

G.I. killer caught 25 years later: Hat sighting was key to solving one of city's most frightening crimes

By Carol Bryant

The Independent

Before the days of "America's Most Wanted," a 1912 Grand Island murder was solved 25 years later when the suspect was recognized in Colorado Springs, Colo.

The murder of 10-year-old Goldie Williams is one of the most intriguing crimes in Grand Island's history, said Stuhr Museum historian Tom Anderson.

Goldie disappeared on Feb. 6, 1912, and was found two days later in a house being constructed at 519 E. 12th. Charles Wesley Cox later admitted to assaulting, strangling and striking her in the head with a hammer.

A story about solving the crime was featured in the January 1938 True Detective magazine.

William Cunningham was a boy when he saw Goldie walking with a man the day she disappeared.

Twenty-five years later, the former Grand Island man was passing through Colorado Springs when he recognized Cox and contacted authorities, according to a June 28, 1937, story in The Independent.

Cunningham recognized Cox by an old hat he wore, sharply creased to a point.

It was just like the one he used to wear in Grand Island. I never could have forgotten it. The fright he aroused in us kids burned every detail about him into my mind, so I just couldn't forget," Cunningham said in a June 29, 1937, story in The Independent. I had two younger sisters, and I know I was scared to death for what might happen to them."

Cunningham then recognized Cox's face, his walk and the way he held his head cocked to one side with his shoulders slightly stooped.

After Cox's arrest in Colorado Springs, Hall County Attorney Lloyd Kelly, Sheriff Dan Sanders, Police Chief Harry Moore and Assistant Chief Al Bockhahn went there to question him.

Kelly returned with a copy of Cox's confession.

Cox was sentenced to 50 years to life in prison for assaulting two Colorado Springs girls, ages 7 and 9. Nebraska authorities planned to prosecute him for the Grand Island murder had he been released from the Colorado prison. He died in prison on July 12, 1939, two years after he was sentenced.

Newspaper stories give this account of the crime:

Goldie was one of eight children of W.W. and Fannie Williams. They lived in an area east of today's Central Catholic High School.

Goldie, her sister and some friends were on their way home from Platt School at 615 N. Elm. They were sliding on ice in a gutter in the 1200 block of West Ninth Street when a man approached.

He asked Goldie why she didn't use skates. She said didn't have any. He then offered to take her to a store to buy some and told her younger sister to go home.

Several people saw Goldie walking with the man, including Cunningham, who identified him 25 years later in Colorado Springs.

After Goldie did not show up for supper, a search for her began. Tracks of the two were followed in the snow to Ninth and Elm, where the walks had been shoveled. Community pledges totaled \$1,800 for a reward leading to the arrest and conviction of Goldie's killer.

After the crime, Cox took a night passenger train to Denver and changed his name from Ellis Horn to C.T. Finnerty. He later moved to Colorado Springs, where he resumed his true identity as Charles Wesley Cox. He worked as an apartment janitor for 12 years.

A Grand Island doctor who saw Cox the day before Williams' murder described him as "once seen, always seen," the June 28, 1937, Independent reported.

Cunningham, who always remembered Cox's face, is among the true detectives who caught Goldie Williams' killer.