

#1, January 22 1976

Biography - Pinkerton, William

Track Down Evidence on Geneva Bank Heist (Over 100 Years Ago)

PART I

(This is the first installment in a four-part series by Julia M. Ehresmann, special services librarian at Geneva Township Public Library and heritage officer on the Geneva Bicentennial Commission.)

Last summer, Geneva Township Public Library came into possession of a detective story by Allan Pinkerton, titled "The Burglar's Fate and the Detectives". For reasons I will explain shortly, Pinkerton qualifies as an almost-local hero, and the library always has a watch out for works by or about him.

"The Burglar's Fate" is a sub-standard literary product. The mechanical, unimaginative prose is typical of late 19th century hack writing. The plot is simple, the outcome is predictable, and the moral injunctions always pop up on cue. Occasional spots of color — a house fire, an encounter with a stereotyped Jewish tailor — do

little to grace the prosaicism of the tale. Why then is this particular story getting so much attention?

Because it reads! "It is a hot, sultry day in August, 18 , and the shrill whistles from the factories have just announced the arrival of six o'clock. . . . At the little bank in Geneva the day has been an active one . . . Suddenly a knock is heard at the outer door, and Mr. Pearson, the assistant cashier, being busily engaged, requested the young lady with him to answer the summons.

"As she did so, two men, roughly dressed, and with unshaved faces, burst into the room. . . . In less time than is required to tell the story, both of them were lying helpless before their assailants, while the open doors of the bank vault revealed the treasures which had excited the passions of these depraved men, and led to the assault which had just been successfully committed."

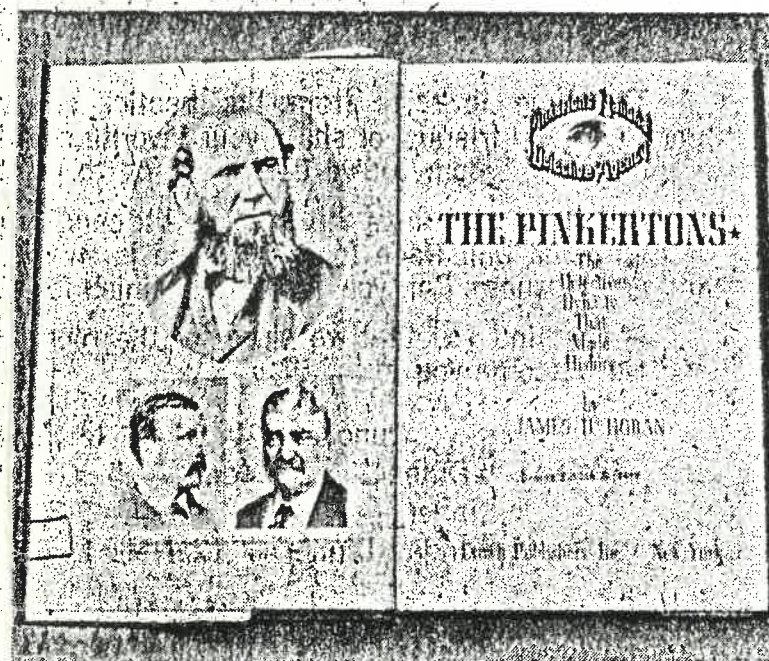
What we appear to have is an account of an actual bank robbery

in Geneva. The book was copyrighted in 1883, so that the teasing reference to the August day of 18 indicates that it was sometime in the 1850's, 60's or 70's.

One is further drawn in by the opening words of the book, in the Preface, "In the pages which follow I have narrated a story of actual occurrence. No touch of fiction obscures the truthful recital. The crime which is here detailed was actually committed, and under the circumstances which I have related."

A number of circumstances about the state of local history study in Geneva turn "The Burglar's Fate" into a case for a modern sleuth. The early issues of The Geneva Republican, which began as the Western Mercury in 1847, were lost in a fire in 1890. The Geneva Historical Society has the Mercury back in 1886 and the Republican from 1892, but the years in which this robbery would

(Continued on page 23)



The Pinkertons in Geneva?

The Geneva Public Library came into possession of a detective story by Allan Pinkerton that indicated he may have been in Geneva because of a bank robbery. Therefore Julia Ehresmann, special services librarian at the library and heritage officer on the Geneva Bicentennial Commission, has been trying to track down more information about Pinkerton. One of the books she used was entitled "The Pinkertons" and told about the dynasty of the detectives.—Republican Photo.

(OVER)

Bank Heist

(Continued from page 3)

have occurred are undocumented by newspapers.

William C. Wood, chairman of the board of the First National Bank of Geneva, records the spotty history of banks in Geneva in his booklet "The First 65 Years," published in 1972. Before 1880, when the Gaunt and Fields bank was formed as the predecessor of the State Bank of Geneva, there had been at least two independent banks. The West and Moore Bank flourished in the 1850's on the north side of State Street just west of First Street. A Mr. Graf had the second bank, on the north side of State just west of Third Street between 1870 and 1873.

Some clues in Pinkerton's account of the robbery indicate that if the event really happened here, it would have to have been in Graf's bank. For one thing, Allan Pinkerton refers to the assistance of both his sons, Robert and William, who had taken charge of the Chicago and New York offices about 1870 when their father's health had begun to fail.

Passages in "The Burglar's Fate" give a picture of Geneva as it must have looked in the 1870's: set in a landscape "beautifully interspersed with gentle elevations and depressions," "the old mill, weather-beaten and white with the accumulating flour dust of ages," "the school-house, a large brick building." These things point to a conclusion that what "The Burglar's Fate" records may have been an event lost to our history.