

THE STRANGLER

Researched and written by Detective Sergeant John Burchill

Jack the ripper gained worldwide notoriety in 1888 for killing five women in the Whitechapel area of London, England. But the Ripper's exploits pale when compared with the havoc created by Earle Leonard Nelson throughout North America in the 1920s.

Although Bella Kiss was accused of killing twelve women in Budapest, Hungary, in 1916 (seven women were found sealed in oil drums in his basement and five more were found buried in the garden outside his front door), it was Earle Nelson who brought the mark of the serial killer to North America. During an 18-month span, Nelson was accused of murdering 24 women and one child before his killing spree ended on January 13, 1928, when he dropped through the trap doors of Winnipeg's gallows.

Until the arrival of such notables as John Wayne Gacy, Henry Lee Lucas and Ted Bundy, Earle Nelson was the most prolific killer ever known. Like Jack the Ripper, Bella Kiss or John Wayne Gacy for that matter, Nelson had his own trademark - he would choose a house displaying a "Rooms for Rent" sign, gain access by posing as a prospective roomer, and if he found a woman alone in the house he would choke her to death, assault the body and then stuff it under a bed before stealing jewellery and clothing. Nelson's 'modus operandi' led him to be labelled "The Gorilla Strangler", and his trail of dead bodies led from Philadelphia to Chicago, San Francisco, Baltimore, Oakland, Buffalo and ended in Winnipeg.

Earl Leonard Nelson was born in San Francisco, California, on May 12, 1897, the only child of James Ferrel and Frances Nelson. Ten months after Earl was born his mother died of syphilis contracted from her husband. Within seven months Earl's father was also dead of syphilis. After his father's death, Earl was taken in by his only surviving relatives - Lars and Jennie Nelson - his maternal grandparents. Earl's grandparents had very puritan beliefs and brought Earl up in an atmosphere that regarded sex as dirty. The "Hell fire and Damnation" attitude of his grandparents drove Earl to become quiet and submissive, unable to even defend himself from attack. At the age of ten, while riding his bicycle, he ran into a streetcar and was carried home unconscious with a hole in his temple. He remained unconscious for six days and while he seemed to return to normal he suffered frequently from headaches and would complain of memory lapses.



*Earle Nelson
Arrest Photo from San Francisco*

While it appears that Earl did bow to the repressive philosophy under which he was reared, his curiosity and interest in things forbidden was not fully crushed, but became furtive, surfacing just before the age of twenty-one. In May 1918, Earl got into the home of Charles Summers, in San Francisco, on the pretext that he was a plumber. Going to the basement, he found the twelve-year-old daughter of the family playing with dolls. Earl attempted to sexually molest the girl but her screams brought her brother to her aid and Earl fled the house after a short struggle. Later that day Earl was arrested but because of his erratic behaviour, he was transferred to the Napa State Hospital for the Insane. In the terminology of the day, the medical staff tentatively diagnosed his condition as a "constitutional psychopathic state". There was no known cure for this type of behaviour and he was put in with the other patients and left to vegetate. Earl did not remain long in the hospital and escaped, although he was recaptured he kept escaping and finally, while still an escapee, the hospital discharged him on paper from the asylum rather than constantly bringing him back for escaping.

Prior record:
 July 25th 1915- San Quentin Prison from Plumas Co.,
 as Earl Nelson-CHARGE: Robbery-2 yrs.
 9-8-1916 Paroled- 7-22-1917- Discharged.
 10-9-1917- 6 mon. Pocation Cal. Pen. Inst. (Cal.)
 10-25-1918- Los Angeles (as Ferrell)- Burglary
 Deception- No dispo. of case.

 May-25th 1921- Held to answer Charge Assault on woman
 Force likely to do Great bodily injury, as Ferrell.
 History- May 19th 1921-Attacked May Somers, 17
 Public Av., striking her with his clenched fist,
 violently throwing her to the floor and then and
 there raped her.
 May 25th 1921- Received at Detention Hospital for
 Examination-Order Judge Superior Court Cal.
 June 13th 1921- Committed to Napa State Hospital for
 Insane.
 Nov. 2nd 1923- Escaped from Napa State Hospital.
 June-15th 1925- Action Dismissed in Superior Court
 on above assault charge.

Earle Nelson's Prior Record
(from San Francisco Police)

While still an 'escapee' from the Napa Hospital, Earl married Mary Martin in San Francisco, using the name of Evan Louis Fuller. The marriage very quickly ran into trouble when Earl was unable to maintain a regular job for more than a few days. When not working, he would get up in the middle of the night and "go out to look for work". He would leave the house in one outfit of clothing and return in another. Sometimes he would be absent for days at a time and when he returned he pretended that he had not been gone at all. When Mary could no longer comprehend Earl's behaviour, and he began to threaten to kill her, she appealed to the authorities for protection. Nelson was examined by several doctors and on their recommendation, he was re-committed to the Napa State Hospital by the Superior Court of San Francisco on the grounds that his behaviour was erratic, violent and dangerous. It seems that the Napa Hospital was not a very secure treatment facility and Earl again walked away from the institution. No effort was made to return him and the hospital again discharged him 'in absentia' on March 10, 1925. Earl was last seen by members of his family in October 1925.

The horrific trail of the Gorilla Strangler began in Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love, on the afternoon of October 18, 1925, with the discovery of the strangled body of Mrs. Olla McCoy. Nineteen days later, on November 6, Mrs. May Murray was found strangled to death and within three days the strangled body of Lillian Weiner was discovered sprawled across her bed. It was noted that a "Room for Rent" sign hung in the window of each home, that the victims had struggled desperately for their lives and had been sexually assaulted after death. In each instance, the strips of cloth used

to bind the wrists of the victims had been tied with a particular type of knot, described as a "complicated sailors knot". In each case items of clothing had been stolen from the homes which later turned up in a pawnbrokers shop on Philadelphia's north side.

The description of the suspect given by the pawnbroker, and the 'modus operandi' were to soon reappear in San Francisco on February 20, 1926, with the strangulation death and sexual assault of Mrs. Clara Newman. The killings continued with the discovery of Laura Beal on March 2, Lillian St. Mary on June 10, Olle Russell on June 24 and Mary Nesbit on August 16, 1926. The killings continued when the strangled and assaulted bodies of more women were found in Stockton, Portland, Seattle, Council Bluffs, Kansas City, Philadelphia, Buffalo, Detroit and Chicago.



By July 1, 1926, the Los Angeles Police had already linked the crimes as the work of the "*Strangle Murderer*" put a notice in The Daily Police Bulletin asking police to be on the lookout for a 35-year old male, 5'7"-5'8", darker complexion (possibly Greek), sandy hair that was long on the top and shorter on the sides.

On June 2, 1927, when the body of Mary Sietsema was discovered by her husband on the floor of their Chicago home with her clothes torn and dishevelled, strangled with an electric appliance cord, it marked the twenty-fourth woman to be strangled and assaulted by Earl in less than twenty months. Earl had moved across the United States by hitch-hiking rides and paying for his meals and lodgings with money he had either stolen from his victims or from money obtained from pawning his victim's belongings. Upon leaving the Sietsema's home, Earl helped himself to a blue suit, patterned sweater and brown sandals belonging to Mr. Martin Seitsema.

On June 8, 1927, Mr. W.E. Chandler of Winnipeg, Manitoba, was heading home to Winnipeg from Detroit. About one mile north of Luna, Michigan, Chandler overtook Earl Nelson walking along the highway and stopped to give him a ride. Chandler took Earl as far as Noyes, Minnesota, a small town about a mile south of the International Border at Emerson, Manitoba. Earl then walked to the border and was picked up by



Mr. and Mrs. Hanna of Winnipeg, Manitoba, just north of Emerson and taken to Winnipeg where they let him off at a streetcar stop on the corner of Corydon and Osborne. From here, Earl walked along Osborne Street, down Broadway Avenue and at about 5 p.m. Earl entered Jacob Garbor's second-hand store at 218 Main Street and traded in Martin Seitsema's blue suit, sweater and sandals for a blue herringbone coat, pants, black boots, a grey felt hat and a dollar in cash.

Earl made his way back down Broadway to Smith Street, and noticing a "Room for Rent" sign hanging in the window of Mrs. Katherine Hill's home at 133 Smith Street, Earl knocked on the door and introduced himself as Mr. Woodcots, "a religious man". Mrs. Hill, believing that Earl was a decent young man, rented him a small bedroom on the southwest corner of the second floor of her home. Earl gave Mrs. Hill the one dollar he had obtained from the exchange in clothing as partial payment on his \$12 per month rent.

That evening, Lola Gowan, a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl from 3 University Avenue, worked her way along Broadway and then Smith Street selling artificial flowers made by her sister Margaret. The Gowan home on University Avenue faced the property of the Vaughn Street Gaol, and ever since Lola's father had been struck down by appendicitis, the family members had to do what they could to make ends meet. Lola's job was to sell the artificial flowers to the area residents after she got out of school. At about 10 p.m., Lola went to 133 Smith Street and as fate would have it she met Earl Nelson standing on the front steps. None of the other tenants were around so Earl indicated that he didn't have any money on him and that Lola would have to come up to his room to get the money for the flowers. Earl led Lola up the stairs to the second floor, opened the door to his room and ushered her in first. With her back turned, "The Strangler" hit Lola over the head to stun her and then wrapped a cloth around her neck and strangled her. Earl then removed all of Lola's clothing and repeatedly sexually assaulted her before stuffing her under the bed. Earl then went to bed.

On Friday, June 10, 1927, Earl got out of bed, packed Lola's belongings into a carrying bag and left 133 Smith Street. He headed down Portage Avenue to Main Street and then worked his way into St. Boniface where he spotted a "Room for Rent" sign hanging in the window of 100 Riverton Avenue. William and Emily Patterson, along with their two children, had immigrated to Winnipeg from Ireland in 1926. After renting various apartments in Winnipeg the young couple purchased a house at 100 Riverton Avenue in May 1927. To help pay the mortgage, the Patterson's advertised a room for rent, an advertisement that for some morbid reason drove Earl Nelson into a sexual frenzy. At about 11 a.m. Emily Patterson answered her door to find Earl standing on the front step. Earl advised Mrs. Patterson that he didn't have any money, but that he could do some repair work around their new home in lieu of rent. Several neighbours saw Earl fixing the screen door on the Patterson's house, but paid little attention.

Having disarmed his victim's suspicions by his helpful approach, "The Strangler" seized an opportune moment in the kitchen when the young brunette's back was turned. Striking her across the head with the hammer he had been using on the door, Earl stunned Mrs. Patterson and then set upon her. A violent struggle ensued during which Mrs. Patterson managed to tear pieces of Earl's hair from his head before she succumbed to his deadly strangling hands. When he had completed his gruesome ritual he shoved her nude body under a bed along with his own clothing that he had purchased at Jacob Garbor's on Main Street. After some rummaging around the Patterson house, Earl found a brown Whipcord suit belonging to Mr. Patterson and \$70.00 in \$10 bills hidden in a suitcase. Earl put on the ill-fitting suit and walked back to Main Street where he traded in the Whipcord suit for another suit at Sam Waldman's second hand-store, 629 Main Street. Earl then went next door to the Central Barber Shop for a shave, haircut and massage. While washing Earl's hair, the owner, Nicholas Tabor, noticed dry blood in Earl's hair and scrapes on his scalp. When Tabor enquired about this Earl became agitated and ordered the barber not to touch them. (Note: Nicholas Tabor is the grandfather of former Winnipeg Police Sergeant Rick Tabor #475).

After his haircut, Earl walked to Portage Avenue and caught a streetcar, eventually arriving in Headingley. From Headingley Earl caught a car ride to Portage La Prairie with Mr. Hugh Elder and then onto Regina, Saskatchewan, where he rented a room from Mrs. Mary Rowe under the name of Harry Harcourt. By now the bodies of Mrs. Patterson and Lola Gowan had been discovered in Winnipeg and reported to the police.

Chief of Detectives, George Smith, had received various circulars describing murders of a similar nature in the United States, and soon established that they were seeking the infamous "Strangler". Every available detective was assigned to the case, and with the valued assistance of other police forces, the suspect was tracked to Headingley and then to Regina. A state of panic and personal fear swept across the prairie provinces. The bulk of the news carried by the large daily newspapers in Winnipeg, Brandon, Regina, Saskatoon and Calgary concerned the Strangler and his list of victims.



George Smith

Earl spent the night in his rented room at the Rowe's residence. He woke early Monday morning, June 13, 1927, read the local newspaper and then discarded most of his clothing after reading a fairly accurate description of himself and the clothing he had purchased at Waldman's in Winnipeg. He vacated his room and made his way to a department store where he purchased a pair of blue overalls, a khaki shirt and a cap. From there he went to the Royal Second Hand Store in Regina and sold the remainder of the clothing he had obtained in Winnipeg. The clerk, noticing the Winnipeg labels in the clothing, matched Earl's description up with the one detailed in the Regina Leader and called the Regina Police Department.

Earl, as luck would have it, decided to leave Regina after purchasing his new clothes and was able to catch a ride with Mr. Isidore Silverman, a scrap metal dealer, as far as Boissevain, Manitoba. Mr. Silverman's occupation took him through all the small towns and farms off the main road and, unwittingly, enabled his passenger to escape detection from the police who were maintaining constant patrols along the main roadways. From Boissevain, Earl was able to obtain several short car rides and gradually made his way southward to a small town - Wakopa - just five miles from the United States border. Shortly before 6 p.m., Earl entered the general store of Mr. Leslie Morgan in Wakopa and purchased some cheese and a drink. Morgan, sensing that the Strangler was in his store, called the Manitoba Provincial Police detachment in Killarney and alerted the sole member on duty to the whereabouts of the Strangler. Constable W.A. Gray immediately raced to Wakopa and was able to apprehend Earl as he walked towards the United States border. Without a struggle, Constable Gray escorted the infamous Strangler back to Killarney and placed him in the detachment's miniature cell block. After Earl was searched and his shoes taken from him as a precautionary measure, Constable Gray left the holding cell area and called in his arrest to the Chief of Detectives in Winnipeg, George Smith.

While Constable Gray was making his call, Earl searched his jail cell and found a rusty nail file under his cot, he used the file to pick the lock on the cell door and escaped into the night. When Constable Gray returned the alarm was sounded and a special train of detectives was dispatched from Winnipeg to aid in the search. Intent on escaping to the United States, Earl made his way to the railway and concealed himself in a nearby grain elevator waiting to catch the next southbound train.

When the whistle of an approaching train sounded on the outskirts of town Earl left his hiding place near the grain elevator and was spotted by Constable William G. Renton of the Manitoba Provincial Police, Crystal City detachment. According to Renton's report he "spotted [Nelson] going around the edge of the bush. I stopped the car, jumped the fence and ran through the bush to intercept him ... on going up to him I asked him who he was and he said he was a farmer. I asked him where he farmed and he pointed to some building by the side of the railway, which I afterwards learned was the Slaughterhouse".



With the help of several local citizens Cst. Renton took Nelson to the Killarney station where he turned him over to the special train loaded with Winnipeg detectives. Upon boarding the train and his subsequent arrest by Winnipeg Police detectives, Sergeant James Hoskins noted that the clothing Nelson was wearing was the same clothing that had been sold to him at Sam Waldman's second hand-store in exchange for the whipcord suit and other clothing that had been stolen from 100 Riverton Avenue on June 10th, the date Emily Patterson was found murdered. The clothing he was wearing was subsequently seized as evidence. Nelson's return to Winnipeg was met by a boisterous crowd of 4000 people.

Earl was taken to the Rupert Street Police Station where he was photographed, fingerprinted, measured and prepared for several identification line-ups. His picture was then sent out by the Winnipeg Police to police departments throughout the United States. As a result, he was identified by witnesses from Illinois to California as being the unknown "renter" suspected in numerous strangle murders. Although he maintained his identity was Virgil Wilson, fingerprints brought to Winnipeg by Captain Matheson of the San Francisco Police Department confirmed that he was Earl Leonard Nelson, a man wanted throughout the United States for murder.



*Earle Nelson
Back In Custody*

The Crown, feeling that they had sufficient evidence to convict Earl for the murder of Mrs. Patterson, proceeded with only that charge. A trial date was set for November 1, 1927, before Justice A.K. Dysart and a twelve-man jury. At the end of the trial, on November 4, the jury took 48 minutes to find Earl Leonard Nelson guilty of murder and sentenced him to hang. There was no appeal. On Friday the 13th of January, 1928, after walking 13 steps to the gallows, Earl became the 13th person to hang at the Vaughn Street Gaol.

Earl Leonard Nelson was accused of killing 26 women in less than twenty months. The total could be higher. Some deaths were never linked to Earl Nelson because of poor intercommunication between police departments and some were never even identified as murders due to sloppy police work. He was the most prolific murderer the world had seen until the arrival of such notables as John Wayne Gacy, Henry Lee Lucas and Theodore Bundy.

Murders Nelson is suspected of:

Mrs. Olla McCoy, Philadelphia, October 18, 1925

Mrs. May Murray, Philadelphia, November 6, 1925

Mrs. Lillian Weiner, Philadelphia, November 9, 1925

Miss. Clara Newman, San Francisco, February 20, 1926

Mrs. Laura E. Beal, San Jose, March 2, 1926

Mrs. Lillian St. Mary, San Francisco, June 10, 1926

Mrs. George Russell, Santa Barbara, June 24, 1926

Mrs. Mary Nesbit, Oakland, August 16, 1926

Mrs. Beata Withers, Portland, October 19, 1926

Mrs. Mabel McDonald Fluke, Portland, October 20, 1926

Mrs. Virginia A. Grant, Portland, October 21, 1926

Mrs. William A. Edmonds, San Francisco, November 18, 1926

Mrs. Florence Fithian Monks, Seattle, November 23, 1926

Mrs. Blanche Meyers, Portland, November 29, 1926

Mrs. John E. Berard, Council Bluffs (Iowa), December 23, 1926

Mrs. Bonnie Pace, Kansas City, December 27, 1926

Mrs. Germanla Harpin and her daughter, Kansas City, December 28, 1926

Mrs. Mary McConnell, Philadelphia, April 27, 1927

Mrs. Jennie Randolph, Buffalo, May 30, 1927

Mrs. Minnie May, Detroit, June 1, 1927

Mrs. Maureen Atorthy (nee Oswald), Detroit, June 1, 1927

Mrs. Mary Sietsma, Chicago, June 3, 1927

Miss. Lola Cowan, Winnipeg, June 9, 1927

Mrs. Emily Patterson, Winnipeg, June 10, 1927

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