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## Law and Order: 1911 Murder of George Herbert Rahier - Part II

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John Benjamin Rahier, uncle of George Herbert; body of George H. Rahier; and Amos Randall Sheriff Deputy, taken at Bigfork as part of the investigation. As part of the post mortem, long trimmed branches were threaded through the wounds to show the entrance and exit. According to family this photograph (or one taken at the same time) was made into postcards and sold as a souvenir. ~ Knotts Family Collection

Submitted photo

Recap: The last column was about the murder of George Herbert Rahier. He had left his homestead in Busti Township to look for blueberries. His body was found several days later with two bullet wounds, at least one of which caused his death. The coroner's inquest found that Rahier "had been killed at the hands of an unknown party." Family and friends had no idea who would want to cause harm to George Herbert. They were anxious for the investigation to yield results and hoped that the murderer would be found and tried.

## The Investigation

As was so often the case, there were no witnesses and no confession. Additionally, in the early 1900s there was very little forensic technology. In 1911 finger printing was just beginning to be used in the United States. The investigation focused on the weapon and the gunshot wounds. As part of the post mortem, long trimmed branches were threaded through the wounds to show the entrance and exit of the bullets. It was determined that George had been shot with a .38 caliber pistol. Two men were suspected of the murder because they both had the same caliber gun that had been used in the shooting. The men were Fire Warden James Whittemore and Edward Erway, a trapper.

“On the day of the murder the fire warden had been on his way to investigate the burning of Zade Cochran’s cabin so as to make a report. On being questioned, he related that he had met Ed Erway just west of the log jam on the Bigfork River. They talked for a few minutes and Erway made the remark as long as he wasn’t the game warden it was all right. The fire warden was very candid about his movements of the day so he was declared innocent.

“Erway was investigated next. He was a trapper with long trap lines. He had squatted on the southeast quarter of section 15 and filed on it at the opening in June 1910, in Cass Lake. While squatting on the land he became associated with another trapper, tanner, and taxidermist who lived near Bigfork by the name of Soyka. Erway had killed a moose and Soyka had reported him; hence his hatred for Soyka and game wardens.” [On the Banks of the Bigfork (1956) by Dorothy Manske]

Following the coroner’s inquest on July 27, Sheriff Riley felt he had enough evidence against Erway to arrest him. He and several deputies were in the Bigfork area by the following day.

## Warrant Out For Edwin Erway

### Grand Rapids Herald-Review 8-3-1911

“A warrant has been issued for the arrest of Edwin Erway, a trapper and homesteader living near the homestead of George Rahier who was found dead with a wound through his head last Wednesday, charging him with the murder of Rahier. The police of the county have been notified to arrest him, but to date there have been no developments. It is alleged that

there had been some differences between Erway and Rahier over some trapping and that the feud had continued until the body of Rahier was found dead last week. About the time of the alleged murder Erway disappeared, and all efforts to locate him have failed.

“Sheriff Riley is on the trail of Erway who is described as follows: about 35 years old, five feet eight or nine inches tall, weighs about 145 pounds, long black hair almost to shoulders, heavy black mustache, dark complexion, dark eyes, black slouch hat and wears either a black or blue suit. Erway’s occupation is homesteader and trapper.

There seemed to be some sensationalizing in the newspapers as information regarding the murder reached the greater Minnesota communities. “County appealed to Governor Eberhart this morning for a reward for the capture of the murderer of George B. Rahier, a farmer, who he says ‘was slaughtered’ in July. Governor Eberhart immediately issued a proclamation offering a reward of \$200.” [Little Falls Herald 8-11-1911]

Henry Rahier, brother of George Herbert wrote a letter to the Bemidji paper which they printed. The most relevant information regarded the portrayal of a feud between the two men. “Seeing an account in your August 9th issue of the Pioneer of the murder of Geo. Rahier of Big Fork, and being a brother of the murdered man, I wish to correct a few statements which I think are misleading...

“There is positively nothing to the story about there being a jealous feud between my brother and Edwin Erway as my brother had no trouble with any of his neighbors in that vicinity, and if he had any with this party previous to his murder it must have been slight, but judging from some of the press statements one would think that a controversy equalling a Kentucky feud existed.

“I do think that Edwin Erway is the guilty party as his every action since the crime has proven him guilty in the opinion of all his neighbors.” [Bemidji Daily Pioneer 8-12-1911]

## The Suspect

I found Edward George Erway’s birth name to be either Edwin or Edward, the latter used most frequently. He was the eldest child born to George and Maria in Michigan in April 1869. His father served in the Civil war, and had multiple health issues later in life. His mother left

her husband and when he died, married George Herrick. The 1891 Canadian Census lists Edward and his younger brother and sister with the same surname as their stepfather.

The 1900 United States Census Erway is living in Township 60-25 in Itasca County and his occupation is listed as hunter. The 1910 census indicates he is in Township 62-25 and is doing odd jobs. Other information indicates that he had been 'squatting' on the latter property but had filed on it in June 1910 when the land opened for homesteaders. Erway was not married and lived alone.

On July 18, 1911 Erway visited with his neighbors, Jim and Anna Blaha. He told them he was going to Cass Lake soon to get a date to 'prove up' on his homestead. They asked if he would mail some letters for them. He agreed and indicated he'd return when his errands were done. That was the last time he was seen by the Blahas. Fire Warden James Whittemore reported meeting him on a common trail on July 19, the day George Herbert Rahier was murdered. Erway seemed to have disappeared.

During the sheriff's investigation Erway's cabin was searched. There was no evidence that Erway returned to his homestead. The letters to be mailed were said to have been found on the table. In the course of the next month, Erway was reportedly seen by individuals on several occasions in the vicinities of Jesse Junction, Bowstring and Sand Lake, but he eluded capture.

## The Investigation

### Continues

In late October 1911 the grand jury met and reviewed the evidence against Erway. The Grand Rapids Herald-Review reported, "R.J. Rahier, nephew of George Herbert, states that he is confident that Edwin Erway who is suspected of having killed his uncle is still lurking in the woods in the Bigfork country subsisting by hunting. The man suspected has been missing from his haunts since the time of the crime and has been seen but once since when he was seen by a farmer in the Jesse Lake country, who alleges that the man suspected drew a rifle on him and warned him to stay away. Rumors of a man roaming the woods in the Big Fork country have come in from time to time and Rahier founds his belief on the fact that the man under suspicion had a considerable cache of provisions at his cabin, about half of

which has recently been removed... Settlers in the Big Fork country, according to Rahier, are confident the murderer is still at large in the woods in that section and believe that he will be compelled to give himself up soon owing to freezing weather.” [Grand Rapids Herald-Review]

Erway was not apprehended. On February 15, 1912 the International Falls Echo reported “A man was arrested at Northome and brought here the first of the week, who was suspected of being the murderer of a homesteader named Rahier near Bigfork last summer. Sheriff Riley of Itasca County arrived Tuesday to take a look at the man and pronounced him not the person wanted.”

The last documented mention of Edward G. Erway that I could find was in the Bemidji Daily Pioneer 5-28-1912. It stated that “A settler living east of Big Fork and a short distance from the claim of Edward Erway states that Erway is in his old trapping grounds in Alaska.”

Officially, the murder of George Herbert Rahier remains unsolved. There is reason to believe that his demise was the result of an unplanned physical assault on the wrong man.

### The Suspect Gets Away With Murder

Based on my research I concur with others who believe that Erway did commit the murder, but that George Herbert Rahier was not the intended victim.

Erway lived off the land, and did not hesitate to do what he needed to in order to survive. He had taken a moose out of season in the summer of 1910, and had alleged been reported to the authorities by a fellow trapper in the area named Gus Soyka. Erway was heard to have made verbal threats to Soyka for his actions. On July 19, 1911 it was Soyka that Erway thought was walking on the trail and he took the opportunity to follow through on his threat, maybe he only intended to wound Soyka.

Leonard Knotts, Jr. (1938-2013) great nephew of George Rahier explained his understanding of this theory in a document he wrote in 2008. “Erway was heard to say that he hated both Soyka and game wardens and ‘they had better stay out of his way!’ While walking through the woods Erway had evidently spotted George Rahier and mistaken him for Soyka. Both were about the same size and carried their guns the same way. (According my uncle, Dutch

Knotts, both George and Soyka carried their guns horizontally across the backs of their necks with one hand on the barrel and one on the stock.) Erway had apparently shot George by mistake and discovering his mistake ‘finished him off’ with a second shot.”

I also concur that Edward Erway made his way back to Canada or Alaska (which wasn’t yet a U.S. territory). I think it is possible that he changed his name as his siblings had done years ago to that of his stepfathers, George Herrick. I have searched every possible resource available to me and cannot find any name combinations of Edward, Edwin, George, Erway, Herrick and variations of the spellings beyond the date of May 28, 1912.

There is nothing in the WWI registration, 1920-1940 U.S. census, death index, social security index or border crossing documents. Nor is there anything in Canada. I can find his mother, sister and brother through 1940, but Edward doesn’t even show up on any family tree, other than the year of his birth and maybe a census or two.

It was not a premeditated murder with a well thought escape plan, but in 1911 it was a lot easier to get away with murder and disappear into the north woods of Canada or Alaska and never be heard from again. And unless a documented deathbed confession is discovered, the murder of George Herbert Rahier will remain officially unsolved.