

# A Reel Old Murder Mystery

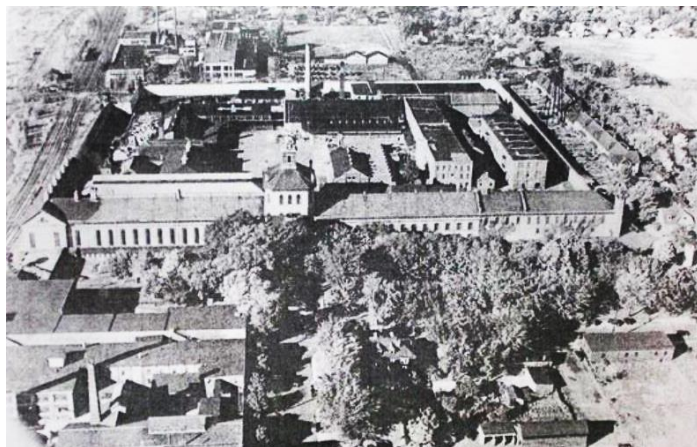
Steven K. Vernon

On Wednesday, July 3, 1918, Vaiden Bordner's blood-stained Ford Model T was found in Jackson, Michigan, about a half-mile northwest of the Michigan State Prison. Police quickly identified the owner and learned that he had not shown up for work that morning. Bordner's landlord had last seen him about eight o'clock the night before, as he supposedly was leaving for a dance at a nearby resort.

Bordner had been "keeping company" with Mrs. Tillie Jenkins, a coworker, who also had not punched in that day. Her family had last seen her around eight o'clock the night before, as she allegedly was leaving for a Fourth of July march practice.

The search was on. On July 4, a pool of blood and skull fragments were found at a location north of the city. On July 5, police organized large volunteer search parties, which included trusty prison inmates. They found a bloody pickaxe handle a few miles north of where the skull fragments had been found. The location was near a prison farm, where trusties provided cheap labor.

On Saturday, July 6, searchers located a set of off-road auto tire tracks not far from the pickaxe handle location. They followed the tracks for about a half-mile, and with the help of dogs, they discovered the bodies of Mrs. Jenkins, a twenty-seven-year-old<sup>1</sup> divorcée, and Bordner, a thirty-one-year-old tool and die maker, fishing reel inventor, and married father of two.



*Michigan State Prison, Jackson, ca. 1900*

Both victims had been clubbed to death. Mrs. Jenkins was "nearly decapitated," and Bordner's skull was crushed. The official dates of their deaths were recorded as July 3, 1918.

Both victims worked for Sparks-Withington Company, which manufactured a variety of products, perhaps the best-known of which was its electrical automobile horn. In 1918, it was also making helmets for the army. The plant in Jackson was a "prison factory," where trusties also provided cheap labor. It was located next to the prison grounds.

Mrs. Jenkins lived with her parents about two blocks north of the prison. Bordner's home address, where he, his wife, and children lived, was in Coldwater, about forty-four miles from Jackson. For at least two years, he also boarded in Jackson, about a block south of the prison.

\* \* \*

Tillie Hancock was born in South Wales on June 18, 1888.<sup>2</sup> Her father immigrated in 1896 and her mother, in 1905. They settled in Pennsylvania, in or near Scranton, and were naturalized in 1905. Tillie's two younger brothers and a sister were all born there by 1910.

On August 6, 1909, Tillie married John Jenkins, a twenty-two-year-old brakeman. Five months later, she gave birth to a daughter, Gladys. It is uncertain where she spent the next few years. Her parents moved to Jackson by 1914, where her father worked as an engineer at a brewing company. Sometime between 1910 and 1917, Tillie was divorced, and she and Gladys joined her parents in Jackson.

Vaiden C. Bordner was born on August 11, 1886, in South Whitley, Indiana. At some point, his family moved to West Point, Kentucky, where Vaiden was in school in 1900. In 1905, while living in Sturgis, Michigan, he married Neva Swift in Bronson, Michigan, her home town. The couple moved to Mishawaka (next to South Bend), Indiana, where daughter Fern was born in 1906 and son Vernon, in 1907. By 1910, Bordner moved his family back to Sturgis.

In 1914, Bordner applied from Elkhart, Indiana, for a patent for his design of an adjustable brake on an



Vaiden C. Bordner (Photo courtesy of Margaret Byers)

Indiana-style fishing reel. It was granted on May 11, 1915, by which time he and his family were living in Coldwater.

\* \* \*

On May 28, 1911, William Tate was wounded by a gunshot in Pontiac, Michigan. Police charged twenty-four-year-old Harry Bushnell with assault with intent to commit murder, and he was arrested in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Bushnell admitted the shooting and claimed self-defense, but he was convicted on September 18, 1911, and sentenced to five to ten years in Jackson prison. He was suspected of having committed a murder in 1910, but there was not sufficient evidence to charge him. By the time he was transferred from Pontiac's jail to Jackson on September 28, he was believed to have collaborated in a recent escape attempt. Although the state pardon board blocked his release in 1916, he became a trusty at Jackson, and he was permitted to operate a threshing machine at the prison farm, where he also boarded.

When Vaiden Bordner's car was found on July 3, a widespread search was begun. Many of the searchers were prison trusties, Harry Bushnell included. On Friday, July 5, Bushnell walked away from the farm.

Investigators found a lantern globe with dried, bloody fingerprints in Bushnell's room. A farm

housemate would testify at a coroner's inquest that Bushnell had been absent at midnight Tuesday, and other inmates noted his change of clothes on Wednesday morning. He had explained that his clothes had been stained with grease that couldn't be removed, and so he burned them. Another inmate had seen that Bushnell had a revolver.

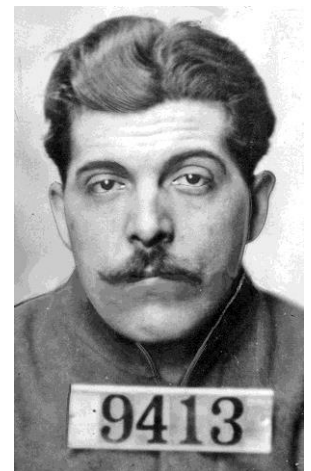
\* \* \*

Bushnell came under immediate suspicion for the murders of Tillie Jenkins and Vaiden Bordner. The "greatest manhunt in local prison history" began, and news stories written much later give widely varying accounts of what Bushnell did next. In July, 1920, he was suspected of having murdered a twelve-year-old girl in Cotterville, Michigan, after allegedly being spotted there. He was said to have gone to Chicago and then to Montana.

On August 27, 1918, only a few weeks after the double murders, Bushnell, using the alias of Vern E. Severen, age 40, obtained a Montana license to marry Theresa McElfresh, age 42.<sup>3</sup> Both claimed Nina, Montana, as their home; Severen claimed he was the son of Leroy and Edith Severen, Los Angeles, California. In 1927, the Butte, Montana, city directory included Verne Sevren, a miner, living with his wife, Theresa C. The 1928 directory included Vern Sevren and wife Helen, and the 1930 directory listed Sevren and wife Kath. However, the 1930 federal census shows that the household of Verne Sevren, born in Virginia, included his wife Thesia C., and their maid, Marie Grant. The 1931 directory included Vern Sevren and his wife Caroline.

On August 6, 1932, Vern Sevren, Butte, and Marie Grant were issued a Montana license to marry. He alleged that he'd been born in West Virginia to Albert and Emma Sevren and she, in Ontario, Canada.

In 1933, a Butte miner, hoping to collect a reward, tipped off police that Vern Sevren was the wanted Harry Bushnell, whose photograph had appeared in *True Detective Mysteries*. Bushnell, a.k.a. Vern Sevren, was arrested and held for Michigan authorities. After his fifteen-year disappearance, he admitted his identity, insisted his wife knew nothing about his criminal history, and waited to be sent back to Jackson. On March 23,



Mug shot of Harry Bushnell, 1911

1933, just before Michigan lawmen arrived, Bushnell was found dead in his cell, having taken a strychnine-containing pill that he supposedly had been carrying for fifteen years. His suicide note denied that he had any knowledge of the murders of Tillie Jenkins and Vaiden Bordner.

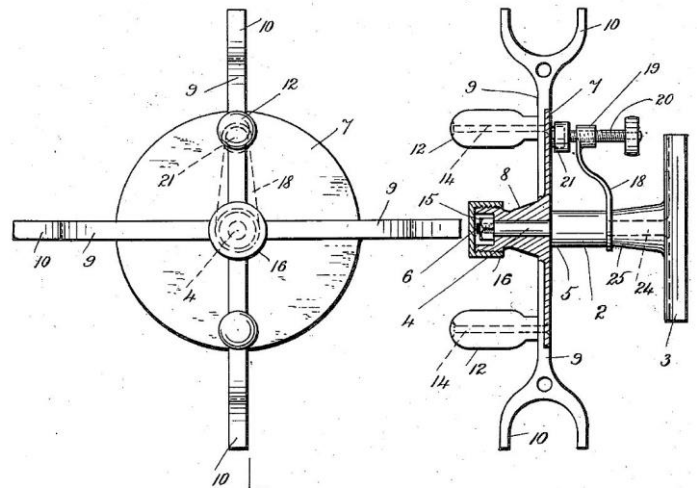
### Epilogue

The evidence that Bushnell committed the double murders is, of course, circumstantial. Other circumstantial evidence suggested that he committed a murder in 1910, and some in Butte accused him of murdering his wife Theresa, who simply disappeared from view. He also was suspected of murdering Grace Bennett, a local ranch owner who disappeared mysteriously after meeting him.

Neva Bordner moved in with her sister and brother-in-law in South Bend shortly after losing her husband and opened a millinery shop with her sister in 1919. She would marry a realtor by 1929 and would operate the Swift Sisters Beauty Salon. Probably divorced by 1936, she would move in with her widowed son-in-law. Her daughter Fern would marry a metal worker at the Studebaker plant in 1923 and would give birth to Vaiden's and Neva's grandson and two granddaughters, but she would die in late 1932 of complications following an operation. Vaiden's son Vernon also would work at the Studebaker plant as a machinist and would marry in 1936. His wife would give birth to Vaiden's and Neva's granddaughter a year later.

Tillie's daughter Gladys was nine years old and living with her grandparents in Jackson in 1920. The only record I have found of her later whereabouts is an odd affidavit of September 19, 1967, in which Gladys Rayner, born January 10, 1910, in Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania, swears that the correct names on her birth certificate should be Gladys Jenkins (subject), John Jenkins (father), and Tillie Hancock (mother). Gladys was living in Seattle, Washington, when she so attested.

A sad, unfinished story, made even more disheartening by the fact that extensive searches have failed to discover an example of Vaiden Bordner's reel brake. His legacy would have been enriched if his invention had ever gone into production. If anyone has one, I would appreciate hearing about it.



*Drawings of Bordner's patented reel. The brake support (18) is a spring. The adjusting screw (20) presses a pad (21) against the spool.*

### Notes

1. Newspaper accounts gave her age at death as twenty-six or twenty-seven. The age recorded on the official death certificate was twenty-seven years, 15 days. However, see Note 2.
2. Tillie Hancock's birthdate on her marriage license. If that date is correct, she would have been thirty at the time of the murder, not twenty-seven.
3. One news account (*Billings Gazette*, 3/23/1933), based on a third-hand report, stated that Bushnell had inadvertently told his landlady Theresa, in Hammond, Indiana, about his record and that she blackmailed him into marrying her. She was supposedly seventy-years-old when she disappeared around 1932. The 1918 marriage license suggests otherwise.

The most complete story of the murder investigations and the suspect's history was published in *True Detective Mysteries*, December, 1935. It was dictated by one of the officers involved in the investigation. Where his version of events differed from official records, I used the official records for the narrative.

### Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to Ron Bordner, Margaret Byers, Jen Martin, and Becky Nufer, descendants of Vaiden and Neva Bordner, to Chelsea Leterski, Jackson County Sheriff's Department, and to David Saalfrank for their enthusiastic help and support in the preparation of this article.