

B. C. Yates Was Oldest Detective In Northwest About 93 Years Ago

Part IV

(This is the fourth and final installment in a series by Julia M. Ehresmann, special services librarian at Geneva Township Public Library and heritage officer on the Geneva Bicentennial Commission. The series began by telling how the library came into possession of a detective story by Allen Pinkerton that told about a bank robbery in Geneva. Then Mrs. Ehresmann told the various sources she tapped to track down the story. Last week Captain Yates was introduced into the story.)

"B. C. Yates is the oldest detective in the northwest, commencing the business in New York nearly 50 years ago (that would have been about 1833), and being the first to follow it in the early settlement of Illinois and Wisconsin, when it was not trivial in its dangers nor light in its hardships.

"He has been in every phase of the business, at the head of private detective agencies, in the service of Chicago and other municipal corporations, and for years in the employment of the United States government.

"During these years most of the prominent detectives of the

present day served with him, and many of them, Pinkerton among their number, have been his subordinates. In fact, the latter commenced the profession under him, and served an apprenticeship of several years in his employ."

So reads the introduction to a book privately printed in 1883 by Yates about his career in crime detection. B. C. ("Tote") Yates called himself "Pioneer Detective of the Middle West." He rose from Sheriff of Kane County to federal counterfeit detective in 1851.

He refers to having parted professionally with Pinkerton by 1853, when Yates was appointed a city detective in Chicago. In 1855, when Yates formed a private detective agency. The title of captain was acquired in 1857 when he was appointed captain and chief of the Chicago Police Force.

His career was punctuated almost every two years by elections which turned out of office the men who had appointed him. In 1859 he went down with Mayor "Long John" Wentworth, who was also editor of the Chicago Democrat.

Yates's sensitivity about Pinkerton's claim and fame as "America's first private detec-

tive" seems to arise from the fact that Yates was the one who had gotten Pinkerton started in the field. In fact, the Yates journal suggests to me that their careers were very closely parallel. Yates was a Chicago city detective by 1853. So was Pinkerton.

Surprisingly, the exact founding date of Pinkerton's own agency, called the North-Western Police Agency, is not documented. An early undated letterhead advertises:

Allan Pinkerton and Edward A. Rucker, under the style of Pinkerton & Co., have established an agency at Chicago, Illinois for the purpose of transacting a General Detective Police Business in Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan and Indiana.

Pinkerton's agency was firmly established by 1856, when Kate Warne was hired as the nation's first female detective. Interestingly, Kane County is mentioned elsewhere as the first county in America to have engaged women as sheriff's deputies, though that was after Yates's and Pinkerton's time.

In the end what makes Pinkerton a far more important historical personality is that he stayed with the profession of crime detection. He surrendered his local identity to the national arena.

Capt. B. C. Yates of Geneva must



Sheriff Yates' Rocking Chair

Julia Ehresman, author of the current series in the Republican about Pinkerton and Yates, is pictured at the Geneva Historical Society Museum with a rocking chair that belongs to B. C. Yates, who was sheriff of Kane County in the 1800's.—Republican Photo.

have been a far more likable man. But his career as a detective was less single-minded. In 1858, when he went out of office as Chief of Police, he and his two eldest sons John and Louis, entered into a ruinous venture. They chartered a boat — named the "Geneva Pioneer" — and set out for Pike's Peak.

Capt. Yates intended to build a

saw-mill there and his son John had his sights on gold. They left Chicago on March 3, 1859. When the ship's pilot deserted in Augusta, Mo., on April 18, Capt. Yates returned to Geneva. John and Louis went on to Colorado on the overland route. Louis' diary is a short but highly flavorful section of the Yates manuscript.

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B. C. Yates

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The Civil War broke out. Capt. Yates turned seriously to farming to try to recoup some of the great losses on the ill-fated Pike's Peak adventure. His daughter Jessie Yates Brown (Jessie after Jessie Fremont) recorded that he continued to commute by train to Chicago (from Elburn) to keep active in his detective practice at the corner of Canal and Randolph until about 1877 or 1878. The journal seems to have been set down in those years.

From the manuscript: "She described her father in those days as a man about five feet nine inches tall, stocky, quick, alert and intense. He had a very happy disposition . . . Evenings on the farm he would trot her on his knee and sing ballads verses and verses long . . . He loved his farm, and knew every tree in the woods . . . They had a splendid orchard, protected on three sides by an osage orange hedge, and they always had many kinds of apples, and peaches by the wagon load." Capt. Yates died in 1890, just short of eighty years.

For all the fame of his most famous protege from Dundee, Geneva's Bartholomew C. Yates looms as a large figure in a time "not trivial in its dangers nor light in its hardships." To know Yates is to know something fine about Geneva's past.

For first-rate reading I commend the Yates manuscript which belongs to the Geneva Historical Society. Geneva Township Public Library has the classic Pinkerton biography to date, James D. Horan's "The Pinkerton's: The Detective Dynasty That Made History" and Sigmund A. Lavine's "Allan Pinkerton, America's First Private Eye" as well as the four Pinkerton detective stories mentioned in Part II of this series.

Burglarize House

A house belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Gus Langston at 103 Northampton was burglarized sometime Monday. The door was pried open and \$767 worth of jewelry was taken from a second floor bedroom. Entry was gained by prying a door open. Officer Keith Landberg investigated for the Geneva police.