

A letter and a watch were two small clues that solved a crime.

Mystery of the Murdered Recluse

by William T. Brannon

Illustrated by Elmer Smith

R. F. LEIGH, known throughout Van Buren County, Ark., as Old Man Leigh, was found hanging from a rafter in the attic of his modest frame house in the hills near Copeland.

But it was no suicide. Raw, red spots on the bottom of his feet indicated torture.

The house and outbuildings had been ransacked, and Sheriff Jim Hatchett knew why: for years there had been persistent rumors that Old Man Leigh had a fortune hidden around his place. This convinced the sheriff that the killer was somebody who lived in the community and was acquainted with the victim. The sheriff wasn't so sure, though, that Old Man Leigh had a lot of money, as rumored. Maybe he hadn't told his tormentors anything because there was nothing to tell.

Since his wife had died two years before, Leigh hadn't got around much. But for years, he had helped those in need—and that included many people in the community. Now, sorrowing neighbors demanded that the sheriff find the killer. Among those most insistent were Aaron Moody, Jesse Hardester, and Elton Reves.

Reves produced a letter given to him a year before by the victim, to be opened in case of his death. Now, Reves opened it. Inside was a note from Old Man Leigh and a sealed letter addressed to the American Red Cross.

The note directed Reves to mail the letter to the Red Cross, then get Ben Russell to help him. "Guard my place with your lives until the people from the Red Cross come," the posthumous letter read. "They helped me when I needed it."

"Old Man Leigh was good to me," said Reves. "I'm going to mail this letter, then guard the place like he said." Ben Russell was informed of the strange request and he immediately joined Reves in the 24-hour vigil.

So now it seemed that the victim had hidden money around his place. Had it been stolen?

The sheriff recalled that Leigh had an old-fashioned, 21-jewel pocket watch with a deer head on the case. It was the sort of watch seldom seen any more and would be conspicuous if it ever showed up. It apparently had been taken by the killer.

It was a few days after Christmas, so Sheriff Hatchett checked on former residents who had returned to the hills to spend the holidays. Several had brought their families, but one man, Jim Jones, had come alone, though he had left home with his wife and children. He had been in the community when Old Man Leigh was killed.

Jones was brought from his home in an adjoining county for investigation. He protested his innocence, but was lodged in the Van Buren County jail while Sheriff Hatchett checked his story.

Mrs. Jones said she had wanted to spend the holidays with her folks; Jim wanted to visit his relatives. They had compromised and each had had his way. Jones' time throughout his visit was satisfactorily accounted for and he was released.

"But I'm not leaving," he told the sheriff, "until I help you find this killer."

The sheriff welcomed help and made Jones a special deputy, then told him the facts of the case.

Meanwhile, a representative of the Red Cross appeared with Old Man Leigh's letter. It directed

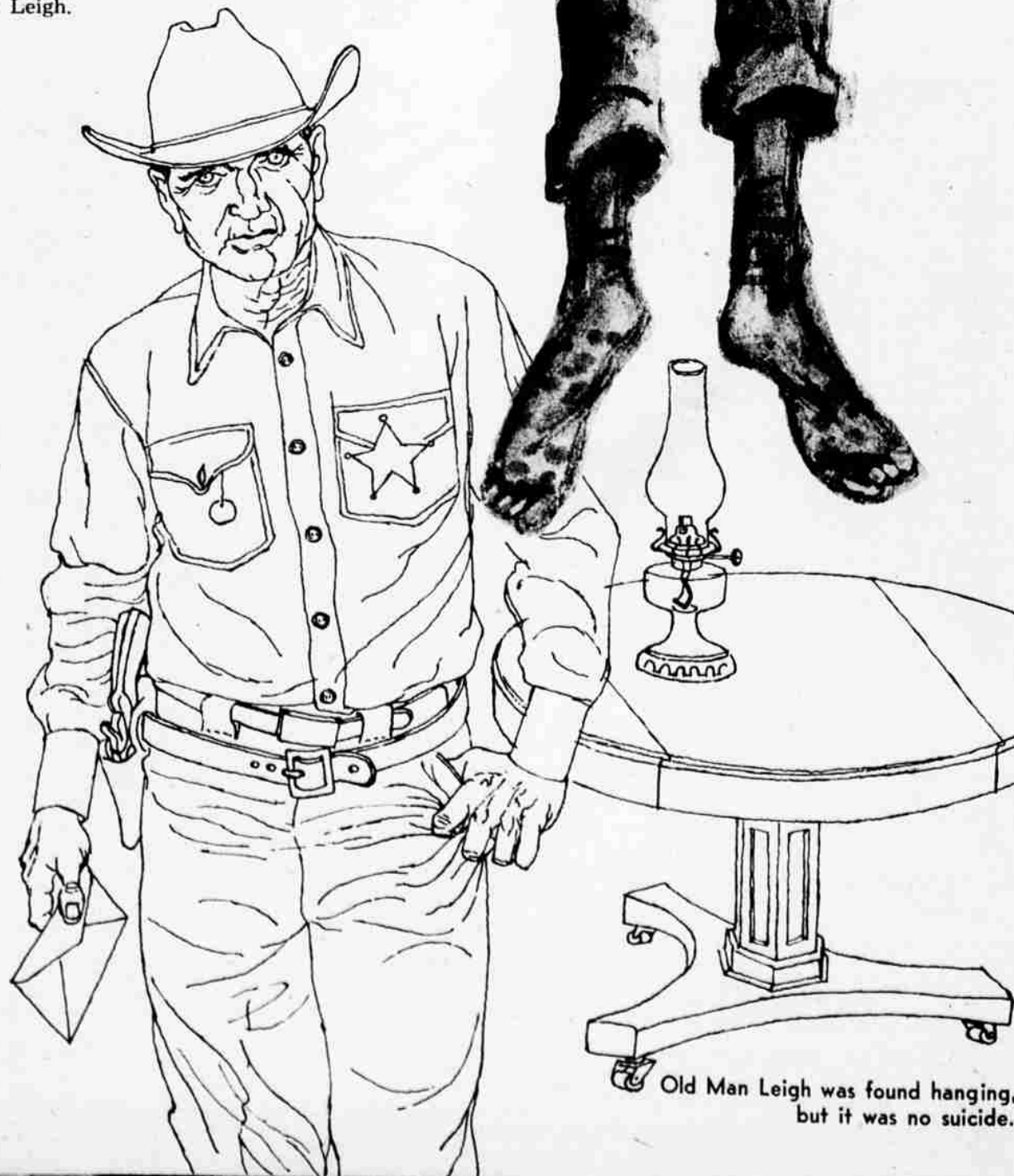
him on a treasure hunt of the Leigh farm that netted more than \$6,000. Leigh had died rather than reveal the hiding place of the money.

Weeks passed, and one day Jones appeared with his younger brother. "He's got the evidence," Jones said. "Aaron Moody is your killer."

Moody was arrested and implicated Jesse Hardester. The two confessed they had tortured the victim and finally hanged him when he refused to tell where his money was hidden. They had ransacked the place and found only \$9. They went to trial Feb. 21, 1933, were convicted of murder, and sentenced to life in prison.

Jones explained the trap that netted the killers. His younger brother had let it be known that he was in the market for a good watch. Dozens of watches were offered to him. He examined them all but said they weren't quite what he wanted.

Then Aaron Moody offered him a 21-jewel pocket watch with a deer head on the case. Moody didn't suspect until he was arrested that Jones actually was looking for the watch stolen from Old Man Leigh.



Old Man Leigh was found hanging, but it was no suicide.