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May 21, 1924

BOBBY FRANKS WALKS HOME

IT WAS WEDNESDAY. In Washington, D.C., President Calvin Coolidge took a chlorine-gas cure for a throat ailment and resolved to take more walks in the fresh air. In the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, New York, a teenaged robber alternately referred to as the “2-gun girl” and the “bob-haired bandit” held up the owner of a picture-framing store at gunpoint, taking \$60 in cash, but returning \$5 of it to him after he told her he was supporting a wife and two children in Russia. In Chicago, Illinois, fearing a law-enforcement raid, the operators of a bootleg brewery dumped thousands of gallons of beer into a sewer, causing a geyser of beer to spurt up five feet into the air from a manhole for more than an hour, attracting the attention of the police.

Also in Chicago, State’s Attorney Robert Crowe was addressing the twin scourges of gun violence and rampant bribery of judges by launching a new crusade to stop judges from issuing gun permits to anyone other than sworn police officers. John R. Caverly, chief judge of the criminal court, promised to give his full cooperation.

But Caverly and Crowe were about to be diverted by another development. That afternoon, in the wealthy Kenwood neighborhood of Hyde Park, 14-year-old Bobby Franks stopped on his way home from school to umpire a baseball game his friends were playing. A little after 5 p.m., he waved goodbye and continued toward home, three blocks away. A car pulled up alongside him as he walked, and his neighbor and second cousin, 18-year-old Richard (“Dick”) Loeb, called out to him. He introduced the pal who was with him, 19-year-old Nathan (“Babe”) Leopold. Bobby and Loeb had played tennis a few days ago at the Loeb’s mansion, just down the block from Bobby’s home, and Loeb asked Bobby to get into the car so they could talk about the tennis racket he’d been using. So Bobby got in.

Within minutes, Bobby was dead, bashed in the head with a chisel, a rag stuffed into his mouth to muffle his cries, suffocating him. Then Leopold and Loeb drove down to a field in northern Indiana, stopping on the way to eat a snack of hotdogs and root beer in the car, with the dead boy’s body in the back seat wrapped in a blanket. Then they made a second stop so Leopold could call his sweetheart to confirm an upcoming date. In a marshy field where Leopold often went bird-watching, they poured acid over the naked body, hoping to disfigure it beyond recognition, and then stuffed it into a drainage pipe where they were sure it would never be discovered. On the way home, they stopped so Leopold could phone his aunt and uncle just to let them know he might be a little late giving them a lift home that evening.

Late that night the phone rang at the Franks home. Bobby’s parents, Jacob and Flora, were frantic with worry about their son, who had failed to come home for dinner. Jacob had called his close friend and attorney Sam Ettelson, and together they’d gone over to Bobby’s school to look for him or someone who had seen him.

So it was Flora who picked up the phone and was informed by a male voice identifying himself as “Mr. Johnson” that her son had been kidnapped and was being held for ransom. “We will let you know tomorrow what we want,” Mr. Johnson informed her ominously. “We are kidnapers and we mean business. If you refuse us what we want or try to report us to the police, we will kill the boy.” Then Mr. Johnson abruptly hung up, and Flora fainted.

Right: The iconic surviving photo of Bobby Franks, said to have been taken shortly before his murder.

Chicago History Museum, DN-0077041

