

Postscripts



G. Aaron Youngquist, 1929

The Winter, 1989, issue of *Minnesota History* contained an article by Stephen Sylvester dealing with prostitution in East Grand Forks during the years around the turn of the century. The account evoked response from several readers, one of whom "had grown up with stories of the same ilk. . . set in East Grand Forks."

Margaret Youngquist Goetz of Minneapolis writes, "My father, G. Aaron Youngquist, was county attorney of Polk County during those years, and he had many stories to tell. Fortunately he wrote them down in a small autobiography he completed shortly before his death in 1959." Mrs. Goetz added that her father "was a Swedish immigrant who became Attorney General of Minnesota and Assistant Attorney General of the United States although he had to go to work before completing elementary school. While he was in the latter post he was in charge of prohibition and taxation and argued over one hundred cases before the Supreme Court. He also was the person in charge of the government's case against Al Capone."

The following paragraphs are excerpted from Youngquist's "Autobiography," a copy of which is now in the MHS manuscripts collection. They pertain to the years around 1915 in the East Grand Forks area.

EAST Grand Forks was a tough town. It was across the Red River of the North from Grand Forks, and DeMers Avenue was lined with saloons for two solid blocks running from the bridge. There were at least three gambling joints, and what there may have been beyond that I did not inquire. In the first campaign for the election of city officers, an older person of the "outs" came to my office and gave me a detailed report of the operation of two gambling houses which he thought I ought to look into. He couldn't or wouldn't supply the evidence, so I used part of a small contingent fund allowed for investigation (disbursed by Judge [William] Watts, the District Judge in Crookston, it being known

only to the two of us as to what it was being used for), to hire a detective to get the evidence.

When his work was completed I told the sheriff that I wanted him and his three deputies to go out on a job with me one evening, and took them over to East Grand Forks, where we raided the two principal gambling establishments. Two of the deputies were assigned to one and the sheriff and I to the other, sending a deputy to the back door to prevent escapes.

The gambling room was on the second floor and as we entered the hallway below it, the sheriff asked for the key to unlock the stairway door. The man started for the warning buzzer but the sheriff was too quick for him, so up we went.

The room was about 35 feet wide and about 60 feet long, supplied with perhaps a dozen poker tables, and a beautiful stud poker table at the far end. I started for the far end and right behind me came the owner, telling the boys to stop, that the sheriff was there. Just as I came to the stud poker table the dealer, white as a sheet, opened the drawer in the table, pulled out some bills, and said [to the owner]: "Ole, where shall I put it?" He put it back in the drawer and I had the key.

Leaving the sheriff and his deputy in charge, I went out to telephone the Judge of the Municipal Court to have him hold court so I could arraign the dozens of prisoners we had. I reached him at his home and told him where I was and waited and waited, but he never showed up. Later I learned he had stopped at the police station on the way and had been told what was up, so he "ducked."

There we were with at least 75 men in the two places and no court! So I sat down at a poker table with a note book and had the sheriff present the prisoners one by one. I took down in each case the name and address of the party and asked him whether he had been gambling—invariably they had only been spectators—and took \$10.00 in bail from each and ordered them to appear in municipal court the next morning. (The only one who appeared was a farmer from across the line in Dakota.) If a man did not have \$10.00, I took what he had. From Ole I took \$200.00 and from his helpers \$100.00 each.

During the process I noticed that the crowd was thinning out more rapidly than it should. The sheriff found that a window behind the corner of the enclosed stairway had been opened and that the men were climbing out onto the roof of the next building one after the other as fast as they could. But we stopped that and finished the job.

I went through the same process at the place across the street (from which, by the way, many of the patrons had slipped out), and we started home about 3 o'clock in the morning, with sizeable rolls of bills in my pockets.

When I appeared in the East Grand Forks Municipal Court at ten the next morning the only man to show up was the farmer from across the line in North Dakota!

The bail money I had taken was more than enough to cover all the fines that would have been imposed had the owners showed, so we forfeited the bail money and let it go at that. . . .

East Grand Forks Liquor Violations

When the county went dry at the end of 1915, most of the saloons in the towns became "soft drink parlors." There ensued an impatient period of waiting before they began selling hard liquor again.

The East Grand Forks police did nothing and violations were so frequent that I asked the Attorney General of Minnesota . . . to bring action to remove the Mayor and Chief of Police. He refused, so I found another statute and started action myself. . . .

My detective, whose name was Hutton, was really a remarkable person and as honest as he looked. Just before the trial of one of the defendants was about to begin, his attorney came to me and insisted it was a case of mistaken identity. So I had him bring his man to the hotel during the noon recess, and when I pointed him out to Hutton he immediately cleared the man, whom he called Jones, by saying this blind pig had been worked by the other detective. . . .

In another case the defense counsel cross-examined Hutton most minutely about the saloon. As Hutton's testimony went on, I sat amazed in my chair, because it seemed impossible for any man to have observed and so exactly recall everything he saw. . . .

After that term of court ended, I called on the Pinkerton Agency to do a similar job in Crookston. But Hutton was not available, and the investigator assigned was so new in the business that he came to town dressed in a brand new lumberjack's outfit, although the sawmill in the town had been shut down for five years or more and no lumberjack had been seen there since. Of course, he was not able to buy a drop.

At each two winter terms of the court in 1916 and 1917 the grand jury returned well over 100 indictments, most of them for liquor violations, and lesser numbers, although always a fair number, at the other terms. The reports made by County Attorneys to the Attorney General for those two years show that Polk County had more criminal business than any other county in the state except the two big city counties—Hennepin and Ramsey.

The work, at \$114.17 a month was so heavy that along in the last year of my term I told the County Board I was resigning. They urged me to stay and offered to pay for an assistant. So I agreed and hired as my assistant, at \$100.00 a month, one of my primary

opponents in 1914, telling him I would not be a candidate for re-election. He succeeded me, and later succeeded Judge Watts. . . .

The most famous of all [during my tenure] was the incident that occurred in the prosecution of Madam Dufour for operating a house of ill fame. One of the "girls" had told me everything, including the names of customers. I called John, an emigrant from Sweden, who didn't speak the English language very well, and pried out of him his story. While the Madam was being cross-examined at the trial, she whispered to me at a recess that Mr. _____, a prominent man, was one of them. "Should I tell about that?" Oh, I told her, we had plenty of other evidence and did not need that.

When we came to trial I called John to the witness stand and after the preliminary questions, asked him: "Were you in Madam Dufour's house last fall?" His answer was: "Naa—What? Naa, I wasn't there, I was in the house next door."

After I had glared at him and he had been excused, he high-tailed it down town. When the taxi man found out why he was in town, he accosted him and said: "John, when are you going to pay me what you owe me for taking you from Madam Dufour's last fall?"

Said John, looking him straight in the eye: "Well, how can I pay you that now, when I just told the Judge I was not there?"

Volunteer Local Detective—Crookston Round-up:

Shortly after that, a local man who did odd jobs around the town came to my office and told me he spent a good deal of his time in the bars and that he had gotten tired of seeing these blind piggers operate and that he wanted to help get them. So I hired him part time to continue his visits, and every few days I would spend the evening with him in my office and write down in a little black note book the places he had visited, who was on duty at the bar, where the liquor was kept, who else was there, what they were doing, how many drinks were bought, and by whom, and even some of the conversation. After all the bars had been covered, there was one of them he had not been able to get anything on, so I had the Municipal Court Judge, who was a trustworthy man, issue search warrants for the others, about a half dozen of them, and in the late afternoon of May 17th, Norway's Independence Day, recruited the entire police force, the sheriff and two of his deputies, the police force consisting of the Chief, his two policemen, one of whom was superannuated, and a driver of the street sprinkler. Even then, counting myself, there were not enough to provide two for each of the joints, so I called in the Mayor and one or two of the aldermen. We met up at the jail at about 8 o'clock in the evening. None of them knew what was up. I

assigned two men to each place and told them where to look for the liquor and gave them the search warrants. But at one bar, to which I assigned the superannuated policeman and the sprinkler driver, I instructed them to make no search, but just to go in, show the search warrant, and lock the place up for the time being.

Exactly at 9 o'clock we descended on our quarry. The sheriff and I found one bottle of whiskey hidden up under the bar, and then, over the vigorous protests of the bartender, went to the room on the upper floor and found several bottles covered by his wife's lingerie in the dresser drawer, and a larger number hidden in a trunk in which he had stored his winter bedding.

We then headed to the place assigned to the supernumeraries, and to our dismay found it open and no one in but the bartender, who knew nothing of the raids. It occurred to us that they had picked the wrong place, and as we got to another a few doors away, for which we had no search warrant, we saw a number of faces peering out of the front window, tried the door, found it locked, and upon entering found also our two officers of the law! So we apologized and withdrew.

The only inconvenience anyone suffered was the audience at the Lyric Theatre across the street, whose film operator had rushed across the street to get a drink between shows and was held incommunicado for nearly an hour!

But finding the liquor was not enough to prove the sale, so resorting to an old and little-used statute, I subpoenaed some of the buyers to appear before the Municipal Judge and got their testimony, which was in the main truthful and made the case. But one man employed in the flour mill across the street from the place the sheriff and I searched, insisted that he had bought only soft drinks, and admitted otherwise only after I, referring to my little black note book, had told him the hour of his visit, that two men, naming them, were playing cards in the bar, the drinks he had bought, and who was with him. I knew that he had patronized another bar near by, which he admitted only after being enlightened by the contents of the note book. He also denied having frequented a third place, which was dry so far as I knew, but merely opening the note book brought the admission that he had bought liquor there too.

We failed to find liquor in only one place, where the search was made by the deputy sheriff who, as previously mentioned, had become "ill."

The defendants in these prosecutions, with the evidence we had by search and by witnesses, were "sitting ducks." Most of them pleaded guilty and the rest were convicted.

No one but Judge Watts, who has since died, and myself, knew, or ever will know, the identity of my good citizen-detective.



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