

# GILMANTON MASS MURDERER

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by **George Woodbury**

Gilmanston in 1860 was the birthplace of Herman Webster Mudgett, who under the name of Harry Howard Holmes set up a record for murder in the 1890s never equalled in the annals of American crime.

Mudgett is a name to conjure with in Gilmanston. There was no older family name in the community and few more respected until Herman shot down the family reputation in such spectacular flames. His great grandmother, the redoubtable Hannah Mudgett, wife of first settler Benjamin, was the first white woman in the town when she arrived after a 12-mile snowshoe hike from Epsom in midwinter of 1761. Her son Samuel, born in February 1764, was the first white baby born in Gilmanston and won a "right of land" for that distinction.

Herman's father was postmaster of the town for years. The Mudgetts were solid, dependable, middle class citizens. No one could ever figure what sent young Herman off on such a tangent, certainly he had advantages of education in private schooling and finally a medical degree from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Pioneer great grandmother Hannah could not read or write, but led a long industrious and useful life. Dr. Herman W. Mudgett, under the alias of H.H. Holmes, was credited with the murder of close to



*H. H. Holmes Mugshot, 1895.*

women - before he was hanged in Moyamensing Prison, Pennsylvania, in 1895.

This spectacular career in crime began when he was an 18-year-old medical student. It was an insurance fraud involving the substitution of a body from the dissecting room for a patient he had already insured. The swindle was successful and highly remunerative, and with variations, he was to practice that modus operandi all over the United States and parts of Canada.

Herman married but soon deserted his bride and their baby. Under his true name he practiced medicine in Mooers Forks, N.Y., for a short time but his abandoned wife, Clara Lever-

so he moved to Chicago, changing his name to Harry Howard Holmes. The next year, 1887, he married bigamously - well-to-do Myrta Belknap. It lasted until Holmes forged the signature of her uncle, John Belknap,

on a note.

He made one attempt at an honest living - a duplicating company - but it soon failed. Then he became assistant to a Mrs. Holders who ran a drug store on 63rd Street in Chicago. He was very successful, and in three years Holmes was a partner in the business. Mrs. Holders unaccountably disappeared and Holmes owned the store. Patent medicines, plus Holmes' flair for amateur hyp-

notism and his medical training, brought him a comfortable fortune.

Chicago was bracing for the World's Fair of 1893 and Holmes invested in a unique business block - soon to have the grim nicknames of "Holmes Castle." The drug store was on the ground floor. Holmes' private chambers were on the second, and on the third were apartments for rent. Every few weeks during the con-

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struction Holmes quarrelled with the workmen, fired the whole bunch and hired a new crew. No single crew knew all that went into the building-only Holmes.

When completed, Holmes' hired help, for the most part girls and young women never lasted long. Holmes gave out that they simply quit the job. He was plausible, glib and prosperous. Chicago was close enough to the frontier not to ask too many questions, but the women were never seen again.

Insurance fraud was Holmes' first and abiding passion and how many he perpetrated as far west as Denver and Fort Worth has never been

even estimated, but finally in St. Louis in 1894 his luck ran out and he landed in jail.

He wasn't there long before his current "wife" bailed him out, but he was there long enough to make the acquaintance of Marion Hedgepeth, the notorious train robber, gun-slinger Lotahrio. Holmes and Hedgepeth while in durance discussed their techniques, women and seduction in general.

Hedgepeth told all in court. It was then that "Holmes' Castle" was ransacked. The upstairs apartments were fitted with secret gas cocks, each one a lethal gas chamber.

In the cellar was a dissecting table, a huge

furnace, drains and great acid vats for macerating whole bodies and dissolving the flesh. There were bits and pieces of human bodies everywhere, like a private anatomy school.

Holmes admitted when on trial that he had murdered 27 in his "Castle," and had thriftily mounted their skeletons and sold them to medical schools. He did not believe in waste.

A surprising number of mass murderers made their start in confidence swindling: Landru, Joseph Smith, Petiot, Fernandez and Beck, but none has ever exceeded the grim record of Herman Webster Mudgett, alias H.H. Holmes of Gilmanton.

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