

It was a slight slip of the tongue, but it proved a criminal's undoing.

clue of the extra syllable

By William T. Brannon

ON A RAW, rainy night in December, 1944, Herschel J. Powell finished his run as a railway mail clerk at Chattanooga, Tenn., and picked up his car. Ahead of him lay a 30-mile drive to his home in Lafayette, Ga.

He was across the Georgia line when he saw two figures beside the road, their bodies hunched against the rain. Powell skidded to a stop and offered them a ride. One got in front, the other in back. Powell commented on the nasty weather.

"Yeah," said the man in the rear. "It's even worse up north. I hear it snowed today all the way from Knoxville to Pennsylvania."

In the dim dashboard light, Powell noted that the man beside him was near middle age, thin faced, with a high forehead, sparse dark hair, and a dark mustache. But he had only glimpsed the other man, who was younger.

Now, suddenly the man in the front seat produced a gun and pressed it into Powell's ribs "Do like I say," he ordered, "or I'll blow a hole in you!"

The mail clerk was so unnerved that he veered to the shoulder of the road. The gun poked him.

"Don't wreck this car or you're dead," the gunman said.

As Powell recovered his composure and brought the car back to the road, the older man began frisking him. He found the .32 caliber revolver that had been issued to him to protect the mail while on his run. The man in the back grabbed it, uttering an exclamation of pleasure.

"Where's the lake around here?" the man in front demanded.

"I don't know," Powell replied.

"It's here and we'll find it." He glanced toward the rocky crags of Lookout Mountain. "Maybe it's on the other side."

"Why bother to look for a lake?" the younger man called. "Toss him from one of the bluffs."

They drove in silence for a few miles. Powell decided the men were fugitives, that they needed his car, and that they planned to kill him and dump his body so he couldn't alert the police.

"Stop here," the older gunman said. When the car stopped, Powell was shoved out into the glare of the headlights. He thought then that his time had come. But the lights of another car flashed

in the distance and the gunmen changed their plans.

Powell was ordered back into the front seat, but the thin-faced man slid behind the wheel himself. The car lurched forward in the beginning of a wild ride.

They went over and beyond Lookout Mountain, slipping, sliding, and skidding around turns. Twice the car stopped and Powell was forced to get out. The two men debated whether to kill him and leave his body beside the road. Twice the older man raised his gun as if to shoot.

Both times, the approach of a car stopped him. Finally, he stuffed a gag into Powell's mouth, blindfolded him with another handkerchief, and pushed him back in the car. He drove a few miles and stopped again.

Powell, hunched down in the front seat, pulled the blindfold up just enough to peer out. He saw a house, with a single light bulb burning on the front porch. A woman came to the door.

The younger man, still in the back seat, reached over and jabbed the revolver in Powell's back. The blindfold slipped back into place.

Within a few minutes, the other outlaw was back and they started riding again. Both men voiced threats of death. Powell had no idea where they were going.

His only chance to survive was to open the car door, leap out, and make a break. He resolved to try it at the first opportunity.

Then unexpectedly, the gag and blindfold were removed. "We're coming to a town," said the older man. "You sit up and act natural. If you try to get help, we'll kill you and then fight it out with the police!"

POWELL GLANCED around and recognized his surroundings.

They were entering Trion, Ga. It was past midnight and the town was dark, but Powell hoped a few places in the business section would still be open. This was his chance.

With a barely perceptible move, he rested his right elbow against the door handle. The two men apparently didn't notice. The driver made a bumpy crossing over some railroad tracks and Powell lurched with the car. His elbow pressed against the door

handle, but not quite enough to force it open.

The car sped into the business section and Powell noticed the bus station was still open. It was now or never!

He pressed hard on the door handle and rolled with one movement. The door flew open and the captive bounced out.

By the time the car skidded to a stop, Powell, only slightly bruised, was on his feet and running for the bus station. The thugs saw they couldn't overtake him, and sped on.

At the bus station, he called the police. They quickly recognized Powell's description of the thin-faced man as Hoyt Ledford, a parole violator for whom the Georgia Bureau of Investigation had issued a wanted order. His wife lived in the vicinity.

Powell was taken to the home of Ledford's wife and identified it as the place they had stopped. The woman admitted she and Ledford had planned to leave for Florida as soon as Powell was disposed of. She insisted she didn't know where her husband was.

Powell's car was found 15 miles from Trion. Ledford was caught two weeks later, after he had stolen another car. He confessed kidnaping Powell, but stubbornly refused to name his accomplice.

Ledford was convicted of larceny, assault, and kidnaping, and was sentenced to 27 years in prison. But he still refused to name his companion.

Police decided he was Silas Campbell, 17, Ledford's closest friend at the Georgia State Penitentiary. A wanted order was issued for Campbell and he was captured three months later.

Powell looked at him, but couldn't identify him. "Have him talk," the mail clerk suggested. "Have him say Pennsylvania."

This was done and Powell made positive identification. Campbell confessed and went to trial; he, too, was sentenced to 27 years.

A former school teacher, Powell had noticed at the beginning of that wild ride that the younger man had spoken of Pennsylv-a-*vania*, with an extra syllable. The same mistake, repeated, led to Powell positively identifying Campbell as one of his abductors.

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James Hill