



John King's Tragic Tale

By Gary Knehans

Eleven-year-old Ellis King braved a brisk April 1st morning in 1908 to walk the short half mile distance to the A. J. Curtis house a short distance east of Vienna. He was going there to borrow a horse from Mr. Curtis, from whom Ellis' mother Anna rented a house. When the boy arrived there, he noticed the door of the Curtis house was ajar. Peeping through the opening, Ellis spotted the old gentleman lying on the floor.

"He's still asleep," the boy thought as he pushed the door open, but quickly froze in his tracks upon spotting blood around the reclining figure. Ellis bolted out of the doorway and ran for home. Once there, he breathlessly told his mother what he had seen. Anna King grabbed her son and they both raced to town to alert officials about the grisly scene.

Sheriff Finn rushed to the Curtis house dragging a train of excited Vienna citizens behind him. What

they saw left little doubt that the elderly man had been brutally killed by a shotgun blast. The Sheriff asked Justice of the Peace McGee, acting coroner, to empanel a jury immediately. It consisted of A. S. Henderson, R. L. Holmes, I. H. Burns, J. P. Jones, Carlos Terrill and Logan McDaniel.

The jury convened right there around the crime scene. Dr. Jose performed an autopsy; and, with surgical instruments in hand, followed the direction the shotgun balls took through Mr. Curtis' head. The load had torn away part of the victim's chin, pierced his trachia and esophagus and entered his lung. The doctor pointed out a felt gunwad embedded in the right side of Curtis' neck and another felt gunwad adhering to the victim's skin.

It was clear to every member of the jury that the old man had been murdered by a person or persons unknown. As Curtis was wearing nothing but shirt, pants and stockings and there was an overturned lamp with a broken

chimney lying next to him, the jurors surmised that the victim had been just retiring for the night when the door to his house was opened and the fatal blast delivered. They thought this probably happened around ten o'clock the preceding evening, March 31st.

But what could have been the motive? A thorough search of the house revealed the answer. It was robbery! Curtis was widely known to carry a fairly sizable amount of money with him. However, not even a single penny could be found either in his clothing nor in the house.

At that point, neither Sheriff Finn nor jury members could come up with the names of any suspects in the case. But while they were meeting, a teenager known around town—John King—was spotted in Vienna with a companion. The fact that they were drinking heavily so early in the day aroused suspicion. When word of this reached the Sheriff, he had the seventeen-year-old

brought before the coroner's jury.

Under questioning, King said that he knew nothing about the killing of A. J. Curtis. However, the jurors soon learned that the boy had been spotted with a gun the afternoon and evening of the crime. They further discovered that he had loaded one shell at his father's home, about a half mile from the Curtis house.

The youth didn't actually stay with his father, preferring instead to live with Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Rook, with whose daughter Elsie he was hopelessly in love. Called before the jury, the Rooks testified that King came in at 10:56 the night of Mr. Curtis' demise.

Armed with that information, the coroner's jury recalled the teenager for more questioning the following day, Thursday, April 2nd. The grilling revealed nothing new, but jurors decided not to discharge King just yet. Not happy about this state of limbo, the boy hopped on his horse and rode hastily out to the Rook house, with Deputy Sheriff R. E. Finn in hot pursuit. Once there, he

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had just enough time to breathlessly tell Mrs. Rook and her two daughters that he had hidden his wallet in a crack in the barn and that he wanted them to retrieve it and take care of it for him.

Finn took custody of King and brought him back to Vienna to be placed in the jail for safe keeping. King spent the night there in a stone cold cell awaiting further questioning. The next day, Friday, April 3rd, the relentless jurors discovered that the boy had cut some wads for the shell he had loaded at his father's place from an old felt boot. This was the same kind of material as the homemade wads found embedded in the victim's neck.

Still, the jury found itself well short of establishing a case of murder against the teenager. Despite further questioning, the boy maintained his innocence. And so, on Saturday, April 4th, law officers and jurors alike asked Attorney Leslie B. Hutchison to visit the teenager in his cell and interview him.

"I went to the jail between 12 and 1 o'clock and requested the Sheriff to allow me a private conversation with John King," Hutchison later testified. "The Sheriff removed Jake Crum from the cell wherein he and King were confined, and I went in. King was sitting on the edge of the cot. I told him I had come to talk with him about the death of A. J.

Curtis. He said he was glad of it. I then began to ask him questions as to where he was and what he did on Tuesday, March 31st, 1908, and that night.

"He went over the matter, telling me practically the same story he had told me once before. After he was through, I asked him how much money he had on his person when he was arrested. He said, 'one penny,' and pulled a copper from his pocket. I asked him if that was all he had, and he said it was. I asked him if he had no other money at home or where he stayed. He said he had not.

"I then asked him what he did while at his father's house on last Tuesday afternoon, and he answered, 'Nothing but talk to the folks.' I then told him what the evidence had developed, that he had reloaded a shell while there, and also that he had hidden \$30 in a pocketbook in a crack of the stable at A. Rook's and had informed Mrs. Rook and her daughter, just before leaving there with the officer, where the money could be found if he never came back. He then broke down and cried.

"After he had quit crying, I asked him if he was engaged to Aaron

Rook's girl. At first he said, 'No,' but later admitted that he was and began to cry again. I asked him if he didn't think he would feel better if he would tell all he knew about the death of A. J. Curtis. He said he thought he would and began to cry again. He then laid down on his cot and asked me if I would wait a little while and let him study. He lay there five or ten minutes and then sat up and said, 'I will tell you what I know, but I know you will not believe me when I tell you.'

"He said that on Tuesday evening about 8 o'clock, and while he was fishing near 'the swirl,' a man came down the river whom he did not know, that the party came up to him and spoke and asked him how far it was to Vienna, that he told him two and a half miles. He said the party then asked him who lived on the road between there and Vienna. He told him Jeff Noble's house was the first house on the right and that Ed Spratley's was off to the left of the road on the hill, that the next house was to the left of the road and that A. J. Curtis lived in it.

"He said that the party then asked him if either of these men had any money, and he told him that he thought Mr. Curtis always kept some money with him, but he didn't know about other parties. He said the man then asked him to go with him and rob Mr. Curtis. He told him he couldn't do it, that he and Mr. Curtis were good friends, and he wouldn't treat him that way. The man assured him there would be no danger of their being caught, even though they had to take Mr. Curtis' life, that they could get away that night, go to the Frisco railroad and catch a train west for Oklahoma. He said he continued to refuse to go with the man, and at last the fellow said, 'I will go by myself and if he has any money, I'll get it. I am not afraid.'

"He said that the man left him then and that that was all he knew of the matter. I told him I didn't believe his story. He broke down and cried again. And, after he quit crying, I asked him if he wanted to say anything more before I left. He said, 'I knew you wouldn't believe it before I told it,' and began to cry again and says, 'Don't leave me for a little while.' He says, 'If I would tell you the truth, would you believe me?' I told him if his story was reasonable, I would. He then broke down and cried again and said he would like to see Elsie and have a talk with her.

"In a few minutes, he sat up on the edge of the cot again and says, 'I know everything is against me, and I'll tell you what I know.' He said that between sundown and



This tombstone in the Vienna Public Cemetery is believed to be at the gravesite of the John King in our story.

dark he was near the cave and shot at a rabbit. When he shot the rabbit, a Negro came out of the cave and walked to where he was. He had a single barrel shotgun in his hand—a short barreled—that he sat on a log in front of him and began to question him. Asked where he lived, how far from Vienna and who lived on the road. He said he told him who lived on the road, and the Negro asked if any of them had any money. The Negro told him he had been in the cave since the night before, and had had nothing to eat and had no money. The Negro then asked him how much money he thought Curtis had. He told him he didn't know, but that he thought Curtis always carried money on his person. The Negro then asked him to go with him and kill and rob Curtis. He told him he would not. Said the Negro kept begging him, saying there would be no danger. No one would ever know who did the deed, and he would give him half the money if he would go.

"After the Negro had begged

him half an hour, he agreed to show the Negro the Curtis house. He went with the Negro to Jeff Noble's little field, that he could see Curtis' house from there. That he pointed it out and told the Negro that was where Curtis lived.

"The Negro says, 'All right, you stay here and I'll go and get the money.' The Negro had been gone but 10 or 15 minutes and he heard a shot, that in about the same length of time the Negro came back to him and says, 'I fixed him. Here is your part of the money,' and handed him a roll of bills, which he afterwards counted and found was six five-dollar bills. He said he and the Negro then turned and walked back through Ed Spratley's meadow field to the hill on the south side. When they got there, the Negro said, 'Goodbye, my boy, I hope they'll never catch you.' Then they parted, the Negro going toward the river and he went across the hills to A. Rook's.

"He then said the first story he had



told me was not true. He said, 'This is all I know about it. Do you believe me?'

"I said, 'No, the only part of your story I believe is that the money you had was A. J. Curtis' money.' He then broke down and cried again. After I had waited a few minutes, I told him I believed he could throw some light on the death of Mr. Curtis if he would, but that if he didn't care to tell me the truth I would go. I said, 'Goodbye, John. I hate to leave you this way.'

"He reached out his hand and I took hold of it. With a sob he said, 'Tell Elsie that I love her better than anything on earth.' I then stepped to the door and knocked on it and Mrs. Finn came and unlocked it. As I went out, I looked back and saw him lying on the cot crying. He admitted to me during the talk that he loaded a shell at his father's house, but said he used fine shot. He also admitted that he hid the pocketbook containing \$30 in the crack of the stable at A. Rook's, and that the \$30 in the pocketbook was what he got from the Negro."

After Attorney Hutchison left his cell, the emotionally charged youth asked the Finn's for paper and pencil to write some notes. These items were brought to him. The boy started writing right away, but Mrs. Finn stated that, at one

point, she heard the boy "dancing" in his cell above the living quarters of the jailhouse. Shortly after 5:30 p.m., Sheriff Finn walked up the stairs to the west cell where the boy was being held to collect his notes and letters for mailing. When the lawman unlocked the door and walked in, he found the teenager motionless on what was now a bloody cot. King's throat was cut from ear to ear and the sheriff found a blood-stained razor lying by the youth's right hand. The apparent self-inflicted slash had severed both of the boy's jugular veins.

Finn sent for the acting coroner, Justice McGee, and gathered King's many written notes. One of the notes, intended for King's girlfriend, Elsie Rook, stated:

"Dear sweetheart—I will write to you, Elsie, I love you, dear, but it looks like it will do me no good. I would give my whole life to get to see you, for you are the girl of my heart. Elsie, I am not guilty of the charge, but it looks like I am going to have to suffer the penalty. Elsie, I want you to be a good girl and not marry, yourself. They are going to punish the wrong man. Oh, Elsie, I love you! I would like to be with you one hour. Well, Elsie, it is pretty bad, but I don't see any chance. I am not guilty of the charge and I don't aim for them to punish me.

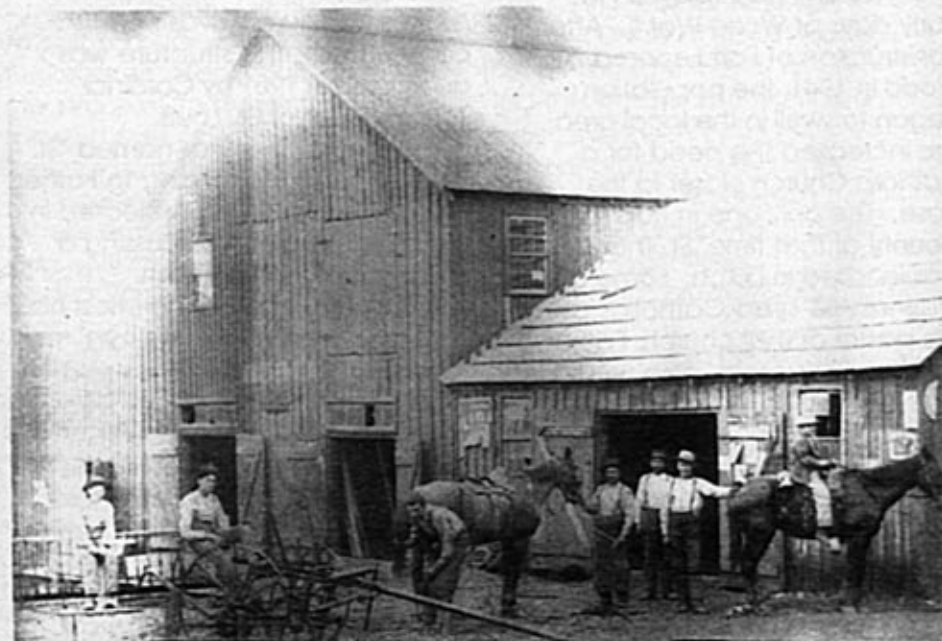
They searched me but I got in with my razor. They are not so sharp as they think they are. So goodbye, sweetheart. God bless you is my prayer."

On the back of one note, King wrote, "Well, I am sorry that everything with me goes wrong, but something seems to tell me that I won't last long. Worry, work and

strife has been with me all through life."

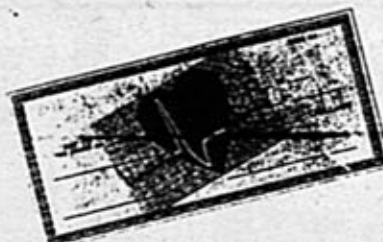
More ominously, the teenager scribbled on the back of another note, "Boys, my razor is pretty sharp."

King was five months short of his eighteenth birthday. Despite his parting request, Elsie Rook eventually got married and moved to another town.



William McKeever Blacksmith Shop in Vienna. The photo shows McKeever shoeing a horse held by Henry Hefti. Photo courtesy of Vienna's Old Jail Museum.

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