

The unsolved murder of surveyor Frank L. Teal Part 1

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Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from local historian Carney Rhinevault's soon-to-be-published book, "50 True Stories of the New York to Albany Post Road." See next week's issue for the conclusion.

Even in the mid-20th Century, once a traveler in the Hudson Valley ventured off the Post Road, he very likely would find himself bouncing along on winding, hilly and rutted dirt back roads. One of those roads was Stone Church Road, about halfway between the villages of Rhinebeck and Red Hook. Highway crews would save these difficult roads for last when it came to repairs in the summer or plowing in the winter. Most people, who lived on the back roads, would complain that the town should use their taxes to fix the darn roads, but there was one man who seemed to enjoy the isolation.

An old-fashioned lifestyle

Frank L. Teal wasn't exactly a hermit, but he was very close to being one. He was born in a sturdy, eight-room house on Stone Church Road, about two miles east of the Post Road, in 1867 to parents of Palatine heritage. He still lived in the same place in 1949 at the age of 82. In all that period, very few improvements had been made to the house; it had only been painted a couple times and vines would often envelope the place up to the roof line. Water was still hand-pumped from a well in front of the house and an outhouse in the back served as a bathroom. No electricity had been brought to the property, so kerosene lamps were used. No telephone provided instant communications with the neighbors; letters and parcel post were the slow methods. A butcher in Rhinebeck even would send supplies of meat to the Teal home by mail on a weekly schedule.

The inside of Frank's home was as stark as the outside. Most of the furniture, including a large piano, had been pushed against the walls and covered with sheets and blankets. On top of the blankets would be piled books, magazines and Frank's surveying papers. For the occasional guest, a few stiff and uncomfortable chairs and a black horsehair sofa were left uncovered by clutter. With no electricity or radio, family entertainment was provided by the piano (when it was uncovered), a flute, an oboe and a very old, hand-cranked gramophone (a wooden box with no lid and a loud speaker in the shape of a horn attached to the handle, which holds the needle). There was no furnace, so two wood-burning stoves on the first floor heated the two-story house. The house was an anachronism, and so was Frank L. Teal.

In his youth, he would walk everywhere he needed to go - no need for a horse. As he reached adulthood, he afforded himself the luxury of a bicycle, complete with a speedometer and watch strapped to the handlebar. Although he refused to own a car, he occasionally would accept a ride from a kindly neighbor or friend.

Surveyor and gentleman

By all accounts, Frank was a serious, but friendly guy. Everybody knew him and liked him, although they probably wondered about his eccentric habits. He had lived at his Red Hook home all but a few years. His chosen professions were surveying and civil engineering and to that end he had wandered far from home only once to receive a higher education.

According to an article by Helen Chapman, published in The Barrytown Explorer on July 27, 1959: "After graduating from Hartwick Seminary (now Hartwick College) in Oneonta, N.Y., he taught school for a time in Germantown, then went to New York City, where he got most of his engineering training in the office of famed bridge engineer David B. Steinman. While there, during the 1890s, Teal worked on the City Transit System and various big bridge projects. He then decided he wanted more formal education, and entered St.

Stephens (now Bard) College with the Class of 1901. But when his father died in 1899, he returned to the family farm and went into business as a surveyor to support his mother and two sisters."

For a 50-year period between 1899 and 1949, Frank L. Teal was the only surveyor in the northwestern Dutchess to southwestern Columbia County area. Two devastating world wars and the Great Depression occurred during his career, but his business monopoly could have made him a rich man. However, that didn't happen. He insisted on using the same 19th century transit with which he had started, and never once raised his prices during the 50 years.

According to The Barrytown Explorer article, "It is reported that after surveying the Bard campus for its WPA-built 'barracks,' the contractors in Kingston returned his bill, saying it was too low to be acceptable to the authorities in Washington."

Somehow he would strap his transit, steel tape, transit legs and other bulky equipment on his bicycle and bounce along for miles to reach his job site. Customers would wonder how he kept his transit in adjustment, and many of the wealthier clients, who lived on the great estates along the Hudson River, would send their chauffeur to pick him up. His client list of more than 1,000 included the Roosevelts, Dinsmores, Dowses, Astors, Millses and Livingstons. His two biggest engineering jobs were the Red Hook water system and the Rhinebeck School.

According to The Barrytown Explorer, "Robert L. Decker, who worked with Teal and inherited his records, recalls that ... he did everything the long way, by hand. He kept his records in old envelopes saved from incoming mail. Benson Frost, who knew Teal well, recalls that his sister could never get him to eat regularly; if Teal was in the field at mealtime, he would work on until he was done. He feared that if he took a break, the second part of his figuring would be in a different shade of ink."

Frank Teal was a traditionalist in the way he dressed for work. During the 19th Century (and perhaps before) surveyors would wear clothing out on a field job that would seem appropriate in the office today. He would invariably wear a light-color, flannel three-piece suit with a white stiff collar shirt and black tie. On his head, he wore a felt fedora or sometimes a derby. For wet or winter weather, his legs were covered with "buttoned kaki gaiters, above which his heavy outdoor black and white speckled trousers bagged grotesquely," according to an unpublished short story from 1935 by Deborah Dows of the Egbert Benson Historical Society.

Always a bachelor

When Deborah Dows once complimented Frank on his surveying skills and asked him why he had not moved to a big city to earn a better income, Frank answered her by stating "that happiness is not to be found by going out into the world, but rather, that it is to be found at home, by giving pleasure to others, by lightening other peoples' burdens. When I realized that truth, I didn't need to leave home. There was enough for me to do here."

Frank remained a bachelor his entire life, at first living with his parents and two sisters and then, toward the end of his life, with his only remaining sister, Eve. While at Hartwick Seminary, he apparently fell in love with an Oneonta girl, but, alas, she married another.

"For many years Teal, at Christmas or Easter, would send a small gift - often a bunch of violets - to the lady, and she would write to thank him and relate her news of the previous year. Even this interchange stopped long before he died," according to The Barrytown Explorer article.

Frank's mother died in 1942 at the age of 96 and Frank's sister, Eve, died in May 1949 while in her 70s. So Frank was alone, living the life of a lonely old man of 82. His nearest neighbors, the Zietz family, were half a

mile away on Stone Church Road. Shortly before Eve died, she had asked Mrs. Isoline Zietz to look in on Frank every day and make his supper meal and Mrs. Zietz had agreed. To do this, Isoline came by in the evening, prepared the hot meal on one of the wood-burning stoves, chatted with Frank while he ate, and left a glass of warm milk for him to drink while he did paper work on his survey projects. The next morning she would come by to clean up.

Frank Teal's last evening

The evening of Dec. 22, 1949 was like all the others since Eve had died, except for one thing - it was Frank Teal's last evening. The county coroner calculated that some time between 10 and 11 that night, somebody approached the west window of Frank's work room and shot a 22-cal. bullet through Frank's head. As usual, Mrs. Zietz came by the next morning, but when she found the door locked, she didn't come in to clean up. She later told the police that she assumed Frank had left home early in the morning and had mistakenly left the door locked.

A gruesome discovery

All day on Dec. 23, 1949, Mrs. Isoline Zietz felt uneasy, so when evening came, she took her 19-year-old son with her to the Teal house. Again finding the door locked, she sent her son to a back window, which he pried open. Immediately, he cried out that there was smoke in the house, but crawled through the window anyway. Entering Frank's workroom, he was shocked to find an unrecognizable, blackened corpse smoldering in the remains of a rocking chair by the stove.

According to a Dec. 24 Poughkeepsie New Yorker article, "He (Frank) was clutching the charred remains of a five and one dollar bill in his burned hands."

In an apparent attempt to cover up the crime by burning the house down, whoever had shot Frank had dumped the contents of one of the kerosene lamps on Frank and set him on fire. The house was closed up so tightly, however, that the fire only burned Frank and his rocker.

"The windows of the house were smudged by the heat of the fire and smoke," according to a Poughkeepsie New Yorker article, published on Christmas of 1949.

There were no relatives, other than a distant cousin, left to mourn the loss of such a fine and noble person. Many friends and neighbors were deeply saddened, but they could console themselves knowing that Frank never knew his instant death was coming. He had begun a survey for Fred Cotting in Red Hook on Dec. 22 and probably worked until late afternoon. He had drunk half a glass of milk just before the very moment of his death.

Motives?

Why would somebody murder such an innocent old man? State Police investigators and Dutchess County District Attorney J. Vincent Grady tried their best to answer that question, but every lead went cold. The State Police had 15 men on the case for several weeks (at a time when that number of manpower was unusual). People in the Red Hook-Rhinebeck area were scared.

The most obvious motive was robbery.

"A watch owned by Mr. Teal and possibly some money, were missing from the house," according to the Dec. 25 Poughkeepsie New Yorker article.

Was he counting money while sitting in his rocking chair?

"It was reported that he had cashed sizeable checks in the Rhinebeck Bank the day before the murder. It was rumored that he had given a \$100 bill to a neighbor 'to buy a washing machine,'" according to an article by Helen Chapman, published in The Barrytown Explorer on July 27, 1959.

The District Attorney stated in the newspapers that he wished anybody, who had received a \$100 bill since Dec. 22, should report it to the police. Several bills showed up, but none had a suspicious origin. Perhaps a drifter had killed Frank, but that seemed unlikely, because his house was so far east of the Post Road, the usual route for tramps.

Perhaps some punk teenagers shot Frank. A search was organized for 22-cal. guns in the possession of teenagers and, again, several were found. Two boys (one was the Zietz boy who found Frank) were arrested for illegal possession of a dangerous weapon, but they had alibis from several people.

Other motives were explored: a disgruntled client or maybe the loser in a property line dispute? Even the motive of jealousy was raised.

"Ink-scribbled postcards were received at State Police headquarters, the DA's office, and The Poughkeepsie New Yorker, stating that jealousy was involved. But these never led anywhere. After all, Frank was 82 years old!" according to the Chapman article.

One good lead

Finally, in mid-January, the police thought they had their man, or more correctly, a 15-year-old boy. He had run away from a foster home in Red Hook and was arrested on petty larceny charges in Germantown, Columbia County. During interrogation, he confessed to killing Frank, but then told the police so many incorrect details about the crime scene, that forensic psychiatrists concluded he had made the whole thing up. He also had no means of getting to the Teal home on Dec. 22, 1949.

The youth was sent to reform school, but a year later, escaped and returned to Columbia County. He stole a car in the Town of Livingston, was picked up on the Post Road, and re-arrested. Again, he claimed to have killed Frank, "then recanted his confession, saying that 'he liked to see the police running around,'" according to the Chapman article.

He was sent back to jail, and apparently stopped confessing to the Frank Teal murder.

Another possibility

The author of this column, a few times during his life, has heard elderly or sick people say something like, "I'm so old, I wish somebody would just shoot me."

Wouldn't it be strange if Frank Teal was also thinking the same thing?

Teal's last close relative, Eve, had died in May 1949, and 82-year-old Frank was living alone in that big old house with no way to give pleasure to others or lighten other people's burdens.

He had such a strong character that maybe he took some of his \$100 bills and paid somebody to shoot him when he least expected it.

Carney Rhinevault is the Hyde Park town historian. He has written two books about local history, "Colonel Archibald Rogers and the Crumwold Estate" and the soon-to-be-published "50 True Stories of the New York to Albany Post Road." He is also the author of a weekly column in the Hyde Park Townsman.

Tatiana Rhinevault, the illustrator of this column, is currently the featured artist at The Hyde Park Free Library Annex. Her work depicts local scenes in watercolor and oil paintings.