

The Lancaster Legend

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HE HAD IT COMING: THE SORG MURDER (Part 1)

by *Benedict Maryniak*

Wind as cold as death blew across Lancaster on February 4. A dozen horse-drawn sleighs and buggies blocked Aurora Road where it crossed Slate Bottom Creek and the Lancaster town line, as a jumble of people swarmed around Michael Sorg's farmhouse. The neighbor families were there, along with Dr. Ernest W. Ewell, town constable Joe Merkle, Father Scheffels who had administered Extreme Unction, and nine more local men who had been dragged from their beds to form a coroner's jury. Erie County Sheriff Andrew Kilgallon and Under-sheriff Charles O'Connor were in the somber-faced crowd, as well as several of their deputies and Buffalo Police detectives. Many feet had churned the farmyard into a sea of mud and investigators could only hope that those first on the scene had looked for footprints. The homeowner had been dead since 8:30, having been mangled with an axe in his bed before dawn. Children cried inside the house.

Around four o'clock that morning, Magdalena Sorg, her crazed eyes red as lanterns and toddler Isabella in her arms, came screaming across Aurora Road to Joseph Diemert's place. A man in a white hood was clubbing Michael. Diemert was Michael's cousin and he immediately grabbed a lantern and a baseball bat and followed Lena's footprints. Sprawled in his bed, Sorg was a doll that had lost its stuffing. Shallow breaths bubbled up through bloody ooze. Not a club, thought Joe, but an axe. Teenager George Sorg stood frozen to the floor in horror but he snapped out of it when Joe told him to get Doctor Ewell. Neighbors Jim Moore, George Feuerstein, and Jacob Bentz soon appeared with more makeshift armament. After snorting the smell of slaugh-

ter out of their noses, the night-shirted foursome cautiously explored the farmyard, starting at every shadow. They found no marauder, no abandoned weapon, no footprints in the snow, and no tracks on the road. The farm's watchdogs -- a bulldog and German shepherd notorious for harassing passers-by -- were silent.

Things grew less intelligent after a plague of reporters reached the Sorg farm by late afternoon. Eleven newspapers fought for Buffalo's attention during 1898, and the stiff competition had turned them into purveyors of seamy malarkey. The press would quickly make this into a matter of political commerce for District Attorney Daniel J. Kenefick and an embarrassment for law enforcement. The first to be lambasted was Deputy Sheriff John P. Sommers, who lived right up the road. He had not rushed to the Sorg farm at first call, but waited until the victim expired and the matter officially became a murder. Magdalena Sorg caused some excitement when she told Assistant D.A. Fred

Haller that the murderer resembled Michael Rogaski, a man who had recently traded cows with her husband. The papers described him as "a Polish farmer with an unenviable reputation whose home is a shanty in the woods along William Street," but he had a solid alibi. He had been at home plucking chickens with his wife and mother. Three Buffalo papers managed to report the murder on the day it occurred. "KILLED BY A MASKED MAN, HIS WIFE SAW THE AX DESCEND ON HIS HEAD!" "AXED BY A ROBBER IN HIS BED!" Axe murders were sure-fire crowd pleasers thanks to Lizzie Borden's notoriety six years earlier.

That Friday in 1898 ended on a terrifying note -- a bloodthirsty lunatic was at large in Lancaster. In light of recent events, people in the village found it easy to



But where is Michael Sorg's grave?

believe. Every night of the past summer, there had been armed patrols by a Vigilance Committee. A curfew had been imposed and the Village's twenty new electric street lamps were left burning all night instead of economically being cut at midnight. There had been several instances in which intruders were found hiding inside homes, silently waiting to rob their sleeping owners. On August 16, 1897, the *Lancaster Enterprise* advised householders to: (1) see that doors and windows are securely fastened every night, (2) not shoot at anyone in the yard without first speaking to them, as it may be a special patrolman, (3) be sure that when leaving the house unoccupied during the day that all doors and windows are securely fastened, (4) not let peddlers and agents into the house, as they may be the advance agents of burglars, and (5) not let all family members leave the house if the fire alarm should ring at night. "It may be an alarm rung by burglars to attract you away from home." This final bit of advice was strong stuff, indeed,

Lancaster New York Historical Society

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<http://lancasterpast.org/society>

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Town Historian: Special
Arrangements
Little Red Schoolhouse (Bowen at
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for people who had seen large portions of their community annihilated by runaway fires during 1894 and 1896.

Half the town showed up for the coroner's inquest on Saturday morning, February 5, 1898. Inside the jam-packed, spanking-new Town Hall, Justice George Bingham repeatedly called for silence as statements were taken from Mrs. Sorg, her son George, and several witnesses. Dr. Ewell reported that a six-inch hatchet blade had been driven into Michael Sorg's head as if attacked by a madman or "someone with a terrible hatred for him." The neighbors who answered Lena's cries had found the snow around the house undisturbed. Others remarked on the curious silence of Sorg's watchdogs. The coroner's jury determined that a murder had been committed by an unknown person or persons. Fully aware that this case would be front page news, Assistant D.A. Haller performed for voters. In a voice with an edge on it, he voiced suspicion of Lena and George, ordering them taken to District Attorney Kenefick for further interrogation. Armed deputies helped mother and son aboard a yellow trolley of the Buffalo, Bellevue, & Lancaster Electric Railway. Haller then directed Sheriff Kilgallon and Buffalo Police Detective Patrick Cusack to immediately conduct another search of the Sorg farm.

Neat homesteads flew past the sleigh full of lawmen as four splendid horses drew them back to the Sorg farm. There were no more than thirty houses on the stretch of Aurora Road between the trolley tracks (modern-day Como Park Boulevard) and the town line. The Sorg dwelling stood out because it was decayed, dismal, and forlorn. It actually looked like a place where murder had been committed. The front section was two stories high with a one-story kitchen in back that ended in a woodshed. In the nine years since his father's death left him owner of the structure, Michael Sorg had never installed a single window! "There was a sickening darkness inside," wrote one journalist. Another reporter mused that the place was so bare of possessions that it couldn't really be described as "in disarray," though it unquestionably was dirty. "A dirtier, more ill-kept house than the Sorg home could probably not be found," Buffalo tabloids trumpeted. "There is not a yard of carpet in the entire building and dirt is weaved in festoons about the ceilings. The Italian slums of Buffalo are models of cleanliness beside it - and the Sorgs are born Americans though they are Catholic." In addition to a few sticks of furniture, the only other items on the first floor were a row of Madonnas hung along a wall like duck decoys. They were gifts from Michael's uncle, the late Father Joseph Sorg, pastor of Saint Louis Church. Spider webs covered the walls of the front room on the second floor, where several bushels of sour-smelling corn were stored. The other second-floor room had two beds used by Leona (20), Louisa (16), Julia (14), Frank John (11), Daniel R. (9), Estelle (6), and Eugene (4). The upstairs rooms

had no ceilings and those in bed saw the roof peak. In the first-floor kitchen was the small bedroom used by Mr. and Mrs. Sorg. George slept on a mattress in the front room.

Though several waves of the officially sanctioned and morbidly curious had swept over the farm, the renewed search turned up "new evidence." There were great gouts of dried blood on George's mattress, and a blood-stained dress at the bottom of a trunk stuffed with clothes. The greatest shock belonged to a Buffalo detective sergeant who lifted the lid of a box to see a hatchet. Chief Detective Cusack sped to the village's only public telephone -- a "Bell station" on Central Avenue -- to call the District Attorney, who was interrogating Lena and George Sorg. Daniel Kenefick was a stubborn, red-faced man -- tough-willed, full of strong opinions, and prone to rashness. He knew how people betrayed each other and his voice had been like an augur drilling into the souls of George Sorg and his mother, but he could

not set one against the other nor pick a hole in their stories. "Let them go back to their farm, Dan," Cusack shouted into the receiver. "We can always pick 'em up again. Hop a trolley out here and see what we've found!" Lena Sorg also received a telephone call. All the way from Albany, it was "Handsome George" Davis, who advised her to retain him as her attorney. Campaigning as a "friend of labor and of the people," George A. Davis had been Lancaster town supervisor from 1888 through 1897, and a state senator since 1895. Senator Davis told Lena she was being railroaded. "Don't answer any more questions -- tell Kenefick to talk to your lawyer."

While a photographer took views of the Sorg farm and a civil engineer mapped the house interior, District Attorney Kenefick convened a task force in the banquet room of the American House hotel. Lancaster Police Justice George Huber read neighbors' affidavits while Cusack and Kilgallon reviewed evidence with the district attorney. Dozens of theories were proposed and shattered that night in formulating the People's case. In the dead of night, deputies roused George Sorg from bed and hustled him to the American House. Townsfolk had recently seen two hostile encounters between the victim and his oldest boy -- one during a parents' night

at George's school and another in a village saloon only two weeks before the murder. He had knocked his father to the ground in one altercation and shouted that he should "kill the old fool and be done with him." But at the American House, George was no longer a country boy. "He did not mourn, he did not cry" but wore an obstinate poker face and refused to answer questions. Before clocks struck Sunday, February 6, there was a John Doe warrant for the first-degree murder of Michael

Sorg. George was strong-armed up Central Avenue to Town Hall where Justice Huber ordered him held as an accessory witness and set bail at \$5,000. A special BB&L trolley then whisked away the entire party -- lawyers and lawmen to their homes, the hatchet for "microscopic exam," and George to the calaboose.

There was something tight as a clenched fist inside the teenage son of the murdered man, and the District Attorney was sure he could reach into him and pry that fist open. George would connect his mother to the crime. The prosecutor had already counted the beads in a rosary

of scandal he would hang around the neck of Magdalena Sorg. There hadn't been any footprints or tracks in the snow on the fatal morning. The watchdogs were not alarmed. Children in the upstairs bedroom had heard their parents' shouts earlier on February 4. Lena's bloody garment had been found and there was blood on George's mattress. The hatchet seemed the likely murder weapon. Mrs. Sorg's story of cleanly escaping from the murderer was far-fetched. Awakened by a hatchet cleaving her husband's skull, Lena not only gathered her thoughts but her 16-month-old daughter as well, managing to stand up next to the murderer and run past him. Had it been a madman so mad that he never swung his blade at her or gave chase? It would be easy to convince a jury that Magdalena Sorg had been goaded to homicidal rage in messy increments by foiled dreams, foul chores, and that filthy home.

Born during 1853 on her father's 125-acre farm in Blossom, Lena Rost grew up in abundance and security but became a martyr to her love for Michael Sorg. Married in 1877, a baby came each of the next ten years and six survived. When his father opened a saloon in Swormville and deeded the farm to him, Michael purchased a few dozen cows and became a dairy man.



Sen. Davis to Lena Sorg: "Don't answer any more questions."

Pleased as he was to have escaped a dirt farmer's daily grind, Michael changed after he took sick and lay in a fever for over a month. When he came to his senses, Lena found her husband was "as cold as a glacier, interested only in money." At six feet, 140 pounds, Michael Sorg was a tall fleshless man who was easy to dislike on sight. About a year before his death, Sorg's knee was fractured by a horse's kick. Soon, the badly disabled man's pain began to dictate the rhythms of the household. When he drowned the ache in alcohol, a dark anger would fill him up like boiling water in a kettle. Lena had his milk business added to all her other chores and her soul began to freeze until she felt her spirit was encased in ice. Life had lost all meaning. She felt she had no future at all, only a barren stretch of meaningless years to use up. There was nothing to gain in the mean, hard pigsty on Aurora Road except pain and more pain. Michael forced her to work his farm and made her children live in filth, always hungry. After long years of balancing between smoldering resentment and mousy martyrdom, had Lena finally lashed out?

Throughout Sunday and Monday, Aurora Road was clogged with buckboards, bobs, and wagons which brought visitors to the Sorg wake. After being trapped indoors all winter, it was a spectacle too sordid to miss. Fred Seeger usually managed to bury the dead with adequate decorum even though he ran his undertaking business from the same shop as his furniture store on

East Main Street, but there was to be no propriety whatsoever for Michael Sorg's obsequies. With a picture of the Virgin Mary overhead on the wall, the mangled cadaver lay on the same sort of hemlock plank used to make sidewalks in the village. People were crammed elbow to elbow in the bare, dim windowless room, packed so close together that some swooned from the smell of perspiration combined with the rotting corn upstairs. Seeger stood at the bier and watched farm families shuffle past on February 6 and 7. If Fred left his post for only a few minutes, these salt-of-the-earth types would pick the cotton wads out of Sorg's gaping head wounds in order to get a better view of the damage. Lena Sorg sat in the kitchen surrounded by her sobbing brood and a sheriff's deputy nearby.

Don't miss the conclusion of this rivoting historic tale in the next issue of The Lancaster Legend.



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