

THE MYSTERIOUS MURDER OF NORMAN BLACK

By: Chris Flook

In the evening of September 22, 1910, William Daniels, the owner of a south Walnut Street grocery and his stock boy, George Fitzgerald, stepped outside their store to relax after a busy day. The grocers noticed a woman in white staring at her reflection in their window.

Fitzgerald later recounted to reporters, "Yes sir, I was sitting on a box and Mr. Daniels and I were talking. I happened to look up and saw her beside the window, her face looked excited and she was as white as she could be. She walked on a little further and I could see spots of blood on her coat." The grocers described a tall woman, between the ages of 18-30.

Around the same time, a horse drawn phaéton (a fancy buggy) moseyed into Budd Thomas' Livery Barn on South Mulberry Street with an unconscious, mostly dead Norman Black in the front seat. Black had a .32 caliber bullet lodged above his right eye. The Muncie Evening Press' grisly description found blood "on the buggy seat and the lap robe, which had been placed over his unconscious form, was covered in blood... (his) hat was covered with dust and a portion of the wounded man's brain was found inside."

Stable hands rushed Black to Dr. J.C. Quick. Seeing the severity of the injury, Quick moved Black to Mix hospital, where he died two hours later. Black left behind a wife and four adult children.

Norman Black was born on a farm near Selma in 1848. By 1890, he was a real estate mogul, owning significant property in Selma. In 1898, he moved his family to Muncie and served as the vice president of the People's Trust Company. Black became an important Muncie businessman, rising in financial and social prominence.

For reasons unknown, Black began an evening routine in the summer of 1910 where he arrived at Thomas' Livery Barn, checked out his phaéton, and returned within a few hours. A witness told police they saw Black, as many as five nights a week, drive "up before the old Hanika Iron Factory (at) Second and Franklin streets. Here he would await the arrival of a woman, who walked quietly down the street, generally from the east" and entered the buggy. Sometimes she was waiting for him in the shadows of the building "and was cautious to make her approach...when no one was near."

Other witnesses corroborated the story, observing the "couple (driving) away in various directions, sometimes to the west and sometimes to the north. The woman was described as slender and rather tall. She was always dressed in white, or a white waist and a dark skirt."

Around 6:45 PM on September 22, 1910, Black left his office at the corner of Mulberry and Howard streets and walked to Thomas' Livery Barn. As usual, he checked out his phaéton and remarked to the stable hand that he was off "to see a party" on the southside.

Around 7:30, a Big Four Railroad flagmen heard three gunshots in rapid succession, followed by two more. At about the same time, residents saw a woman in white hastily exiting a buggy at Second and Walnut streets before running off. By 8:00, the horse, who apparently knew the route by heart, arrived back at Thomas' with an unconscious Black.

Switchboard operators told police that a woman phoned three different doctors that evening and later attempted to reach the coroner. Police found nothing missing, concluding that robbery wasn't a motive. Witnesses also saw a mysterious man "loitering near the old Inter State Factory on west Willard Street" around the time of the murder. He was wearing "a light suite of clothing, soft hat, which he had pulled down over his eyes."

The police never could identify the woman, or the mysterious man. With stunning sexism, investigators determined that "While women criminals have shown remarkable fervor, yet they as a rule, when once aroused, cannot carry their deeds past the point where they can be hid from police."

By spring, editorials in Muncie and Indy cried foul. On April 7, the Muncie Evening Press wrote "there is little doubt that several people in Muncie know who murdered Norman Black. For the most part these persons are men prominent in society, business and politics." Writing in the Indianapolis News, William Blodgett remarked "that such a crime as this should be committed and no particular effort made to arrest and convict the criminals...has caused not a little comment. The only reasons given is that the arrest of the murderer would expose prominent people."

Black's murder was never solved.

(Author's Note: Thanks to Nicole Rudnicki, VP of the Old West End Neighborhood Association who first told me this story. A longer and more detailed version of this story is also found in Keith Roysdon's and Douglas Walker's *Wicked Muncie*. I highly recommend the book for local true-crime history buffs).