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PRESENT**

THE STORY OF Stagger Lee

BY TIMOTHY LANE

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. PRINT PAGES 2-6**
- 2. TAKE PRINTED PAGES AND STICK THEM IN THE PRINTER FLIPPED AND ROTATED 180 DEGREES SO THAT SUBSEQUENT PAGES WILL PRINT ON THE BLANK SIDE AND UPSIDE-DOWN.**
- 3. PRINT PAGES 7-11.**
- 4. FOLD IN HALF AND STAPLE.**
- 5. ENJOY!**

Editor's note: *Riverfront Times* and Timothy Lane are producing a small number of bound and signed copies of *The Story of Stagger Lee*. A free copy will be sent to the first 50 readers who send a request, along with full contact info, to:

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AFTER SHOOTING BILLY LYONS, "STACK" LEE "TOOK HIS HAT FROM THE HAND OF THE WOUNDED MAN AND WALKED COOLLY AWAY." 2



THEN HE MADE HIS WAY BACK TO HIS SIXTH STREET ADDRESS...



THERE STACK CHECKED HIS GUN IN WITH HIS LANDLADY AND WENT TO BED.



... A TENEMENT BUILDING IN "TAMALE TOWN". ACCORDING TO CECIL BROWN, SIXTH STREET WAS THE DISTRICT'S MAIN ARTERY FOR VICE. "BLACKS, LOWER-CLASS WHITES, AND CHINESE WERE THE PRINCIPAL INHABITANTS, WITH AVAILABLE SPACE REDUCED BY GROWING NUMBERS OF FACTORIES, PUBLIC BUILDINGS, HOTELS, AND BUSINESS ESTABLISHMENTS IN ST LOUIS, SIX HUNDRED OF TAMALE TOWN'S FOURTEEN HUNDRED BLACK RESIDENTS LIVED IN THIS ONE BLOCK." 4

AFTER BEING TAKEN TO THE HOSPITAL, BILLY LYONS DIED AT 4 A.M.



ONE EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNT RECALLED:



... AND THEY STOOD AND TALKED AWHILE, AND STACK SNATCHED OUT HIS PISTOL AND SAID:

GEORGE G. MCFARO

I AM NOT GOING TO GIVE YOU THE HAT,

YOU CAN KILL ME.

OR, AS ANOTHER EYE-WITNESS REMEMBERED LYONS SAYING...

'YOU COCKEYED SON OF A BITCH, I'M GOING TO MAKE YOU KILL ME!'

WITNESS UNKNOWN

IF YOU DON'T GIVE ME MY HAT, I WILL BLOW YOUR BRAINS OUT! 4

HE [BILLY] SAID:

SO WHEN HE PULLED THE PISTOL OUT, I WALKED OUT, I DIDN'T STAY ANY LONGER.

LYONS DREW THE KNIFE HE'D BORROWED FROM HIS FRIEND, CRUMP. 1

FLIT!

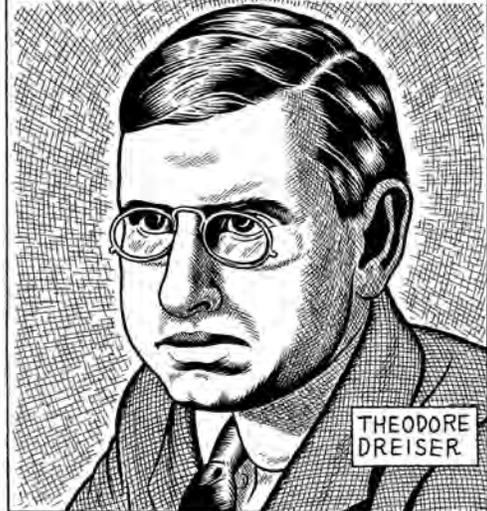
SON OF A BITCH!



FLANIGAN AND FALVEY ESCORTED SHELTON TO THE NOTORIOUS FOUR COURTS OF THE CHESTNUT STREET POLICE STATION.

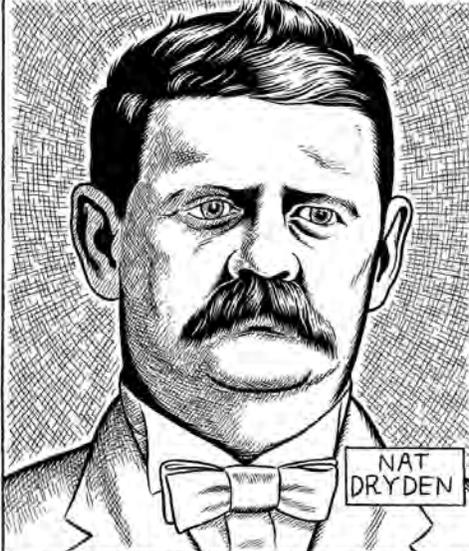
THE YOUNG THEODORE DREISER, THEN WORKING AS A CRIME REPORTER, WROTE OF THE FOUR COURTS: "A MORE DISMAL ATMOSPHERE THAN THAT WHICH PREVAILED IN THIS BUILDING WOULD BE HARD TO FIND... HARLOTS, CRIMINALS, MURDERERS, BUZZARD LAWYERS, POLITICAL JUDGES, DETECTIVES, POLICE AGENTS, AND COURT OFFICIALS — WHAT A COMPANY!

"THE PETTY TYRANNIES THAT ARE PRACTICED BY THE UNDERLINGS AND MINOR OFFICIALS! THE 'GRAFTING' OF LOW, SWINISH BRAINS! THE CRUELTY OF AGENTS OF JUSTICE!"⁶



BY FRIDAY, DECEMBER 27TH, SHELTON HAD HIRED THE "BRILLIANT IF ECCENTRIC" NAT DRYDEN AS HIS LAWYER, "ONE OF THE BEST, IF NOT THE BEST, IN TOWN," WRITES CECIL BROWN, "WHAT WAS UNUSUAL WAS THAT SHELTON HAD DRYDEN... AN ALCOHOLIC AND OPIUM ADDICT, BUT IN THE COURTROOM HE WAS FLAMBOYANT AND DRAMATIC, A BRILLIANT CROSS-EXAMINER AND A GIFTED ORATOR, WITH A GOOD RECORD OF BEATING MURDER CONVICTIONS."

THE FACT THAT SHELTON COULD AFFORD DRYDEN SUGGESTS THAT SHELTON HAD MONEY. HE WAS ALSO ABLE TO POST BAIL FOR HIMSELF.



A CROWD OF ABOUT 300 AFRICAN-AMERICANS GREETED SHELTON AND DRYDEN WITH "CURSES AND HISSES" AS THEY ARRIVED FOR THE INQUEST AT 1 P.M. ON DECEMBER 27TH.



THE CROWD "SURGED TOWARD THE DOOR," FORCING THE OFFICERS TO DRAW THEIR WEAPONS WHILE THEY WAITED FOR REINFORCEMENTS TO ARRIVE.¹



"STACK" LEE STEPPED UP TO THE BAR AND ASKED...



EVERYONE POINTED AT LYONS.



LEE SHELTON AND BILLY LYONS WERE SAID TO BE CASUAL FRIENDS.



THEY BEGAN TALKING AND LAUGHING TOGETHER.

BUT EVENTUALLY THE CONVERSATION, HAVING TURNED TO POLITICS, WENT SOUTH.



SOON, LYONS AND SHELTON "BEGAN EXCHANGING BLOWS BY STRIKING EACH OTHER'S HATS."¹

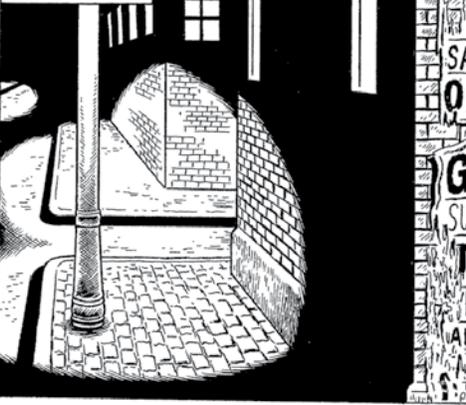


IT WAS NAT DRYDEN'S "BRILLIANCE AND EXPERTISE" THAT RESULTED IN THE HUNG JURY AT SHELTON'S FIRST TRIAL ON JULY 18TH. DRYDEN'S INDISPENSABLE ROLE IN SHELTON'S DEFENSE IS EVEN NOTED IN ONE OF THE MANY SONGS COMMEMORATING THE INFAMOUS STAGGER LEE LEGEND:



UNFORTUNATELY, DRYDEN WAS UNABLE TO DEFEND SHELTON AT HIS SECOND TRIAL.

DRYDEN'S FATE WAS INITIATED BY THE HARMLESS GESTURE OF HIS WIFE.



THE GLASS OF SHERRY "CAUSED DRYDEN TO GO ON A DRINKING BINGE...

UNAWARE OF HIS DRINKING PROBLEM, SHE HAD GIVEN HER HUSBAND A GLASS OF SHERRY.

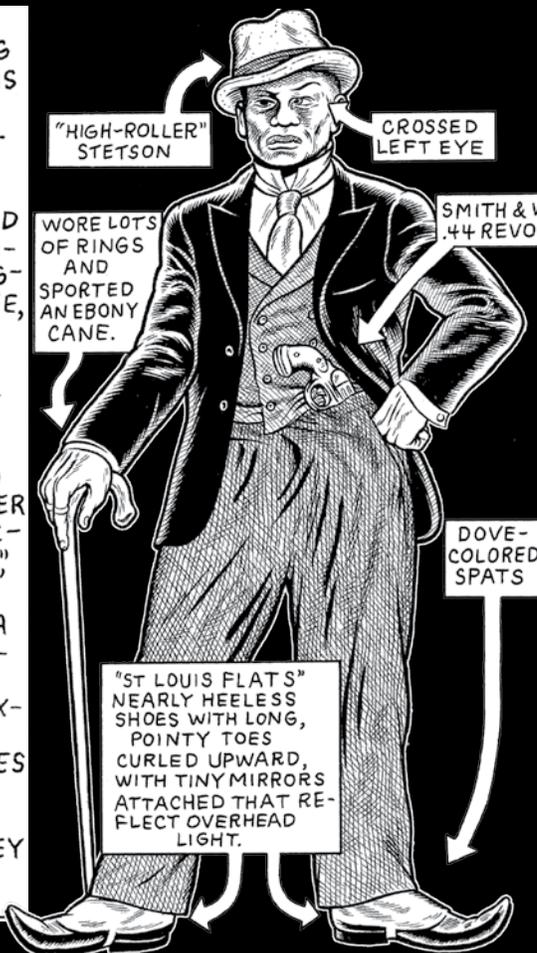


... WHICH KILLED HIM" ON AUGUST 26TH, 1897.1

THE STORY OF STAGGER LEE ORIGINATES FROM A SHOOTING THAT OCCURRED ON CHRISTMAS NIGHT, 1895, NEAR THE THIRD WARD, ALSO KNOWN AS "CHESTNUT VALLEY" OR THE "BLOODY THIRD WARD." THE CENTRAL CHARACTER WAS A MAN NAMED LEE SHELTON, VARIOUSLY REFERRED TO IN LEGEND AS STAGGER LEE, STAGOLEE, STACK-A-LEE, AND STACK O'LEE.

ON DEC 26, 1895, THE GLOBE-DEMOCRAT DESCRIBED HIM AS A CABDRIVER, IDENTIFYING HIM AS "LEE SHELDON" - ALSO KNOWN AS "STAG." NEWSPAPER REPORTS AND DEATH CERTIFICATES REFER TO HIM AS "STAG," "STACK" OR "STOCK" LEE.

SHELTON, IT'S SAID, OWNED A NIGHTCLUB CALLED THE MODERN HORSESHOE CLUB. "LEE SHELDON BELONGED TO AN EXOTIC GROUP OF PIMPS IN ST LOUIS CALLED 'MACKS,'" WRITES CECIL BROWN¹. THESE MEN, BROWN WRITES, WERE "NOT JUST 'URBAN STROLLERS'; THEY PRESENTED THEMSELVES AS OBJECTS TO BE OBSERVED."



"HIGH-ROLLER" STETSON

CROSSED LEFT EYE

WORE LOTS OF RINGS AND SPORDED AN EBONY CANE.

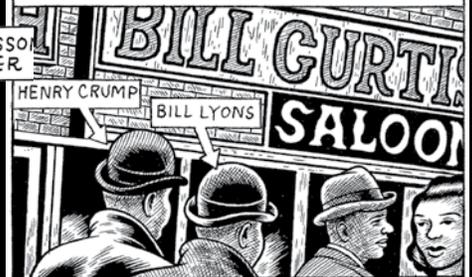
SMITH & WESSON .44 REVOLVER.

DOVE-COLORED SPATS

"ST LOUIS FLATS" NEARLY HEELESS SHOES WITH LONG, POINTY TOES CURLED UPWARD, WITH TINY MIRRORS ATTACHED THAT REFLECT OVERHEAD LIGHT.

ST. LOUIS, MO. 1895

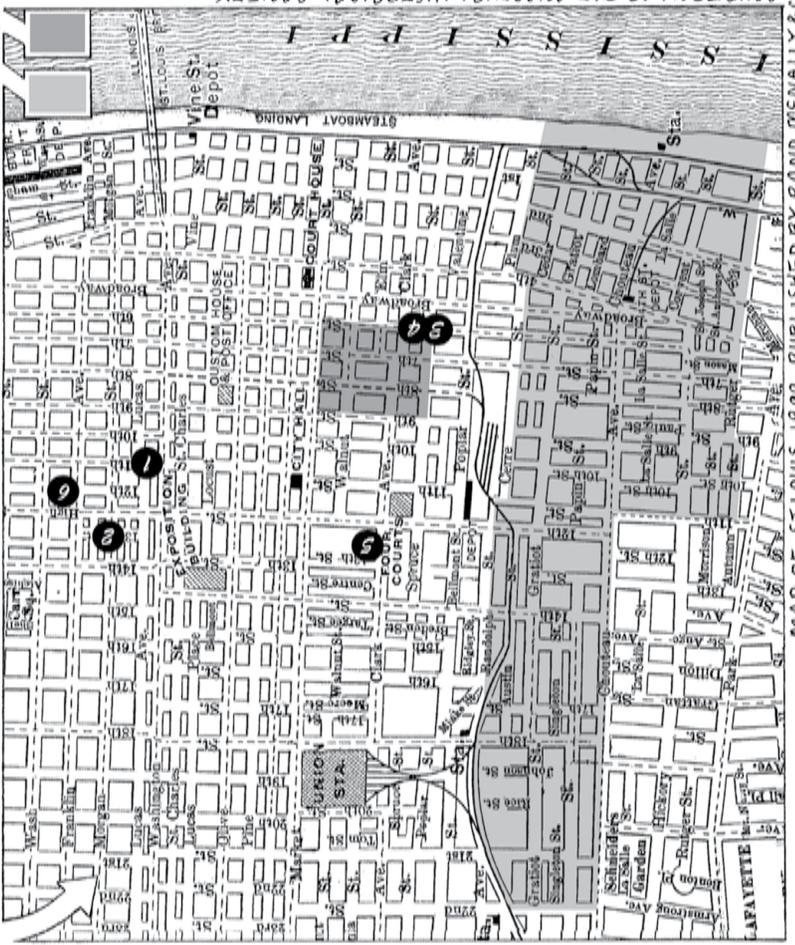
LOCATION: THE BILL CURTIS SALOON, 1101 MORGAN STREET, AT THIRTEENTH. THE NEIGHBORHOOD, KNOWN AS "DEEP MORGAN" OR "LOWER MORGAN," WAS THE CITY'S RED LIGHT DISTRICT.



WILLIAM LYONS ARRIVED AT THE BILL CURTIS SALOON WITH HIS FRIEND, HENRY CRUMP. LYONS HAD HAD TROUBLE AT THE SALOON BEFORE. HE URGED CRUMP TO LEND HIM HIS KNIFE.



THE STORY OF
Stagger Lee



DOWNTOWN ST. LOUIS, 1895 (LOCATIONS RELEVANT TO THE "STORY OF STAGGER LEE")

"THE BLACK NEIGHBORHOODS WERE DIVIDED INTO A FIFTEEN SALOONS, EACH ONE HOSTING POLITICAL MEETINGS, GAMBLING, PROSTITUTION, AND GENERAL GATHERINGS." - CECIL BROWN

1) BRIDGEWATER SALOON, LOCATED AT THE CORNER OF LUCAS & 11TH STREETS. RIVAL ESTABLISHMENT TO THE BILL CURTIS SALOON. THE NIGHT LEE SHELTON SHOT BILLY LYONS AND HIS FRIEND, HENRY CRUMP, WERE DRINKING AT THE BRIDGEWATER SALOON BEFORE WALKING TO THE BILL CURTIS SALOON.

2) BILL CURTIS SALOON, 1101 MORGAN STREET, AT 13TH STREET. THE LEGENDARY ALTERCATION BETWEEN LYONS AND SHELTON OCCURRED AT THE BILL CURTIS SALOON. IN 1895, MORGAN WAS KNOWN AS "DEEP MORGAN" OR "LOW-MORGAN" AND WAS CONSIDERED THE CITY'S RED LIGHT DISTRICT. (MORGAN IS NOW DELMAR BOULEVARD, ALTHOUGH AT 13TH STREET, WHERE THE BILL CURTIS SALOON WAS, IT IS CALLED CONVENTION PLAZA.

3) 307 6TH STREET. NOT KNOWN WHERE SHELTON LIVED, ST. LOUIS POLICE OFFICERS FLANIGAN AND FALVEY FIRST LOOKED FOR HIM AT THIS ADDRESS.

4) SHELTON'S SIXTH STREET ADDRESS (NUMBER UNKNOWN) NEAR SPRUCE STREET, WHERE FLANIGAN AND FALVEY FOUND SHELTON FAST ASLEEP.

5) FOUR COURTS BUILDING OF THE CHESTNUT STREET POLICE STATION, WHERE FLANIGAN AND FALVEY TOOK SHELTON AFTER ARRESTING HIM.

6) SHELTON'S 12TH STREET ADDRESS, 911 NORTH 12TH STREET, BETWEEN FRANKLIN AVENUE AND WASH STREET (12TH STREET IS NOW TUCKER BOULEVARD, FRANKLIN IS NOW DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING DRIVE, AND WASH IS NOW COLE STREET). THIS IS WHERE SHELTON HAD HIS "LID" CLUB, OR WHOREHOUSE, OF ALL THE LOCATIONS INDICATED ON THIS MAP, THIS BUILDING IS THE ONLY ONE THAT STILL STANDS.

THIRD WARD, ALSO KNOWN IN 1895 AS THE "BLOODY THIRD WARD" AND "CHESTNUT VALLEY".

TAMALE TOWN, HOME TO BLACKS, POOR WHITES AND CHINESE IMMIGRANTS, A MAIN AREA FOR VICE.

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FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS, THE SPECIFIC DETAILS SURROUNDING THE LEGENDARY ALTERCATION BETWEEN LEE SHELTON AND BILLY LYONS AT THE BILL CURTIS SALOON ON CHRISTMAS NIGHT, 1895, CHANGE FROM ONE VERSION OF THE SONG TO THE NEXT. HOWEVER, NOT ONE OF THEM — NONE OF THE HUNDREDS OF THE RECORDED VERSIONS — CONTRADICTS THE MOST CRITICAL DETAIL, WHICH EYE-WITNESSES TO THE BLOODY INCIDENT ALL CORROBORATED:



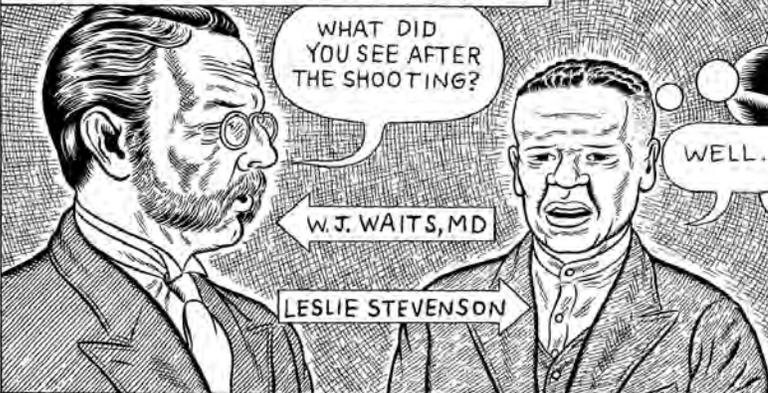
...STACK O'LEE KILLED BILLY..

MISSISSIPPI JOHN HURT



© MISSISSIPPI JOHN HURT'S VERSION OF "STACK O'LEE" IS WIDELY CONSIDERED TO BE THE QUINTESSENTIAL VERSION.

THE INQUEST FOR THE MURDER OF WILLIAM LYONS BEGAN ON DECEMBER 27TH, 1895. THE PROCEEDINGS WERE OFFICIATED BY CORONER W.J. WAITS, M.D.



WHAT DID YOU SEE AFTER THE SHOOTING?

W.J. WAITS, MD

LESLIE STEVENSON

WELL...

... HE [LYONS] STAGGERED AGAINST THE SIDE OF THE BAR, LEANED AGAINST THE RAILING, HOLDING THE HAT IN HIS FINGERS...



...AND IT SEEMED HE WAS GETTING WEAK...

...AND HE LET THE HAT DROP OUT OF HIS HANDS...



...ABOUT THAT TIME, SHELTON SAYS:



GIVE ME MY HAT, NIGGER!

... AND HE TAKES AND PICKS IT UP AND WALKS OUT INTO THE BRISK AIR!*



FINALLY, SHELTON GRABBED THE DERBY OFF OF BILLY LYONS' HEAD. 1



LYONS, INDIGNANT, GRABBED THE STETSON OFF STAG LEE'S HEAD.



GIVE ME BACK MY HAT!

NO!



SHELTON PULLED OUT HIS SMITH & WESSON .44.



I'M GONNA BLOW YOUR BRAINS OUT!



AT 3 A.M. POLICE OFFICERS JOHN FLANIGAN AND A. FALVEY WENT TO SHELTON'S RESIDENCE IN ORDER TO ARREST HIM.



SUSPECTING THAT STACK LEE WROTE THE NOTE, THEY GOT HIS ADDRESS FROM THE GIRL.



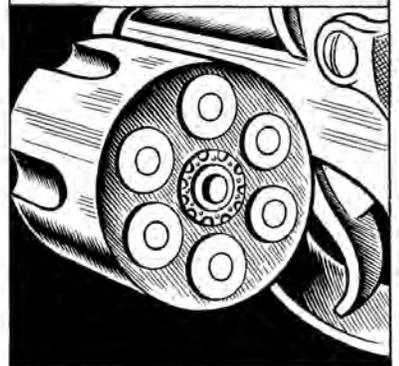
THEY FOUND STACK IN BED, ALREADY ASLEEP.



AFTER MAKING THE ARREST, FLANIGAN OBTAINED SHELTON'S REVOLVER FROM THE LANDLADY, WHO HAD STASHED IT IN A DRAWER.



ACCORDING TO FLANIGAN, STACK'S .44 SMITH & WESSON WAS "FULLY LOADED, EVERY CHAMBER WAS FULL."



NOT KNOWING WHERE HE LIVED, THEY WENT TO "A LADY AT No. 307 [SIXTH STREET]." THERE THEY FOUND A "WOMAN CARRYING A NOTE TO THIS MAN'S [STACK LEE'S] GIRL. 1

HENRY GAVE BILLY HIS KNIFE AS THEY ENTERED THE BILL CURTIS SALOON.



THE SALOON HAD A REPUTATION FOR MURDER AND CRIME. ONE NEWSPAPER CALLED IT "THE ENVY OF ALL ITS COMPETITORS AND THE TERROR OF THE POLICE."⁵



JOSEPH PULITZER CALLED IT ONE OF THE "WORST DENS IN THE CITY."⁵



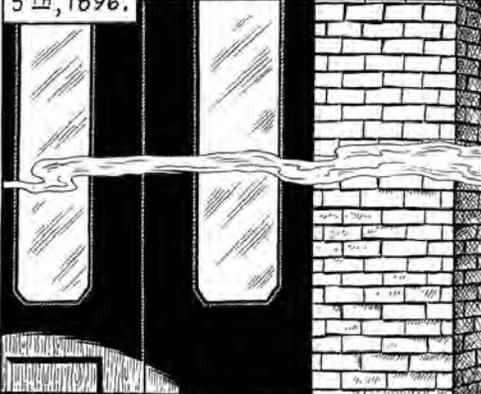
BILLY LYONS HAD JUST ORDERED A BEER WHEN HE "NOTICED THAT PEOPLE WERE LOOKING TOWARD THE DOOR."¹



IN WALKED "STACK" LEE.



LEE SHELTON WAS RELEASED ON \$4000 BOND (ABOUT THE EQUIVALENT OF \$100,000 BY TODAY'S STANDARDS) ON JANUARY 5TH, 1896.



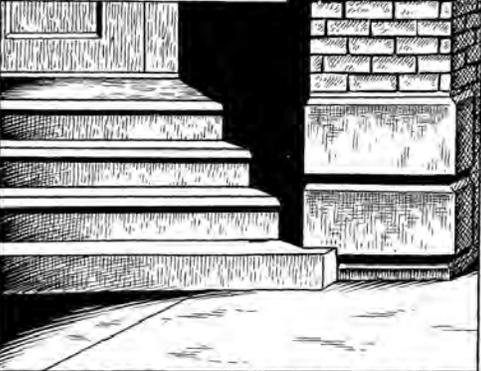
ON JULY 15TH, SEVEN MONTHS AFTER SHOOTING BILLY LYONS, SHELTON'S CASE WENT TO TRIAL.



THE "BRILLIANT IF ECCENTRIC" NAT DRYDEN ARGUED IN SHELTON'S DEFENSE THAT HIS CLIENT SHOT LYONS IN SELF-DEFENSE.



AND CONVINCINGLY...



AFTER DELIBERATING FOR 22 HOURS, THE JURY RETURNED AT NOON ON JULY 18TH, UNABLE TO REACH A VERDICT.



SHELTON WAS RELEASED ON BAIL...



...AND OSTENSIBLY RETURNED TO HIS JOB RUNNING THE MODERN HORSE-SHOE CLUB.¹

INFORMATION REGARDING SHELTON'S SECOND TRIAL IS UNKNOWN. WHAT IS KNOWN, HOWEVER, IS THAT HE LOST:

HE ENTERED THE MISSOURI STATE PENITENTIARY ON OCTOBER 7TH, AT JEFFERSON CITY TO BEGIN A 25-YEAR SENTENCE.¹

SHELTON WAS PAROLED IN 1909, BUT RETURNED TO PRISON IN 1911, CONVICTED OF ROBBING THE HOME OF WILLIAM AKINS AND BASHING AKINS' SKULL WITH A REVOLVER.²

SHELTON DIED IN PRISON OF TUBERCULOSIS ON MARCH 11TH, 1912, FIVE DAYS BEFORE HIS FORTY-SEVENTH BIRTHDAY.³

JOHN LOMAX PUBLISHED THE FIRST KNOWN VERSION OF THE SONG COMMEMORATING THE STAGGER LEE MYTH. HE RECEIVED IT FROM ELLA SCOTT FISHER IN 1910.⁴

SHELTON DIED TWO YEARS LATER, IT'S LIKELY THAT HE HAD HEARD, BEFORE HE DIED, THE SONG THAT WOULD MAKE HIM IMMORTAL.



HOW DID LEE SHELTON BECOME KNOWN AS "STAG" OR "STACK"? IT'S HARD TO SAY, BUT HERE ARE SOME POSSIBILITIES:

* IN 1885 A GROUP OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN ST. LOUIS CALLED THE STAGS VOTED FOR THE DEMOCRATIC NOMINEE FOR MAYOR, EDWARD NOONAN. NOONAN WON, AND THE STAGS CONTINUED TO SUPPORT THE DEMOCRATS. LEE SHELTON WOULD HAVE BEEN 21 IN 1885. ALTHOUGH THERE'S NO EVIDENCE THAT SHELTON WAS ONE OF THE STAGS, IT IS KNOWN THAT HE WAS A DEMOCRAT. THE INCIDENT BETWEEN SHELTON AND LYONS (WHO WAS LIKELY TO HAVE BEEN A REPUBLICAN) WAS CHARGED WITH LOCAL POLITICS, WHICH I DIDN'T GET INTO LEST THE TEXT OF THIS GRAPHIC RETELLING BECOME A BOOK. THE BILL CURTIS SALOON WAS A MEETING PLACE FOR BLACK DEMOCRATS; THE BRIDGE-WATER SALOON FOR REPUBLICANS. POLITICS MIGHT BE ONE REASON THE SHOOTING RECEIVED SO MUCH PRESS ATTENTION.

* IN THE 1800S AND EARLY 1900S, THE TERM "STAGG TOWN" REFERRED TO A "NEGRO SETTLEMENT"

* THE TERM "STAG" REFERS TO A MALE DEER OR HORSE, AND HAS ALWAYS IMPLIED MALE VIRILITY. IT IS SIGNIFICANT THAT SHELTON RAN A CLUB CALLED THE MODERN HORSESHOE CLUB, DROVE A CARRIAGE AND WAS A PIMP.

* SOME SCHOLARS BELIEVE THAT LEE SHELTON TOOK HIS NICKNAME, "STACK," FROM A RIVERBOAT CAPTAIN NAMED STACK LEE. SHIELDS MCILWAINE, AUTHOR OF MEMPHIS DOWN IN DIXIE, CLAIMED THERE WERE "MORE COLORED KIDS NAMED STACK LEE THAN THERE WERE SINNERS IN HELL."

* THERE WAS ALSO A RIVERBOAT CALLED THE STACK LEE, WHICH BELONGED TO THE LEE LINE OF RIVERBOATS, FOUNDED BY JAMES LEE SR. IN MEMPHIS. THE LEE LINE, WRITES GREIL MARCUS IN MYSTERY TRAIN, "RULED THE MISSISSIPPI FROM NEW ORLEANS TO ST. LOUIS AFTER THE CIVIL WAR." WRITES CECIL BROWN IN STAGOLEE SHOT BILLY: "BLACKS WERE PARTICULARLY FOND OF THIS LINE AND OF THE ANCHOR LINE [OWING TO THEIR] SPEED, SUMPTUOUS CABINS, ELABORATE CUISINE - AND PROSTITUTION."

REFERENCES

"BILLY DIDN'T HAVE AN INSURANCE PLAN, DIDN'T GET AIRSICK YET HIS GHOST IS MORE REAL AND GENUINE THAN ALL THE DEAD SOULS ON THE BOOB TUBE." - BOB DYLAN

- 1) STAGOLEE SHOT BILLY, CECIL BROWN, HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2003
- 2) ST. LOUIS GLOBE-DEMOCRAT, DECEMBER 26, 1895
- 3) ST. LOUIS GLOBE-DEMOCRAT, DECEMBER 28, 1895
- 4) ST. LOUIS STAR-SAYINGS (ACCOUNT OF THE DECEMBER 27TH INQUEST), DECEMBER 29TH, 1895
- 5) ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH, FEBRUARY 21, 1897
- 6) A BOOK ABOUT MYSELF, THEODORE DREISER, NEW YORK: BONI AND LIVERIGHT, 1922
- 7) ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH, MARCH 17, 1911
- 8) MYSTERY TRAIN: IMAGES OF AMERICA IN ROCK 'N' ROLL MUSIC, GREIL MARCUS, PLUME, 1997

