

(An Undertaking and Embalming Magazine)

THE STORY OF A MUMMY WITH A HISTORY.

Wonderful Experiences of an Undertaker in the Southwest Who Embalmed and now Has the Body of a Man Who Claimed That he Was John Wilkes Booth, Assassin of President Abraham Lincoln - One of the Most Noteworthy Cases Known An Ethical Discussion of the Case and Many Interesting Historical Allusions - Was Mummy Booth or Smooth Impostor? - Interest National in Extent - By W. B. Penniman, Copyright, 1909.

On the thirteenth day of January, 1903, there died in the City of Enid, Okla., a man who claimed to be John Wilkes Booth, the assassin of President Lincoln. Six weeks before his death he registered at the Grand Avenue Hotel, at Enid, as David E. George. El Reno, Okla., and was assigned to room No. 4, where he died. He was taken in charge by Undertaker W. B. Penniman, at whose establishment the body was embalmed and preserved.

Death occurred about 10:30 or 11 o'clock in the morning and was plainly a case of suicide. Several days prior to his death the man had purchased strychnine at the drug store, with the comment, that he was going to poison a dog. On the day of his death he appeared as usual in the office of the hotel where he lived and, after breakfast, went out for a walk. Returning about 9 A.M., he retired to his room with instructions to call him for dinner in case he failed to come down. In a short time his agonized cries called attention to his room and another guest at the hotel effected an entrance and found him in the throes of death. On the dresser, near at hand, was the box of poison half emptied.

In the course of half an hour the body was in the hands of the undertaker. At first he was regarded as a common pauper subject. In the pockets were a few coppers and postage stamp, while no valuables of any description were found among the effects.

No embalming was attempted until late in the afternoon. About 2:30 or 3 o'clock, business being quiet, Mr. Penniman raised the right carotid and introduced a tube. This was done more to keep familiar with the anatomy of this part of the body than with the idea of preserving or disinfecting it. In the meantime the evening papers chronicled the death of David E. George, and the item fell under the notice of Mrs. E. C. Harper, wife of the Methodist minister of Enid. She had known David E. George at El Reno, Okla., before her marriage and before her removal to Enid. George boarded with a family named Simmons and Mrs. Harper chummed with the Simmons girl. George was a moody man who would sit at night under the trees in the yard intoning a mournful melody that annoyed the household. His various moods would lead him into many melancholy nights and many days of solemn soliloquy. In one of these fits he took an overdose of chloral, and when he thought he was dying he called Mrs. Harper to his bedside and told her he had killed the greatest man that ever lived. Then asking for pencil and paper he wrote the names:

"Abraham Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth."

Recognizing the name in the newspaper, this good lady immediately dispatched her husband to the morgue to view the remains of the David E. George who was the subject of the article she had just read, in order to identify it, if possible, as the body of the man, who three years before, had confessed to her at El Reno, that he was the assassin of the War President.

Mr. Harper entered the morgue with no little trepidation. All of the surroundings were strange and unfamiliar. The reverend gentleman was ill at ease and uncomfortable. The embalming was not finished and, owing to the fact that the operation was being done for the purpose of research and education, the operator had not taken the customary precautions to keep things clean and sightly, so that it would not be surprising if Mr. Harper was filled with a desire to discharge his errand and escape to the more congenial atmosphere of his home. And so, hitching from one foot to the other, he stepped back a pace or two and with finger poised and pointing at the embalmer, he said in tones of deep emotion:

"Young man, do you know whom you are working on?" "No, sir," replied Mr. Penniman.

"You are working upon the body of John Wilkes Booth," declared Mr. Harper. That being the case," replied Mr. Penniman, "I believe I will embalm him and keep him."

And the body is today in a perfect state of preservation and is visited by hundreds of sightseers every year. The next day Mrs. Harper visited the morgue, accompanied by her husband and completed the identification.

The news of this strange occurrence spread through the city and outlying districts, and the people began to demand admittance, wherein was raised a nice question of propriety. Those asking for admission were not connected with the deceased and inasmuch as the body had been identified, they were moved entirely by curiosity, which rightfully should deprive them of the privilege they sought. But they congregated in such numbers and their clamorings were so insistent that to refuse them was impossible. For almost two weeks excitement ran high, and in that time it is safe to say that ten thousand people saw the body of the alleged assassin. The country people drove for miles in order to look, and the school children came at the close of the school session in charge of their teachers with histories and other publications that they might pursue intelligent investigation of the case. There was no time in the first ten days that the little room was cleared. Almost everyone wanted a souvenir, and were it not that Mr. Penniman had provided adequate protection, the most malicious deprecations would have been committed. In speaking of the case, Mr. Penniman said, that there was no doubt but that Booth had changed collar buttons fifty times or more with some person who wanted a keep sake.

By this time the story had gained flavor, and widespread attention from the press and finally came to the attention of Mr. Finis L. Bates at his home in Memphis, Tenn. Upon reading it he at once wired to know if the body was still unburied and stated that if it was he was in a position to give it the right identity.

This startling intelligence came as a thunderbolt out of a clear sky. All the excitement up to this time had emanated from the statement of a citizen of the City, and Mr. Penniman says he had not attempted to check it for the reason that he regarded it as cheap advertising. But the telegram from Memphis put a new phase on the case, and at this stage of the matter it could not be disregarded. For fear, however, that Mr. Bates was an irrational Southerner in search of notoriety, an adventurer or a professional insurance swindler, of some other kind of a grafter who mistook the widespread publication of the Booth story for an opportunity to get in his graft, the body was thoroughly anointed with vaseline, wrapped in cotton and bandaged and hidden away.

In due time, Mr. Bates arrived laden with books, letters, newspapers clippings, magazine articles, pictures, photographs and no end of data upon which to base his claim that the dead man was none other than the arch villain Booth. Instead of being an un-reconstructed Southerner, bubbling over with war time prejudice and hatred, he proved to be a dignified, refined and elegant gentleman, educated and beyond suspicion. Before he was admitted to view the remains he extended to Mr. Penniman the privilege of examining his proofs, the genuine character of which could not be questioned, and this consumed the entire afternoon and evening of the day on which he arrived in Enid. The next morning he came to the morgue. The body was unwrapped and placed in a crepe casket for the occasion, and Mr. Bates was permitted to view it. His exclamation, as he stepped away from the casket

and wiped his eyes, was: "That is my friend - that is John Wilkes Booth."

Realizing the importance of permanently preserving the body, Mr. Penniman then caused both femorals to be raised and injected both ways with a fluid somewhat strengthened by the addition of about two ounces of forty percent formaldehyde and the effect was far from satisfactory. The toxic effect of this treatment hastened dessication and within a few weeks the skin had the drawn and tanned look of an old mummy. When this operation was performed there was positively no occasion for it, as there was no sign of fermentation or discoloration. This also, can be truly said of the cavity work, which was done by a traveling representative of the fluid people who made the compound with which the body was embalmed, in order that he might be able to say that he had had a hand in the work, and for no other reason. To the best recollection of the writer, this happened several weeks after the man died.

In the spring following the first visit of Mr. Bates, to Enid, he returned with intention of beginning a lecture tour in that city. The opera house was engaged for two nights, and Mr. Bates announced himself as being prepared to further enlighten the people on the escape and suicide of John Wilkes Booth. The night of his first lecture the building was well filled, and Mr. Bates proved himself equal to the emergency. However, his arraignment of those high in official life at Washington at the time of the assassination, was badly received by the old soldiers, and Mr. Bates was warned not to deliver his lecture in Enid again. Their attitude bode ill to the lecturer and he decided to bid his time. So severe was their criticism of the man and his subject, that he was told that they would not promise but what violence would be done him if he attempted again to deliver his lecture before an Enid audience.

As a consequence of the second treatment, the body took on extreme rigidity and was posed for the photographer. Several negatives were made with the body in a standing position, but were not so good as the one shown in this article, which was taken under extreme difficulties on account of the pose, the feet having to be wired to the chair-legs to keep them in position. At the present time the body stands upon its own feet in a rough box, which has been prepared for it by having the cover cut and hinged in order to be accessible. On strictly ethical grounds, however, Mr. Penniman has always steadfastly refused to open the box for those who desired to look, as he does not want any one to be able to say that Mr. Penniman showed him the body. He has always been consistent in his reluctance to aver that this is the body of John Wilkes Booth. When asked what he thinks about it, he almost invariably refers the inquirer to Mr. Bates - or says he does not know. A favorite expression is, "I don't know, it may be Robinson Crusoe for all I know." This he deems to be the wisest course, for the reason that at some future time it may be identified as some one else, whose relatives might be tempted to make trouble because the body had been kept above ground, where it was accessible to the public.

It seldom happens that a dead body is not claimed by some one and a decent burial provided, Especially is this true when the death becomes, as in this case, a national incident and is mentioned in almost every paper in the country on account of some extraordinary feature. Mr. Penniman conducts a large and profitable business, and for many years did the county work for his community. His experiences in other cases have by no means been unique. A little effort has almost always resulted in finding loving relatives or friends who came forward to perform the last offices of affection for the unfortunate creatures who had fallen into his hands. No matter how low in the scale of morals a man may have descended, if there is anything about his death to attract attention, it is a safe guess that the fact will reach his family and his remains will receive their tender ministrations. No such thing happened in this case. But when it is remembered that all of the Booths are dead, excepting Junius Brutus Booth, the younger, who would

be only a second cousin to John Wilkes, the matter is not so surprising. Still Junius Brutus Booth, in an interview with Mr. Bates, said that he knew that his father had died with a secret in his heart which he had not divulged, and after carefully listening to Mr. Bates, gave him power of attorney to protect the Booth interests in this case.

Curio hunters and museum people have made many overtures for the body. The demand for him has not grown less with age. All kinds of propositions have been made and refused. Show people have offered to lease him, pay him on a royalty or buy him outright. One man offered a thousand dollars for him, laying the money on the desk, if Mr. Penniman would vacate the building for fifteen minutes. In that time he thought he would have a fair chance to get away with the body. But the invariable answer has been a positive negation. Mr. Penniman says that he is not trafficking in human bodies, dead or alive, and is not in the museum business. He does not desire to incur any risks from legal entanglements, nor degrade the honorable profession to which he belongs, but on the contrary believes more firmly in the strict enforcement of the moral code, a better grip upon the ethics and a desire to be more professional than commercial. Strict watch has been constantly kept upon it, nevertheless, for fear some accident might befall. In this connection it might not be amiss to state, that on April 28, last Mr. Penniman received from Mr. Bates the following telegram:

"W. B. Penniman, Enid, Okla.

"Washington tip says guard body closely from fire and theft.

F. L. Bates."

Unfortunately, Mrs. Harper had lost the scrap of paper on which George had written what purported to be his confession, but what she lacked, Mr. Bates was fully able to supply.