

THE MYSTERIOUS AND VIOLENT DEATH OF JEREMIAH SUDBURY

By Marie Coady

Of the many businesses on Main Street, Woburn, MA in 1939, none had a more hardworking owner than Jeremiah Sudbury. Sudbury owned and operated a small tailor shop on the second floor of 408 Main Street and according to neighbors you could set your watch by his comings and goings. So, as usual, on that final Monday, December 11, 1939, Sudbury appeared for work on schedule at 8 A. M. and the people he passed checked their watches to see if they were running as efficiently as Sudbury.

Nothing seemed amiss when his fellow businessman and friend, butcher Arthur Leland brought him a pair of trousers to be mended at 9 A. M., engaging in small talk and leaving him alive and well shortly after. But at 11:05 A. M., when fellow cribbage partners, Frank White and Harold Cheever, came by, the door was locked and Sudbury's radio was blasting at full tilt.

When Cheever and White got no response to their continual pounding, Cheever used his key and entered upon a sight he and White were destined never to forget. Both were struck with horror at the grotesque sight of Sudbury, lying in a pool of blood with blood spattered on the ceiling. Most bloodcurdling of all was the light directed on the scene from two bare light bulbs coated with blood and casting their eerie glow about the room.

His friends lost no time in sounding the alarm and summoned Officers Fay and Reil to the scene. Officer Fay later said it appeared Mr. Sudbury, had been seated in a swivel chair facing a window looking out onto Main Street when he turned to confront his attacker. He most likely put his hands up, covering his face to ward off blows. Instead, the fingers of his right hand were broken by the blunt end of a claw hammer that smashed onto his head nine times to inflict nine distinct blows.

Police lost no time setting about their investigation and interrogating more than a dozen people till well past midnight.

Lt. Detective Edward J. Sherlock of the Massachusetts State Police, seemed baffled as to how the murderer could have escaped sight unseen when, judging from the murder scene, he would have had to have been covered with blood which would have made it nearly impossible for him to slip by unnoticed if he exited onto Main Street.

“It's a murder, but nobody saw anybody. It is brutal, one of the worst in my experience, and I would almost say it was the work of a fiend,” Sherlock claimed in frustration.

After several days of thorough investigation, it was ascertained the murder must have been committed between nine and ten A. M. The timeline was determined when the janitor at the Emmet Club next door to Sudbury's shop, James Winn, reported he'd heard someone pounding and kicking at Sudbury's door a little after 10 A. M.

It was later learned that the pounding and kicking could be attributed to another friend of Sudbury's, Frank Newcomb, who had stopped by to see him at about 10 A. M. Upon finding the door locked and the radio blaring, Newcomb made quite a racket trying to raise Sudbury. He finally gave up and left, deciding that Sudbury must have kept an appointment at a hospital in Boston that he'd mentioned earlier.

Two things were learned from this encounter. First, that Jerry Sudbury was suffering from a serious illness and sought treatment in Boston, and second, that he always left his door ajar. It was, in fact, highly unusual for him to lock it if he were on the premises.

One mystery yet unsolved was that of an unclaimed suit that Sudbury was working on when the killer struck. It was a blue suit made for a small man and Sudbury had been bent over them lengthening the trousers at the time of his death.

Another lead sent police on a search for a young man who was rumored to have approached Sudbury a few days before to borrow money for a trip to New York. Yet, this lead proved fruitless when a friend of the young suspect came forward to inform police he'd driven the suspect to the bus station at Park Square in Boston the night before Sudbury was murdered. This gave him a solid alibi and sent police in a different direction.

Since the murder weapon had not turned up as yet, and it was believed claw hammer may have belonged to Sudbury, a hammer which janitor James Winn of the Emmet Club remembers asking for to repair a loose nail. When he asked Sudbury for it, he was told it had disappeared. So it seems that the perpetrator may have planned his attack by using Sudbury's own hammer and then spirited it away with him; unless, of course, someone is lying.

Police have also been stymied by the lack of motive for the murder. The only motive that seems feasible is money. It seems Sudbury's wallet was missing and although he carried little cash in it, its disappearance leaves police to believe robbery could have been the motive. It's the only motive they have been able to come up with throughout their investigation.

For the next six straight days since the murder, local and state police followed up every clue, questioned over sixty witnesses and still were no closer to solving this baffling mystery. But police were still determined to follow up every lead until a killer was found.

State Lt. Detective Sherlock spoke again saying, “This is the most baffling crime I have encountered in my long career as a state detective as there is little or no motive, other than robbery, with no eye witnesses to anybody entering or leaving the place and the man had no enemies and was ill at the time. Unless it was a fiend who was compelled to kill at the sight of a man with his back turned. Other than that there are very few avenues to follow.”

No reports were filed on the story until March 21, 1940 when state detectives returned to Woburn to re-question witnesses to see if they were any inconsistencies in their stories. This renewed investigation also included some new participants, but as the day drew to a close no further progress was made on the case.

A month later to the day, in April 1940, police revived the investigation with the questioning of a man who had disappeared from Woburn right after Sudbury's murder. As it turned out, the former leather worker had an iron clad alibi for the morning of the murder as he was on the unemployment rolls as one who worked that day and state records backed up his claim.

No more was reported on the Sudbury murder and today it still remains an unsolved mystery.

On December 14, 1939, funeral services were held at Jeremiah Sudbury's home on 3 Hart Place at 2:30 P. M. He was buried in Woodbrook Cemetery where he lies today, his violent death still shrouded in mystery.

©Copyright, 2003 – Marie Coady