University of Wisconsin Eau Claire

A Case Study of Murder in a Midsized Urban Area: Homicide in Eau Claire, Wisconsin in the Interwar Period

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Abstract

This paper describes the nature of urban murder in the interwar period. By examining primary source documents, a case study of Eau Claire, WI was done in order to determine what factors influenced murder in midsized urban areas, in order to refute the misconceptions concerning crime from 1920-1940. These misconceptions are perpetuated by popular culture as well as secondary historical literature, which focus almost completely on large metropolitan areas.
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Introduction

Murder in America is a subject that has long fascinated historians and the general public alike. America has been a turbulent and often violent place since its creation, and the interwar period saw an increase in murder rates throughout the country. Eau Claire, Wisconsin was no exception to this trend, however, murders were taking place there for different reasons than those taking place in larger urban areas such as Chicago. What factors influenced homicide murder in these two drastically urban environments? To answer this question, this project focuses on murder in Eau Claire during the interwar period. Its results are compared the secondary literature on the time period, which focuses almost exclusively on urban crime in major metropolitan areas.

The time period of this case study is the interwar period of 1920 to 1940. This was a time of great change for the United States, with major events occurring such as the initial prosperity of the "roaring twenties," the rise of labor unions, prohibition, the emergence of organized crime and the Great Depression. Nevertheless, though the country was going through a great deal of changes, those transformations affected areas of differing sizes in different ways. Therefore, it is necessary to challenge the misconceptions concerning murder in America during this time period, due to the fact that murders in larger urban areas took place due to completely different factors than those that influenced murders in smaller urban areas. This paper argues that smaller urban areas such as Eau Claire represent murder in the urban United States during the
interwar period more accurately, since issues that were endemic in American society, such as domestic violence, explicit issues of privacy, and racial and class conflict are more easily revealed when unclouded by the media glare covering criminals and crime trends in major metropolitan areas.

Wisconsin became a state in 1848. According to History of Eau Claire county, Wisconsin, past and present; including an account of the cities, towns and villages of the county, the Chippewa County board of supervisors divided Chippewa County, which was then a vastly large area that encompassed several modern day counties, into three separate towns on July 27th, 1855. One of these towns is identical to the location of current Eau Claire County, but was initially called Clearwater. However, a section on the northwest banks of the Chippewa River was known as Eau Claire, so both town names were used for a while, until Clearwater was dropped and only Eau Claire was used. The town remained under the use of town government for one year, until an act of legislature was approved in October of 1856 to create Eau Claire County. The town of Eau Claire was the only town government organized at the inception of the county.

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1 Bailey, William F. History of Eau Claire county, Wisconsin, past and present; including an account of the cities, towns and villages of the county. Chicago: C.F. Cooper & Co., 1914.
By 1920, the population of Eau Claire had reached 35,770 people. Today, it would be categorized as an “urban cluster,” described by the United States Census Bureau’s Census 2000 Urban and Rural classification an area with less than 50,000 inhabitants. The larger area against which crimes can be compared to, Chicago, had county populations of 3,053,617. This more than qualifies it as an “urbanized area.” It is assumed that organized crime of the roaring twenties, prohibition, and the Great Depression all lead to an influx of murders in the interwar period in all parts of the country, however, smaller areas such as Eau Claire had completely unique factors at play when it came to crimes. The factors that influenced the act of murder in larger urban areas, such as organized crime and prohibition, were not present in Eau Claire, while other aspects that were present in both areas were not given proper attention in larger urban metropolises.

Literature Review

In the case of murder and violence, particularly on the national level, there is a staggering amount of information available. There seems to be a book or journal on

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every aspect of homicide, including the racial, cultural, societal, legal, and geographical implications of it. Roger Lane describes murder in the US during from 1917 until 1941 in his book *Murder in America: A History*. Lane argues that the effect of Prohibition, as well as problems in the justice system in the inter-war period, contributed to the numbers of murders that took place. He also cites increases in racial tensions due to black pride in unprecedented areas, the emergence of organized crime and gang violence as factors. While this was undoubtedly true in an area like Chicago, these factors of influence on homicide were not as widespread in a midsized area such as Eau Claire.

In order to fully understand murder and its influences in Eau Claire, it is helpful to compare them national trends during the same time period. Is there some way in which Eau Claire was exceptional, or was it standard compared to the rest of the country? Does Eau Claire’s size, rural location, methods of industry, or other factors of the town itself affect how its people not only lived, but also died? An article published in the July 2, 1927 edition of *The Literary Review* describes murder rates around the US in the article “Our 12,000 Killings in 1926.” According to the article, one person in every 10,000 was a victim of a violent crime resulting in death in eighteen different cities in the US in 1926. The article quotes Dr. Frederick L. Hoffman, who wrote “our murder record of approximately 12,000 persons each year is a most serious indictment of American

8 Lane, *Murder in America*, 228
civilization, and evidence of lawlessness which has no counterpart in any other country in the world” concerning high murder rates in a number of cities in the New York insurance journal *The Spectator*. The article only focuses on larger urban areas, though, and details that Chicago had the highest homicide rate in 1926 with 510, while New York followed with 340. According to the data collected from the Eau Claire Coroner’s Reports, the number of deaths investigated and deemed murders in the year 1926 was zero. Conversely, when looking at murder on a per capita basis, it is Southern cities that have the highest rates of violent death. For example, Jacksonville, Florida has the highest murder rates per capita in the United States, with a rate of 75.9 murders per 100,000 people, followed by Tampa, Memphis, and Birmingham. The article quotes both the Baltimore Sun and Birmingham News as citing great “negro” population as being a direct cause of high murder rates in the south, who claim that an influx of wandering farmers and “industrial transients” creates a social situation ripe for bloodshed. The Detroit News, on the other hand, believes that it is a state’s judicial process that determines its crime rates, and offers Massachusetts as an example. That state has a large number of immigrants of all different races, but has judges that handle justice in a swift and sure manner, which in turn discourages criminals and decreases murder rates. The article also includes a table containing the cities with the leading number of homicides from around the country, but only includes those cities that have a population of more than 100,000 people (see Table 2.)

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10 *The Literary Digest.* July 2, 1927, 1.
11 *The Literary Digest.* July 2, 1927, 1.
12 Eau Claire County Office of the Coroner, *Eau Claire Coroner’s Reports* (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1926)
13 *The Literary Digest.* July 2, 1927, 1.
14 *The Literary Digest.* July 2, 1927, 1.
15 *The Literary Digest.* July 2, 1927, 1.
representing or describing murder in the interwar period, due to the fact that it focuses solely on larger urban areas and ignores both midsized and rural areas, in which there wasn’t nearly as much of the cultural turmoil taking place to cloud perceptions of crimes. An area with less than 100,000 people may still have high murder rates proportionate to their population, or conversely they may not have higher murder rates at all in the interwar period, which directly conflicts with the reports on murder during this time period.

H.C. Brearly did an investigation into the high homicide rates in the US, and published his findings as to what caused the rate of homicide to reach such unprecedented numbers in his book *Homicide in the United States*. His explanations include the influence of wealth, the aftermath of World War I, immigration, the media, family structure and disorganization, and many others in order to account for homicides.\(^\text{16}\) Again, while these factors may have been validated by Brearly’s research into homicides in larger urban areas, many of them do not apply to data collected on Eau Claire.

**Methodology and Primary Sources**

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\text{Total Number of Cases} & 252 \\
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The main resource for understanding murder in Eau Claire during the interwar period came in the form of coroner’s reports. After entering each case into a database with the criteria of cause of death, marital status, occupation, and other such criteria, it became possible to analyze what trends emerged as possible factors that influenced murder (see Table 1.) There were also specific crimes that emerged as ones that warranted further research, so Circuit Court documents and trial transcripts were used in order to investigate the legal process that occurred following these particular crimes.

Since much of the information used for this case study comes from the Eau Claire County Coroner’s Reports, it is vital to understand what the role of a coroner was during the interwar period, not only to understand the main primary source that was consulted but also as a means of understanding death reporting as a whole. The duties of coroners have changed a great deal over the course of time. In 1929, George H. Weinmann and the National Research Council did a research study on laws concerning the dead, and published their findings in the Bulletin of the National Research Council: A Survey of the Law Concerning Dead Human Bodies. The research council admits that though there is an assumption among academics that a dead body cannot be moved until it has been examined by a coroner, there is no actual legal precedent for such a belief. Coroners actually began as officers of the King in England, whose task was not actually determine a cause of death, but to keep a record of all deaths in the county that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Number of Cases Ruled Homicides</th>
<th>9</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Female Deaths</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Cases That Went to Court</td>
<td>11</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 1: Data Collected During Case Study

related to the management of criminal justice. The survey then cites the work of Bracton, whom they credit with creating “one of the fullest and ablest treatises on jurisprudence that this country has ever produced.” According to Bracton’s work, the duties of the coroner were to follow mandates from their lord or king, and in doing so visit the bodies of those who were murdered, drowned, or had died suddenly. An article in the London Times later described the case of an 18 year old boy being found with a revolver next to his body, Rex v. Haslewood. The coroner was late, and a jury soon deemed the case a suicide, and the coroner didn’t think it necessary to view the body. As a result of this breach of informal protocol, it was mandated that a coroner must view the body at some point before a cause of death is decided. This leads the National Research Council to assert that “unless changed by statute in the several states and territories, the common law of England will apply in this country.”

Nonetheless, the duties of coroners in one state may not be those of a coroner in another state. The National Research Council did not ignore this fact, and proceeded to describe the statutes concerning coroners as they varied from state to state. The Wisconsin statute is listed as follows:

"Whenever the District Attorney shall have notice of the death of any person within his county and from the circumstances surrounding the same there is good reason to believe that murder or manslaughter has been committed, he shall forthwith order and require the coroner or some justice of the peace therein to take an inquest on the view of the dead body of such person…"

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22 Weinmann, *Bulletin of the National Research Council*, 44.
There is also a law in place that requires inquests done in areas with over 150,000 inhabitants be done exclusively by the coroner or one of his deputies, if the coroner is rendered unavailable.\textsuperscript{24} This stipulation did not apply to Eau Claire, as the population of the city was only 35,771 in 1920, increased to 41,087 in 1930, and further increased to only 46,999 by 1940.\textsuperscript{25}

**Domestic Violence in Eau Claire**

When examining the Eau Claire County Coroner’s reports, there are several trends that emerge, but one of the most striking is the lack of women’s deaths being reported. (See Figure 1 in Appendix.) There are many aspects that could have influenced reporting the deaths of women during this time period, though the first and most obvious is the prevalence of domestic violence. Domestic violence is a tragic phenomenon that has occurred in the United States and around the globe. According to *The Family Secret: Domestic Violence in America* by William Stacey and Anson Shupe, domestic violence began as “[an] understood and accepted…male’s right in American society.”\textsuperscript{26} However, laws began to surface in some states that legally supported a man’s right to beat his own wife, beginning with Mississippi in 1824.\textsuperscript{27} As many other states followed suit, laws began to evolve once more.

\textsuperscript{24} Weinmann, *Bulletin of the National Research Council*, 47.
\textsuperscript{25} University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, “Historical Census Browser,” University of Virginia Library, http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/index.html (accessed October 9, 2010).
“By the 1870s courts in states as different as Massachusetts and Alabama began rejecting the legal justification of wife-beating. The pendulum began to swing the other way as this “legitimate discipline” became viewed as cruelty…by 1910, only eleven states still did not permit divorce by reason of cruelty by one spouse to the other.”

As divorce law evolved around the country, it also did in Wisconsin. Not only was the occurrence of adultery ground for divorce, “cruel and inhuman treatment, habitual drunkenness, desertion and imprisonment” were all seen as legal grounds for divorce for both men and women. However, cruel and inhuman punishment was narrowly defined as treatment which directly endangered a woman’s life or made the cohabitation of spouses impossible, and verbal abuse was not considered grounds for divorce until much later in 1916. As a matter of fact, the most common grounds for divorce in early 20th century Wisconsin was in fact cruelty, “because it best fitted the contradictory moral and practical needs of the Victorian era.” This trend continued for many decades, and by 1930 more than 80% of all divorces were granted on the grounds of cruelty.

However helpful these changes in legal policy may have been, simply changing the laws legalizing the beating of wives or granting women divorces on the ground of cruelty did not stop the violence whatsoever. The interwar period was a time of great

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change for women. Not only were they given the right to vote, and began attending college in unprecedented numbers, but the problem of domestic violence was not “eradicated by the women’s suffrage movement in the early part of the 20th century.”

This is especially obvious in the case of death reporting in Eau Claire County, within which there is a clear and obvious gender bias. The vast majority of the deaths found in the coroner’s reports are male, even though women accounted for just under half population of Eau Claire County between 1920 and 1940, which was between thirty five and forty thousand people. Though the numbers of men and women present in Eau Claire are far less disproportionate, women only represent 17.7% of the deaths recorded in the coroner’s reports. This gender biased most likely occurred due to women’s lack of status in society during this time period. Though they were given the right to vote, a woman’s “place” was still within the private sphere. One clear example of this is the fact that though the industrial revolution was well underway, the emergence of women in the work place was not. Of the 313,139 people engaged in manufacturing industries in Wisconsin in 1929, only 51,827 (or 16.5%) were women. While some may cite the Great Depression as the cause for this phenomenon, prior data disputes that claim. In 1919, around a decade before the Depression hit, there were still only 52,247 women engaged in manufacturing, which is only 16.4% of the 317,899 total

manufacturing workers. This lack of women in the work place clearly limited their agency in society as a whole, given the fact that very few women were earning their own money. Therefore, they were still by and large dependent on their husbands for survival, and many remained within the confines of the domestic sphere.

One of the most striking examples of domestic violence found within the Eau Claire County coroner’s reports is the case of Harold and Mildred Johnson. It is important to note that Harold is listed initially by first and last name, and Mildred is listed only as “Wife- Mildred.” It is clear that, though Mildred is just as dead as her husband, his death takes precedence over hers. Mildred and Harold lived in the home of Harold’s parents, who heard noises coming from their room at around 11 pm on the night of January 21, 1932. When Harold’s parents went to their son’s room to inquire as to what all the noise was, they were assured that everything was fine. A short while afterwards, the elder Johnson couple once again heard noises coming from their son and daughter in law’s room, this time the sound of groaning. They forced open the locked door, and were met with a grisly scene. Harold had shot his wife five times over her head and body, and then slit her throat. He then cut his own throat from ear to ear. Harold’s parents found their son’s body fallen over that of his wife in the early morning hours around 4 am on January 22, 1932. Mildred was rushed to Luther hospital, where she

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36 US Census Bureau, Fifteenth Census of the United States, 563.
died that afternoon. Clearly, this is not a run of the mill case of domestic violence, and is an extreme example. However, perhaps cases had to reach this extreme level of violence in order to be recognized. There is also no question of guilt in this case, seeing as Mildred’s husband killed her and then himself. Therefore, no extra work or effort on the part of the coroner is required, and this woman’s death can simply be written down as an afterthought after her husband’s, and then forgotten. There is also no mention of this case in any editions of the *Eau Claire Leader Telegram*.

Another obvious case of domestic violence that tragically resulted in death was the case of Andrew and Orpha Easterson. The husband’s name is once again listed first and the wife’s second, but most importantly; Orpha’s name is listed but once. Any other time she is mentioned within the document, she is listed simply as Mrs. Easterson, exhibiting the fact that she has no identity without her husband in life or in death. Orpha was coming home from work on her lunch break when she was approached on the corner of Putnam and Galloway streets by her estranged husband Andrew, who attempted to draw her into conversation. When Orpha refused, Andrew tried to strike her with his fist, which she was able to evade. As she attempted to flee, Andrew took out a revolver and shot Orpha in the back of the head. According to the coroner’s report, she died instantly. Andrew then ran across the street and shot himself in the side.

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of the head, also dying instantly. He left a note indicating his motive for such an attack, which was later discovered in his residence, but was never published. There were also three witnesses who saw the attack, and as a result, no inquest was deemed necessary by the District Attorney.\textsuperscript{39}

This murder suicide in broad daylight on the sidewalk is another extreme case of domestic violence, but serves as another striking example of men brutalizing their wives during this time period. Conversely, this case was given a large amount of media attention, unlike the aforementioned case that occurred inside a private home during the early morning hours rather than on city streets in the middle of the day. The front page headline of the July 11, 1937 Eau Claire Leader Telegram read: Murder, Suicide End Family Strife.\textsuperscript{40} The very large section dedicated to the crime includes a picture of the couple with their son, and describes the husband shooting the wife and then himself shortly after noon, following an altercation occurring at the junction of Putnam and Galloway streets. It also notes that their son is now being looked after by relatives. It would seem that this case was given so much media coverage due to the fact that it could not be kept private, as it occurred so publically. The Easterson family was also known for having marital problems, so perhaps that lessened the public’s shock concerning such a crime.

Though cases like these are atypical, domestic violence clearly was not. Fifty percent of the women murdered in Eau Claire during the interwar period were killed by

\textsuperscript{39} Eau Claire County Office of the Coroner, \textit{Eau Claire Coroner’s Reports} (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1920), page nr.
\textsuperscript{40} Eau Claire Leader Telegram, “Murder, Suicide End Family Strife,” \textit{Eau Claire Leader Telegram}, July 11, 1937.
their own husbands (see Figure 2 in Appendix.)

According to the evidence found in the Coroner’s reports, the deaths of women were seemingly less important than those of men. This idea is supported not only by the lack of women’s deaths present in the coroner’s reports, but also the fact that they were without fail listed after their husband’s name should their suspicious death even be recorded at all. In some cases, women that died were listed as “wife of O.A. Chase” within their reports, rather than simply being identified as their own individual or as Freda Chase. This idea of husband’s dominance over his wife’s very identity after she dies exhibits his unquestionable power over her during her life.

Another area of death in which there was a gender gap is suicide. Suicides accounted for 13% of men’s deaths and 17% of women’s deaths found in the coroner’s reports between 1920 and 1940. However, 75% of the suicides committed by women were done by married women, while only 25% of men who committed suicide were married (see Figure 3 in Appendix.) This is yet another way that domestic violence may have ended the lives of women in Eau Claire, because a battered woman may have seen suicide as her only way of escaping her abuser. This feeling of helplessness may have been compounded by a woman’s lack of the ability to go out and get her own

41 Eau Claire County Office of the Coroner, Eau Claire Coroner’s Reports (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1920), page nr.
42 Eau Claire County Office of the Coroner, Eau Claire Coroner’s Reports (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1920), page nr.
43 Eau Claire County Office of the Coroner, Eau Claire Coroner’s Reports (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1920), page nr.
44 Eau Claire County Office of the Coroner, Eau Claire Coroner’s Reports (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1920), page nr.
job, since she has no prior work ability or skills as a result of her presence solely in the private sphere.

Domestic violence is a tragic yet enduring aspect of family life in the US, and interwar Eau Claire County was not immune to the cycle of abuse. Both Mildred Johnson and Orpha Easterson were victims of domestic violence who paid the ultimate price of their lives, because there were neither laws nor social constraints in place to curtail the occurrence of such violence. Their abusive husbands had power over them even after they had robbed them of their lives, and both women were listed after their husbands in the coroner’s reports even though Mildred and Orpha were the victims. Because domestic violence makes up fifty percent of the deaths of women listed as murders in interwar Eau Claire, in addition to the fact that there is not a single case of a woman murdering a man, it is clearly a large factor affecting murder in midsized urban areas such as Eau Claire.

Domestic violence also occurred in large urban areas, however, it is not thought of today as a prevalent cause of murder during the interwar period in the ways that organized crime and other factors are. It is in this way that a midsized urban area such as Eau Claire provides a far more accurate picture of murder than a larger urban area would, given the fact that there are no famous criminals such as Al Capone occupying the media spotlight and therefore being the best-remembered aspect of crime.

Class and Race
Other influencing factors of death reporting were those of class and race. One of the criteria within the database used for this case study was that of race, and another was occupation. However, this data was not always easy to ascertain, as occupation was only sometimes listed in the Coroner’s reports, and race was listed only twice.\textsuperscript{45} One case that did shed light on the presence of racial tension in Eau Claire was that of Henry Hudson, a black junk dealer who was murdered by John Sather, a white man. It is detailed in the coroner’s reports that Hudson was shot by Sather in April of 1920, but does not say where or describe a motive.\textsuperscript{46} The coroner’s jury also found that the cause of Henry Hudson’s death was that of a bullet fired from a pistol, which was discharged from the hand of John Sather.\textsuperscript{47} The case was then sent to Circuit Court. While this crime was not particularly gruesome, it was unique in that it is the only case of its kind that was reported in Eau Claire during the interwar period. There are no other black males or females listed in the coroner’s reports, as the perpetrators or victims of crimes. Furthermore, racially motivated crimes such as these are often thought to have been committed exclusively in the South. In 1920, there were only twenty three “negroes” living in Eau Claire County: twelve females and eleven males.\textsuperscript{48} This number decreased to nine females and eleven males by 1930, and the number of “negroes” living in Eau Claire County stayed at twenty by 1940.\textsuperscript{49} Eau Claire was inhabited by people of European descent, including Germans and Norwegians, with the latter being the only

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\textsuperscript{45} Eau Claire County Office of the Coroner, \textit{Eau Claire Coroner’s Reports} (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1920), page nr.
\textsuperscript{46} Eau Claire County Office of the Coroner, \textit{Eau Claire Coroner’s Reports} (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1920), page nr.
\textsuperscript{47} Eau Claire County Office of the Coroner, \textit{Eau Claire Coroner’s Reports} (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1920), page nr.
\textsuperscript{48} University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, “Historical Census Browser,” University of Virginia Library, \url{http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/index.html} (accessed October 21, 2010).
\textsuperscript{49} University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, “Historical Census Browser,” University of Virginia Library, \url{http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/index.html} (accessed October 21, 2010).
\end{flushleft}
other reference to race or ethnicity made in the Coroner’s reports. In this case, the small numbers of African Americans listed in the Coroner’s reports is supported by their similarly miniscule presence in Eau Claire County. This is a direct contrast to the findings on women, who were just as present in Eau Claire as men were in life, but were not as well represented in death.

Class and socioeconomic status also influenced life and death in Eau Claire. In 1930, there were 15,667 “gainful workers” in Eau Claire County, out of the 20,906 people listed in the county’s urban population. The social status of the male murderers involved in the aforementioned domestic violence cases did not seem to affect the reporting of the crimes; however, this may have been due to the fact that no trial was necessary for those murder suicides. Harold Johnson is listed as a laborer who lived on Barland Street in the 1932 Eau Claire City Directory, though it does not list what company he worked for. Andrew Easterson was a driver for GN Nelson and lived on Summit Avenue. Both of them were working class men not unlike their friends and neighbors, except of course for their violent side.

Issues of Privacy

Murders influence the society in which they occur not only through the crimes themselves, but how they are reported to and perceived by the public. In this case, the Eau Claire Leader Telegram was examined in order to ascertain which and to what extent the violence was reported and perceived by the public.

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50 Eau Claire County Office of the Coroner, Eau Claire Coroner’s Reports (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1920), page nr.
52 Eau Claire City Directory (Dallas: R.L. Polk & Co, 1932), selected dates.
extent murders were exposed to the community by way of media coverage. The evidence suggests that issues of privacy were obviously present when it came to reporting murders. Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary defines privacy as “the quality or state of being apart from company or observation,” which is exactly how most murders in Eau Claire ended up—without being observed by or presented to the public.\footnote{Merriam Webster Online, s.v. “Privacy.”}

For example, the Johnson murder-suicide was not only sensational but also especially gruesome, which today would have made it the perfect fodder to be reported by major news outlets. However, no mention of their deaths was even found. Conversely, the murder of Orpha Easterson by her husband and his subsequent suicide is seemingly very similar to the Johnson case. But there was one fundamental difference: the location of the murders. The Johnson case took place in the privacy of a residential house, while the Easterson murder took place in broad daylight in front of several witnesses. Therefore, it could not be hidden from the citizens of Eau Claire County, and the newspaper wasn’t exposing anything unsavory or previously unknown information by reporting it. As a result, the Easterson murder was given a front page spread in the \textit{Eau Claire Leader Telegram}, complete with pictures of the family. The same is true for the murder of fourteen year old Joyce Sorenson, which also took place on a public street and in front of witnesses.\footnote{Eau Claire County Office of the Coroner, \textit{Eau Claire Coroner’s Reports} (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1920), page nr.} The case was also deemed worthy of the front page, even though it concerned the murder of a child by a man who later pleads insanity. This represents an essential difference between the ways in which murders are reported today and how they were reported in the interwar period. Today, it is assumed that because the law is broken, the crime automatically becomes public knowledge,
especially in the case of lives being taken. But in the interwar period, murders were still considered private unless they actually occurred in public. This is especially true in the case of the murders of women, who were considered a part of the private sphere in life and whose deaths were under investigated as a result. There were others whose place in society was also very private, and subsequently whose deaths were not properly examined. One example of such a death was that of Ed Wendt, an inmate at the Eau Claire asylum who died after presumably jumping from his second story window.\textsuperscript{56} There are no witnesses of this crime listed though, so it is entirely possible that Wendt could have been pushed or otherwise forced to jump or fall, which resulted in his death. Had someone whose role and agency in society been more public or important such as a bank president or factory owner met with the same fate, would their death have been investigated more thoroughly? Or is it true in all cases that it was easier to simply record a death that occurred under mysterious circumstances within the Coroner’s reports and write it off as an accident, medical condition, or old age, rather than investigating the death as a crime or even considering the possibility of foul play. It has been concluded through the research of this case study that in almost all instances, death in the interwar period was considered a thoroughly private affair, even in the case of horrific and dreadful murders. Nevertheless, those that died whose position in the community was a part of the private sphere were even less likely to receive an investigation into or media attention of their death, unless it occurred in the public presence of the community itself.

\textsuperscript{56} Eau Claire County Office of the Coroner, \textit{Eau Claire Coroner’s Reports} (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1920), page nr.
The Judicial Process

Another interesting aspect to murder in a midsized urban area is the judicial process that followed those crimes. In many of the crimes examined in this case study, there was no need for a court case, given the fact that the criminal took his or her own life as well. There were certain criteria that had to be present in order for a case to go to court. First of all, an inquest into the death had to be ordered by the District Attorney, which was not a common occurrence. In fact, out of the 252 deaths, only 28 were deemed worth of investigation.\(^5^7\) After an investigation took place, a Coroner’s Jury hearing was held. The duty of the Coroner’s Jury was to examine the evidence gathered in the investigation that may be pertinent to a criminal trial, and to assist in determining the cause of death.\(^5^8\) A Coroner’s Jury was held after all 28 investigated cases, but only 11 went on to court proceedings. There are a few key cases for which transcripts and documents were found that aid in shedding light on the court processes and proceedings that took place during this time period.

Once such death actually found in court documents was that of the Laura Joyce Sorenson murder, which was committed by Carl Johnson on July 1\(^{st}\), 1937.\(^5^9\) Sorenson was a fourteen year old girl, whom was shot by Johnson while she walked home with a friend. Johnson was apprehended soon after, and was taken into custody. Carl Johnson’s ensuing trial was an interesting and somewhat lengthy one. There are two separate court records that describe the trial: a docket found in the County Court docket


records, and another found in the Circuit Court records. The County Court docket describes the testimony of a witness, one Norman Brandrup. Brandrup made the complaint under oath that Johnson shot Sorenson. However, Brandrup does make the distinction that Johnson did not premeditate the crime. According to the docket, the crime was committed “without a premeditated design to effect the death of said Joyce Sorenson, said killing being perpetrated by an act imminently danger to others and evincing a depraved mind regardless of human life...”60 A warrant is then issued for Johnson charging him with the crime, and the defendant appeared in court three days later, on July 6th of 1937. Johnson appeared in person with his lawyer Malcolm Riley, and the case was arraigned in by V.O. Tronsdale, the district attorney. Johnson informed the court through his attorney that his defense for the murder was insanity. He then waived an examination, and the case was sent to the Circuit Court.61 At the onset of the Circuit Court trial, Johnson’s lawyer made a motion to change the venue of the trial, presumably because he thought his client could not receive a fair one within Eau Claire County. That motion was denied. Johnson is sentenced to no more than fifteen but no fewer than fourteen years in prison, however, it is not noted within the case summary whether the sentencing came by way of plea bargain. It is noted that an appeal was sent to the Supreme Court, which upheld the verdict.

The case of Henry Hudson, a black man killed by John Sather (who was white) in April of 1920 is a striking example of how race and class influenced life and death, as well as another case in which the court became involved. First, there was a coroner’s jury trial. After hearing testimony, the coroner’s jury found that a revolver in the hand of

60 Eau Claire County Court Docket (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1937), page nr.
61 Eau Claire County Circuit Court Reports (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1937), page nr.
John Sather caused the death of Henry Hudson.\textsuperscript{62} However, in court, a verdict of not guilty found.\textsuperscript{63} There is no further investigation into Hudson’s death, nor can is there any mention of it in \textit{Eau Claire Leader Telegram}. This begs the question: was a not guilty verdict handed down because Hudson was a black junk dealer, and John Sather was a white man? While it is obvious that racial violence was far more common in the Deep South, it was not unheard of for such crimes to occur as far north of the Mason-Dixon Line as Eau Claire.

Another factor that prevented many deaths that would today be considered prosecutable crimes from being investigated or tried in court is the fact that they were not deemed as such in the interwar period. For example, there is a case in the Eau Claire Coroner’s Reports of a three year old girl who was playing with another child, a boy whose age is not listed but was definitely older than the toddler. The young boy returned home without the little girl, whose parents began to search for her. The young boy then admitted that the young girl had drowned, and pointed to her small body floating in the river. The death is not investigated, the young boy is never questioned as to how exactly the toddler came to be in the river, nor are the parents of the girl asked why she was allowed to play near a dangerous river without proper supervision. Accidental drowning was listed as the official cause of death, though no actual work was done to determine whether or not it was truly an accident.\textsuperscript{64} Today, this death would have been investigated far more thoroughly, and could have lead to a charge of neglect.

\textsuperscript{62} Eau Claire County Office of the Coroner, \textit{Eau Claire Coroner’s Reports} (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1920), page nr.
\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Eau Claire County Circuit Court Reports} (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1937), page nr.
\textsuperscript{64} Eau Claire County Office of the Coroner, \textit{Eau Claire Coroner’s Reports} (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1920), page nr.
on the part of the toddler’s parents. Another case concerning the death of a child that could have been the fault of that child’s parents is the death of young Marshall Lane, another three year old whose life was cut tragically short. Marshall was riding on a piece of farm machinery pulling a manure spreader, and ended up falling into the equipment. Once again, accidental death is listed as the cause of death; with no question as to what a child of that age was doing near the moving parts of such a dangerous piece of machinery.\textsuperscript{65} The deaths of industrial workers that occurred on the job were also not investigated as possibly being the fault of the companies that employed the deceased workers, as they are today. This is apparent in the death of Charles. H. Meltz, a 46 year old worker who was killed when a pipe exploded at his factory. The Coroner’s Reports indicate no investigation as to whether the work environment was safe, or if the company was in any way responsible for the faulty pipe that resulted in the death of this man.\textsuperscript{66}

\textbf{Conclusion}

Murder is a tragic and horrible event, yet such crimes have held the attention of American scholars as well as popular culture for centuries. The interwar period saw an increase in the number of murders throughout the country, but the information available from both scholarly as well as entertainment sources paint a picture of murder in the interwar period that is not necessarily accurate, because they focus on large urban areas. While factors such as organized crime, bootlegging due to Prohibition, and the

\textsuperscript{65} Eau Claire County Office of the Coroner, \textit{Eau Claire Coroner’s Reports} (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1920), page \textit{nr}.
\textsuperscript{66} Eau Claire County Office of the Coroner, \textit{Eau Claire Coroner’s Reports} (Eau Claire: Eau Claire County, 1920), page \textit{nr}.
Great Depression may have been important factors that influenced murder in large urban areas, they were not as important as domestic violence, class conflict, and race differences in smaller urban areas. A smaller urban area such as Eau Claire County provides a much more accurate picture of murder in the interwar period, because they were not tainted by the media coverage of the enduring and at times more glamorous and attention-grabbing aspects of murder that are still the subjects of Hollywood films nearly a century later. One of the reasons why secondary literature on murder in the 1920’s and 1930’s focuses on large urban areas is due the fact the incidences of homicide in areas like Eau Claire are deceivingly low, and were not occurring for as interesting or sensational reasons. Murders that occurred in midsized urban areas were not classified as such unless they were blatant and obvious acts of homicide and such acts were still not made known to the public unless they occurred publicly. Therefore, it is probable that the murder rates in Eau Claire were far higher than the available data presents, because that information reveals high numbers accidental deaths and suicides that may well have been classified as murders, had they only been properly investigated (See Figures 4 and 5 in Appendix.) In addition, newspapers in large cities sold more papers with articles about large-scale gangster like Capone and Dillinger than they would have had they reported the seemingly more mundane cases of domestic violence deaths like that of Mildred Johnson or industrial accident that killed Charles. H. Meltz. Those deaths are forgotten by history because scholarly literature has chosen to focus on murder in larger urban areas, even though midsized urban areas represent the crime far more accurately, which is why this paper sought to expose homicide in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, in hopes that some of these crimes are no longer without recognition.
This paper also helps to correct the skewed perception of urban murder in the interwar period, which has been brought about in part by popular culture. Books such as *The Great Gatsby* and movies like *The Godfather* propose that the norms and values of urban culture in the interwar period are very different than those suggested by this case study. Not everyone was involved in organized crime, bootlegging, and gun fights in the streets. Rather, wives were being killed by their husbands, black men and the hands of their racial superiors, and children were dying due to neglectful behavior at the hands of their parents. This is the far less glamorous but true nature of urban murder in the interwar period, which is clearly exhibited by the case study done of Eau Claire, WI.
Figure 1: Deaths Reported By Gender in Eau Claire County, 1920-1940.

Figure 2: Murders of Women in Eau Claire

Committed by Men
Committed by Women
Accidental death refers to the following causes: Drowning, hit by a train, hit by a bus, hit by a street car, accident, car accident, and motorcycle accident.
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### Table 2: Top 18 Cities by Murder Rate per 100,000 people- 1926

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City and State</th>
<th>Murders per 100,000 people, 1926</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jacksonville, Florida</td>
<td>75.9 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tampa, Florida</td>
<td>67.6 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birmingham, Alabama</td>
<td>58.8 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memphis, Tennessee</td>
<td>42.4 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans, Louisiana</td>
<td>33.7 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas City, Missouri</td>
<td>32.3 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas, Texas</td>
<td>32.0 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charleston, South Carolina</td>
<td>29.7 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nashville, Tennessee</td>
<td>29.2 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile, Alabama</td>
<td>28.4 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisville, Kentucky</td>
<td>26.7 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston, Texas</td>
<td>25.8 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit, Michigan</td>
<td>25.3 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacramento, California</td>
<td>21.8 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pueblo, Colorado</td>
<td>20.5 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas City, Kansas</td>
<td>18.8 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis, Missouri</td>
<td>18.6 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cincinnati, Ohio</td>
<td>18.2 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winston-Salem, North Carolina</td>
<td>18.1 murders per 100,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eau Claire, WI</td>
<td>9 total homicides per average population between 1920 and 1940 of 41,526.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Bibliography
Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


The Literary Digest. Our 12,000 Killings. July 2, 1927.