



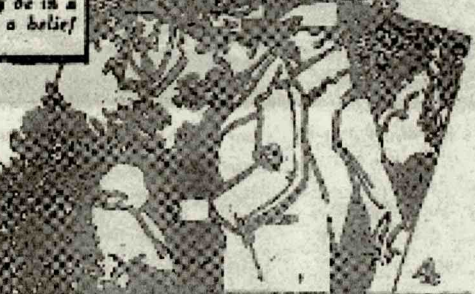
1 Clara Olson, 23, farmer's daughter, disappears from her home near Prairie du Chien, Wis., at midnight Sept. 9, after a love affair.



3 Olson leaves a letter to his parents declaring: "I can't say you will ever see me again, unless it may be in a coffin"—leading to a belief of his suicide.



2 Erdman Olson, 18, no relation, the student son of a wealthy tobacco planter, disappears from Gale College, Galceville, Sept. 27. (He had previously been missing for several days, at the time Clara disappeared.)



4 Clara's father, when unable to find a dress that she was buried in the woods, gave down. A searching party finds her in the woods mentioned, in exactly the position the father described. (The woods had been searched repeatedly before.) A murder warrant is issued for young Olson's arrest.

Republican Herald. Illustration from the Winona County Historical Society

Murder mystery

■ Although Carla Olson's killer was never caught, many believe they know what happened back in 1926

Christ Olson's nightmare came true just before noon on Battle Ridge.

Four nights before, he dreamed of his daughter, face down in a shallow grave. Moved by the power and certainty of the vision, Olson went the next day to the Crawford County court-



Carla Olson



Erdman Olson

house and, on Nov. 29, 1926, swore out a murder warrant.

The first day of December, a patch of disturbed vegetation just beyond the tree line attracted the attention of an American Legion search party.

Moving aside leaves and branches that covered loosened soil, they saw the heels of a new pair of woman's rubbers jutting out of the earth.

One of the party trotted the 40 yards downhill to the highway, then flagged down a passing automobile. Within the hour, the news traveled up and down the Kickapoo Valley: Clara Olson was found and she was dead. Erdman Olson, they said, had killed her.

Locals referred to the farm neighborhood, on Hwy. 27 about midway between La Crosse and Prairie du Chien, Wis., as Little Norway. Stoic and independent, the immigrants and sons of immigrants grew tobacco during the week and on Sunday prayed in the little Lutheran churches that dotted the countryside.

Albert Olson, no relation to Christ Olson, had done well on his 280 acres of tobacco land, well enough to outfit son Erdman with a car, clothes and tuition and send him off at age 16 to Gale College, the Norwegian Lutheran church college in Galesville, Wis.

Two years later, by all accounts, Erdman was, at best, an indifferent student, best known on campus and around town for his car, clothes and aloof manner. "Erdman liked his own company," one of his schoolmates commented in 1926.

Barely six miles from the other Olsons, Christ Olson raised his three sons and five daughters in considerably more modest circumstances.

Clara was 22 as summer 1926 turned to fall. The summer before, she had met Erdman Olson, four years her junior, at a Lutheran church social. The wealthy and relatively worldly lad charmed the naive farm girl, who'd never seen a city larger than La Crosse or known any life

beyond the limits of Little Norway.

The two began to "keep company," though Christ later would recall that Erdman always wanted to meet his daughter someplace away from the family home, and that his repeated invitations to the boy were met with repeated excuses.

Despite her father's reservations, in the summer of 1926 Clara Olson knew she was in love. She also knew she was pregnant.

She shared this insight with Erdman's father in a letter sent in mid-August. Unhappy about the prospective match, Albert confronted his son and ordered him to get Clara and have her submit to a medical examination. She refused, Albert let the matter drop, and Erdman went back to Galesville.

On Sept. 9, Clara, now about

6 months pregnant, received a long letter from her sweetheart. Months later, her sister recalled how the letter seemed to lift Clara's spirit, spurring her to a sudden flurry of activity, including burning all of Erdman's letters. That night, her sister said, she saw Clara fiddling with a lamp in her bedroom window, positioning it so the window shade could be used to make it a crude signal light.

About midnight, Christ heard a car on the road, then the sounds of someone leaving the house. "I'm just getting a breath of air," Clara told him. Moments later, he heard the car drive off.

Christ found her note the next morning. "Please do not worry about me as I will not be gone very long," Clara assured him. "Everything will be all right."

Days passed. Frantic for news of his daughter, Christ went to

see Albert Olson. He was told not to worry. Albert told him, "Like a lot of girls, she would be home after New Years with a kid and without no man," Christ said, "That was the first time we knew anything about it."

On about Sept. 25, Christ went to Galesville to plead with Erdman to do the right and honorable thing by his daughter. He offered to give him some cows, some land to raise tobacco, and "you and Clara can be happy."

But Erdman would have none of it. The young man who had bragged to his college friends of his "easy conquest of the little hick girl" told her father he had driven her to Viroqua on the Sept. 9, put her on the train to the Twin Cities and had nothing more to do with her.

Later he laughed about Christ "offering me cows to marry his daughter. Them hicks must think

I want to be one, too," a Gale student recalled.

But before he left, Christ warned young Olson that if he didn't hear from his daughter in three days, he was turning the matter over to the sheriff.

On Sept. 27, Erdman Olson visited Gale College president K. Lokensgard to tell him he was leaving school for a few days to have an operation on his throat. He would never return.

A day or so later, a letter from Erdman arrived at the Albert Olson farm. "You'll never see me again," it read, "unless it's in my coffin."

Then in November, Christ Olson had his dream.

The searchers didn't have far to dig. Only a foot or so of loose dirt covered Clara's body, dumped face down and hurriedly covered.

At the inquest, Dr. Charles Hunting testified that Clara Olson died of a "compound fracture of the skull and the resulting bleeding." The injury was caused by a single, horrendous blow from a hammer, the blunt side of an ax or some other heavy bludgeon. She would have given birth in about three months, had she lived, Hunting said.

Tucked into the bosom of her black silk dress, sodden with mud, blood and rainwater, the doctor found two letters, the letters delivered the day she disappeared.

"We'll go and get the ceremony over with, and then come back in a week or so and let them know," Erdman had written. She was to meet him the night of the 9th. She was to bring money, but nothing more than the clothes on her back, so as not to rouse suspicion.

"Do as I have asked you, and everything will be OK," he wrote. "If you don't, your chance may be shot, and I might make a scarce hubby. So if you wish to avoid disgrace, do as I say and keep mum."

He signed "As ever, as usual."

District Attorney G.S. Earll argued that Erdman Olson picked up the girl, drove her to a remote logging road, killed her and dumped the body in a pre-dug grave. He drove the quarter mile or so from the grave site to his parents' farm, made a sandwich, talked to his family, listened to the radio and went to bed. All between midnight and 1:15 a.m.

Albert Olson defended his son, arguing there wasn't time to carry out the killing and burial, and there was no indication that anything was amiss when his son appeared at the family home. He couldn't have done that "if the blood of the girl was on his hands."

On Dec. 8, 300 people crowded a church with seats for half that many. "Great as your affliction, how infinitely greater is that of the family which has reared a murderer," the Rev. Martin Finstad intoned. "Let us pray for the boy who so cruelly murdered this girl. Grant him repentance, O Lord, and forgive him through thy blessing."

"At the college, we like to think as little about this case as possible and dismiss it as much as possible," Lokensgard said. "Erdman was a disturbing element at the college. He was back in his work, seemed to loaf all the time and was usually in some sort of trouble."

In Crawford County, a \$1,000 reward was posted for his capture. It was never collected.

"It's an unsolved murder," said Jacob Vedvik, president of the Crawford County Historical Society. There were rumors for years about what became of Erdman Olson, Vedvik said, but he was never found either dead or alive.

"It was a sad thing," he said, "Nobody seems to forget that around here."