

Small Town, Big News

Maddie H.

On October 20, 1931, I started my day as I usually did, by walking into my father's bank. The Kraft State Bank, which was founded in 1914 by my dad, Philip Kraft, was his pride and joy. The grand facade was framed by the meat market and a large, brick building that housed the Montgomery Ward Co. I paused on the front steps, gazing up at the intimidating building with large windows and peaked roofing.

The lot that was home to the Menomonie Kraft State Bank started life as a successful meat market, owned by A.O. Strand. In 1908, Mr. Strand sold the lot to George and Herman Schneider, who continued to operate a market. Years later, George bought Herman's share and kept working the market on his own. Later, in 1952, the market would change hands again. A Mr. Otto Miller buys the market but doesn't own it for long. Soon after, the bank would purchase the property and expand to cover the old market site.

"Alright, James. Get to work." I adjusted the coal-colored suit my father had given me for my first day. He said he believed it would match my eyes and make me look like a proper businessman. I walked through the glass front door and into the stately lobby. My shoes clicked across the white marble floor as I walked across to the employee entrance. As I unlocked the door, a voice greeted me from behind the marble teller counters.

"Morning Mr. Kraft! There's coffee on your desk." A friendly female face popped into view behind the gold bars over the teller windows.

"Good morning, Barbara. How's the family?"

"Very well, sir. By the way, I already started organizing the meetings planned for today."

"Very good. I'll look that over then open up the bank." I continued on to my office, where I found the coffee Barbara had mentioned. As I took a sip, I opened the file folder on the mahogany desk Father had gotten me for my birthday, the day he told me I would get to start handling some of the bank's affairs.

"Hm, that's interesting," I mumbled to myself. I hadn't remembered scheduling a lunch meeting for that day. "Barbara?"

"Yes, Mr. Kraft?" She appeared in the doorway.

"Did you schedule a lunch meeting for today?"

"Oh, yes sir. Mr. Johnson called yesterday. I forgot to mention it. I apologize, sir."

"That's quite all right. Thank you."

"Of course, sir."

I took a final sip of my coffee and went to unlock the bank doors. As I walked back across the lobby and took my keys out of my pocket, I noticed a car idling outside. That's strange, I thought to myself. I soon forgot about the strange car, though, as business picked up.

Soon the lobby was filled with patrons coming to make deposits. The buzz of conversation was almost deafening as I walked across the lobby; I had spotted an old family friend, Mrs. A.W. Schafer. She was wearing a new purple dress that complimented her pale skin and dark hair perfectly. As I waved to catch her attention, I noticed three men in bulky trench

Menomonie Middle School 8th Grade Language Arts

coats enter through the front door. Everything seemed to slow down as I watched them pull large machine guns from their coats. Waving the guns above their heads, the men yelled at everyone to get on the ground.

My panic grew as the seconds spent on the ground turned into minutes. One robber was already rooting through the large vault at the back of the lobby, which had been left open for a deposit. Later, doing the math in my head, I figured that there must have been at least \$90,000 in the vault. My only hope was that Barbara had managed to activate the silent alarm to alert the police of the robbery.

Soon, three minutes had passed. I looked around at the people on the ground around me. I saw a group of women shuddering in fear in the corner. One man had passed out the moment the robbers revealed their weapons. To my horror, I saw a thin young woman with mouse-brown hair frantically trying to keep a newborn baby wrapped in a rosy blanket quiet. She caught my eyes and I felt her terror rip through my body. I mouthed to her that it would be alright and I saw her relax slightly.

Suddenly, I felt a hand grab the back of my jacket and pull me to my feet. I turned and the tallest of the three men was staring me in the face.

“What’s your name, boy?” His rough voice was like fingernails on a chalkboard.

“K-kraft. James Kraft.” I struggled to keep the fear out of my voice as he pulled something out of his pocket. It appeared to be a photograph. He held it up next to my face, then yelled to his comrades.

“I’ve got the Kraft boy! Let’s go before the police show up.” As I was dragged out the front door, I watched as the third robber dragged Mrs. Schafer to her feet and tried to drag her along. I was out the door and shoved into the backseat of a Lincoln Model L before I could do anything to help her. The third robber tried to put Mrs. Schafer in the car as well, but she tripped on the sidewalk and the robber left her. I’m sure that stumble saved her life, but I had no time to think about that. Soon all three of the robbers were in the car and the getaway driver stepped on the gas.

A spray of bullets followed us as people from the rest of the businesses in town tried to stop the speeding car. The driver was hit in the eye! As the car sped off toward the highway, I thought about what I knew about the Lincoln Model L, in case I survived and needed to report some detail to the police.

As far as I could tell, the car was a 1928 Lincoln Model L, which was produced from 1921 until last year, 1930. It was the first model to be produced under the Ford Motor Company. This car, in particular, was black, with two doors on each side and a canvas roof acting as protection from wind and rain, and, in this case, bullets. It also sported dual-windshield wipers, which I remembered had been added to the model in 1929. That small piece of information could be important if the police tried to identify the car later. I locked it into my memory.

Soon, I was snapped out of my thoughts when the car suddenly stopped and the men got out. I watched with interest as they scattered nails onto the road. I realized that this was an effort to stop any pursuers. When they got back into the car, two of the men started yelling at each other about how the getaway driver, who was apparently named Frank, wasn’t responding. They came to the conclusion that he had died due to the bullet that had gone straight through his eye into his brain.

Menomonie Middle School 8th Grade Language Arts

Suddenly, something very strange happened. My perspective seemed to change from sitting on the back seat of the car to looking in through the window. I watched as two of the remaining robbers grabbed me. I saw the third draw a pistol from the pocket of his trench coat. They were going to shoot me! I tried to bang on the glass of the window, but I couldn't get the attention of anyone inside the car! I watched with horror as the man with the gun held the gun to my head and pulled the trigger. My body went limp. Blood trickled down my temple, but I hadn't felt anything! Why was the me inside the car dead, but the me outside, watching through the window, perfectly fine?

The car started moving again, so I tried to hang on. I soon realized that I didn't have to. Some unseen force had strapped me to the car and I was being pulled along. I could still see through the window, and I watched as the body of Frank was pushed into the back seat with my body and the tall robber who had grabbed me at the bank. I noticed he was bleeding and didn't look very healthy. The car headed east on old Suckow Road, then stopped at the entrance to the Ranney Farm. The two healthy robbers in the front of the car pushed the bodies out of the car and left them lying in the ditch. One of the robbers also got out and grabbed a can of gasoline from behind a bush. They must have planned the route days in advance so that they could plant gas and food along the way.

I found I was no longer connected to the car and decided to go take a closer look at the body of Frank. He definitely had been shot through the eye, and I silently thanked whatever town business person had managed to land a clean shot. Next, I went to look at the other body, *my* body. There was a bullet hole clean through my head, causing a puddle of blood on the ground to dye my white-blond hair a gory pink. Shuddering, I walked, no, *floated*, back to the car. The men had refilled the gas and were getting back into the car. I decided to follow them.

The car continued north, to the highway, where they scattered more nails. I could tell that the tall robber was in a lot of pain. His mouth was pulled into an ugly grimace and his pale skin had turned even paler. Sweat mingled with the blood on his neck and his eyes rolled back into his head. It looked like he had been shot in the neck and maybe the knee. The other two soon stopped the car and pulled him out of the car and into an abandoned farm. His black clothing was covered in dust from the ground. They threw him some money, "In case he survives," I thought, then left him there. I was sure he would die very soon.

As the car continued on Highway 12, I thought about Menomonie, my hometown. I heard the robbers refer to Menomonie as the "city with the crooked bridges," and I assumed they were referring to the way Highway 12 crossed three bridges and twisted around some of the milling company buildings.

Menomonie is located in the Red Cedar Valley in northwestern Wisconsin. I had lived there my entire life and remembered learning about the Indians who had populated the area. The Sioux were here when the French began exploring the area in the late 18th century. The first permanent settlement in Menomonie was in 1830. Finally, in 1882, Menomonie officially became a city, changing its name from Menomonee, meaning "people of the rice" to the Menomonie we know today.

I thought about my family and my father's company. I thought about the lifelong friends and people I would never see again. But, I knew that if I got distracted, I might never know what the remaining two robbers were up to. I shook the sadness from my mind and focussed on the task at hand. I followed the robbers for eight months until they were finally caught by police in

Menomonie Middle School 8th Grade Language Arts

Kansas City and returned to Leavenworth Prison, where they had escaped from in 1930. With my job done, I decided to try to return home to check on my family. As I floated back towards Wisconsin, I thought back to that fateful day in October and swore that I would make sure everyone who had been in the building that day were well. I could never forgive myself if anyone had gotten hurt.

Menomonie Middle School 8th Grade Language Arts

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