

Prologue: Guilty Secrets

Toward the end of his second year in office, in December 1869, President Ulysses S. Grant delivered a message to the Congress summing up the state of the nation and laying out the issues to be addressed next. It had been a year, he said, “of peace and general prosperity”; “We have, through a kind providence, been blessed with abundant [*sic*] crops, and have been spared from complications, and war, with foreign nations.”¹

But all was not well. The state governments that had declared themselves in rebellion nearly a decade earlier were not yet all restored to the Union; radicals in the Congress were intent on grinding the former Confederacy into bankruptcy, Southerners had just established the Ku Klux Klan to carry out vigilante justice and, through terror, to “restore” order. Conflicts with native peoples in the West were intensifying, and internationally the United States was mired in disputes with the European powers and prepared to launch its dominion into the Caribbean. These were not, as Grant had so confidently stated, peaceful times.

By the midsummer of 1870, things were no better, but across the country citizens readied themselves to celebrate the national day, the anniversary of the Declaration that had led to independence from Great Britain. If the damage done by the Civil War had not yet been repaired, nor the dead quite forgotten, there was nonetheless a sense that the time of national trauma had passed and the future presented limitless opportunities. Industries had provided materiel for the war and now were ready to produce even more for national consumption and international export. Railroads could be planned and built. A decade earlier, “rock oil” had been extracted in northwestern Pennsylvania, and, now that the war was over, venture capitalists were ready to turn petroleum

into the fuel that would power the nation's energy. Agriculture, the country's largest industry, was becoming the great beneficiary of the railroads; products grown at a great distance from markets could arrive in prime condition. Barrels of oysters reached the midland; freshly slaughtered meats flowed from Chicago across the land.

The Fourth of July 1870 was a time for celebration. For the story that follows, it is a turning point in which to introduce three brothers at rest. Nothing in particular happened to them on that July Monday, but looking backward from it prepares us to look forward to the most eventful year in their lives.

Then as now the village that it takes to nurture a child also fosters the killer. The present-day criminologist Lonnie Athens invites those hoping to explain violence to consider that murderers see themselves as part of a "phantom community" where values are fostered that eventually make killing a rational act and even an obligatory moral choice. Self-respect and honor demand murder when the "phantom community" declares certain humiliations to be intolerable and therefore requiring a response. The person so unfortunate as to stand between the killer and his desire is done to death to clear the way. The phantom community seeks its satisfaction.

Athens sketches several types of violent actors; for our story, we need consider only one: the "frustrative" murderer who sees himself as a good person forced by circumstances into a violent situation. Frustrated persons may be coercive, Athens writes, but they may also be "resistive," doing evil to prevent a greater evil.² The killer can see himself, as ours did, as a victim of circumstances, forced to do violence to a person who might thwart him.

People learn violence in the same way that they learn the social graces: through their upbringing. Athens's phantom community creates killers by providing "significant" social experiences, though not all who experience the same events necessarily internalize the same lessons from them. In Athens's view, nearly all killers are calculating, and the calculus measures present frustration against past obstructions. Many times, victims are merely an obstacle. Murderers who have killed once are likely to kill again if they encounter circumstances they regard as like the ones in which they killed before. Society cannot tolerate the threat of repetition. Athens states this dour conclusion: "The ultraviolent criminals in our communities are outside the reach of any presently devisable long-term rehabilitation programs, much less short-term ones."³

The preliminaries to violence, whether rational or emotional, are shaped by the phantom community and thus offer insight into community values in the past. Our story is thus social history with murders in the middle.

It begins with Rulof Rulofson (1754–1840), a second-generation North American who lived in a German-speaking settlement in New Jersey where his father was prosperous and prominent. With the Declaration, only two months after Rulof had been elected to the vestry of Zion Lutheran Church in Hunterdon County,⁴ the family saw every reason to uphold their loyalty to the Crown, and so Rulof promptly enlisted in the Loyalist New Jersey volunteers. During the war against rebellion, he rose to the rank of captain, and at the surrender he asked the king for a grant of land in Nova Scotia.⁵ In due course, he received nineteen hundred acres along the St. John River, settled in Hampton, New Brunswick, and was appointed the first school superintendent of the province. In 1784, he married Mehitable Phinney. In 1809 he would become justice of the peace, and, at his death in 1846, would be celebrated for an honorable career as both a public and a private man.⁶

Rulof's son William Herman Rulofson (1792–1827) seems not to have been the equal of his father, except perhaps in producing children. William's wife Priscilla Amelia Howard (1798–1843) gave birth in 1818, 1819, 1821, 1822, 1824, and 1826. In those days of women exhausted by childbirth, it was not Priscilla but William who died in 1827. William remains mysterious, partly because his three surviving sons distorted the truth about their parents. In one obituary of the youngest in 1899, it was reported, "His father was a farmer, horse breeder, and at times imported blooded horses from Europe."⁷ The same notice said that his mother "soon followed" in death, and another obituary said that "he was left an orphan when but a child."⁸ These statements were not true.

In 1827, Priscilla Howard Rulofson found herself a widow with three surviving sons: John Edward Howard (1821–71), Rulof Isaac Allen (1822–99), and William Herman (1826–78).

However successful Priscilla's husband may have been in dealing with "blooded horses," he seems to have left little in the way of an estate, nor is there evidence that his prominent and still vigorous father was moved to support his grandsons. Priscilla returned to her childhood home and there, with the help of her mother, struggled to raise her children to measure up to their family record of talent, loyalty, ambition, and daring. Soon she married again and gave birth to yet another son,

James Henniger, who acts as a sidekick in the drama that follows.⁹ Priscilla lived long enough to see all her sons grown or on the brink of adulthood. She was remembered as “a Christian woman of remarkable force of character and considerable education.”¹⁰ No records survive to illuminate the personalities of either of her husbands; all of the sons were romantics, were strivers, were violent men.

On July 4, 1870, the youngest of the Rulofson boys celebrated the nation’s birthday in San Francisco. Though California had only been admitted as a state twenty years earlier, all the ceremonies of the eastern states had been imported intact and then elaborated. At ten o’clock, an open coach moved off down Market Street carrying three aged veterans of the War of 1812, and a long parade of military bands and troops in their ranks followed. Perhaps distinctive of freewheeling San Francisco were floats: the Chariot of Liberty, with goddess and Amazons, representing the American Republics, for instance. Perhaps not every municipality could boast of a Mounted Corps of Wholesale Butchers, with cleavers. San Francisco took pride in them. The excellent reader of the Declaration of Independence was “a native of California,” and an anthem composed specially for the day, “Our Glorious Land,” was performed to great satisfaction by the band and singers. The oration addressed the reconciliation of the states, and the orator was regularly interrupted by laughter and cheers. When he had finished, the band struck up “The Star Spangled Banner,” and after that the Episcopal bishop of California pronounced a benediction. Out in the Bay, promptly at one o’clock, a regatta of schooners, sloops, and scows celebrated the Master Mariner Benevolent Association, and the steamers *Contra Costa* and *Goliath* carried spectators for a closer look, at fifty cents a head. At the Pacific Race Track, stakes races could be viewed (and wagers made) for a dollar admission. At the ballpark, the Eagles beat the Atlantics, 23–19. Woodward’s Gardens was the venue for “Chang, the Chinese Giant” and the “First Appearance of the Two-Tailed Horse from Japan.” In the evening fifty thousand people gathered to watch a display of fireworks. Among the spectacular terrestrial showers of sparks was the motto: “Westward the Star of Empire Takes Its Way.”¹¹ Later in the evening were the predictable riots, drunkenness, arson, and shootings.¹² It was an altogether satisfactory occasion.

In the midst of it all was William Herman Rulofson, the junior partner of Bradley and Rulofson’s Photographic Gallery at the corner of Montgomery and Sacramento Streets, an excellent viewing point for

the parade as it passed along Montgomery. In the census of 1870, the value of the gallery was reported as thirty thousand dollars for the real estate and forty thousand dollars for the contents. It would shortly be improved by the installation of an elevator—driven by a hydraulic engine attached to the city water system—to raise sitters comfortably to the studios on the upper floors where natural light could be admitted and regulated through “the largest sky-light in North America.” William was a booster for photography, and he predicted that it would go beyond art to foster “the progress of civilization” in myriad ways including aiding “justice by detecting the criminal.”¹³ So it would shortly do.

William was a wealthy and honored man, who, having been in California since 1849, had qualified himself for membership in the Society of California Pioneers. A brief episode of gold mining instructed him that the way to wealth lay in photography, a skill he had mastered before leaving Canada. With a huge wagon set up as a “daguerreotype saloon,” he plied his trade in the goldfields before settling in Sonora, where once he managed to save his studio from a fire by having a team of oxen draw it out of harm’s way. In 1863, he had moved to San Francisco, where he remained until the end of his life, as he grew increasingly prominent in photography. (In 1873, he was to win a gold medal at a competition in Vienna, and in 1874 he would be elected president of the National Photographic Association.) Innovation and creativity lay at the heart of his success. In a wonderful combination of the two modes of representation then competing with each other, he turned a room into a camera and produced life-size photographs. He then engaged a painter to add colors to make the image even more lifelike. He was a founding member of the Bohemian Club and its official photographer.

Beneath this surface of respectability and success lay small deceptions and dissimulations. One of his death notices declared that he was a native of Pennsylvania, another that he had been born in Maine.¹⁴ Rulofson liked to relate that he had been shipwrecked in 1846 and landed, after “prolonged suffering,” destitute, at Liverpool. Only his skill as a photographer, he said, had enabled him to earn his return passage. He wanted people to believe that he had overcome obstacles through self-reliance, ability, and determination. Only much later did close inquiry reveal that the ship in question was outbound from Liverpool when it went aground, and that its passengers were given free passage on the next available ship. Many episodes mentioned in reports of his election as president of the Photographic Association were similarly

fictitious: he had not, for instance, been as a teenager “a wanderer over many lands, including Europe, America, and the islands of the sea.”

William’s biographies did not mention that in 1847, in Canada, he had made pregnant a fourteen-year-old girl: Amelia Violet Currie (1833–67). Their son was born there in 1848, and one of his biographers presumes that the precocious marriage may have hastened his departure, alone, for California. He returned for his family in 1850, and Amelia would bear five more children. She died at the end of January in 1867, and four months later William was married a second time, now to twenty-two-year-old Mary Jane Morgan, then employed as a receptionist at his studio. This union produced another five children. His second son, between the time of his mother’s death and his father’s remarriage, went to sea “to escape the severity of his father’s punishment”; on his return, father and son agreed that the captain of the vessel should adopt the nineteen-year-old boy.¹⁵ In 1874, William would stand up for one of his employees, Eadweard Muybridge, who had killed his wife’s lover. Muybridge would be acquitted, in part on William’s testimony that a “crime of passion” was only a manly act. In 1875, the youngest daughter of his first wife would die under suspicious circumstances; the inquest finding “welts . . . presumed to have been inflicted by her half-brother, Charles,” then nine years old.¹⁶ The old man seems to have spawned a young killer.

These acts of violence do not find their way into William’s photography, but they are vividly on display in a book published in 1877 that he claimed to be his own, *The Dance of Death*. It is a violent attack on the “intolerable nastiness” of the waltz, and a morbid anatomy of sexual desire.¹⁷ A man leading his partner in the dance is vividly described: “his eyes, gleaming with a fierce intolerable lust, gloat satyr like over her.”¹⁸ When it was published, some reviewers thought it must be a hoax, and Ambrose Bierce, who knew about its composition, later alleged that it was. Years later, Bierce said: “W. H. Rulofson (the ‘William Herman’ of the title-page) . . . suggested the scheme and supplied the sinews of sin,”¹⁹ and the precise sharing of the authorship is unimportant for an understanding of Rulofson. William claimed the book, and no one denied his ownership of its message. A few months before his death, he told a visitor to the studio: “I have shown society what a loathsome ulcer festers in its midst.”²⁰ For William, the book was no hoax, and the waltz was a matter of secret, hidden horror. That it was seen as hyperbole is a measure of how far it departed from even the

most extreme expressions of moral outrage of the day, a time when fervor against sin ran high.

In northern central Pennsylvania, the celebration of Independence Day in 1870 was a far more sedate affair. The newspapers in Clarion County were in the habit of granting their writers and printers two week's vacation around the holiday, and they simply suspended publication. Consequently there is no definite record of what took place, but Rulof Isaac Allen Rulofson certainly did not have the rich menu of amusements open to his younger brother then in San Francisco. The village of Strattanville, where he lived, had only Central Avenue with two parallel streets to the north and to the south. A fast walker could travel from Rulof's house on the west side of the platted village to the east side in two or three minutes. Clarion, the county seat, was just three miles west, and any ceremony for the occasion would be held in the square opposite the magnificent courthouse. A speech or two and a band concert were likely to have constituted the ceremonials, and the love of small boys for blowing themselves up with fireworks was doubtless freely indulged.

Like his brother in California, Rulof was a prominent man. The 1870 census declared his real estate in Strattanville worth seven thousand dollars, and his personal property at one thousand dollars, but this was far less than his net worth since he was the manager and junior partner of Marvin, Rulofson and Company, a lumbering enterprise with ownership of eight thousand acres of prime timber forest. He had the family enthusiasm for children; he and his wife Amanda Jane Emerson (1828–98) had eight, five of whom survived to adulthood. Rulof was a fraternal, too, in both the Odd Fellows and the Masons, and he took pride in having written “a masterpiece”: “A Mason for Sixty Years.” An innovator, like his brothers, Rulof designed the floor plan of his residence in the shape of the Masonic square and compass. He was remembered as temperate, sedate, and a keeper of secrets.

When he arrived in Pennsylvania from the lumber mills of Maine, Rulof had been very much a man of the woods. He bought a gang saw in Maine, and it was transported at the last stages of its journey up the Clarion River on pole boats. Eventually replaced by a circular saw in the production of lumber, the newly designed mill allowed a skilled operator to extract the most valuable boards from the raw timber and increased profit for the mill owners. Every scrap could be made valu-

able, and the Rulof's mill produced lath and shingles in addition to finished boards.²¹ A person with a long memory wrote in 1898 about the operation of Cobb and Rulofson in Elk County. Cobb was "the most eloquently profane man that ever stepped on pine timber"; Rulofson was "an educated man, polished in his manner, his early habits and training showing refinement in every act."²² Rulof sold out his interest to Cobb in 1858, just before a massive flood swept the mill away. He then purchased the eight thousand acres near Strattanville with the proceeds and additional capital from Robert Marvin of Jamestown, New York. There he continued to be active in the forest, and another memoir writer recalled him as "the little man with the whiskers and the big boots."²³ The success of Marvin, Rulofson and Co., however, came from technical innovation, and in this respect Rulof's fascination with technique resembled his younger brother's combination of patents and promotion in the development of photography. Everywhere Rulof went, his half brother, James Henniger, another man handy in the woods and an utterly trustworthy companion, accompanied him.

Fabulous origins were part of Rulof's official biography, just as they had been for his brother William. He claimed to be a veteran of the Aroostock War, a bloodless conflict between Maine and New Brunswick that had erupted in 1836 when he was fifteen. In his maturity, he celebrated his own courage and strength. When he was nineteen, "he was nursed in the arms of a bear, and at another time was buried in the snow in consequence of a deer getting fast in one of his snow shoes." He said that in Pennsylvania he had seized a buck by the horns and wrestled with him in midstream until someone could bring a knife to finish the animal off.²⁴ All these episodes testify to a high standard of violence under circumstances where he might have behaved more prudently. Rulof thus promoted himself as more than what he seemed: a sedate businessman, Methodist, and Republican. As his past demonstrated, he was capable of subduing brute nature by brute force.

The most dramatic of these stories came from his older brother, who recalled that as a schoolboy Rulof had been beaten insensible by one of his teachers. Several days elapsed before it became clear that he would survive, and weeks before he had recovered. "The teacher afterwards begged his forgiveness, and was forgiven, but the incident has never been effaced from the memory of these boys."²⁵ Young Rulof was a survivor, and the beating taught him and his older brother deep lessons about the power of rage—and its uses.

In New York City, the July 4 celebration came early. Across the water in Brooklyn, there was a cannonade at dawn, and daybreak in Manhattan brought with it “a perfect pandemonium of jubilant sounds”: fish horns, fireworks, and drums. As the *New York Times* reported the next day, these noises signaled that “the great birthday of the nation had come.”²⁶ At seven o’clock the military units mustered for the huge parade on Broadway. At 7:30, the belfry at Trinity Church began with a peal of changes, followed by such selections as “Red, White and Blue,” “Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean,” and “Yankee Doodle”—the latter rung twice. The Atlantic Yacht Club had organized a race from Nyack to Stony Point, and all sorts of cruises and special rail excursions were available for those seeking a pleasant day away from the city. Ordinary citizens packed picnics; on the steamer *Vanderbilt* “a select class of our citizens” ate more elegant fare while being serenaded by the band of the Seventh Regiment. At Tammany Hall, the Grand Sachem, William Marcy Tweed, presided over the speeches railing against those who would impose tariffs and limit immigration. These edifying remarks were followed by a reading of the Declaration enacted by a descendant of Thomas Jefferson. At the Military Hall in the Bowery, thirty veterans of the War of 1812 were given “a plain but substantial repast.” Between five and seven in the evening, the Central Park Band offered a concert and concluded with “The Union.” More band music and fireworks were offered in the parks across the city, the program of each display having been meticulously listed in the morning paper. A popular choice was the “United States Coat of Arms,” with wheels of Chinese, Egyptian, and radiant fires. Of course the day concluded with a predictable set of catastrophes attendant on drunkenness and celebration: stabbings, shootings, fistfights, and fires.

At 170 Third Avenue, in a pair of rooms over a dry goods store, the oldest of the Rulofson brothers awoke early in the morning. Beside him in the double bed lay his protégé and pal, Al Jarvis. The Jacob family, parents and two teenage children, were their landlords; they occupied the back rooms of the dwelling, and they were happy to have living with them two temperate men of regular habits. John Edward Howard Rulofson was known to them as Edouard Leurio, and out of respect for his studious habits and serious demeanor—not to mention his long, full beard—they called him “Professor.” No one was very certain about his age (he was forty-nine), but people saw him as “elderly” or even “old.” The word *harmless* seemed just right, especially as he played with two

abandoned youngsters in whom he took a grandfatherly interest. His companion, Al Jarvis, a handsome and dapper dresser, was about to celebrate his thirtieth birthday; the Jacob family thought his name was Charles G. Curtis.²⁷

Neither Edward—the name John Edward Howard usually used—nor his friend Al enjoyed the prosperity of William and Rulof; they had no substantial property, nor any obvious means of maintaining themselves. Edward would occasionally take the ferry to Brooklyn to collect rent payments, as he had done a few days earlier, in time to pay the Jacobs the thirty-nine dollars in rent for July. In the early morning, he and Al were likely to have discussed a venture out of town that would help them improve their fortunes. Perhaps they took the holiday as an opportunity for relaxation, watching the parade or the boats racing in the harbor, admiring the fireworks. It is hard to imagine that they could resist a short walk to City Hall Park, where the most spectacular of the public displays brightened the darkness. The finale was “composed of red, white and blue, filling the air with streamers and colored stars, forming one of the grandest and most extensive pieces ever attempted in pyrotechny, exhibiting at one view over 50,000 square feet of fire of the most brilliant and beautiful colors known in art.” For them, as for the diarist George Templeton Strong, it may have been “an uncommonly pleasant Fourth.”²⁸

More likely, however, is that “Professor Leurio”—that is, Edward—remained at home. When later asked how her senior tenant had occupied himself, Mrs. Jacob said definitely: “Studying, sir, studying; he was always studying.”²⁹ The landlady did not know just what occupied him in these many hours of study, but her daughter Pauline could guess: “He was changing Greek, Latin, and German into English and French or else English and French into Greek, I hardly know which.”³⁰ Pauline’s brother Edward had little more to add to the mystery of these researches, but he recalled the intensity of Leurio’s scholarly work. “Sometimes he would be playing with the children, when an idea would strike him, and he would go right to his desk, and begin to write.”³¹ The fruits of these efforts produced a huge and growing manuscript detailing that there was “method” in the apparent chaos of the world’s languages.

This was not the “professor’s” first attempt to distinguish himself in intellectual pursuits. Thirty years before, he had trained himself as a physician; later he had lectured on phrenology; he had invented an improved drill bit, a three-barreled pistol, a novel system of shorthand.

None of these had raised him to wealth or position. At last, late in life, he was on the track of an important discovery.

Grammar schools in nineteenth-century North America taught grammar in the expectation that more advanced study of languages would follow, especially of Latin and Greek. All educated young men of leisure were expected to be proficient in at least Latin, or to have been so at one time. Latin tags were freely used: the *New York Times* concluded its extravagant praise of the City's Independence Day celebration with *Valete et plaudite*, a shortened form of *Vos valete, et plaudite, civis* from Roman drama; as translated in the nineteenth century, "Farewell, citizens; we hope you are pleased." Few preachers, statesmen, or lawyers could complete an address without the use of such brief quotations.

A "key" to the mystery of language would allow persons with less Latin and no Greek to discover through English the meanings of classical expressions. This was only one of the many benefits "Professor Leurio" hoped would flow from his discovery. He was a contributor to the newly conceived discipline of *philology*, an inquiry devoted to unraveling the tangled web of words. The year before, in 1869, Leurio had attended meetings of the American Ethnological Society in New York, where a mixed group, mostly of enthusiastic amateurs, gathered to discuss voyages, discoveries, and exotic customs. (Cranometry, the measurement of skulls, was the subject of special inquiry by the society in those days.) In July, he announced his "key" in a flyer addressed to America's philologists, and he had made persistent calls on scholars in and around New York in an attempt to persuade them of the great value of it. He was far from the only scholar attempting to unravel the mystery, and magazines of general circulation summarized titanic battles between competing theories and theorists. Philology was more than just words; it was a field of study that combined history, literature, archaeology, and anthropology.

Above all, it was about race.

For most scholars, the races were settled scientific categories: some were "civilized," some "barbaric"; some "advanced," others "primitive." And scholars assumed that all aspects of human behavior are summed up and expressed in language. If philology could discover the sources of the diversity of tongues, scholars would be able to formulate a unified theory of human behavior. Laboring night and day, Leurio produced etymology after etymology, weaving together a network of relationships among words that revealed that languages contained encoded messages

from the past. He had discovered the secret to the code; he was still faced with the hard task of making the meanings of the messages known. He was sure that almost any day he would find the solution. All he needed was time.

John Edward Howard Rulofson was a man of many names; the one he had selected for himself as a young man was “Edward H. Ruloff,” and it was by this name that he had become infamous. In 1870, there were reasons for him to disguise his identity, and he had used one alias after another for many years. By one of these names he was sure to beat his brothers in their intense competition for success. William was rich and famous in California; his contributions to “art” through photography were increasingly recognized nationally and internationally. Rulof Isaac was rich and famous in Pennsylvania; his contributions to the “mechanics” of forest products made him known far beyond his immediate vicinity. Edward was poor and ignored in New York; his discovery of *Method in the Formation of Language* would make him immortal.

Ruloff the philologist thought himself to be the victim of “misfortunes” that had dogged his career. Sometimes absorbed in self-pity, he was now ready at last for success. His abstemious life and humble circumstances would soon give way to considerable wealth if only he could find a buyer for his huge manuscript with its many speculations about words. In 1869, he had offered it for sale for half a million dollars, and, though he had not found a purchaser, he was certain that it was immensely valuable. The key would transform teaching and make schooling “efficient” in ways particularly admired by nineteenth-century America. Education could take less time producing the same level of skill; it could get to the sturdy heartwood of all the subjects with less distraction about the branches of learning. Al Jarvis, who had himself learned German as a student of Ruloff’s, heartily endorsed the program. He was willing to put everything at risk to help Ruloff bring the project to a successful conclusion, and he fully expected to share in the wealth that would be realized from it.

Keeping close-mouthed about their secrets, on the Fourth of July 1870, the three Rulofson brothers were on the upward trajectory of success. All of them believed that the benefits of postwar progress would carry them along to yet more achievements. All three thought they were out of the ordinary. What was past was prologue.

And now our story begins.