

X-CAR BATTLE OF SWEETMAN, AND THE THRASHERS WITH T

Victor Speer

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IN addition to his regular work on the Erie police force Murray was gradually drawn into the service of the men at the head of the Pennsylvania Central Railroad. His success in the cases he undertook attracted their attention to such a degree that they finally urged him to sever his connection with the Erie Police and devote himself exclusively to railroad detective work. William L. Scott, the railroad magnate, whose home was in Erie, and for whom Murray had done considerable difficult railroad detective work, was particularly desirous of obtaining Murray's undivided services.

Mr. Scott, Milton Cartwright, who built the Dismal Swamp canal, and was interested in the building of the Elevated Railway system in New York, James Casey, George Ham of Boston, and others, united in the building of the Canada Southern Railroad, now the Michigan Central, between Buffalo and Detroit, with its route in Canada from Fort Erie, opposite Buffalo, through St. Thomas to Windsor, opposite Detroit. They had difficulties in Canada. Station houses were burned. Trains were derailed. Bridges were fired. The trouble primarily grew out of the right of way. Some of the country folk seemed to think the railroad should make them all rich. The officers of the company knew Murray, and they held a conference and urged him to leave Erie and straighten matters out in the Canada Southern's troubles. Their offer to Murray was so flattering that he agreed to go for three months, with the right to return at the end of that time if he did not find matters satisfactory.

In May 1873 Murray left Erie and went to Canada as head of detectives of the Canada Southern Railroad of which William L. Scott was president and F.N. Finney was general superintendent. He established headquarters in St. Thomas and travelled between Buffalo and Detroit, and frequently Chicago.

"The bridge-burning stopped first," says Murray. "I began a systematic watch of the bridge that was the scene of the most trouble. Night after night I lay in a clump of brush by the railroad track. They were hard to catch, but eventually the bridge-burning stopped, along with the firing of stations, for I gave chase in earnest and caught some of the incendiaries and they were sent to the penitentiary.

"Soon after the bridge-burning was broken up, L.D. Rucker, of the Canada Southern, called my attention to complaints of wholesale robbery of cars. Goods consigned from Boston and New York to the west were found to be missing on the arrival of the cars at their destination. The various roads over which the cars passed had to pay pro rata the loss to the shippers."

The selection of Murray to run down this wholesale train robbing, affecting various railroads, indicates the reputation he had earned at that time as a clever detective. It was a hard case.

"I went to Boston and started over the route of the goods," says Murray. "I saw the cars go through unbroken to Black Rock at Buffalo, where customs officers and sealers inspected and resealed the cars, after which they went on west through Canada. After following the route of goods several times I became convinced that the robberies were perpetrated at Black Rock, and that car sealers and railroad employees were in collusion. They, alone, could have the necessary knowledge or opportunity.

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"Mose Mills was Customs Officer at the International Bridge at that time. I put up a job with Mills. We made a fake manifest showing boots, shoes, silks, and clothing, making a fat car. We gave the number of the car and sent the manifest out as usual, and then had the car placed at the old Bathurst Street yards at Black Rock. I got Police Captain Dixon, of old No. 5 station in Buffalo, and two of his men, Joe Henderson and Andy Dayton, a brother of Mayor Dayton. A fence ran along by the tracks. We got outside the fence and lay in wait.

"I remember the night well. It was the night of July 12th, 1874. It was blazing hot, breezeless, suffocating. We crouched alongside the fence for several hours. About 1.30 o'clock in the morning we saw two lanterns dodging in and out among the trucks. Three fellows slipped along silently, looking for the car numbered in the fake manifest.

"Here it is,' said one of them.

"They broke the seal, slid the door, climbed in and began to open the boxes. When they were well along with their work we made a break for the car. Two of the three ran, with Dixon, Henderson, and Dayton after them. I grabbed the third fellow, a powerful giant in a cotton shirt and overalls. We grappled in the car and fell among the boxes. It was stifling hot in the box car and the water began to pour off us. Neither spoke a word. It was a silent struggle in the darkness. I recognised the fellow as one of our road's employees named Sweetman, counted one of the huskiest men in the business. He tried to strangle me to death, tried it so deliberately I had to admire his coolness. I broke his hold and, when he tried to jam me behind the boxes where he could shove a big packing case on me and crush me, I forced him over by the car door. There we heaved and strained amid the big boxes.

"I had stripped him naked in the first grapples of the fight. His cotton shirt and overalls had come off like the peeling of a banana. In his fury he tore my clothes off me and as we lurched toward the car door we fell out to the track below, two naked men, drenched with perspiration as if a tub of water had been emptied on us. We fell in a bunch and over we went on to the cinders and ballast and ties. There was no let up. Whichever man got the chance banged the other's head on the rails, jammed his face in the cinders or thumped his bare body on the ballast and ties. A free hand meant a stunning blow. We fought under the car and out on to the other tracks. All the while we were silent as two mutes. It was a case of which or t'other on top. He was worrying me. I was busy as I could be and I could not yell, and my gun was gone.

"We came to a full stop on the track between the rails beyond the car where our fight began. Neither of us was on top. We were a tangled bunch. As we lay straining, gasping, we heard a creaking and crunching. Instinctively both of us looked down the track. An engine had backed some cars in and they were bearing slowly, steadily down upon us. Sweetman was a game man, he never flinched. 'You first!' he gasped, 'as he strove to roll me nearest the approaching cars. My answer was a heave that turned him prone between the rails and there I held him, panting and desperate, not daring to relax my hold. Nearer and nearer came the cars. We could hear the grind of the flange. Sweetman writhed and strove to drag me down and force me over.

"Give up?' I gasped.

"Sweetman shook his head and butted me full between the eyes. Together we reeled back on the track. The trucks of the nearest car were not thirty feet away, when Joe Henderson came running down the track, from the chase after the other two men, and dragged us back and snapped the handcuffs on Sweetman. Henderson had captured his man and the third escaped. I was somewhat disfigured and had to borrow some clothes, but I was mightily relieved when I saw the grim trucks of the freight cars go by and felt my bones safe beyond their reach. Sweetman was a partner of Slip Lewis. He was locked up, and later his attorney made a fight on some technicality.

"But this stopped the car burglaries. The railroads thanked me, and thereafter goods went west and arrived at their destination unmolested."

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When Murray returned to St. Thomas, after breaking up the car burglaries, he found complaints of train tapping and quickly located it at the west end of the road in the vicinity of Amherstburg, on the Canadian side of the mouth of the Detroit River. Cars laden with grain would lose bushels in transit, in some unknown way. The cars were weighed at Detroit to make sure of their cargo and when weighed later by the railroad they were many bushels lighter. Murray by a plan of frequent weighing of the cars, narrowed the territory, where the thefts were committed, to the vicinity of Amherstburg.

"The method employed by the train tappers," says Murray, "was to crawl under a grain car at night, bore holes in the floor of the car with an auger, fill as many bags with grain as they could cart away, and then plug up the auger holes, and the car would bear 110 visible outward sign of having been robbed. Hundreds of bushels of grain would be stolen in this way. One night a single train was rifled of enough grain to make two waggon loads of filled bags. The quantity stolen in such a short time satisfied me that a gang of six or seven did the job, and that it was not the work of only one or two. So I nosed around looking for sixes or sevens who would be apt to engage in train-tapping. I was puzzled to learn what became of the grain, if the thieves were people in the vicinity, for I could find no trace of any sales of grain apart from the usual barter in crops by farmers.

"I arranged for a string of grain cars to be laid out on a siding, and the first night I spotted a figure sneak under some of the cars and bore holes and put in plugs. No attempt was made that night to steal any of the grain, and evidently the cars were being prepared for the next night's raid. I decided to follow the fellow to his home on the first night, and I did so. The trail led to the home of the five Thrashers, a father, mother, and three sons, whose constant companions were two fellows named Johnson and Mike Fox.

"I went back and got two constables, and told them to meet me at a point in the yards, where I would have a freight engine. I got a switch engine, but the constables failed to appear, so I went alone with the engineer, John Savina by name, and the fireman. The engine stopped opposite the Thrashers, and I went out to the house to arrest the five people. I told the engineer and fireman to be prepared to come in a jiffy. I knocked at the door, and no one answered I knocked again, and when no response came I shoved against the door and walked in. No one was in sight. I passed through the kitchen, and was about to enter a room opening off it when a tremendous screech came from the room. I stood and listened. It was like the high, quavering note of a calliope or steam piano. Without further ado I shoved open the door and entered. All I could see was a big, old-fashioned bed, surmounted by a mosquito net. Sitting upright in this bed was one of the ugliest women I ever saw in my life. She would glance at me, and then throw back her head and screech just as a coyote howls when he serenades the moon. She was Mrs. Thrasher. I bade her get up. She answered with a series of ear-splitting screeches. I spent about ten minutes trying to persuade her to get out of bed. When words were of no avail I laid hold of the mosquito netting and pulled it out of the way.

"I am palsied!" shrieked Mrs. Thrasher. "I am paralysed, and cannot be moved!"

"I approached the bed, and she dealt me such a thump on the head with her clenched hand as no paralytic ever was able to do. I sought to take her out of bed, but she buried herself in the bed clothes. So I simply took the tick, and pulled it off the bed, and was preparing to take the bed apart with her in it, when she sprang out and fled through the kitchen. I knew I could get her later, and the tick had seemed very heavy in my hands. I slit it open, and found it filled with new boots and shoes. While I was emptying them out I heard a stealthy step behind me, and whirled around just in time to see Mrs. Thrasher swing an axe and aim it at me. I dodged, and laid violent hands on Mrs. Thrasher's ankles, and landed her on the floor with a thud. Before she could regain the axe I just rolled her into the emptied tick, and fastened her by one of the tall bedposts, where she kicked and screeched, and probably well-nigh suffocated while I was searching the house.

"They had a number of bed ticks all filled with wheat. They also had a big chimney that was unused. They had stuffed this chimney full of bags of wheat. Old man Thrasher came out of a closet, and I arrested him. The engine hands helped me take the plunder away. I went to the place of Mike Fox near by, and arrested him after finding

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more of the stolen stuff on his premises. I also arrested Johnson, and took the whole batch before Magistrate George Gott, who also was Canadian customs officer, and he committed them to Sandwich gaol for trial before Judge Horne, who sent them to Kingston Penitentiary for four years each.

"That broke up train-tapping. Mrs. Thrasher averred that after she was bagged in the tick she experienced a sensation similar to that caused by smiting the outside of the tick with the open hand. I suggested to her that perhaps she had wriggled and kicked so much as to bump herself against the bedpost. But she seemed to cling to the idea that she had been spanked soundly, not beaten or bruised, but simply spanked strenuously. What could a woman named Thrasher expect?"