



Written by [Steven Neill](#) on October 27, 2020

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Fear Nothing, Your Crime Will Go Unpunished

While the period from 1837 to 1901 is fondly remembered by most as the “Victorian Age,” it also has a much more sinister nickname in the annals of criminal history: The Golden Age of Poison. Accidental poisonings were frequent because poisonous mineral pigments such as chromium, cadmium, mercury, lead, cyanide, antimony, arsenic salts, and others often gave paint, wallpaper, food, medicine, and fabric their vibrant colors. Anyone could buy strychnine or cyanide from the local general store for pest control, and manufacturers used arsenic in everything from baby food to makeup and flour additives.



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Because poison was easy to obtain, it became a favorite method of disposing of an unwanted spouse or hastening an inheritance, especially since, at the time, it was difficult to prove it had been used as the murder weapon. Moreover, the burgeoning sales of life insurance policies provided a motive for murder. To get money and life-insurance payouts, Belle Gunness, aka Hell’s Belle, used strychnine to kill as many as 40 people, including her husbands and children.

Stepping into the breach against this world of poisons and murders were men such as Spanish chemist Mathieu Orfila, who became the world’s first toxicologist in the early to mid-1800s, and Sir Thomas Stevenson, the famed British chemist from the late 1800s. Both helped solve several high-profile poisonings and were instrumental in getting the perpetrators convicted.

Following in their footsteps was Charles Norris, the father of American forensic science. He almost singlehandedly brought the rule of law to a corrupt political machine that even allowed wholesale murder to the highest bidders. His story is one that highlights that when politicians secure free rein — absent restrictions of laws and penalties and a judicial mechanism that will call out wrongs whenever they appear — there is no end to how low those politicians might stoop.

Suicide or Murder?

In 1918, New York City adopted the office of medical examiner, and Norris began to institutionalize the forensic science we take for granted today. Previously, “coroners” were used to determine the cause of death. Not only were the majority of coroners unqualified or inept, but stories of their corruption became legendary. That corruption included fistfights over the “rights” for a corpse (the city paid coroners for each body processed) and openness to taking bribes to certify whatever cause of death a payer desired.

And not only was the situation acceptable to the powers-that-be, the politicians perpetuated the problem. New York mayors used the coroner position as a reward for party loyalty, so between 1898 and 1915, the list of coroners for the city included eight undertakers, seven politicians, six real estate



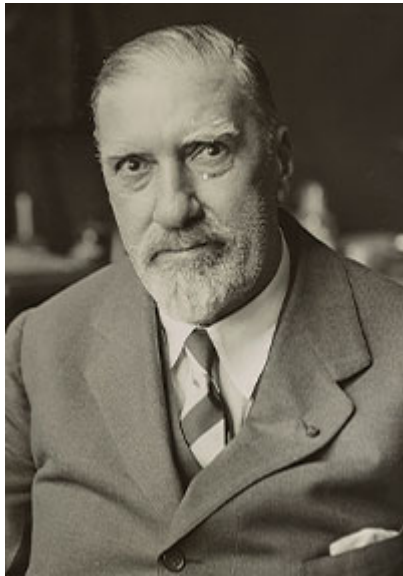
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agents, two saloonkeepers, two plumbers, a lawyer, a printer, an auctioneer, a woodcarver, a carpenter, a painter, a butcher, a marble cutter, a milkman, an insurance agent, a labor leader, a musician, and 17 physicians who had either lost their licenses to practice medicine or were in danger of doing so.

Patrick Riordan, an alcoholic, was a coroner from 1914 to 1918, and one of the most corrupt and inept of them all.

On December 9, 1914, one train rear-ended another on the Ninth Avenue "L." Typical of the wooden passenger cars used by the rail and metro lines of the day, the last cars of the rear-ended train crumpled into the forward ones, collapsing like the tubes of a telescope. It took several hours for rescuers to search the wreckage for the survivors and send them to local hospitals. Police took two dead rail workers to the police station to await the coroner.



Pursuit of truth provides big gains: Charles Norris' relentless pursuit of tests to determine the truth behind causes of death revolutionized the fields of criminology and chemical safety. His willingness to fight corrupt government officials and educate an unwilling public saved numerous lives.

When Riordan stumbled into the police station to pick up the bodies six hours later, he needed assistance to stand because he was so drunk. Reporters witnessed his appearance and made sure it was plastered across the front page of several newspapers the next day. This was the last straw for reformist mayor John Purroy Mitchel, who ordered Leonard M. Wallstein, the New York City commissioner of accounts, to investigate the city's coroner system. Wallstein's report laid bare the corruption of the coroner system. Exposed were the facts that the coroners and their associates had:

- Failed to report hundreds of suspicious deaths to the district attorney;
- Frequently extorted money from insurance companies, families of the deceased, and even murderers;
- Often filled out death certificates without seeing a body;
- Commonly forced grieving relatives to use certain morticians who split their profits from funeral costs with the coroners; and
- Charged for death certificates and other documents that should have been free.

Following the release of the report, Dr. James Ewing, professor of pathology at Cornell University



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Medical College and a recognized expert on child mortality, stated: “I should say that as far as the activities of the coroners’ office, as you have detailed them to me, are concerned, that infanticide would be carried on with impunity in New York City.” He added: “I feel that New York gets along practically without any aid from the science of legal medicine.”

In February 1915, while the report was still the talk of the town, a short, nervous, chain-smoking man walked into a New York City police station, introduced himself as Frederic Mors, and confessed to killing eight residents at the Bronx German Odd Fellows Nursing Home. He called them acts of kindness intended to “put people out of their misery.”

He admitted that he had tried arsenic on his first victim, but it took too long for the person to die. Mors said he then tried using chloroform, saying, “When you give an old person chloroform, it’s like putting a baby to sleep. It frees them from all pain. It is humane and kind-hearted.” He also stated that his supervisor, Adam Banger, instigated the killings to make room for more patients.

Mors’ confession exploded across the front pages of New York’s newspapers. In Mors’ apartment, they found a German book about poisons and the tweezers Mors claimed to use to administer the chloroform. Several people who knew him said he was cold and intimidating, while older patients at the nursing home feared him.

James Dunn, the district attorney, ordered the exhumation of the first victim’s body to search for traces of arsenic, only to learn that all of the remains had been doused with arsenic to help preserve them. Next, Dunn asked Bronx coroner Israel Feinberg if there was a test to detect chloroform in the victims, and Feinberg assured him that none existed.

But not wanting to set Mors free, Dunn had him committed to the Bellevue Hospital for observation. Mors’ doctors diagnosed him as “paranoically inclined” and committed him to the Hudson River State Hospital for the Insane, awaiting deportation to Austria. One week before his extradition, he escaped the hospital and was never heard from again.

After receiving the news that Mors had escaped, and learning that Feinberg was mistaken about there being a test for trace amounts of chloroform in a corpse, Commissioner Wallstein told New York reporters: “It is clear that the welfare of the city absolutely requires the immediate abolition of the elective coroner’s system.”

Governor Charles Whitman demanded Riordan’s removal as coroner, and the state legislature passed a bill establishing a new medical examiner system for New York City, with strict guidelines and qualifications for the office. The new examiner would be empowered to appoint a professional staff capable of ensuring such a fiasco did not happen again.

New York City’s First Medical Examiner

On January 31, 1918, Charles Norris became New York City’s first medical examiner, over the objections of New York’s new, and thoroughly corrupt, mayor, John Hylan. Previously, Hylan had tried to install his political crony Patrick Riordan, the same drunk who had been ejected from the position of coroner shortly before.

At the very start of Norris’ tenure, the complete lack of professionalism of the coroner system was apparent, as was the amount of tenacity and money necessary to remedy corrupt government. There



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was virtually no testing equipment, the staff consisted of incompetent or mediocre political appointees, and there was no building to house the new department. And there was a vengeful mayor who attempted to sabotage Norris in every conceivable way. Norris, however, showed he was up for the challenge as he moved the department to Bellevue Hospital's new pathology wing and began to change how human remains were processed.

When Mayor Hylan refused to pay for the staff and equipment Norris needed to create the new department, Norris, who was independently wealthy, paid for it himself. Norris began to purge the new office of political appointees and hire skilled professionals, while developing new protocols for the police and hospitals for the proper handling of corpses.

Probably Norris' best move was to hire chemist Alexander Gettler.

Gettler was the son of Austrian Jewish immigrants. From an early age, he displayed endless curiosity, boundless energy, and incredible drive. He earned a degree in chemistry and worked as a teacher at Columbia University, where he met Norris.

Though Gettler and Norris were opposites personality-wise, together they would revolutionize modern forensic science. Norris was outgoing, lived an extravagant lifestyle, and basked in the limelight. Gettler avoided the public eye, gave minimal answers to reporters' questions, and stayed in his laboratory at work. Off work, however, Gettler loved to bet on horses, play poker with friends, and take his sons to baseball games.

As problems in investigating crimes forensically appeared, the duo slew them. In late April of 1922, police investigated the fully-clothed figures of Fremont and Annie Jackson in their locked apartment. Both dead bodies showed all the classic signs of cyanide poisoning, but there was no evidence of cyanide in their studio. Initially the police believed their deaths were suicide, but asked Norris to investigate the crime scene. Norris examined the area and had the stomachs and other organs of the couple sent to Bellevue for Gettler to investigate.

Gettler found traces of cyanide — frequently used by exterminators to fumigate houses and apartments — in the Jacksons' lungs; however, the landlord, Eli Dupuy, and the fumigator, Albert Bradicich, denied having fumigated recently. To test his suspicion, Norris put rats in the apartment and released cyanide gas in the basement. The rats soon died. Dupuy and Bradicich still refused to acknowledge releasing the poison, but the DA charged them with manslaughter.

Norris and Gettler both knew they had a lot riding on that trial. If they lost, the credibility they were building in the new field of forensic science would receive a severe blow. However, during the trial, the defense lawyer was able to attack the evidence enough to plant the seed of reasonable doubt in the jurists' minds, and the defendants walked free.

Following the loss, to prevent doubt from being attached to their claims in the future, Gettler buried himself in the lab, conducting studies on cyanide. He presented them in the paper "Toxicology of Cyanide," which is still cited today.

Countrywide Tyranny

Norris was relentless in the pursuit of honest criminal inquiry, coordinating with other medical examiners on a campaign to teach Americans about forensic science.



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For many years, he sought an end to the deaths caused by wood alcohol (not grain, or drinking, alcohol) and other poisons that Americans imbibed because of government's crackdown on beer and liquor sales during Prohibition.

On January 16, 1920, after decades of work, progressives convinced enough people that legislating morality was possible, and they obtained the votes to ratify the 18th Amendment, making Prohibition the law of the land. From 1920 to 1933, Prohibition banned the production, importation, transportation, and sale of alcoholic beverages. Its proponents proclaimed that the ban would strengthen families. In reality, alcohol abuse increased, and the law created a new breed of violent criminals who provided booze Americans couldn't buy legally during the Roaring Twenties.

While commercially produced spirits from Canada and elsewhere were still available at the right price, most Americans consumed booze made by bootleggers, who used any number of toxic substances in its production. The most common additive was methanol, also known as wood alcohol or methyl alcohol. Methanol was cheap and easy to make. Bootleggers used scrap wood, sawdust, or dead plants, and it tasted like grain alcohol. Unfortunately, it contains the poisons formaldehyde and formic acid, which metabolize slowly in people's bodies and may lead to death or blindness within five days.



Attraction to chemistry: Alexander Gettler, whose love of forensic science exposed the dangerous world in which Americans lived, helped solve numerous deaths by cyanide, arsenic, lead, carbon monoxide, denatured alcohol, radium, and thallium poisoning. (*Photo credit: LibraryofCongress*)

Poisonings from methanol were common even before Prohibition, but after the law passed, the number of victims skyrocketed. Early on, Norris and Gettler began a citywide campaign to warn doctors of the signs and dangers of wood alcohol poisoning. During the first seven months after Prohibition began, New York had over 60 deaths and 100 people blind from the methyl alcohol. Both Norris and Gettler knew the number of deaths was much higher because it was hard to detect methanol in a corpse, a problem Gettler would spend hundreds of hours examining tissues and organs to remedy.

As speakeasies replaced saloons, the strange and often lethal cocktails served became a badge of honor to those with a morbid sense of humor:

The bartender brought me some Benedictine, and the bottle was right. But the liqueur was curious — transparent at the top of the glass, yellowish in the middle and brown at the base.



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Oh, what dreams seemed to result from drinking it. That is the bane of speakeasy life. You ring up your friend the next morning to find out whether he is still alive.

One judge said of the rising methanol death rate: "Prohibition is a joke. It has deprived the poor working man of his beer and has flooded the country with rat poison."

Norris also commented on it: "Poison, poison everywhere, and increasing thousands are daily drinking it. Shall we simply shrug our shoulders and say 'So much the worse for them?'" Little did he know that the death rate was about to skyrocket.

On Christmas Eve, 1926, a man staggered into the emergency room of Belle-vue Hospital, screaming about being attacked by Santa Claus, and when the hallucination ended, he died. Over the next few hours, eight more perished, and more than 60 people came in with similar delusions. The body count climbed to 23, with hundreds getting ill or going blind over the next two days.

Since grain alcohol could still be produced for manufacturing purposes, the government required manufacturers to add methanol and other poisons such as benzene to grain alcohol to make it extremely poisonous to consume. The thinking was that if people knew it was extremely toxic, they wouldn't drink it. That turned out to be wrong.

Soon, wood alcohol became the additive of choice for the government because bootleggers couldn't figure out how to remove it from the grain alcohol.

Everyone knew that this poison-laden alcohol was often stolen and turned into "hooch," but the government was determined to stop alcohol consumption, no matter how many died. When Norris and Gettler examined the hooch, they found it could contain kerosene and brucine (a plant alkaloid closely related to strychnine), gasoline, benzene, cadmium, iodine, zinc, mercury salts, nicotine, ether, formaldehyde, chloroform, camphor, carbolic acid, quinine, or acetone.

Norris called a press conference and stated:

The government knows it is not stopping drinking by putting poison in alcohol, yet it continues its poisoning processes, heedless of the fact that people determined to drink are daily absorbing that poison. Knowing this to be true, the United States government must be charged with the moral responsibility for the deaths that poisoned liquor causes, although it cannot be held legally responsible.

The poisoning program did not stop illegal drinking; instead, in 1927, 200 became sick, and 400 died in New York City alone, and the number climbed to over 700 the following year. Norris consistently campaigned to end both the poisoning program and Prohibition. By the time Prohibition ended, the government-mandated poisoning had claimed over 10,000 lives nationwide.

Also, during Prohibition, shooting deaths soared as gangsters battled over who would control the illegal alcohol trade, which was yet another plague on society that Norris would attempt to remedy. He pioneered the use of the newly invented "comparison microscope" to match bullets to the guns that fired them, and he began the study of powder burns on the victim to determine if a death was suicide or murder.



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It's Gruesome, but Not Murder

Norris' commitment to integrity and justice was ever apparent. One case, however, showed the lengths to which he would go for fairness: the Travia case.

On December 26, 1926, it was foggy at the pier when a police officer saw a man dump something in the water. Covered in blood, the man bolted when hailed by the officer and did not stop until tackled by the cop.

The scruffy, middle-aged man was Francesco Travia, an Italian immigrant dock worker. While Travia was in the holding cell, officers searched his apartment and found the upper torso of a dismembered woman in a large pool of coagulated blood.

The DA expected it to be an open-and-shut case of murder when he called Norris to meet him at the apartment. However, after examining the corpse, Norris stated that the woman had not been murdered, but instead had died of carbon monoxide poisoning. The DA disagreed and worked tirelessly to have Travia put in the electric chair.



Deadly brew: There is little doubt that “the noble experiment” of Prohibition failed. It led to many deaths through poisoning by people drinking illegal “hooch” and increased crime. It warns us that the Constitution should not be changed for social engineering.

In the questioning room, Travia confessed that the body belonged to a neighbor who had come to get some of his hooch. He stated that before she had come in, he had put on a kettle to make tea, but when she came over, they sat in the kitchen and drank. They started to argue when he suddenly fell onto the floor. When he awoke, the woman was dead on the floor. Assuming he had killed her in his sleep, he hadn't gone to the police about it.

Instead, he cut her up using a butcher knife and chisel, planning to dispose of her in the water. Norris knew the death was the perfect vehicle to prove that science had a prominent role in police work.

Working closely with Norris, Travia's lawyer, who was New York Governor Al Smith's son Alfred E. Smith, based his defense around findings Norris and Gettler made in their lab. In the end, the weight of the scientific evidence cleared Travia of murder, but he still faced other charges over dismembering a corpse. The case was a stunning victory for Norris, and a considerable boost to the Medical Examiner's



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Office.

There would be other cases that Norris would work on that proved the significance of honesty and ethics in public life.

Norris would:

- Help solve the mysterious deaths of the “Radium Girls,” who contracted and died from radiation poisoning due to painting watch dials with radioactive self-luminous paint;
- Determine that the lead General Motors and Standard Oil were adding to their gasoline, called Ethyl or tetraethyl lead gasoline, was responsible for numerous deaths and injuries;
- Fight for the implementation of safe food standards for our foods and medicines; and,
- Assist in the acquittal of Frederick Gross, accused of murdering his wife and four children.

The years of battling and lavish living caught up to Norris on September 11, 1935, when he died of heart failure. In its September 23, 1935 edition, *Time* magazine summarized the career of Charles Norris:

“The famed, sardonic, goat-bearded, public-spirited” medical examiner who “battled for pure food laws, fought against quack doctors, Prohibition, unsanitary restaurants, pronounced on many a suicide and murder that perplexed police, made his name and detective work known in medico-legal circles the world over.”

Gettler performed autopsies on over 100,000 bodies before he retired as the New York City head toxicologist at the age of 75. He became a legend in the realm of forensic science, and his research on poisons is still used today.

Charles Norris and Alexander Gettler were giants in the field of medical forensic research and excellent examples of how scientific research should operate, free from politics and preconceived agendas.



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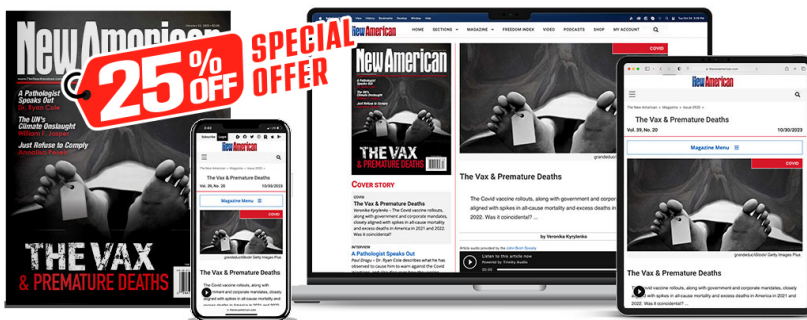
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