice and sister [Nellie Pitezel] were slain in Toronto.

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Full text: The two sisters, Alice, 14, and Nellie, 13, are buried one above the other in a single grave just inside the iron fence of St. James' Cemetery, a few steps from a bus stop on Parliament St.

They died in an idyllic little cottage, with hollyhocks and climbing roses framing the verandah, on what is now Bay St. Their deaths caused such anguish and anger in the Toronto of 1895 that they were buried in secrecy. Even their mother, Mrs. Benjamin Pitezel, mobbed by a crowd of 500 when she arrived on the train from Detroit, had to plead for permission to attend.

At the cemetery, she screamed and tried to tear away from attendants holding her back. "Oh, Nellie! Oh Alice!" she cried. "I must see them."

In a new book, *The Devil In The White City*, that has just hit the bestseller lists in the United States, author Erik Larson describes the career of Dr. H.H. Holmes, "the first of the modern serial killers."

While thousands flocked to see the wonders of the 1893 World Fair in Chicago, including many guileless young women, Holmes, whose real name was Herman Webster Mudgett, built a death factory on a Chicago back street. There, quite indiscriminately, he lured men, women and children, tortured, gassed, strangled or poisoned them, then cremated some while stripping the flesh of others in quicklime to sell their skeletons to medical schools.

What is little known is that the last chapter in Dr. Holmes' bloody career was written in Toronto.

A Toronto newspaper headline would call him, "A wolf in human shape." No one would have guessed it, seeing the tall, charming, blue-eyed doctor help down his third wife, Georgina, from the Detroit train at Toronto's Grand Trunk Depot on an October day in 1894.

Oddly, the couple registered as "Geo. C. Howell and wife, Columbus" at the Walker House hotel.

Holmes later returned to the station, just west of today's Union Station, to meet the wife of his associate, Benjamin Pitezel. The woman did not know it, but Holmes had already murdered her husband in Philadelphia. While registering at the Union House, on Simcoe St., as "C.A. Adams and daughter," she appeared agitated—perhaps she had intimations.

The following day, the final pieces of the tragedy fell into place when Holmes returned once again to the station to meet Mrs. Pitezel's daughters, Alice and Nellie, on a train from Detroit. He entrusted them to a porter from the Albion Hotel on Jarvis St., where, unbeknownst to their mother, they lived out their last days.

Holmes' bizarre juggling act had to do with a racket that had served him well since his days as a medical

student. Back then, a fellow student had insured himself for \$12,500, naming Holmes as beneficiary. A body was procured, the insurance company paid up, and the two rascals used the cash to finance their studies. This time, Pitezel's life had been insured for \$10,000, naming his wife as beneficiary. Sure enough, a body soon afterwards turned up in a room above a store in Philadelphia, and Holmes hurried to the city to identify it, bringing along young Alice Pitezel. "Are these your father's teeth?" she was asked, as the sheet was peeled back. "Yes," she sobbed.

In fact they were- Holmes, worried that the heavy-drinking Pitezel would give away their scheme, had decided to get rid of his partner, tying him up, burning him and, then, for good luck, injecting him with chloroform. Now though, Holmes had a problem: If Alice went home to her mother in St. Louis and said daddy really was dead, the whole scheme might blow up. The doctor decided Alice would never again see her mother. He gave the "widow" \$500, paid \$2,500 to a crooked lawyer who had helped in the scheme, pocketed the remainder, then generously offered to care for Alice, Nellie and their brother Howard while Mrs. Pitezel went home to her parents for a rest.

He moved the children to Indianapolis (where young Howard disappeared), Minneapolis, Detroit (where Holmes rented a house and was digging a hole in the basement when neighbours became suspicious), and Toronto (where, he promised Mrs. Pitezel, she would see her husband and children again).

Two days after arriving in this city of 168,000- where the police still wore bobby-style helmets, a choice 10-room house in Rosedale cost \$6,500, and two children had died of starvation that week- the honey-tongued Dr. Holmes raised his bowler hat to Mrs. Frank Nudel and said he wished to rent her cottage at 16 St. Vincent St. He needed the little house (on the site of today's Addison General Motors dealership) for his widowed sister in Hamilton, who wished her children to attend the Wellesley St. school. The rent would be \$10 for the first month, \$12 subsequently. Privately, Holmes did not expect he would need it past the first month.

Pausing only to take his new wife Georgina (whom he had married bigamously) for a brief Niagara Falls honeymoon, Holmes began a routine of picking up the girls each morning, taking them to the cottage then returning them to the hotel in the evening.

On Oct. 25, he paid the hotel bill. A neighbour at 18 Vincent St., an elderly Scotsman named Tom Ryves, saw the girls in blue and white striped dresses playing in the garden. He remembered the day- Holmes had come over to borrow a spade to dig a hole for storing potatoes.

His work done, Holmes hurried to the Union House and told Mrs. Pitezel to pack and leave for Ogdensburg, N.Y., where her husband was waiting for her. Later, he wrote her in St. Louis, asking her to move an incriminating bottle he had left in her basement. Probably suspecting now what had happened to her husband and three children, she refused.

It contained explosive nitroglycerine. She could easily have been Holmes' last victim.

However, the net was closing on Holmes. A Philadelphia detective, Frank P. Geyer, hired by an insurance company, arrived in Toronto and, with the help of a friend, Toronto Police Detective Alf Cuddy, located the St. Vincent St. cottage.

Borrowing the same spade from Tom Ryves, the two began digging in the cellar. A metre down, they uncovered an arm.

In his confession, following his Philadelphia conviction for killing Pitezel, Holmes admitted he had forced the girls to climb into a large trunk. After seeing Mrs. Pitezel off to Ogdensburg and enjoying a hearty dinner, he had returned to the cottage and attached a gas hose to an aperture in the trunk.

"Then came the opening of the trunk, and the viewing of their little blackened and distorted faces," he said with odious relish.

The discovery of the two bodies alerted the Chicago authorities to what had been taking place in Holmes' "castle"- a substantial building with a drug store on the ground floor and various sealed rooms, vats, a shaft for dispatching bodies to the basement for chemical disposal or cremation, and even a medieval torture rack.

Holmes admitted to 27 murders. Chicago police listed 50 missing people, many of them young women who had gone to work at the castle as secretaries during the World Fair.

This week, in the leather-bound St. James' burial record for the period, I found the names recorded in copperplate: "Alice Pitezel, 14 years, Nellie Pitezel, 13 years, Missouri, U.S.A." The cause of death, pencilled in later: "Found dead in cottage, St. Vincent St."

What could motivate such a monster? I wondered.

Sex, yes. Greed, yes. More than anything though, it was power. The power of life and death, which has motivated many notorious physician murderers.

And like some of his murderous colleagues, Holmes had a grim sense of humour. "Take your time about it," he told the hangman. "I am in no hurry."

Former Star columnist Frank Jones is author of Murderous Women: True Tales of Women Who Killed (Key Porter).

Illustration

Caption: Chicago Tribune photo Known as "murder castle," the Chicago building, top, once housed a store owned by Dr. H.H. Holmes, shown left and the subject of a new book, The Devil In The White City. He killed six people in the store's basement, part of a spree that claimed 27 lives, including Alice and Howard Pitezel, above. Alice and sister Nellie were slain in Toronto.

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