Lafayette teen-ager left behind a mystery

"No motive has been found for the act of Louis Kerlin, a 17-year-old high school boy of West Lafayette who came to the city last Wednesday evening and committed suicide at the Tourner Hotel last night by swallowing strychnine."

— Bloomington *Weekly Courier*, Jan. 5, 1915.

Some events don't make any sense, no matter which way you look at them. The death of Louis Kerlin could certainly be considered one of them.

According to the *Courier*, the boy stepped off the 7:15 p.m. Monon train in Bloomington on Dec. 30 and soon checked into the Kirkwood Hotel. He paid in advance for his room.

The newspaper related what he did next. "About eight o'clock he went to the residence of Mrs. Blount Campbell on South Lincoln where he introduced himself and asked to see Miss Alice Campbell, her daughter. He had written a few letters to Miss Alice after the moving of the C.F. McIntosh family from Lafayette to this city, a year ago. Miss Mildred McIntosh, who was a friend of Miss Campbell, lived as a neighbor of the Kerlin family in Lafayette and was a classmate in school with the Kerlin

Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

boy."

Discovering that Alice was at the movie with her sister, the boy waited until they came home. After chatting for a short time with Alice, he went back to the hotel.

Continued the *Courier*, "Thursday morning he returned to the Campbell residence and said he had come to say goodbye and that he was returning to Lafayette on the 11:20 train. Instead of doing so, however, he went back to the Kirkwood and Miss Alice never saw or heard of him again until his death."

It seemed that some very serious matter was bothering Kerlin, but he didn't give any hint of what it was. M.D. Wells, the proprietor of the Kirkwood Hotel described the boy as "despondent." In fact, he sat in the hotel office all day with his "hand over his head." Wells asked him if he was sick, but the boy said he wasn't.

Inexplicably, the next night, Kerlin took the train to Lafayette and withdrew money from a bank and took the Saturday evening train back to Bloomington. On his second visit, instead of the Kirkwood Hotel, Kirlin chose the Tourner, again paying in advance.

The *Courier* continued, "(On Sunday) he went to the Gilmore Restaurant on North College Avenue, procured lunch, and returned to his room at the hotel. He did not leave the hotel again during the day and did not attempt to communicate with anyone."

Things changed drastically in the evening. About 8 p.m., the landlord heard groans coming from Kerlin's room. He went in to check on the boy, but Kerlin denied that anything was wrong.

The newspaper picked up the story. "Mr. Phelps (the landlord) returned to the office and 20 minutes later the chef passing the room heard groans. He found the boy writhing in the last stages of strychnine poisoning."

Dr. John P. Tourner was unable to save Kerlin, who died within 10 minutes. Apparently he had placed the poison in a glass and drank it all.

What was puzzling to everyone concerned with the tragic event was that the boy left no note and no hint of why he had taken his life.

His adoptive father, a Purdue University student who roomed with the Kerlins and a *Courier* reporter made the rounds of all the places where the boy had been in Bloomington to pick up any scraps of information they could find. Their hope was that pieced together they might make some sense of the suicide.

According to the *Courier* there was one theory. "It is believed that the young man killed himself because he had run away from home and because he feared to return. It is certain that he had no love affair in this city as he had no other acquaintances here and had never been here before."

Other particulars about the boy included his good grades, ability as a basketball player and membership in the Methodist Church. There was nothing to indicate that he had become estranged from the Kerlin family, who adopted him from an Indianapolis orphanage when he was 3 years old.

Why did he do it? There isn't any answer.

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