Not So Black and White:
Media Coverage of the Ed Gein Homicides

Jack McMahon
History 489: Research Seminar
December 13, 2014
Abstract

This work looks at how news media covers a specific crime from varying levels of concentration. The homicides of Ed Gein had caught the attention of a variety of newspapers from across the nation, and this work looks at how the news coverage varies depending on location. This work breaks the news coverage down into two spheres of influence, the local and non-local and focus only on newspaper coverage during the time after the homicides. The research shows that local and non-local newspapers portrayed the case in different ways not only with Gein but also the community where he was from. The result is that local newspapers are more sensitive the people of the town where Gein is from and to the people involved in the case. The non-local papers were far more of the case and the community.
Introduction

The small village of Plainfield rests almost exactly in the middle of Wisconsin and has an area of less than 2 square miles. This is a small village that has pride for religious tolerance during the 1950s because of the many denominational churches that were located there, although mostly Christian. The strong religious background that would appear to be the core of the family structure of anyone who lived there causes one to wonder how the town gained such notoriety for something so heinous. The crimes of Edward Theodore “Ed” Gein shoved this town of less than 1,000 people into the national spotlight. Gein was convicted of the murder of local women, Mary Hogan in December 1954 and Bernice Worden in November 1957, as well as charged for the exhumation of local graves. Aside from the murders, which were notable enough as they were, it was what Gein had done with the bodies that had made him standout as a criminal. He skinned his victims and created various articles of “clothing” from their body parts. He also crafted other various items from the graves he dug up as well as the women he had murdered. Many journalists and psychologists have written about the horrendous things that Gein did and why people suspect he did what he had done. His acts were so heinous that they have even been replicated in pop culture in movies like Silence of the Lambs, American Psycho, Texas Chainsaw Massacre. After a long and drawn out legal case, Ed Gein was ruled legally insane and was committed to a mental institution after the crimes for the remainder of his life. There has been so much written about the man who committed the crimes, but there is little work that explains the town where he had lived, the small little village of Plainfield or the victims of the crimes.
Gein’s crimes brought a spotlight to the small town of Plainfield, with people wishing to see the house where he grew up and kept the bodies, and swarms of journalists and reporters from all around the US trying to find details to report back to their own newspapers. By looking at these newspaper articles from varying degrees of proximity it is clear how the perception of not only Gein’s crimes were different but also how people thought of the town where he came from.

Prior to the crimes, Plainfield was rarely mentioned in an article in the New York Times or even some of the local newspapers from Steven’s Point or Sheboygan. Now the town is forever associated with Gein and his crimes. Looking at how Plainfield was perceived in local media prior to the murders will display how the town perceived itself: wholesome, tolerant and sane, and how it was written about after the crimes at the non-local level. For the sake of this paper, newspapers that are not within the immediate vicinity of the Plainfield, within 25 miles are considered non-
local. Analyzing the town through the local and non-local through newspapers will display how media often depicts crime and also the details of crime. As mentioned above, a lot was written about the insanity and depravity of Gein’s crimes by criminologists and people interested in his crimes, but there were also articles written about the women who murdered and the town where he came from by reporters and local journalists. Through each level of interpretation each detail of the case is represented differently. The way in which Plainfield is represented was drastically different between these levels and it is because of this discrepancy that the town of Plainfield still has its name associated not for their wholesome background but the terrible crimes of Ed Gein. The local and non-local newspapers show that the closer the publication is to the even the more likely they publication is sensitive to the people and town involved. The farther removed from the town where the murders happened the newspapers are more morbid with the details they include.

**Brief Historiography**

In order for a proper understanding of how this work fits in with other works in history as well as other fields there is a need to understand those works and what they have contributed. Not only research in the field of history is relevant to this work, but also in the fields of media and journalism as well as criminal justice. These are relevant to this work not only because of the methodology of looking at newspaper articles and the fact that it is a study of a specific crime, but it also shows how history is an interdisciplinary field that needs a background of context information to fully comprehend the details of an event in a specific time. All three of these areas, history of
crime, media coverage, and microhistory, have had varying histories of their own and need to be thought of separately to gain a better perception of how they were all related.

Historians have researched the topic of homicide for many years but now they have access to new information. Historians are now able to review and access crime statistics that were formally only available to members of the government. Now that this information is publicly available, historians can analyze this information and make connections and see patterns and trends over periods of time that they were not able to see before. As the years have progressed historians are looking at more statistical information than they had in previous years and looking more at quantitative information to draw conclusions on patterns in American history.

Being able to look at how crime statistics across America have changed makes it easier to assess how the public responds to these crimes. Randolph Roth’s *American Homicide* is the most groundbreaking and new work on the subject of homicide in America. Roth looked at the statistics of homicide across all of America from the pre-colonial era to present. His quantitative research allowed him to notice trends in crime waves in the US and how they relate to events occurring in the country. Roth openly admitted in his book that he did not have many numbers to make claims on anything to recent, because the information had not been released. From the information that was available Roth made conclusions on how people react to changes in events in America and how the general public reacts to crime and the our capacity for crime,

Our capacity of cooperation, teamwork, friendship, empathy, kindness, forbearance forgiveness, compromise and reconciliation is unparalleled, because our happiness and survival depend on the strength of our social groups and on our
commitment to them. But we also have an unparalleled capacity for competition, factionalism, hostility, sadism, cruelty, intransigence, and dominance.¹

Plainfield prior to the crimes of Ed Gein was thought by community members to resemble the beginning of this excerpt; they were friendly and cooperative with one another. With the positive there is also the negative side to this statement as well. Seen in the articles from various non-local newspapers there are multiple accounts depicting Gein as cruel and insane, and stating that it was because he grew up in the town of Plainfield that made him that way. Further study into the newspapers that depict Gein and the town where he committed his crimes affirms the statements made by Roth that while we are able to be compassionate with one another, we are also capable of great cruelty towards others by defaming an entire town for one person’s actions.

In other recent work that looks at trends in homicide, *Murder in America* by Roger Lane explains how sentencing for crimes has changed in the early twentieth century as well as how the public reacts to crime. Crimes had begun to take on different characteristics; views of crimes varied not only in how serious the crime was, but also in who the offender was, and in the after the 1950s began to receive harsher sentences.² Lane speculated that after the World Wars the world united in the ideas of morals and values, which lead to an almost uniform broad reaction to crimes in the US:

> In fact as the 1950s moved into the 1960s it seemed to optimists that the whole world was moving closer, not just in terms of buying Coca-Cola, radios and blue jeans, but also in terms of values, standards, and behavior. Regional differences would flatten in the same way; as the urban industrial revolution spread over the

---

world, peoples everywhere should grow more prosperous, contented, and rational that ever before. ³

It was crimes that would go against these new worldwide morals and values that would gain national notoriety, such as the Gein murders. Homicides by unrelated working class adults were in decline; the most troubling kinds, such as bombings and serial killings, have been on the rise in recognition according to Lane. ⁴ Lane makes a valid argument in saying that the more troubling the crimes became the more attention they would receive not only locally, but also nationwide. Lane’s work further illustrates that people pay attention to crimes of a gruesome nature, such as the Gein case, and less attention to the other forms of crime. As more and more attention deviated from single homicides to stories of serial killings or more macabre murders, the national media began to pick up on what was being read by the public and took advantage of this new topic in news. This national attention towards crime brought a new need to understand how media played and active role in crime perceptions by the public.

Non-Local Newspapers

Looking at the Gein case through the newspaper articles in a non-local setting display the events of the Gein crimes in a different way than the newspapers that covered the case locally. Non-local newspapers relied on the gory and vivid details of the crime and did not focus on the people who were the victims in the Ed Gein murders. Along with ignoring the details on the victims there was a blatant use of graphic language describing

³ Ibid., 267.
⁴ Ibid., 353.
the murders as well as quotes questioning the sanity of Gein. Media and crime are tied together in this case study so it is important to break them down separately to understand how they influence each other together.

In Vincent F. Sacco’s “Media Constructions of Crime” he explains that news coverage of crime has the most dominant presence in mass media. Reports of crime vary across different news media, but it is more dominant than congress and the presidency and even election coverage.\(^5\) This means that people are more exposed to media that relate to crime more than other large news coverage. This gives newspapers a lot of power in what the public sees about a specific crime and what information people are given about it. When newspapers are choosing to write only about the gory details of the Gein case, or about the small town that supposedly corrupted him, that is what the public will see and perceive as true. Although it can be assumed that people were still able to gather information from other sources, newspapers were still used as a source for news information for the public. When the general public from across the US was gathering a lot of the information about Gein and Plainfield from the non-local newspapers that is the only story that they will see. As Sacco points out that not all of this information was selectively presented and was even damaging to the reputation of Plainfield and Gein at the national level, people were only seeing the dark side of the Gein crimes and developing a poor idea of what Plainfield was like as a town. Another one of the main arguments that Sacco makes throughout the article is that media coverage of crime is vast but it is also not totally accurate. He says that one of the biggest problems with news reporting of crimes is that reporters are able to freely interpret information given to them,

making some of the information not wholly valid. The information that the public is now receiving about these events may now not only be defaming but also inaccurate. The other arguments that he makes that are relevant to the news coverage of the Gein case is about the information given about the victims. Crime news often strips information about the victim or is presented in a place where there is no knowledge of the victim. Crime news is often nonlocal and removes judgment of the public in the immediate environment. By not including information about the victim it dehumanizes the victim and makes it easier to talk about how gruesome details and horrible things Gein had done. The image that is created by the news media of the victims of the crimes is also very telling for the type of story they wish to tell about Gein or Plainfield. Many times throughout the news coverage the women are only referred to by their name, age and if they were lucky what they did for a living. In *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*, Mary Hogan and Bernice Worden are mentioned as follows: “Gein had admitted the killing of Mrs. Mary Hogan, 54, at his farm near Plainfield... Earlier Gein had admitted killing and butchering Mrs. Bernice Worden, 58-year-old hardware store owner of Plainfield last Saturday.” Each of the women were attached to Plainfield by the article, which implies that they would embody the lifestyle and attitudes of everyone who lived there. This creates the stark contrast when set up next to Gein who was seen as horrible monster of a human being. As the news story develops more information on Gein and Plainfield come to the surface and Gein’s deeds tarnish the image of humble of Plainfield.

---

6 Ibid., 148.
7 Ibid., 152.
Eammon Carrabine discusses this in his work *Crime, Culture and Media*. Carrabine’s most relevant area of research that relates to the media coverage in Gein’s case would be how news media can provide information as well as entertainment for the masses. He mentions that often news media can blur the distinctions between informing and entertaining the audience. This creates a struggle between providing accurate information and selling copies through entertaining and making news seem more salacious. This would encourage newspapers to write more about the acts of Gein and the “horrible” town where he grew up without any regard to the sensitivity of the people involved or their families, which is seen in the non-local papers. The more disgusting or disturbing the details the printed the more papers they would sell. According to Carrabine newspaper’s desire to print salacious news led to false perceptions of Gein and the entire town of Plainfield.

Gein and Plainfield were not the only victims that had to endure their names being in the national spotlight, the victims of Gein’s crimes were also written about in a way that made them seem unattractive and almost like animals. In an article in the *Sheboygan Press* one of the main headlines reads, “Believe Head of Spinster In Collection,” referring to the victim Mary Hogan. “Spinster” being a derogatory term used to describe an older unmarried woman was not a respectful or even emotionally empathetic way to describe the deceased woman who fell into these unfortunate circumstances. Later throughout the article it again refers to Hogan as a spinster but then goes to describe the acts that happened to her, saying she was “butchered” and was “hanging by the heels”

---

and “dressed out like a deer.” The author of this article made the decision to make the story seem more interesting by including more of the gory details that more local newspapers would not, much like Carrabine had described newspapers would do in circumstances involving gruesome murder. A newspaper writing in this way makes it appear that it is normative practice to write about crimes with such detail. By writing about Hogan in this way it not only includes the morbid details that readers will be drawn to but it also greatly dehumanizes Hogan. It makes her seem less like a human being who had been murdered and more like an animal that had been hunted and was now a trophy for some serial killer. In a way this might make it easier for the writer to write about the horrible death of a person. Making victims appear less human so as to not think about the horrible acts that happened to them. This way it also pulls the focus from the reader towards the terrible things Gein had done and not feel as emotional or sorry about the loss of life of an innocent woman.

In a separate account written in the *Janesville Daily Gazette* they do not refer to any of the woman in such an animalistic way like the *Sheboygan Press*. In the *Gazette* they did mention both the names of Bernice Worden and Mary Hogan with a picture of Mary Hogan in the article. “Gein, 51-year-old bachelor from Plainfield, Wis., has admitted the butchery killing of Mrs. Bernice Worden last Saturday. The Crime Lab source said the test thus far also indicated he killed Mrs. Mary Hogan, 54, who disappeared nearly three years ago from the tavern she operated about six miles from Gein’s farm.” This stands out from the *Sheboygan Press* because it reminds the reader

---

11 Ibid.
that it was in fact people who had died and not just a random collection of bodies. It is not until the reader goes further in the article that the victims are stripped of their humanity again. The article does not write about the women as if they were animals, but reduces them to mere body parts. Describing how they were partial cadavers found amongst unidentified human remains.13 The paper wrote about how the Sheriff, “recognized the face of Mary Hogan among nearly a dozen human heads, or portions of heads, found in Gein’s living quarters,” the women who were brutally attacked were now just a collect of bones who only contribute to the gory details of Gein’s crimes and no longer were people.14 Not mentioning the names of the other victims who had been dug up from graves or associating Hogan with the other human remains strips these people of their identity and makes them another detail to add to a story. This makes them no longer people but another facet of the case making it easier to write if the reader does no have to think of these “heads” as people. Although people will remember Ed Gein indefinitely for the crimes he committed and some might even remember the town where he came from and performed the horrible acts of murder and mutilation, few will recall the women who were victims. These women were victims of Gein and later victims of the news media, stripped of everything that makes them human and reduced to details in a horror story. Their lives were more than just interesting facts to add to the story, which is how the news media presented them. The small details of the Gein case can say more about the town where he came from and the people who were involved in the case.

13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
Local Newspapers

Historians are now conducting research on a smaller scale when understanding history through local history or microhistory. Local history as a field of study explains how small details in larger events, such as the town of Plainfield in the national notoriety of the Gein crimes, can alter views on a topic and create a new angle to look at an event. Sigurdur Magnússon writes how social historians can learn greatly from looking at their own history introspectively. This allows historians to see where their story fits into the Grand Narrative of history.\(^\text{15}\) Knowing how smaller stories or local histories can add detail to larger perceptions of events, provides a deeper insight into those events and what happened. They can change the way events are perceived and upset what we think might have actually happened. They can also aid in the context of why events happened how people of the time perceived events.\(^\text{16}\) The argument made here by Magnússon proves that understanding the history and background of the small town of Plainfield shows an entirely different town than what was written about in the national press. Local papers very close to Plainfield presented an entirely different news story than those that are published nationally. This adds a new layer of complexity to the story behind the news coverage of the Ed Gein murders.

The background information provided by the works of other historians and researchers allows a more insightful look at newspaper articles that covered the Ed Gein murders. The news coverage ranged from the local newspaper in Plainfield, The Sun, to

\(^{15}\text{Sigurdur Gylfi Magnússon, “Social History as ‘Sites of Memory’? The Institutionalization of History: Microhistory and the Grand Narrative”, Journal of Social History 39, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 905.}\)

\(^{16}\text{Ibid., 906.}\)
national newspapers like *The New York Times* and statewide newspapers in between. The stories that are presented in these articles stick to the general timeline of events and overall story of what had happened. When the articles mention or choose not to mention details is clear that the articles are truly different. It is these small details that make the big difference when understanding how media has covered the case and portrayed the town of Plainfield.

A couple days after the arrest of Ed Gein and discovery of the bodies in his Plainfield house, *The Sun* came out with an article discussing the trial of Ed Gein but more importantly how the people of Plainfield were dealing with the national attention. The article mentioned how with Gein being taken to Waupan Prison because he had pleaded insanity would hopefully take away some of the attention from Plainfield and bring some peace of mind to its residents, “Plainfield folks went to church and bout their business, hoping somehow to start forgetting”.17 By discussing the people of the town it goes along with Vincent F. Sacco, because it demonstrates how local papers will discuss the people that are more directly related to the crime, where a large paper would not make the information so personal.

This is drastically different from what was presented in *The New York Times* around the same time as this article was released. In the *Times* article Plainfield is not even mentioned, only the county where they court hearing was taking place, Wautoma. 18 This did not mean that the *Times* did not take the opportunity to make a comment about Gein’s sanity or ignore the humanity of the victims. After Gein had been pronounced insane, all mention of the victims were gone. In one article the victims are mentioned in a

---

way that describe who Gein was, “The judge said he did not believe that Gein, 51-year-old slayer of two women and grave robber.”

Articles prior to this one do mention Bernice Worden and Mary Hogan by name, but then the subject quickly changes to how Gein had collected body parts in his house from robbing graves.

To set the contrast for how the town of Plainfield is portrayed in media coverage of the crimes, there also needs to be a look at the work that is published in the local setting as well. The newspaper *The Sun* that is published in the town of Plainfield provides many different editorials and articles about the people of Plainfield view the town that they live in. This is important to recognize because it shows that there are two sides to the story of Plainfield. There is the outsider perspective which has shown Plainfield and Gein as dark and horrible, but now there must be a the other side which represents Plainfield on a lighter side. It is important to note the bias that comes with the writings of the people who live in Plainfield. While what they may have to say about the activities or events that take place in Plainfield may very well be factual, but how they are represented may not be. That is not to discredit any of the work that they have written or how they may feel about Plainfield, it is only meant to acknowledge that they are not likely to comment on the events that could have led to the murders or prove that Plainfield is a bad town. Like any other town there is an important background that needs to be understood before the interpretation of the people that live there can be expressed.

Little work about Plainfield was written prior to the murders due to the town’s small size and overall lack of historical significance to Wisconsin history. In a work written by Elaine Reetz, she outlined the town’s start in Wisconsin and how it paved the

---

way for the town that we know today. She explained that Plainfield as part of Waushara County had started out in 1848 prior to the Civil War, and became a town reliant on saw mills.\textsuperscript{20} By 1950 the majority of the population that had shifted from working in saw mills to a more agricultural lifestyle. The population of Waushara County where Plainfield is located was just fewer than 14,000 people in 1950. This further illustrates the fact the Plainfield remained a small town that has only maintained a village status in the Government records. According to the Wisconsin Blue Books from 1950 into 1960 the population change in the village of Plainfield was only 110 people.\textsuperscript{21} In a span of 10 years there have only been 11 new residents to Plainfield each year, which demonstrates how this town is not growing as fast as other rural areas might be, but also how this town is able to remain the same over periods of time with little change over the years. Reetz ended her analysis of Plainfield explaining the religious diversity in the town, with stating it had 3 churches of different denominations, Methodist Episcopal, Baptist, and Catholic. When Reetz mentioned the religions of the town it shows how moral and wholesome the town was prior to the crimes, which seems to be a major claim made by the local newspapers. This can be seen in a local newspaper article about Plainfield that one of its residents had written after the scandal surrounding Ed Gein had become popular press,

Plainfield people were always fond of pointing out the tolerance of the community. Native Yankees, whose grandparents came from Vermont and New York state at the time of the Civil War, mingle freely with generations of relative newcomers, whose forebears came from Ireland, Germany, Poland, Scandinavia, and one or two from Italy... Methodists Baptists, Catholics, Lutherans, Assembly of God, Seventh Day Adventists and Congressionalalist work together and cooperate on every level.²²

When historians and local people make references to the religious lifestyle of the town in which they live it makes it clear to the reader how important it is to their culture and community. When horrible crimes become what a small town is known for the local people will try to painstakingly to convey the religious and background of the town. The fact that Reetz goes as far to say that the town not only was religious but had a sense of religious tolerance across different religions, although all of them Christian, shows that the town is inclusive and wants people to feel welcome. This need to represent Plainfield as harmonious and cohesive demonstrates that the people of the village were trying to fight against what journalists and newspapers were saying about their town and by extension the people that lived there. In a letter written to an editor following a scathing editorial about the town of Plainfield, the writer went out of his way to explain that the town is not as bad as the news media makes it out to be.²³

An article that was published in *The New London Press* that was referenced in *The Sun* was one of the most defaming of Gein but especially the town. “Western Waushara county as it melts into the ‘dead heart’ region of Wisconsin…takes on a peculiar, lonely, wild feeling,” this is how the writer referred to the town of Plainfield,

not by name only as something dark and foreign. Later throughout the article it takes a shift to describe Plainfield rather than provide information on the Gein case. Anytime reporters chose to mention Plainfield, they stated how it would make sense that someone would commit such a crime because of where he grew up, “and so when this murder took place on the border of that netherland it was something we’d suspect would take place, could take place.” This image of Plainfield became one that was seen by many people in Wisconsin and the surrounding region. The town of Plainfield became synonymous with the dark middle part of Wisconsin that raised serial killers. The media had portrayed a town that barely anyone had heard of before these murders and now was known nationally as a place where a serial killer could emerge at any time.

After that article had been released and the people from Waushara County were exposed to certain image of the town of Plainfield, some people were not happy about what they were reading and how they were being portrayed. One person even went so far as to write a letter to the editor of the New London Press expressing his discontent with how his town was being described in the paper. In the letter written by Franklin Otto, he remarked that he grew up in Plainfield and was very proud of the town where he lived. He explained that Plainfield had four churches for people to worship within, community service projects that gave toys to children around Christmas, and even how smart and athletic their students were that they even got mentions in the New London Press.

Yes, I live in Plainfield, the town that has four Churches in which to worship, the town that has an advancement association that packs 500 children’s bags for Christmas or sponsors delegates to ‘Trees for Tomorrow’, and many other civic improvements. We have a Tri County High School with students from the

25 Ibid.
region you talk of. We are proud of the students even if you call some ‘Marsh Angels’.

Otto wrote in detail throughout the letter describing the town that he has grown to call home. Everything that he wrote stood in vivid contrast to what had been previously written about Plainfield. Otto did point out that the journalists covering the case did have a job to do. They had a gruesome job to perform, but they left room for a better description of the town in the opinion of Otto.²⁷ Through Otto’s affectionate account of Plainfield we can gather that he feels very strongly about the town he grew up in and has felt an amount of contentment towards what journalists were writing. This letter to the editor also makes it clear that people of Plainfield were not only aware of what was being said about them and the town where they live, but also those they were not happy with it.

Otto was not the only one who thought of the Plainfield as more than just the town that raised a serial killer. Ed Marolla, an editor for the Plainfield Sun, wrote an article that appeared in the Steven’s Point Daily Journal that explained how the people of Plainfield viewed their town and their reaction to the Gein crimes:

> Good things also happen in Plainfield. The people of this little central Wisconsin community, reeling and stunned from the brutal crimes committed in their midst and exposed to the relentless eyes of the entire world by the terrible publicity so reluctantly foisted upon it be world-wide news coverage, hope the outside world will take the time to note and remember some of the nicer things.²⁸

Marolla laments for the people of Plainfield who have been portrayed in such a negative light by the national media against their will. They were forced to endure what the newspaper reporters and journalist were writing about the town they called home against their own will. While Otto explained all of the community service efforts performed in

²⁷ Ibid.
Plainfield and how the people went to church, Marolla elaborated on the type of people that lived there, and how they were all diverse and tolerant of one another. He explained the variety of ethnic heritage within Plainfield, with people coming from backgrounds all across Europe and how they brought with them a variety of religious traditions. He explained that so much of the tolerance and acceptance that occurred within Plainfield was attributed to the religious leaders in the town. How even from different creeds they got along and encouraged others to do the same. One of the most prominent messages that comes out of the narratives provided by the people of Plainfield is about their religious background and how it was the root of the tolerance and community that made up Plainfield. It is clear that religion and a sense of community and values that the people of Plainfield held in high regard. The people of Plainfield rose up to defend their beloved town’s name when their town was given a bad name in the national media.

Although Otto and Marolla may be entirely correct about Plainfield and the wonderful things that make up this town, it does not mean something like this cannot happen here regardless of the number of churches that they have. The myth that bad things do not happen in small communities is one of the problems with understanding rural crime. Joseph F. Dormermeyer and Walter S. Dekeseredy explain that rural crime does happen and should not be so shocking when it does in their book *Rural Criminology*. They point out that despite a town’s collective efficacy, as described by Otto in Plainfield’s ability to sustain itself as a community, does not mean that crime

---

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
including murder cannot happen.\textsuperscript{31} They explain how that it is wrong for people to assume that towns with collective efficacy have very low cases of crime, while places with high social disorganization will have high cases of crime. Homogeneity within a community does not ensure that there will be no crime; it only makes it more noticeable and shocking to the people when it does happen.\textsuperscript{32} They come up with a unique way of explaining how crime in rural areas develops, “Crime, when it occurs in rural communities and to rural people, is an aberration, maybe even an ‘urban invasion,’ ignoring the reality that it is the place based expression of an established social organization and an enduring structural inequality reinforced by localized cultural context on norms, values, and beliefs.”\textsuperscript{33} This would agree with Lane and the theory that as morals and values with a structured community begin to align with one another it makes it more apparent when there is a violation of those norms. This also points out how deviants within the social structure are more visible such as Gein and his murders.

It is when these strange breaks from the norm events occur that the media gets involved in small town crimes. Russell Frank explains it best in an article he wrote about small town crime:

> News is not a found object, but a human construction. At each stage of the journalistic project, from an editor’s determination that an occurrence is newsworthy, to the reporter’s choice of source to interview, and on through the writing editing and placement of the story on page, the news reflect the values and the ideology of the people and institutions that produce it.\textsuperscript{34}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 16.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Russell Frank, “When Bad Things Happen in Good Places: Pastoralism in Big-City Newspaper Coverage of Small-Town Violence,” \textit{Rural Sociology} 68, no. 2: 212.
\end{itemize}
Frank continues to write about how media and journalists write about small towns and how the public perceives the towns when journalists write about them. There is the stereotype that emerged about small towns and how they are supposed to be quiet towns where safety is never questioned. Towns that Frank describes as “key in the ignition and doors unlocked” kind of towns, that seem to describe the atmosphere that the people of Plainfield have created for themselves. Frank explores the idea that even though small towns may be seen as wholesome and safe journalists from bigger cities see them only that way and any horrible act there is out of the ordinary and striking. Violent crime in small towns must be juxtaposed against the safety and wholesome backgrounds of the towns that are written about. Journalists then only write about the crime as some anomalous act, because journalists from bigger metropolitan areas expect that bad things cannot happen in small towns. In cities that are even relatively close to Plainfield write about Plainfield as if it is a picturesque town where things like the Gein murders could never happen. “The macabre crimes committed by Ed Gein were ghastly beyond comprehension; so extremely out of character for a small quiet community. Pulp magazine horror stories are nursery rhymes by comparison,” the opinion of a local citizen shows how despite the horrible crimes committed in Plainfield the image of the wholesome town prior to the crimes still resonate within the writer’s mind. Although the person may not have been from Plainfield and may have only driven through the town or heard of it, they still have knowledge of the small town and therefore have the more respectable image of the town in his/her mind. Perhaps that is the distinction between writing about the town pleasantly as locals have or in a more gruesome spotlight like the

writers from further away. Knowing the town, or the fact that it was a small town, creates the image of how horrible things could not happen there. This offers the question then, why do newspapers that perceive small towns as safe and crime free, write about Plainfield as a breeding ground for America’s next great serial killer? The answer again goes back to Frank, Dormermeyer and Dekeseredy, and Lane were saying about community cohesion and how deviant crime stands out. When towns have citizens that all get along and have similar values, if one citizen does not they will stand out drastically from the rest of the group, making that person an easy target for the press. Frank’s work argued that the rest of the world perceives small towns as places where horrible things cannot happen and when they do it is a shock to the rest of the world. The act and the perpetrator as seen as uncharacteristic of the rest of the town, which did not seem to be the case with the Ed Gein homicides. The newspapers wrote about Gein and Plainfield as if this was expected to happen in a town so small and not as something so surprising. Frank was right that newspapers wrote about Plainfield as a sleepy town, but it was to reporters it was only a matter of time before someone would commit the crimes that Gein had.

The work between Frank and Carrabine seem to have two different targets in mind when it comes to how media portrays crime within small towns. Frank’s work seems to explain that the town is written in a positive light, while the criminal act and/or the criminal are seen as the dark deviant who disturbed the peace. Carrabine makes acknowledges that newspapers need to sell copies to make money and will write scathing things in order to do so, regardless of the target be it small town or serial killer. In articles that seem to avoid the mention of the town Plainfield and refer to Gein as a “head
collector,” this would align more with Frank’s idea of rural crime. In the same article it refers to the skulls and various body parts only as “physical evidence” collected by the Plainfield police almost in a way to distance the town name from gruesome details of the case and maintain some dignity. Although how they mention these various body parts as, “An Avalanche of physical evidence has been recovered which take weeks and possible months to completely evaluate and process,” creates the idea that these victims have become a burden to local officials. Almost in perfect contrast to that article the New London Press did not hold back any of the information describing the town as “the dark heart region,” would have gruesome enough details for people to buy into the idea that small towns are where serial killers come from. Journalists coming from the bigger cities who think of small towns as uneventful and safe, sleepy towns that are boring because boring people live there, might see it as no surprise that something horrible would happen there. This would make a better story of how a sleepy town could have a serial killer emerge at any moment, stirring their readers into finding out more details on the case.

**Conclusion**

It goes without question that media in any form will always be able to sell a story that includes gory details about any murder case. The town that created serial killers sells better than a town that had an anomalous encounter with crime. Journalists will be far more inclined to write about a place or city that they do not know with far more severity

---

38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Frank, “When Bad Things Happen,” 219-220
and critical lens than they would about somewhere they are familiar. This creates the
distinction between the local and national levels of coverage of news. The newspapers
that are closer and more relatable to small towns, such as Plainfield, are able to write
about it in a way that is more respectful not only of the town, but also the people that live
there. The more removed a news source becomes from a region there is more detachment
from writing conservatively about the morbid details. The focus of the newspapers
seemed to shift as well the further removed the publication was. Local newspapers wrote
primarily about the people and the community and how they were all affected by the
crimes of Ed Gein. The non-local papers looked almost exclusively at the acts committed
by Gein. When non-local papers wrote about the community it was never positive and
very brief. The non-local newspapers made Plainfield and Gein seem terrible because
they only focused on the act of the crime and did not give any context to the town where
it was committed. This slanted and one side of the story demonstrates the importance of
microhistory and understanding small details of larger events. It is important to examine
and interpret the information of big events on a small scale to fully understand what has
happened. There was a larger story that was included in the murders in Plainfield, but it
has not received the attention necessary to full grasp what happened over 60 years ago.

Looking through the articles that cover the Ed Gein murders and follow the story
of his acts from Plainfield the distinctions between the local and national coverage of the
case is more transparent and easier to observe. The details of the case including the
gruel acts he performed with the victims were far too attention grabbing for national
newspapers to ignore, but because the crime was in such a small town local news felt the
need to not only provide coverage on the case but also to display their side of the story.
These two factors, the macabre crimes and the small town location, made news coverage so drastically different across the country. No two newspapers covered the story in the same or displayed the information in a neutral perspective. As news media expands more and more with the digital age it will change how crimes and criminal cases are perceived across a country. Due to the ability of national organizations with larger funds and better means to produce news faster and more effectively than smaller news companies, there might be a total extinction of one side of a news story. People may no longer have the access to local news and be only exposed to what national news agencies choose to write about. The more respectful and personal side of the story appears to come from the local news stories and almost seems to keep the national news in check with what they are writing. Whatever the story may be covered in the news, the information given will always vary and each source will provide a different look at how events are to be perceived. It is important to keep this in mind when consuming news, that the story is not always the same and that getting multiple viewpoints does give you the better story.

Media can become so complex and cause only a specific image that newspaper journalists are attempting to create to stick in the readers’ brain that it is important to know what is being read and who is writing. This is important when considering the negative comments as well as the positive ones. The only story that we know is the one that is created by those who witnessed events and interpreted them, so it up to us as readers of history to look at these depictions of events in time and understand that there is more than what is written on the page. For every interpretation there is a meaning behind which changes how certain events are viewed. The Gein case is an example of how two different perspectives can alter the views of events and people as well as town. The
perspective created by the non-local newspapers provides us with what could be a horrible truth about rural towns throughout the United States, but it might also be a dramatized story to make the mundane appear to be more interesting. The opposite of that might be true for how the people of Plainfield might have felt about the town where they are from. They could be explaining the wonderful small town atmosphere of tolerance and community, or they could be ignoring a bigger problem. The important thing to realize is that perspective alters a story. The Gein case gives examples of how the world may have seen an event versus how the people who lived it may have viewed an event. Each viewpoint is valid and necessary when understanding the big story and should be considered before a final judgment on issue is made. We know what the facts are easy to uncover but the story written by others is all in the details.
Bibliography


