

THE

BROAD

SIDE

by Kyle Warmack,
Program Officer

THE MYSTERIOUS CASE OF THE MISSING DETECTIVES

The Mountain State has its share of literary greats. Denise Giardina, Mary Lee Settle, Jeannette Walls, Louise McNeill, Davis Grubb, Homer Hickham...the list goes on. Between these and many others, every West Virginian can find a piece of themselves on a page somewhere.

We're short on detectives, however—the literary ones, at least. Not just any detectives, but the recurring ones. Serial detectives. Sherlock Holmes, Philip Marlowe, Lisbeth Salander, Hercule Poirot: the hard-bitten, observant types who return time and again to solve the unsolvable and catch the uncatchable. In two years of searching, I've only been able to identify three such detectives here in West Virginia:

- the Uncle Abner stories of Melville Davisson Post,
- the Boley-McKee stories of John F. Suter,
- and the Bell Elkins novels of Julia Keller.

Some criteria are in order. First, all of these examples are written by West Virginians and feature detectives who are also West Virginians (this rules out Post's earlier serial character, Randolph Mason). Second, like many good detective characters, our protagonists aren't necessarily law enforcement professionals (Sherlock Holmes wasn't, after all), but they do need to be the ones out there hunting the baddies and solving the crimes. And third, as serial detectives, they need to do it more than once—they should be featured in at least a handful of narratives.

Humanities Council devotees will be familiar with the first on this list, Uncle Abner. Not only did the Council collaborate with WVU Press to republish *Uncle Abner: Master of Mysteries* in 2015, we've also featured the Abner stories in the first season of our ongoing podcast, *Mysterious Mountains*. Between 1911 and 1927, Harrison County-born author Melville Davisson Post (1869-1930) wrote twenty-two Uncle Abner stories. They all take place in West Virginia—albeit in the antebellum period, when we were still a part of Virginia. Abner is a stern, infallibly moral, Abraham Lincoln-esque character who unravels criminal activities with his insights into human nature.

Post became one of the most successful mystery authors of his time—due in no small part to the Uncle Abner stories, which were published frequently in *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Metropolitan Magazine*. The author lived out his days in a Swiss-style chalet outside Clarksburg.

John F. Suter (1914-1996) came onto the scene a generation after Post and was born in Pennsylvania. He moved to Charleston, West Virginia, when he was only ten and spent the rest of his life in the Mountain State. After graduating with a chemistry degree from Franklin and Marshall College in Pennsylvania, he returned to the Kanawha Valley to work for petrochemical juggernaut Union Carbide for the next thirty-six years. Through it all, however, Suter's passion for writing was insatiable.

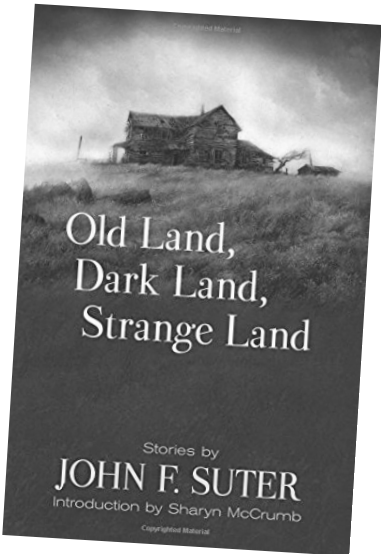
In the 1940s and early 1950s, he landed a couple of radio plays on CBS's *Suspense* program, now considered one of the greatest mystery productions ever to grace the airwaves. In 1953, his short story *A Break In The Film* was published by *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. Dozens of stories followed in other genre magazines for the next fifteen years. Despite this success, Suter appears to have taken a decade-long writing hiatus in the late 1960s, after his retirement from Union Carbide.

What reignited Suter's passion in 1979, curiously enough, was Uncle Abner. While working on an article about Melville Davisson Post, he was contacted by Post's estate. Would the former chemist be interested in picking up where Post had left off? Over the next six years, Suter published fifteen new Uncle Abner mysteries—two-thirds as many as Post himself—in *Ellery Queen*. He admitted in a 1988 letter that Uncle Abner "did wonders for me." But Abner is Post's creation, and is not the Suter detective we're here to talk about.

Prior to working on the new Uncle Abner stories, all of Suter's stories were one-offs, and never featured recurring characters. As he was finishing up his cycle of new Abner works, however, that changed. The Boley-McKee mysteries were born.

These short stories feature the unofficial duo of Sheriff Warren McKee and heavy equipment operator Arlan Boley, two friends in an unnamed rural part of West Virginia (Nicholas County is my hypothesis, but that's a discussion for another time). Boley is usually the one who unintentionally dips his foot into trouble, stumbling into criminal goings-on while digging a ditch or cutting a road. Inevitably, Sheriff McKee gets called. Men of few words, the pair have an instinctual habit of working through the mystery together.

Ellery Queen bought six of the Boley-McKee stories between 1985 and 1990 (a seventh features a cameo by McKee, but he plays no part in the mystery). Several of these enjoyable works are collected in Suter's only solo anthology, *Old Land, Dark Land, Strange Land*, published by the University of Charleston in 1996.



Julia Keller was born in Huntington and launched her career as a journalist after graduating from Marshall University. For over thirty years, Keller paid her dues with various newspapers from Washington D.C. to Chicago, even winning a Pulitzer Prize in 2005 while at the *Chicago Tribune*. Her fortunes took a more literary turn in 2012.

Keller had published two books prior to that year, neither of which were mysteries. When shopping around a third manuscript, an editor asked the journalist if she had anything with a strong female protagonist. Keller fibbed and said she did, then sat down to write *A Killing in the Hills*, the literary

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For a good start finding West Virginia authors, look no further than the Fairmont State Folklife Center's West Virginia Literary Map.
www.fairmontstate.edu/folklife/west-virginia-literary-map

A LIFE OF

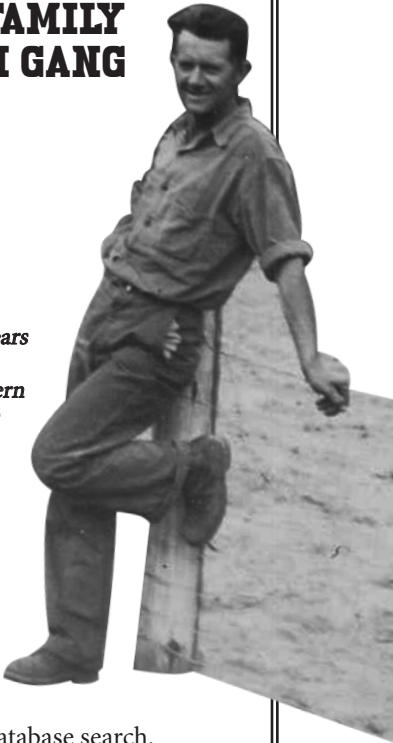
CRIME

DISCOVERING MY FAMILY AND THE GOODMAN GANG

by Jennifer Cline,
Contributor

Loren "Cat" Cline strikes a pose against a wire fence in Wyoming County in the 1950s. During his years as a moonshiner, Cline operated extensively with a notorious southern West Virginia crime ring known as the "Goodman Gang."

Photo courtesy of the author



It all began with a newspaper database search.

When I was a child my grandfather, Loren Cline, had regaled me with stories of his days as a moonshiner. He spun vivid yarns of car chases, revenuers, and the best 'shine ever made in Wyoming County. I never doubted Grandpa Cline had many adventures during sixteen wild years of dubiously legal activities, but it wasn't until I began delving into the newspapers decades later that family lore began to correlate with historical fact.

Obituaries were the first step, starting with grandpa's brother, Bert Cline. To my astonishment, the search for Bert led to articles with titles such as, "Goodman Gang Arrested," and "Probation Granted Four Members of Goodman Gang." What had I stumbled upon?

The memories came flooding back. Before grandpa passed away, I had interviewed him about his life. The stories of his wilder days had always stood out. Digging out my notes, I found that grandpa had recalled a "Goodman lady" who made moonshine in an old abandoned mine or cave—and that it was the best moonshine he had ever tasted. The newspaper articles agree on some of these details: The Goodman Gang in Wyoming County had indeed manufactured and stored their moonshine in a cave on their property.

Several years of research followed. Soon, my son Aaron Parsons was also hooked by the thrill of the chase [Ed: Parsons is now the Director of the West Virginia State Archives]. We have combed records at the West Virginia State Archives and the Wyoming County Courthouse. At the West Virginia State Penitentiary, where some of the Goodman Gang's members eventually ended up, I was told that one guard on staff still remembered the gang's leader being imprisoned there!

Court documents, newspaper articles, and other records have helped piece together the story. The Goodman Gang's activity dated back to the 1940s, and perhaps as early as the 1930s. The ringleader was Tommy Goodman, who ruled the gang with an iron fist from his wheelchair—a shooting accident had left him paralyzed in childhood. It was said that any Goodmans who were arrested would not speak to the authorities until they received permission from Tommy.

The gang's heyday ended when much of the organization was rounded up and arrested in February 1953. Most of the gang were members of the Goodman family, and a significant number were juveniles.

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MISSING DETECTIVES

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world’s introduction to our final West Virginia serial detective, county prosecutor Bell Elkins of fictional Raythune County.

Leaving behind a broken marriage and successful law practice in Washington D.C., Bell Elkins has returned to her (also fictional) hometown of Acker’s Gap, which Keller says is modeled partly on her own hometown of Guyandotte. There, over the course of twelve novels and novellas (as of 2022), the plucky lawyer faces the brutal challenges of the opioid epidemic, corrupt cops, terrorists, small town prejudices, and dark family secrets.

Supporting Bell is a small cadre of earnest, hardworking folk who want to see Acker’s Gap rise from the ashes of its past. Bell’s most consistent collaborator is also her father figure, county Sheriff Nick Fogelsong, who in some ways resembles the quiet solidity of Suter’s Sheriff McKee. Keller’s novels, however, provide Fogelsong much more narrative space to grow into a full-fledged character. Together with her determined crew, Bell Elkins fights to make Raythune County a better place to live.

Using clues from five of the novels, I tried to reverse engineer the locations of Acker’s Gap and Raythune County, eventually settling on the vicinity of Mason, Putnam, and Jackson counties. In an email exchange, Keller told me that my guess is a good one, but she prefers to keep it a mystery. Julia Keller currently lives and teaches in Ohio, and returns to West Virginia often.

It’s hard to say why only three authors and their three serial detectives are the sole representatives within our borders of this time-honored subgenre. Or have I missed one? Are there other detectives hiding in the shadows that I’ve overlooked? Feel free to let me know.

There’s certainly no shortage of capers for Mountain State sleuths to pursue, whether contemporary or set more distantly in the past. Any number of historical scenarios could be drawn upon to craft crimes for hypothetical gumshoes: corporate espionage, the Mafia in Wheeling, moonshiners, Balwin-Felts agents, explosions at chemical plants or coal mines, or a suspicious accident on the Hatfield-McCoy Trails...

...and if the successes of the three authors in this article are any indication, the readers for such mysteries are out there.

A LIFE OF CRIME

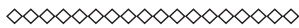
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By sheer happenstance, my grandfather had already left Wyoming County prior to the arrests, and thus he never served time. Bert—my great uncle—and Bert’s brother-in-law James Goodman (brother of ringleader Tommy) were both arrested.

According to state police and local authorities, the Goodmans were “one of southern West Virginia’s worst crime rings.” They were held for a variety of offenses including moonshining, operating a still, breaking and entering, arson, insurance fraud, and even a plot to commit murder. Wyoming County court records show most of the gang were either sentenced to time at the county jail or given probation. The juveniles were sent to serve out their punishment at the Industrial School for Boys in Pruntytown, Taylor County (now the Pruntytown Correctional Center). However, Tommy, along with his caretaker and a few others, was sent to the West Virginia State Penitentiary in Moundsville.

There is little doubt that my grandfather was also a member of this gang at one point. The family stories about grandpa’s moonshining days parallel too closely the events uncovered and attributed to the Goodman Gang—and through his brother Bert, he had every reason to be involved. In addition to grandpa, Aaron and I have been able to document seventeen members of the Goodman Gang using records at the Wyoming County Courthouse and the State Archives.

You never know what adventures await in the dusty basement of your local courthouse or among the untold riches of the State Archives collections. In my case, it strengthened my bond with both my grandfather—now deceased—and my son. In this instance, I suppose, crime does pay.



To enjoy the Council’s *Mysterious Mountains* podcast, search for it on iTunes, Google Podcasts, iHeartRadio, Pandora, Spotify, or your favorite podcast platform. You can also find us on the web at mysteriousmountains.podbean.com.

EVENTS APRIL - MAY 2022

Always check with the venue or hosting organization of an event before attending, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, as schedules may change without the knowledge of the Council.

- Apr 2

Walt Disney - History Alive! Presented by WV Garden Glubs, Canaan Valley Resort. 12pm
- Apr 6

Walt Disney - History Alive! Presented by the Woman’s Club of Huntington, Guyan Golf & Country Club, Huntington. 7pm
- Apr 7 - Apr 21

High School Art Show* - Wetzel County high school students respond to Smithsonian exhibit themes, Wetzel County Center for Children and Families, New Martinsville. M-F, 9-4pm
- Apr 8

Wetzel County Hall of Fame Induction* - Ceremony and discussion for “The Lunch Bunch”, Wetzel Co. Museum, New Martinsville. 7pm
- Apr 8

Bessie Smith - History Alive! Presented by WV Association of Museums’ annual conference, Love Hope Center for the Arts, Fayetteville. 7pm
- Apr 9

Gabriel Arthur - History Alive! Presented by WV Association of Museums’ annual conference, Aventures on the Gorge, Fayetteville. 10am

- Apr 14

Music with Adrian Niles* - Crossroads event, Wetzel Co. Museum, New Martinsville. 7pm
- Apr 22

Smithsonian Opening in Mount Hope* - Crossroads traveling exhibit opening reception, Mountainair Hotel, Mount Hope. TIME
- Apr 23

Salt Rising Bread Marker Dedication - Legends & Lore marker program, Ronceverte Public Library, Ronceverte. 3pm
- Apr 23

Ramp Dinner and Craft Fair* - Showcase of Fayette County traditions, Mountainair Hotel, Mount Hope. TIME
- Apr 24

Little Lecture with Joe Geiger Jr. - Former Director of the WV State Archives discusses Reconstruction Era unrest in West Virginia, McFarland-Hubbard House, Charleston. 2pm
- Apr 24

Oh Deep In My Heart* - Art show opening focusing on Smithsonian exhibit themes, Tamarack Center, Beckley. TIME

- May 22

Little Lecture with Shirley Ann Higuchi - Author, lawyer and descendant of imprisoned Japanese-American citizens discusses the legacy of Japanese-American incarceration during World War II. McFarland-Hubbard House, Charleston. 2pm
- May 30

Smithsonian’s Last Day in Mount Hope - Memorial Day parade and exhibit celebration, Mountainair Hotel, Mount Hope. TIME

*Events marked with an asterisk are part of the Council-sponsored Crossroads Smithsonian tour. For general tour information, visit www.wvhumanities.org/programs/crossroads

For local contact information on events and exhibit hours in New Martinsville, visit www.visitwetzelcounty.com

For local contact information on events and exhibit hours in Mount Hope, visit facebook.com/harmonyforhope

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HUMANITIES COUNCIL

