

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A NUMBER OF NORMALLY UNRELATED factors worked together quite effectively to isolate Isadore, Michigan, from the outside world at the turn of the previous century. Geography was the first of these. We Michiganders love to hold up our right hand, palm out, to anchor some specific locale in the lower peninsula of our state. Using this time-honored system, Leelanau County is the pinkie fingernail, slipping away slightly from the hand's other digits into the vastness of Lake Michigan. The West Arm of Grand Traverse Bay divides this little finger further. Though Isadore is located inland, uncharted swampland, acres of farmland, and finally what amounted to a three-sided moat separated the village from the rest of the state, the country, and the world beyond.

Working alongside geography were two other random isolators, religion and nationality, which, at the time this story takes place, amounted to one and the same. Virtually everyone who lived in Isadore in the decades before the murder until long after the trial was Catholic and of Polish descent. They spoke and wrote in Polish not only at home but also in school and in church. They conducted business, whenever possible, with other Polish speakers; even today, if you attend a gathering in Isadore—an auction say, or Holy Rosary's annual Summer Festival for a plate of their *smaczne* (which means delicious) fried chicken—you will hear Polish and English spoken in equal measure, with few offers to translate the former for a visitor.

And finally, the weather worked to set the tiny village apart. In an

average winter, more than ten feet of snow falls on this region from November to April; a hard winter could bring as much as fifteen feet, along with a near constant arctic wind and weeks of ice. In the early 1900s, roads were crude and cars still a novelty; even going short distances required skis, snowshoes, or a sleigh; traveling in or out of the region from late fall to early spring was a suicide mission. "It keeps out the riffraff," today's residents say proudly, of the northern Michigan winters. In Isadore at the time of this story, anyone not local was riffraff.

Into this remote northern village came two unmarried women who couldn't have been more different: one a gregarious and naive Catholic nun, and the other an uncompromising and joyless housekeeper. Within the isolation of Isadore, they separated themselves even further. The tiny church, school, convent, and rectory were yet their own island, and it was there that these two women found themselves living in the same household. The result would be sorrow of the worst sort.

Today in Isadore they refer to the crime as "the tragedy"—if, that is, they refer to it at all. Though the same last names that began appearing on headstones in the cemetery as early as the 1860s can be found on mailboxes of the living all along the roads leading in and out of Isadore, very few members of these pioneer families will talk openly about the event, even though it happened more than a century ago. One elderly woman pointed a bony finger at me and rasped, "You should be afraid of the evil eye." A force still feared in Isadore.

As a side note, it's worth mentioning that, for clarity's sake, I committed to a single spelling of the Polish surnames belonging to the people in this story. During my research I found multiple spellings of each last name on everything from gravestones to immigration papers to newspaper articles and even court documents. An early settled America dominated by English speakers had a difficult time with the consonant-heavy and lengthy Polish last names and often misspelled them.

So as not to confuse the reader, here Stella's full name is always spelled "Stanislawa Lipczynska," even though historical records document her name in a variety of incarnations including "Lypchinski," "Lypcrynska," "Lipinski," "Lipinska," etc. Likewise for the surname "Flees"; it has been spelled "Fleis," "Fleece," and even "Flies." To further confuse things, in the Polish language the suffix "ski" generally refers to a man, and "ska" to a woman, sometimes to a woman unat-

tached to a man either because of youth, free choice, divorce, or widowhood, as was Stella's case. And, finally, the *J* in Sister Janina's name is pronounced like a *Y*: "Ya-nina."

The story I tell here is entirely nonfiction, pieced together from anonymous and attributed personal interviews, historic newspaper accounts, magazine articles, court documents, prison documents, police records, personal letters, family memoirs, priests' notes, sacramental records, church correspondence, and local histories; everything in quotation marks was spoken aloud and came from one or more of these sources.

While this story centers around a murder of the most ghastly sort, there is love here, too, and devotion, and religious fervor. There is sin, sex, torture, confession, and secrets. Every device imaginable for the darkest gothic novel appears in these pages, and yet this drama was not drawn from the imagination, but from tattered bits of fact confined, for more than a century, to local gossip and legend, and scattered historical records. This story is true, and yet somehow had escaped a thorough retelling until now.

The quotes that begin the sections (and can be found sparingly in the text) are taken from a battered copy of *The Nun's Rule*, by Bishop Richard Poore, Rev. James Morton, and Rev. Francis Aiden Gasquet, published in 1905 as part of The King's Classics series. I found it for \$1 at Holy Rosary's annual Attic Treasures sale.

Isadore's Secret: Sin, Murder, and Confession in a Northern Michigan Town

By Mardi Link

https://www.press.umich.edu/1481044/isadores_secret

University of Michigan Press, 2009

Prologue: A Grave

November, 1918

They are the devil's dirt-men, and wait continually in his privy. Thus, they are busy in this foul employment, and strive with each other about it. Such men stink in their stinking trade, and make every place stink that they come to.

—*The Nun's Rule*

SWINGING PLANKS OF LANTERN LIGHT shine through the musty air and onto the dirt floor of the church basement. The oddly glowing rectangles syncopate over the damp ground and illuminate even the darkest, stooped-down corners of the space beyond.

The shapes are out of place on this bright autumn afternoon. Outside, it is still daylight. Only an hour ago, the end-of-day voices of schoolchildren could be heard echoing over the grassy hillside as the students walked home together to neighboring farms. Down here in the dank, the only human sound is the ragged breathing of two men.

If not for this gruesome errand and their shared spiritual faith, these men would have nothing in common at all. They are separated from each other by class, motive, age, and vocation, and yet have been made temporary equals by the dread they now share.

One of the men, the young parish priest, holds a malignant rumor in his heart and the lantern handle in his hand. A hand that shakes without ceasing, causing the kerosene glow behind the light's glass chimney to

illuminate its earthbound quarry unevenly. The other man, a laborer, is much older and has only recently been promoted to church sexton. He grips a hand-forged farm implement and slides it gingerly into the dirt. His tool is a potato fork; a shorter, squatter, less savage-looking cousin of the pitchfork. It is commonly used for bringing potatoes up out of the ground at harvest time without damaging them, and not for authenticating church gossip. Leaning nearby, against the basement wall, are two shovels, just in case.

Despite their differences, above ground these men belong completely to this place, in both body and soul. A glimpse of their faces anywhere in the sanctuary, the rectory, the school, the barn, or the gardens would be a welcome sight. The priest is the religious and cultural leader of an insular flock of immigrant Polish farmers in northern Michigan. He is well liked and respected for his handsome good looks and obvious spiritual fire. The sexton is appreciated too, for his consistency and practical skills. And today, by the priest at least, for his loyalty.

But here below, these men of Isadore are interlopers. Only trespassers would sneak silently into the church's sloped underbelly without witness to carry out such a sinful and secret errand as this one. Despite their tools, and their lantern, and their resolve, neither is equipped for the task at hand or for what is to come.

Still, the younger man watches while the older man labors. The grave they seek isn't deep, and they don't have to wait long before it is found. The pile of lumber that hid it for more than a decade is gone. The tines of the sexton's fork strike something hard and smooth and almost porcelain-like. A bone. A human thighbone.

The men share a long look at one another but say nothing. They each must know what the other is thinking. That the rumors are true. That the missing nun, their spiritual sibling and fellow attendant of God, did not run away from the convent, after all. She didn't turn her back on her calling and flee with a lover. She wasn't kidnapped and neither did she slip into madness like her mother, and wander into the swamp at the edge of the meadow. Instead, she was taken from them. And yet, she was also here all along.

The shovels turn out to be necessary. The priest puts down the lantern to help his sexton dig. With first the potato fork, and then the shovels, and finally their bare hands, the men find many more bones—

nearly a full skeleton—laid to rest on her back as if bent in half, her arms flung over her raised knees. At one end of the grave they find a pair of low-heeled shoes with small foot bones still inside. At the other end, a human skull.

Rotting over these bones are remnants of the coarse brown wool traditionally used to fashion a nun's habit, as well as a piece of braided black waist cord. It was as if the Sister simply went to the basement, ducked her head under the small doorframe, walked to her shallow grave, and, without making a sound, lay down in this raw grittiness and died. Except for one thing.

The sexton digs up the skull with his shovel, then cradles it in the warm bowl of his dirt-smeared hands. The earth surrounding this spot has a darker color than anywhere else. The sexton caresses the brain cavity with his calloused thumbs, rubbing away years of dirt. He does not see or feel the crack a few inches above the skull's right temple, but it is there.

Yes, it was exactly as if the Sister just walked here of her own volition and lay down in her grave, except for that.