Skull in the Ashes: Murder, a Gold Rush Manhunt, and the Birth of Circumstantial Evidence in America

Patricia Bryan
University of North Carolina

ISSN 0003-4827
Copyright © 2014 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12072

Hosted by Iowa Research Online
the Stavig letters, which she places clearly within the framework of the
general immigrant experience. Readers who are not familiar with the
history of Norwegian immigration may find it useful to read her essay
before reading the letters; they would thus gain a better understanding
of how the Stavigs’ experience represents broader trends in immigra-
tion history. In particular, she shows clearly how the lives of second-
and third-generation immigrants were vastly different from those of
the immigrants themselves. Lars’s inability to communicate with his
grandchildren, since he had not learned English and they could not
speak Norwegian, illustrates the bittersweet character of the immi-
grant experience: While they were materially successful, many settlers
nonetheless felt alienated in their new environment.

As Bergland notes, “The Stavig letters can be seen as both typical
and atypical” (129). It is unusual to have both sides of the correspon-
dence survive, and the letters cover a much longer period than most
other sets of communication. Yet they also represent many of the over-
arching themes of Norwegian immigration to America. This volume is a
valuable contribution to the study of Norwegian American history and
a useful resource for anyone wishing to learn more about the subject.

Skull in the Ashes: Murder, a Gold Rush Manhunt, and the Birth of Circum-
stantial Evidence in America, by Peter Kaufman. Iowa City: University
of Iowa Press, 2013. 287 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, in-
dex. $19.95 paperback.

Reviewer Patricia Bryan is the Martha Brandis Professor of Law at the Univer-
sity of North Carolina. She is the author of “John Wesley Elkins, Boy Murderer,
and His Struggle for Pardon” (Annals of Iowa, 2010) and, with her husband,

On February 3, 1897, fire destroyed the general store owned by Frank
Novak, an ambitious businessman in the small community of Walford,
Iowa. A corpse, burned beyond recognition, was found in the smol-
dering ruins and assumed to be Novak, who often slept in an upstairs
room. But reports quickly surfaced about Novak’s gambling habits,
his ongoing financial troubles, and his recent purchases of life in-
surance policies. Also, another man was reported missing; Edward
Murray, a hard-drinking drifter, who had been seen with Novak the
night before the fire. When the few remaining features of the corpse’s
“ghastly grimacing skull” (5) appeared to match Murray and not
Novak, the newly elected Benton County Attorney set out to find
Frank Novak and bring him to justice. Neither the lawyer nor the in-
surance companies financing the search could have anticipated what
would follow: a six-month pursuit that took detectives across the
country and deep into the Yukon Territory, and then, back in Benton
County, a courtroom drama that was one of the most widely publi-
cized legal proceedings in Iowa history.

Peter Kaufman presents this compelling story in his excellent new
book, Skull in the Ashes. The book is divided into four very different
but equally engaging parts: the mysterious fire in Walford; the per-
ilous manhunt for Novak; the sensational murder trial; and, finally,
the long years of incarceration. Most dramatic is the journey through
Alaska, with detectives joining the stampede of the Klondike Gold
Rush. Relying on a diary of one of the participants, Kaufman takes
readers on a fast-paced adventure as the men scale mountains, navi-
gate rapids, and survive near-death experiences. With Novak’s cap-
ture, the scene shifts back to Benton County and the legal battle be-
gins. Although the pace of the action slows, Kaufman holds readers’
attention with his brisk style of writing and vivid depictions of people
and places. The final section of the book describes daily life behind the
bars of the Anamosa State Penitentiary.

Although Frank Novak is the connective thread of the narrative,
he remains a murky character whose motivations are never clear. For
much of the book, Kaufman focuses on three other men, each obsessed
with Novak, who drive the action in the story. The author’s well-
rounded portrayals of this trio constitute the most engaging sections
of the book. Red Perrin is the detective, “half bloodhound and half rat-
tlesnake” (57), who pursues Novak down the dangerous Yukon River;
M. J. Tobin, the aggressive young Benton County prosecutor, “sharp,
streetwise and stubborn as a terrier” (7), who is determined to put No-
vak behind bars; and Thomas Milner, the “fiery, ebullient and down-
right cocky” (110) defense attorney from Belle Plaine, Iowa, who
matches wits against Tobin in the courtroom.

Based on memoirs, diaries, newspaper articles, trial transcripts, and
secondary sources, Kaufman’s impressive research has resulted in a
compelling and highly readable factual narrative. The book is fasci-
nating for its contextual detail, and it also offers a broad historical per-
spective, with a particular focus on the striking changes in criminal
justice at the turn of the century. Kaufman explores how a new breed
of detective investigated crimes, utilizing technological innovations.
Newspapers responded to the public’s “unquenchable thirst for blood
and mystery” (33) with melodramatic reports designed to boost circula-
tion. Prosecutors began to rely on advances in forensic science and cir-
cumstantial evidence to prove a defendant’s guilt. Prison wardens em-
braced individual rehabilitation over punishment as their primary goal.
In Kaufman’s hands, the story of Frank Novak provides an ideal springboard for lively discussions of these groundbreaking developments. *Skull in the Ashes* is highly recommended for Iowa history buffs who will appreciate Kaufman’s rich characterizations and descriptions of Iowa lawyers and judges, newspapers, courtrooms, and prisons. More general readers will also be captivated by this thrilling turn-of-the-century tale of murder and its aftermath. The black-and-white period photographs, especially those inside Anamosa, are a fine addition to the book.

“Inherently Bad, and Bad Only”: A History of State-Level Regulation of Cigarettes and Smoking in the United States since the 1880s, Volume 1, An In-depth National Study Embedding Ultra-Thick Description of a Representative State (Iowa), by Marc Linder. Iowa City, 2012. 3,758 pp. Online publication only at http://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=books.


University of Iowa law professor Marc Linder’s online history of cigarette regulation is the first scholarly effort to pull into one narrative the complicated and varied histories of state-level cigarette regulation dating back to the 1880s. It is a monumental task and, free of the editorial demands of the printed page, Linder uses 3,758 pages to accomplish it.

The book is divided into six parts that explore two main narratives: the mixed success of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in banning the sale and public consumption of cigarettes on the state level from the 1880s to the 1920s, and the movement to outlaw second-hand smoke in public from the 1970s to the present. The state of Iowa, which had the nation’s longest sales ban (1896–1921), is the focus of three of the six parts. Although the themes of social reform, public health, and American politics and industry are constant, Linder relegates them to the periphery of his straightforward and highly detailed legal and legislative history of state cigarette regulation laws and court rulings, as well as the political contexts that explain their passage and repeal. The author neglects secondary historical work that would enrich the project, but the primary research that he uses is impressive, consisting of thousands of original sources from legal, government, press, and social reform organization archives.