The 1910's Ax Murders

An overview of the crimes and the McClaughry theory

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From 1911 - 1912, the American Midwest was plagued by a very specific type of crime, the mass homicide of entire small town families by an unknown assailant or assailants using an ax. Of the approximately fifteen different crimes, six of them had enough similar characteristics to prompt the press and Department of Justice Special Agent M.W. McClaughry to theorize that one man was responsible for all the crimes, covering more than twenty-five murders. This paper gives the reader an overview of the crimes linked together by the McClaughry theory, crimes that were similar in nature yet were not included in his theory, and the suspected killer, with a discussion of the viability of the proposition.

The popular term "mass homicide" defines a situation involving more than three murders by a single person or group of people. A "spree killer" murders several people in a short period of time, such as the Columbine High School gunmen from Littleton, Colorado in 1999. The serial killer murders several victims in separate events over a period of time, sometimes waiting months or years to strike again. This distinction between spree and serial killers is based on the timing of the crimes rather than motive or other factors.¹ Were the Midwest ax murders a product of a roaming serial killer, or a random series of spree killings that shared eerily similar traits?

In the latter half of the twentieth century, serial murder seemed to be a phenomenon, a new type of American crime credited to changes in our society such as drug abuse, poverty, and pornography. However, historical studies have shown that serial murder was not a rarity during earlier times in America. Phillip Jenkins, in his article, "Serial Murder in the United States 1900 – 1940: A Historical Perspective" argues that it is a lack of research on early twentieth century homicide that makes it appear the

crime of serial murder to be a recent one, and that it has been a notable part of the American psyche since the 1888-1889 London "Jack the Ripper" case.²

Police work in 1911 - 1914 was not as sophisticated as it is today. As most of the ax murders detailed show, crime scene management in the time period was non-existent. As soon as word was public that a murder had occurred, citizens congregated at the location, milling through the scene, destroying or even stealing evidence.³ Bloodhounds were often used to track killers. Authorities in small towns were not trained in the methods of the day and experts needed to be brought in; sometimes days after the crime had occurred. The two main identification systems used by law enforcement were the Bertillon system and fingerprinting. The Bertillon system had been used since the late 19th century and measured skeletal structure (such as finger length) to produce a result that uniquely identified a person. In the early 1900's, the new technique of fingerprinting was introduced to America's police forces and supplanted the Bertillon system because it was more accurate. A central repository for fingerprint records was not established until 1905, and the Bertillon method was still being widely used in the early 1910's.

Common thought is that early serial killers did not have easy means of transportation to travel to find victims and police forces across jurisdictions were too unsophisticated and uncommunicative to determine a pattern if one were to present itself. Both of these suppositions are disputed by Jenkins' research. In fact, Jenkins posits that police actively sought to link unsolved crimes from other locales and "the early twentieth-century experience suggests that the "roaming" killer is by no means a recent innovation and that police agencies have long been capable of dealing with this type." ⁴

As this paper details, the press was also quick to try to link crimes together, sometimes blurring facts in order to make supposed connections seem stronger.

McClaughry and his theory

Matthew Wilson "M.W." McClaughry was familiar with the last stop of the criminal justice system, being the son of the Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary warden and the brother of the Iowa State Reformatory warden. Starting his career as a records clerk at Leavenworth, McClaughry led the United States Department of Justice's Bureau of Criminal Identification when it moved to the Penitentiary in 1907 to serve as the nation's central repository for fingerprints. He was named a Special Agent of the Department of Justice, the forerunner of today's Federal Bureau of Investigation. McClaughry studied the Bertillon system under its creator in France and learned the fingerprinting system at Scotland Yard.⁵

The six crimes that comprise the McClaughry theory started in Colorado Springs, Colorado in September, 1911, continued with two incidents in October, 1911 at Monmouth, Illinois and Ellsworth, Kansas, another two incidents in June, 1912 at Paola, Kansas and Villisca, Iowa, and culminated in the murder of two elderly widows in Columbia, Missouri on December 17, 1912. The Columbia victims were Mary J. Wilson and her daughter, Georgia Moore. Henry Lee Moore, son and grandson of the women, was convicted of the Missouri crime and sent to prison in March, 1913. In May, 1913, McClaughry, who had assisted authorities in Villisca, theorized that Moore was responsible for all six crimes due to the similar circumstances of each crime and statements Moore made at his trial. McClaughry pointed out that the crimes started after Moore's release from the Kansas Reformatory at Hutchinson in 1911 and stopped after his imprisonment in Missouri. Henry Lee Moore, from prison, denied any involvement in the crimes. Major newspapers throughout the country, including the *New York Times* (which got most of the details concerning dates and names wrong) ran the story with the accusation prominently, some with a picture of Moore. (Figure 1)

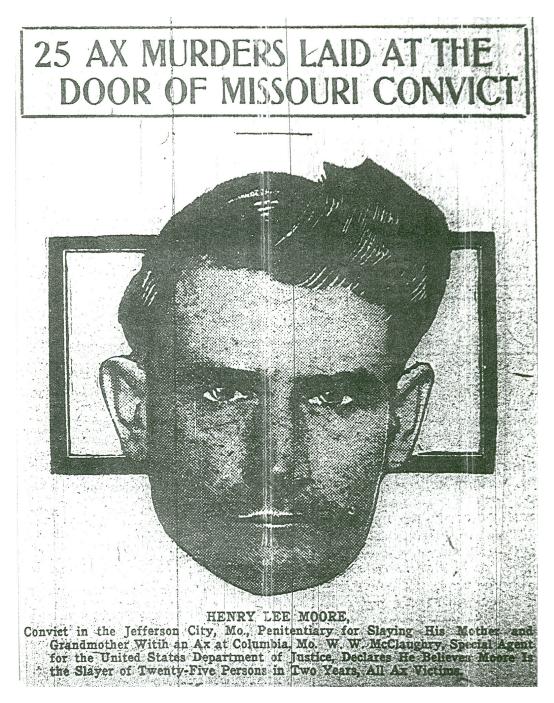


Figure 1. - Henry Lee Moore, Denver Post, May 10, 1913, 10.

The arrest of Moore and the publication of the theory did not clear the other five crimes. Four were never officially solved. However, the theory alone was enough to give Moore a notice in the 2000 publication *The Encyclopedia of Serial Killers*, an entire article in the 1990 book *Hunting Humans* (both written by Michael Newton) and mention as a suspect in the 2004 documentary *Villisca, Living With a Mystery* by Kelly and Tammy Rundle.

How did McClaughry find out about Henry Lee Moore? The Newton book *Hunting Humans* gives credit to his father, the warden at Leavenworth, who heard about Moore and the Columbia crime through his contacts in the penal system. Newton then states that "comparison of *modus operandi* in the several cases, capped by interviews with Moore" prompted publication of the theory.⁶ In actuality, Columbia officials sent an inquiry to the Leavenworth bureau office in December, 1912 and received a letter back from McClaughry confirming that Moore had spent time in the Kansas Reformatory and describing the similar crimes which had taken place throughout the country.⁷

The crimes

Colorado Springs, Colorado: September 17, 1911 – 6 victims

In 1911, Colorado Springs, Colorado was a bustling resort city of approximately 45,000 people, many of whom had moved to the area to live at one of the tuberculosis sanatoriums in the Pikes Peak region. The area's dry climate and altitude was promoted throughout the country as a cure for the disease. Arthur J. Burnham was one of those men. He was afflicted with the disease and lived and worked on the grounds of the Modern Woodmen sanatorium while his wife Alice and two children lived in a small home in the city. On Wednesday afternoon, September 20, 1911, Mrs. Burnham's sister

and another woman went to check on the welfare of the family after not having heard from them in a couple of days and discovered the bodies of the woman and her two children after opening the locked house. Medical personnel surmised the three had been killed by the blows of an ax sometime during the previous Sunday evening, the last night they were seen. As news of the crime spread, neighbors noticed that there had been no recent activity at an adjacent house occupied by Henry F. Wayne, his wife, and baby daughter. Entrance was gained into the Wayne house to reveal the same scene: three more victims in bed with skulls crushed.

Henry Wayne had lived at the Modern Woodman sanatorium before sending for his wife and child from Indiana. Arthur Burnham befriended Wayne and told him of the availability of the home adjacent to his. It was thought Wayne had no enemies in the city as he and his family had only been in Colorado Springs for a couple of weeks.

Crowds gathered immediately at the crime scene as people who knew the families discussed possibilities. Neither home had been burglarized and the doors of both residences were locked with the blinds drawn. Bed clothes had been heaped upon the bodies in both residences and the killer had stopped to wash his hands and wipe ink that he had spilled on his entrance to the Burnham house. The blood-stained ax was found at the crime scene. There seemed to be no motive and the small houses were well within walking distance of the railroad tracks.

The suspicions of the local authorities immediately centered on the sole survivor of the families: Arthur J. Burnham. Burnham was located at the sanatorium twelve miles away and brought to the crime scene. The *Colorado Springs Gazette* reported him as "the least affected of any of those who stood about in the little room."⁸ Knowing he

was under suspicion, he denied his involvement in the crime and his alibi proved to be airtight. He had worked all day on Sunday and his tubercular cough had kept his roommate awake that night. In addition, the sanatorium was twelve miles away from the crime scene with no mode of transportation other than walking, which his condition precluded. His tuberculosis led the police to conclude he did not have the physical strength to kill six persons with an ax. The next suspect was Italian laborer Tony Donatel, a friend of the late Mrs. Burnham. His friends offered him an alibi, but he was held for questioning. The ax and a washtub both had a thumb print caused by the spilled ink and a Bertillon expert was called in from Denver. The expert cleared both Burnham and Donatel of involvement in the crime and they were released.

Posses were sent out around the area looking for insane or deranged men. Residents told of strange men they had seen and conversations they had overheard. Hypnotists and seers sent letters to the police regarding the crimes. Local merchants demanded results from the police and offered a \$1,000 reward. An enterprising man from Denver guaranteed he would solve the crime if the city of Colorado Springs made him police chief. Arthur J. Burnham died four and a half months later, on February 5, 1912 of complications from asthma, tuberculosis and Bright's disease still maintaining his innocence. The case was never officially closed.

Monmouth, Illinois: September 30, 1911 – 3 victims

Monmouth, Illinois is a small community in the west-central part of the state, about thirty miles east of the Mississippi River. On Sunday morning, October 1, 1911, William E. Dawson, the janitor of the First Presbyterian Church was supposed to have opened the church for Sunday morning services. When parishioners arrived to a locked church and Dawson could not be reached by telephone, men were sent to look for the caretaker. Dawson, his wife and teenage daughter were found dead in their beds, their skulls crushed by a heavy object. The house was unlocked and the blinds drawn. Nothing inside had been bothered and nothing seemed to be missing from the premises. Bloodhounds were brought in and found an pipe, covered with blood. A flashlight with the words "Colorado Springs" scratched on it was found when a fence was removed from the perimeter of the Dawson yard. This led people to believe the crime was connected to the murders in that locale.

Authorities believed the murders were due to a long standing grudge between Dawson and a man named Stoelwegen against whom he had testified in a criminal case. Stoelwegen had been released from prison earlier in 1911, but was located in a neighboring county and was determined to have an alibi for the night in question. ⁹ In 1915, the case was reported to have been solved through the arrest of a black man, Loving Mitchell, in St. Louis, Missouri. A local woman and her husband, already in the Illinois penitentiary on a burglary charge, were also arrested. A *New York Times* article stated the motive as being "revenge for attentions which the negroes believed Dawson had shown to their relatives."¹⁰ The Monmouth police chief was quoted at the time of the arrest in 1915 that "I do not believe these three negroes are connected with any of the other ax murders which occurred in different parts of the country."¹¹

Ellsworth, Kansas: October 15, 1911 – 5 victims

If the national press and police were not aware of a pattern of killings after the Dawson family murders in Monmouth, Illinois, they certainly were attuned to it two weeks later when the Showman family was found in their beds outside the small Kansas

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farming community of Ellsworth. A neighbor, worried by the unresponsiveness of the family by telephone, went to the house, and finding the door open, found the bodies of William Showman, his wife Pauline, and their three children in two different beds. The slayings were determined to have occurred on Sunday night, October 15, 1911. The murder weapon, an ax taken from a neighbor's yard, was found inside the home, having been washed off by the killer. An article of clothing was put over the telephone to muffle the sound and a lamp, without a chimney was at the foot of one of the beds. The chimney was discovered in the kitchen, under a chair. The *Ellsworth Reporter* surmised the murderer had feared the family might have awakened in stronger light.¹²

The local sheriff brought in bloodhounds from nearby Abilene to search for the killer's escape route. The dogs followed the scent to the intersection of the Union Pacific and Frisco railroad tracks a short distance from the Showman home. A man in Ellsworth looking for work and registered in a hotel under the name John Smith was identified by a coroner's jury as the man likely to have committed the crime. This man, John Smitherton, was arrested under the influence of alcohol, sobered up and interviewed and found to have a reliable story for his appearance in town.

The main focus in the crimes then turned to Charles Marzyck, Mrs. Showman's sister's ex-husband. Marzyck had been sent to the Kansas Penitentiary in 1906 for stealing wheat, had threatened the people who testified against him, but had since completed his sentence and moved to an unknown location. A local Marshal, instrumental in the conviction, reported that someone had attempted to enter his house on Sunday evening, cutting a screen in the process. Rumors flew of Marzyck's arrival in Ellsworth, then a report he was in Alaska, and another in Oklahoma.

The media weighs in

The press was awakening to the possibility of a roaming serial killer based on the similarities between the Colorado Springs, Monmouth, and Ellsworth crimes. In the *Rocky Mountain News*, the killer was described as "traveling about the country like a millionaire or a tramp ... obsessed with the desire to terrorize a nation."¹³ An article in the *Colorado Springs Gazette's* discussed the Showman murders:

Is another family, somewhere, slated for massacre by "Billy, the Axman," on Sunday, October 29? If there is anything in sequence or in the theory now accepted by the authorities of five states, one family, perhaps two, living in a small, two-room cottage on the outskirts of some town in the United States, will be murdered with an ax sometime between midnight, October 28 and midnight October 29 to satisfy the seemingly insatiable thirst for blood of the most cruel and heartless beast ever known in the history of crimes.¹⁴

The *Gazette* included the three crimes detailed already along with two crimes the *Rocky Mountain News* was unaware of (which will be recounted below because they were not included in the McClaughry theory) at Portland, Oregon and Rainier, Washington.

Charles Marzyck was the main suspect for the string of crimes thus far. He had married Mrs. Showman's sister in Denver and was well known to the police there. Colorado Springs police were trying to link him to that city. The *Colorado Springs Gazette* reported that Arthur Burnham, sole survivor of that city's rampage could not recall any link between his family and the Marzycks. The paper also reported, in the same article, that not only had Marzyck's brother lived in Colorado Springs approximately eight years earlier but that Marzyck himself had once lived in Monmouth, Illinois.¹⁵ Marzyck's ex-wife reported him in the Portland *Morning Oregonian* as having been convicted of forgery in Colorado Springs.¹⁶ A check of the Colorado Springs city directories do not show anyone by the name living in the city during the years 1898 – 1912.

Just when the press had notified the nation of the series of ax murders, they seemed to have stopped. Although there was an incident in Mount Pleasant, Iowa on October 31, 1911, McClaughry did not include it in his theory so it will be recounted later. Louisiana and Texas were also grappling with an ax-wielding murderer during the time period between January 1911 and August 1912. The victims in this series of crimes, with most of the violence happening between November 1911 and April 1912, were blacks and mulattoes. Police investigating that murder spree assumed the culprits to be of the same race. ¹⁷

Paola, Kansas: June 5, 1912 – 2 victims

In June, 1912, McClaughry's string of crimes started again. Twenty-one year old Rollin Hudson had moved his wife Anna to Paola, Kansas, a small town approximately seventy miles southwest of Kansas City, to save his failing marriage. They had only been in Paola for a couple of months. The town knew very little about the Hudson's except that their marriage was not a happy one, punctuated by arguments and separations. A neighbor confided afterwards that Hudson had told him his wife was unfaithful and he had recently intercepted letters from the man who had held his wife's attentions back home.¹⁸

As with the other crimes, concerned neighbors prompted the discovery of the victims. Two women pushed open the unlocked door of the Hudson home and found the bodies in bed, under a comforter, through which the attack was made. They had been killed on a Wednesday evening with an instrument which was never found. The home

was accessed through a window, the screen removed and left against the outside of the house. The *Miami Republican* reported that it was possible the victims were chloroformed before the attack.¹⁹ Valuable items were in the house, discounting a motive of robbery, and a coal lamp, without a chimney, found beside the bed.

A man was seen at the front door of the Hudson home on Wednesday night after having asked about the family throughout the town earlier. He had been admitted inside and the police instantly named this person as a suspect. He was never found. Several local citizens stepped forward to claim they had seen Anna Hudson and a man arguing on a local bridge the day of the murder. A threatening "letter of affinity" to Anna Hudson was found on the stairway of a Justice's office postmarked May 27th, but there were no clues to be found in it. A detective from Kansas City was hired to work on the case and determined that Roy "Hookey" Adams, of Akron, Ohio was the former sweetheart of Anna Hudson. The detective traveled to Ohio and found that Adams had applied for employment at a rubber plant there the night of the murders and discounted him as a suspect.

Another family in Paola was awakened the same night to the sound of a lamp chimney falling inside their home. A man was spotted exiting that household and a screen later found that indicated he had entered through a window. A dress, believed to have been owned by Mrs. Hudson was found at that scene.²⁰ Without any leads to investigate, the Sheriff was reported to be of the opinion that the person who had axmurdered "whole families in different parts of the country the past year" was also guilty of the Paola crimes.²¹

Villisca, Iowa: June 10, 1912 – 8 victims

Less than one week after the Paola murders, the small, southwestern Iowa town of Villisca was horrified to discover the ax murders of eight of its residents. Josiah Moore was a successful farm implement dealer with a wife and four children. He and his family and two visiting children were found in beds in three rooms after being killed on a Sunday night. The children had performed in church services that Sunday evening, and two Stillinger girls, Lena and Ina, had received permission to spend the night at the Moore's. When a neighbor wondered about the quiet home on Monday morning, suspicion was aroused and Joe Moore's brother was called to the locked, curtain-drawn home. Gaining entrance, the eight bodies were found in three bedrooms on two different floors.

It was ascertained that entrance was made through an unlocked back door while the family was sleeping. The killer lit a lamp, removed the chimney and put it under a chair before going up the staircase to where the Moore family slept. The killer dispatched the parents in one room before attending to the children in the other room upstairs. Returning back down the stairs, he went into an adjoining room and killed the Stillinger girls as well. One of the girls awakened during the attack and moved down in the bed to unsuccessfully escape the attack. After the killings, the murderer took the time to drape his victim's faces and mirrors with clothing, pull each shade, lock each window, light another lamp (and remove another chimney), and wash his hands in the washbasin. A slab of bacon was removed from the icebox, which authorities believe was a masturbatory aid. Lena Stillinger had been moved after being killed so the murderer could view her naked body. The ax was left inside the house, which was then locked from the inside. Local police immediately lost control of the crime scene. As word of the murders spread, people gathered at the Moore house, gaining entrance at one of the three exterior doors while a lone deputy tried to keep people out. A piece of Josiah Moore's skull was taken by a local pool hall operator as a souvenir.²² By five o'clock that evening, the number of people estimated to be in Villisca was over 5,000. The town had but 2,500 inhabitants. The Iowa National Guard was called out to maintain peace ²³ Bloodhounds arrived and took the authorities through town to the Nodaway River to a point where the railroad tracks crossed. Fingerprint expert M.W. McClaughry arrived from Leavenworth but, according to the movie *Villisca: Living with a Mystery*, was so intoxicated he could not start his work that day. ²⁴ Fingerprints were to be of no use because of the number of people who had disturbed the crime scene.

Speculation on a suspect centered on local businessman F.F. Jones, a state senator and competing farm implement dealer. Josiah Moore had been Jones' top salesman before opening his own store and taking the John Deere account with him. The two were never on friendly terms after that, and there were whispers that Moore had an affair with Jones' daughter-in-law.²⁵ No one in Villisca seriously thought that Senator Jones did the deed himself, but some were convinced he had hired someone to eliminate his business rival. A detective with the Burns Agency, James N. Wilkerson, moved to Villisca under the guise of a land agent, but was investigating the crime. Wilkerson was convinced a man named William "Blackie" Mansfield had been hired by Jones to murder the Moore family. By 1916 Wilkerson had made enough noise to that effect that F.F. Jones sued him for slander. The slander trial was turned by Wilkerson into a referendum on Jones' guilt or innocence. The Grand Jury impaneled at the time determined that Mansfield, whose family was ax-murdered in 1914 in Blue Island, Illinois (detailed later), had a jobrelated alibi that eliminated him from suspicion. F.F. Jones was never brought to trial and never publicly stated any connection to the crime. He did not run for re-election to the state senate, sold his banking interests and farm implement store and lived quietly in Villisca until his death.

Another suspect was an English immigrant, the Reverend George Jacklin Kelly. Kelly was an odd man who lived in the nearby town of Macedonia, Iowa who had preached in Villisca the Sunday morning of the murders. That night, he had stayed with the Presbyterian minister's family and left the next morning on the train, before the murders were discovered. He showed a keen interest in the crimes and was indicted by the Grand Jury in 1917 for the murder of Lena Stillinger. Since the 1912 murders, Kelly had lost his grip on sanity, sending letters to detectives and police denying his guilt so vehemently that the police started to take notice of him. He was convinced the authorities were going to arrest him for the Villisca murders and once they did, Kelly confessed to the crimes but later recarted that confession. The main points of evidence against him were his recanted confession and the recollection of an elderly couple who claimed Kelly had told them about the crimes the morning before they were discovered. Under cross-examination, it was discovered that Kelly had returned to Villisca the following Sunday, asked for and received a tour of the Moore residence under the guise he was from Scotland Yard, and had possibly talked with the elderly couple after the commission of the crimes. The jury hung on one vote to acquit Kelly on the first trial and a second jury acquitted Kelly. Reverend Kelly and his wife later lived in Chicago and New York City

It is the split in town opinion over the guilt of Jones or Kelly that is the basis for the 2004 movie *Villisca: Living with a Mystery*, which examines what the worst massmurder in Iowa history did to the fabric of Villisca over the subsequent years. The Villisca murders were never officially solved.

Columbia, Missouri: December 17, 1912 – 2 victims

It was eight days before Christmas and Henry Lee Moore had told his mother and grandmother he would come to pay some bills and arrange things for the holiday. Arriving in town that morning from his home in Moberly, he went to their home, where he found the front door locked and the curtains drawn. He then retreated to the house next door and asked a neighbor if the women were at home. With the neighbor watching, Moore pushed open the unlocked back door to see his mother on the kitchen floor and ran from the scene to alert the neighbors. Mary J. Wilson, Moore's grandmother, was found in bed, having been struck there with one blow from an ax. Georgia Ann Moore was found in her bedclothes face up by the kitchen door. The house had been ransacked. The ax was found in a ravine near the house.

Henry Lee Moore's story started to unravel immediately and he was arrested for the murders of his relatives. Police found that he had arrived in Columbia at 3:45 the previous afternoon and checked into a local hotel under an assumed name. Moore explained he had lied because he knew he would be the main suspect in the crimes and had arrived earlier without informing his family so he could sleep, having worked the night before. He told the authorities he had used an assumed name so his family would not know he had come to town and not stayed with them. Moore claimed he had eaten supper at the hotel, returned to his room and never left it until the next morning. He explained blood spots on his clothing and a handkerchief alternately as paint stains and from a nosebleed. A Bertillon expert was called and measurements taken. Moore further damaged his chances by having newspaper clippings showing an interest in murder trials and convictions based on circumstantial evidence. He also said he was a graduate of the Kansas State Agricultural College (KSAC) and a world traveler.²⁶

The trial, held in March, 1913 was a quick one. Moore had claimed he had never been to jail before, which was refuted by the prosecutor. He gave the name of an aged man whom he thought had committed the crimes, but had never pointed out this man to the authorities while he was in jail for three months before the trial. The prosecutor also proved he had never attended KSAC and a review of letters he had written "shows he had an exaggerated idea of the worth of his mother's property here. The desire to get possession of this property would be sufficient motive for the crime."²⁷

Thirty-seven year old Moore was apparently quite the womanizer. Among his effects were letters from women all over the country. Love letters he had written to a fifteen year old girl were turned over to the county coroner. The coroner quoted the girl as saying:

...she never intended marrying him. Once, she said she told him she would never marry a man who has no home. In reply, according to the girl, Moore said he would someday have his mother's home here in Columbia.²⁸

Another woman testified Moore asked her to run a rooming house for him. He had given her an expensive hat and money and put a down payment on furniture for the house and promised to pay it off after he returned from Columbia. A third woman and her father both testified that Moore had told her he would inherit his mother's home on her death and they would have a house when they married. The financial motive was clear, although contradictory. The motives were attacked by the defense, but a life sentence in prison was handed down unanimously after just three and a half hours.

Non McClaughry crimes

There were other ax murders or assaults in the same time period of the McClaughry crimes that were not included in his theory, but linked to the others by the media. The first two, in the Pacific Northwest, were noted in the Colorado Springs *Gazette* concerning a possible serial killer dubbed "Billy the Axman." These crimes had similar circumstances to the murders in the Midwest, but the details were distorted, perhaps in an attempt to strengthen the links between the crimes. The *Gazette* article reported a Portland, Oregon crime as happening on Sunday, August 20, 1911, when in fact, it had occurred on Tuesday, June 20, 1911. The article also reported a Rainer, Washington crime as having occurred on Sunday, September 3, 1911, when it had happened on Monday evening, July 10, 1911. The Gazette's erroneous dates misled readers into thinking a two week time table was being held to by the killer, and that each crime was being committed on a Sunday evening. In addition, despite the belief of many that the two Northwest crimes were committed by the same man, the Washington crime led to the conviction of a man who had an alibi for the Oregon case. In the two Northwest crimes, the female victims also had been sexually assaulted, an aspect not seen in the Midwest crimes.

Ardenwald (Portland), Oregon: June 8, 1911 – 4 victims

William Hill, his wife Ruth and their two children were discovered by a concerned neighbor in a suburb of Portland, Oregon, struck down by an ax discovered inside the home. Bloody fingerprints were found on the victims, and both Mrs. Hill and

her five year old daughter had been sexually assaulted. The children were found in their bed, but the parents were found in different areas of the house. Valuables were reported missing from the scene, hinting at robbery as a motive. The family had lived in Ardenwald only a month, setting up a temporary home on the acreage they had just purchased. A Bertillon expert was called in, but was not able to examine the murder weapon before others had handled it after discovery of the crime.²⁹ A bloodhound trail was sought after eight days, but proved to be cold. Numerous suspects were arrested, one for bothering women, another, a vagrant, a third a survivor of an ax assault in 1898. Two youths implicated a traveling partner before cross-examination of the story broke down. All were released and the crime remained unsolved.

Rainier, Washington: July 10, 1911 – 2 victims

On the discovery of the bodies of Archie Coble and his wife in Rainier, Washington, south of Tacoma, the local newspaper immediately linked the slayings to the commission of the Hill crime in Portland the previous month. ³⁰ The young couple, married for less than a year, was found in their bed by concerned neighbors entering through an unlocked door. Nothing was taken from the home.

Swedish immigrant Swan Peterson had worked in Rainer but left without pay on the day the bodies were discovered. He was arrested on the word of his section foreman. Peterson was interviewed and protested his innocence, but his English was very bad and authorities doubted he really knew what his circumstances were. Officials held the Swede on the promise of Portland crime experts who had said they would be able to connect the crimes via blood evidence using a system they were developing for finding blood stains. The experts stated that if the section hand was proved to be the man who stayed in a certain hotel room, their process would conclusively prove his guilt in the case. Peterson admitted to staying in the hotel room.

Approximately two weeks after the crimes, G.H. Wilson, the section foreman who implicated Peterson in the murders was arrested. Wilson's wife had demanded to know about blood she had found in a tent Wilson had slept in the night of the murders. His evasive answers prompted her to tell neighbors and finally the authorities. Wilson admitted killing the Cobles, but said he did not remember doing so, being convinced he had done so because of the presence of blood in his tent. Wilson's confession was considered to be "weak" by the authorities, and he had an alibi for the Portland crime.³¹ His sanity was questioned both by the press and authorities. In August 1911, George H. Wilson was charged with first degree murder for the killings of the Cobles. At the trial, the expert's assertions about the conclusive guilt of Peterson were presented and their system was proven to be a sham.³² George Wilson was convicted of murder in the second degree and sentenced to twenty years to life in the Walla Walla state penitentiary.

Mount Pleasant, Iowa: October 31, 1911 – 1 person assaulted

Sixty miles west of Monmouth, Illinois, in the southeastern Iowa town of Mount Pleasant, J.B. Jordan readied himself to go to work. He spoke briefly with his wife and went out the door at 5:10 a.m., leaving the kitchen door unlocked behind him. Twenty minutes later, eldest son Bert Jordan heard his mother call out from downstairs and found her lying crosswise on her bed, covered in blood, bed covers over her. Thinking his mother had suffered some sort of a seizure, Bert went to get his father and doctors were called. The examination revealed ahead wound caused by a blunt instrument. There was no evidence of an attempted robbery, and the local newspaper speculated that the crime "was not done by anyone who was trying to rob the house, else he would not have attempted the murder first, while Mrs. Jordan was asleep." ³³ It was also speculated that a robber would not have attempted to burgle a home with grown children in it during the morning light with lights burning within. ³⁴ The weapon was never found.

The time frames involved in the commission of the crime made it impossible for J.B. Jordan to have done it. Belle Jordan lapsed into unconsciousness and it was feared she would not live, but she did wake up several days later. Unfortunately, she could not remember anything that had happened and was under the impression she had fallen and hurt herself. Mrs. Jordan was reported to have ultimately lost the sight in one eye because of the assault. There is no record of the case ever having been solved, but the *Rocky Mountain News*, in its initial reporting of the story, stated Iowa authorities were searching for Charles Marzyck, the main suspect in the Ellsworth crime that had occurred two weeks previously, a fact that was not reported in the Mount Pleasant newspapers. ³⁵

Blue Island, Illinois: July 6, 1914 – 4 victims

Even after the publication of the McClaughry theory implicating Henry Lee Moore as the Midwest ax murderer, a crime in the Chicago suburbs in July, 1914 was reported as "not the work of the maniac who has committed a series of similar crimes in four mid-western states." ³⁶ Jacob Mislich, his wife and married daughter, Mrs. William Mansfield, and her baby were murdered in their beds in Blue Island, Illinois. Bed covers were pulled over the victim's bodies and the ax found at the scene. Witnesses were contacted that saw a man loitering about the home at 2 o'clock of the morning of the murders. It was thought that the murderer knew something of the layout of the house, as he had to climb into an attic to kill Jacob Mislich, a location a stranger to the house may not have known about. Chicago detectives identified a suspect as being a former sweetheart of Mrs. Mansfield prior to her marriage and sent descriptions of the suspect to other police jurisdictions. Fingerprints on the ax and bedclothes were photographed by the authorities. The crime was so similar in nature to the Villisca, Iowa crime that Mislich's son-in-law, the so-called "Blackie" Mansfield became the focus of the Villisca crime although he was not implicated in the Blue Island murders of his family. Further research is needed to determine if this crime was ever solved.

Why Henry Lee Moore?

McClaughry's theory that Henry Lee Moore committed over twenty-five murders in four states is primarily based on his assertion that the crimes shared similar characteristics to the crime for which Moore was convicted as well as his availability to commit the crimes. McClaughry also pointed to Moore's apparent interest in murder cases, due to the clippings from local cases found in his belongings after his arrest. McClaughry's reply to Columbia authorities on their inquiry to him for Henry Lee Moore's Kansas fingerprints shows he was already formulating the theory prior to Moore's conviction on murder charges.³⁷

How alike were the crimes? Figure 2 summarizes some of the similarities. The surface similarity between the crimes is the weapon and the fact the murders were committed while the victims were sleeping in bed. Axes were a very common, handy weapon, as most rural homes had them in the yard to cut firewood. A murderer intent on silently killing multiple victims would not have been able to use a gun because of the noise, or a knife, because it would have taken more than one blow, waking others in the bed. In addition, without the use of a drug such as chloroform, reported as a possibility

only in the Paola crime, ax murders would prove to be difficult in the daylight with conscious victims.

The modus operandi of the "non-Columbia" crimes seems to link them together more tightly than the others. At Colorado Springs, Ellsworth, and Villisca, the murderer did strike on a Sunday night, staying on the scene to wash his hands or face and generally roaming around the house. In Colorado Springs and Villisca, the homes were left locked and the blinds drawn, and in Ellsworth, Paola, and Villisca, the lamp chimney the killer used was removed and placed in another location. The Columbia murder shared none of these characteristics.

Figure 2 – Chart of crime similarities

	Colorado Springs, CO	Monmouth, IL	Ellsworth, KS	Paola, KS	Villisca, IA	Columbia, MO		Portland, OR	Rainier, WA	Mt. Pleasant, IA	Blue Island, IL
Number of Victims	6	3	5	2	8	2		4	2	1	4
										-	
Weapon was an ax		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	?	Y
Weapon was found at scene	Y	Y	Υ		Y	Y		Y	Y		Y
Crime occurred on Sunday night	Y		Y		Y						
House was locked / shuttered	Y				Υ						?
Sexual aspect					Υ			Υ	Υ		
Robbery / financial motive						Y					
Victims in Bed	Y	Y	Υ	Y	Υ	1		2	Υ	Y	Y
Bed clothes covering victims			?	Y	Υ					Y	
Killer stayed on scene	Y	?	Υ		Υ			Y	Υ		
Killer washed at scene	Y		Υ		Υ						
Near Railroad	Y	?	Υ	Y	Υ	?				Y	
Major Suspect?		Y	Y		Y	Y			Y		?
Chimney Lamp laid aside			Υ	Y	Υ						
Conviction		Y				Y			Y		

The Columbia and Monmouth murders were the only one of the McClaughry

crimes to seem to have a motive, probably because they were the only crimes to have

been considered to have been solved. The Monmouth murder was not financial in nature.

Henry Lee Moore was obviously interested in his mother's and grandmother's house. There is no overt financial motive for any of the other crimes. The Columbia murder is the only crime of the six where a victim was killed outside of the bedroom while awake. It is also the only crime in which the house was ransacked. The other crimes have more in common with each other than the Columbia crime has with them.

Henry Lee Moore was born November 1, 1874 in Boone County, Missouri and was the eldest of four sons of Enoch and Georgia Ann Wilson Moore. Enoch Moore was a farmer and a veteran of the Civil War and Georgia Ann supported herself in later years as a nurse for families in the Columbia area. The younger siblings were Tilden, Turner, and Charles. Turner, Tilden, and Enoch Moore all died before 1910. Youngest son Charles left home and went west, ending up in the Stockton, California area, where he died in 1960. During Henry Lee's trial, his whereabouts were unknown. It is not known if Charles Moore ever learned the fate of his mother, grandmother and brother.

In 1900, Henry Lee Moore was listed as a farm hand living with the Vaux family in Franklin County, Iowa. The family had a young daughter named Martha. By 1910, the Vaux family had moved to northern Wisconsin and Martha had a young daughter, Edna, age seven. Martha was counted as a widow and both had the surname Moore. Henry Lee has not been found in the 1910 census, possibly because he was awaiting incarceration in Sedgwick County, Kansas. At thirty-five years of age, Henry Lee had convinced authorities that he was much younger and was sentenced to the Hutchinsonbased Kansas Reformatory School (rather than the Kansas Penitentiary) on a forgery charge on May 1, 1910. He was released from the Reformatory on April 26, 1911, and was free to commit the crimes accused of him when they started in Colorado Springs in September 1911 (or Portland in June, 1911 for that matter). Testimony at Moore's trial indicated that he had lived with his mother and grandmother in Columbia during the winter of 1911 and summer of 1912 before moving for his railroad job.³⁸ His employment with the railroad afforded him the opportunity to get passes to travel the country, but he had worked for the Wabash Railroad yard in Moberly, Missouri only since September, 1912. Henry Lee Moore was familiar with the Midwest, having lived in Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri. He may have also lived for a time in California, as Charles Moore's 1918 World War I registration card indicated his brother's residence as Bakersfield, California. McClaughry claimed it was telling that the crimes stopped after Moore was arrested in 1912, but another crime with similar characteristics occurred in Blue Island in 1914.

Henry Lee Moore had spent 36 years in prison when the governor paroled him on December 2, 1949. He was eighty-two years old and had lived eight years at the Salvation Army Men's Center in St. Louis earning forty dollars a month as a tailor when the governor commuted his sentence on July 30, 1956. When and where he died is a mystery.

Other law enforcement officials did not seem to put much stock in the McClaughry theory. Columbia authorities did not think he was connected with the other crimes when McClaughry pointed out his theory to them after Moore's arrest in December, 1912.³⁹ Kansas City detective Thomas O'Leary interviewed Henry Lee Moore shortly after his arrest in Columbia to determine if the murders of his family were, in any way linked to the murders of the Moore family in Villisca. (The Moore families were not related.) O'Leary wrote a letter to a Henry Sampson of Des Moines, Iowa with the following:

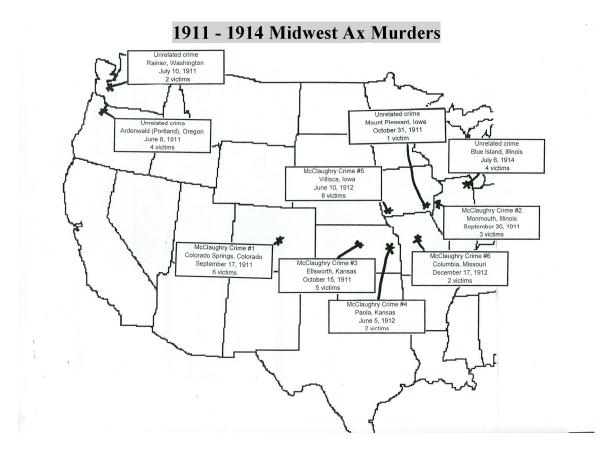
Not having heard from you since I was at Columbia, Mo. on the Lee Moore <u>Ax</u> <u>Man</u> Murder in December, thought I would drop you a line. I am curious to know if your office has any new theories on the Villisca case. As you are no doubt aware there was absolutely no connection between the Columbia and Villisca murders except <u>an axe</u> was used in both cases and the names were the same. I assisted the County Attorney of Boone County a few days and there is no doubt in my mind that Lee Moore the man under arrest killed his mother and grandmother, and we will be able to price the motive.

Perhaps M.W. McClaughry and the national press were too anxious to link the

crimes together and solve them by implicating one man. Authorities in the other communities continued to search for their killer, conduct trials and convict suspects, even after widespread publication of the theory. Phillip Jenkins author of the article, "*Serial Murder in the United States 1900 – 1940: A Historical Perspective*" attributes the twenty-five ax murders to Lovey Mitchell, the Monmouth suspect, even though the Monmouth police did not attempt to link the crimes.⁴¹

Crime investigation techniques were just being developed that may have been able to prove Henry Lee Moore's guilt or innocence in the other five McClaughry theory crimes. Had later crime scene management techniques been followed, fingerprints may have been obtained and analyzed. At the time of the murders, the central fingerprint repository had only been in existence for less than ten years, so a comprehensive file was not available for comparison had fingerprints been obtained. The use of the Bertillon method was already being phased out around the country because of doubts of it's effectiveness in exclusively identifying a person.

Henry Lee Moore was undoubtedly a murderer. His commission of the crime in Columbia was so poorly executed that he was immediately arrested and unanimously convicted. Is it possible that a man accused of so cunningly killing over twenty-five people in five different communities without a clue left behind would return to his home to kill his remaining family members in such a haphazard and obvious manner? After the media coverage of the other murders, particularly the Moore family in Villisca, the idea may have been planted in his head to do the same in order to obtain title to the house in Columbia. Perhaps Henry Lee Moore was a copycat killer; he certainly seems to have been a scapegoat.



Map of 1911 – 1914 Ax Murders, created by Beth Klingensmith, July 20, 2006.

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