



Shown above is an aerial view of downtown Lincoln, Illinois and the Logan County Courthouse (photo by pilot Roger Thompson, 1972).

“Hello, bumpy roads, this is where the pavement ends.”
—Lyrics to a song written by Charley Packard—

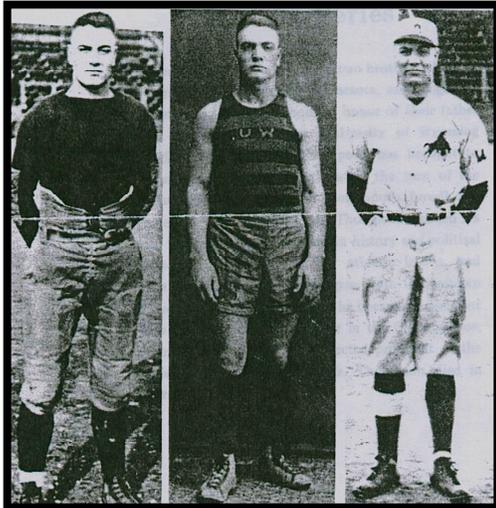
Overview

During the year of 1976, my hometown, Lincoln, Illinois, was turned upside down by six violent murders that transpired between June and October. My father, Roger Winston Thompson, was the Logan County State’s Attorney who handled some of these high-profile central Illinois murder cases.

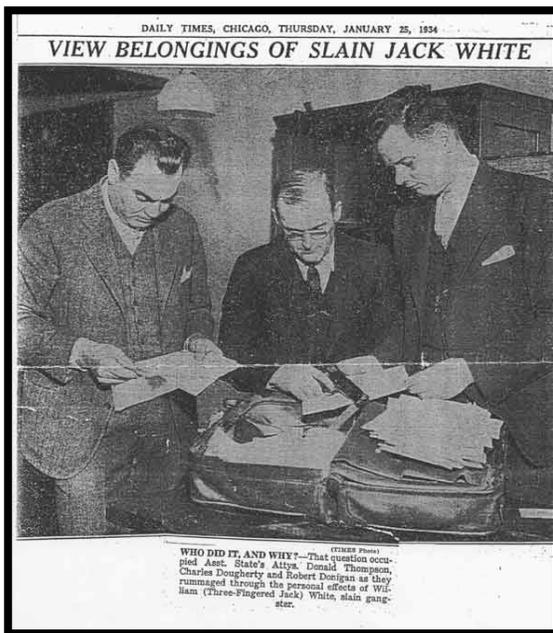
Prior to becoming state’s attorney, Dad tried his first murder case as Logan County Public Defender representing Edward Richard Cesarz, a resident of Michigan. On July 22, 1967, Cesarz walked into the Lincoln Holiday Inn and cold-bloodedly shot desk clerk Ruth Evelyn Ross while attempting robbery. I was just ten-years-old when my father was preparing for the Cesarz trial, and I remember vividly how conflicted he seemed with having to defend a man who was so obviously guilty—it was the first time I’d seen him out of character and despondent. At that time, our family had recently moved to “Country Club Estates,” a rural neighborhood near the Elks Country Club. My father’s parents, whom we affectionately dubbed Nana and Grandods, had just moved to Lincoln from Park Ridge, Illinois and purchased our former home in the Mayfair subdivision.

Grandods was a moose of a man often mistaken for World Heavyweight Champion “Jack” Dempsey. He was a star athlete during his college years at the University of Wyoming, earning ten letters in varsity sports: four each in football and basketball and two in baseball. After graduating from UW, he went on to receive a law degree from Georgetown University. During his years in D.C., he worked as an engineer on a small underground train that transported people to and from the government buildings. My Nana, Helen Cordelia Winston, was the personal

secretary for U. S. Senator Charles Samuel Deneen who'd been Governor of Illinois prior to being elected to the Senate. Nana was a smart, fleshy woman with a gulping chuckle, an artistic hand, and a titanic heart. She first met Grandods on the underground train, and then they married in 1929 and moved to Park Ridge, Illinois, where she'd been raised. They agreeably never slept in the same bed because Grandods's thunderous snoring could raise the roof and easily wake the dead.



Above left: Donald Thompson honored athlete at University of Wyoming. Above right: Chicago *Tribune* photo. The caption reads, "PLUMBERS' UNION RECORDS SEIZED IN RAID ORDERED BY STATE'S ATTORNEY. Left to right: Donald L. Thompson, assistant state's attorney; Sgt. Roy Steffens and C.E. Lounsbury, assistant state's attorney, examining papers taken in safety deposit boxes." Below left: 1934 Chicago *Daily Times* photo. Pictured on the far left is Donald L. Thompson. The caption reads, "WHO DID IT, AND WHY – That question occupied Asst. State's Attys. Donald Thompson, Charles Dougherty, and Robert Donigan as they rummaged through the personal effects of William (Three-Fingered Jack) White, slain gangster." Below right: Donald L. and Helen W. Thompson (1930s).

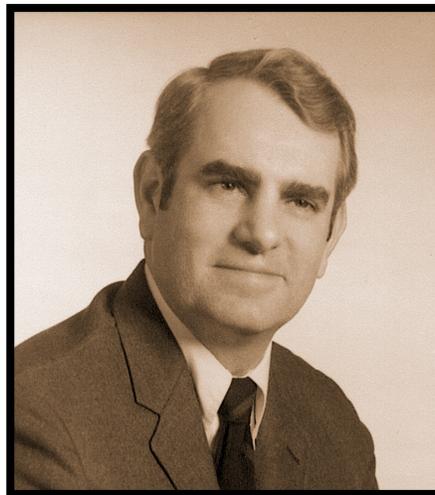


Grandods eventually became a noted Chicago trial lawyer specializing in criminal law and later served as a Cook County Assistant State's Attorney. His colleagues called him "Smokey Thompson" because he was often seen outside the courtroom puffing on a stogie.

At birth, Grandods was given the middle initial "L," but he had no actual middle name. When he began receiving notoriety as an assistant state's attorney, Nana decided the "L" should stand for something, and she christened him Donald "Littleton" Thompson. The name didn't seem that befitting for a robust man with a gruff, commanding voice, but Nana had admired a distinguished attorney named Littleton, and she thought the name sounded sophisticated. Ultimately, Grandods only used his middle initial and seldom revealed it stood for Littleton.

Before and during the Cesarz trial, our family would often go over to Nana and Grandods's house in the evenings. My mother, Lois, my older brother, Scott, and I would watch TV in the front living room with Nana while Dad and Grandods discussed the case in the back family room. I knew better than to disturb the two counselors—serious business was taking place, and I was to steer clear and out of earshot.

The Cesarz trial began on March 4, 1968, and Dad went to battle against Logan County State's Attorney Warren Peters whom he liked and respected. Mr. Peters reminded me of Abraham Lincoln: tall and long-limbed, soft-spoken, honest, smart, and humble. The Cesarz trial concluded on March 14th with a guilty verdict. Dad seemed relieved when it all ended. Essentially, it was defendants comparable to Richard Cesarz who made my father realize he'd rather be on the other side of the fence prosecuting those undesirables rather than defending them. He announced his candidacy for Logan County State's Attorney in 1972 and ran unopposed in the primary election.



Logan County State's Attorney Roger W. Thompson (1972).

During his first term as prosecutor there were some serious crimes in the county, but nothing particularly earth-shattering materialized until June of 1976. On June 2nd, 51-year-old real estate agent Ruth Louise Martin was shot in her garage, hoisted into the trunk of her car, and then taken to an unknown location by her abductor(s) and hidden away. Two days after her disappearance,

her Pontiac Catalina was discovered in the parking lot at the Holiday Inn in Bloomington, IL. The trunk mat was found besmirched with blood, but Ruth remained missing.

No one in our community could fathom why anyone would want to harm or kill Ruth Martin. Since there was no known or obvious motive for her murder, Lincoln detectives focused on her husband: Richard Martin became their main suspect. Poor Mr. Martin went through absolute hell until the police finally gave up and the investigation fizzled out in and around 1980. To this day, the mystery of Ruth's disappearance/murder is unsolved, and although Russell Smrekar is the suspected perpetrator, there's a strong possibility he used accomplices. Ruth's remains have never been found, and technically her case remains open.

Through my personal investigation of the Martin case, I rediscovered powerful evidence collected several days after Ruth's disappearance. This evidence is truly monumental, and I believe it may be *the* missing link my father was always looking for but could never find. This critical evidence could potentially solve not only the Martin case, but some of the other 1976 murders as well. You will learn more about this startling evidence and shocking revelation in the coming chapters of *BURIED TRUTH Part Two: Preponderance of Evidence* and *BURIED TRUTH Part Three: Plea for Justice*.

On the 19th of August 1976, a hulking 21-year-old Lincoln resident, Michael Edward Drabing, gained access to the home of Lloyd C. Schneider, a well-to-do farmer who raised prize-winning hogs and produced hundreds of acres of corn and soybeans. Shortly before midnight, Lloyd, his wife, Phyllis, and their 17-year-old daughter, Terri, were murdered in their home—stabbed a total of 90 times. Drabing claimed he drove to and from the Schneider farm that night and acted alone. He testified at trial that the murders were a premeditated “dry run” for his plan of a “revolution to exterminate the rich,” who he insisted were the root of all evil in our world. Drabing pled not guilty by reason of insanity, but he was convicted and sentenced to serve 75-100 years at Menard Penitentiary, Illinois' largest maximum-security prison.

The early morning hours of October 9, 1976, the moon was full and bright when the dogs began barking and howling wildly at the north end of Chicago Street. But it was the sound of shotgun blasts, and not the luminous moon, that triggered the barking and startled the neighbors of Jay and Robin Fry. Shortly before the event occurred, Jay, a slender, nice-looking fellow, and his three-months-pregnant wife, Robin, had spent the latter part of the previous evening celebrating the pending birth of their first child. The couple was obviously head over heels in love and ecstatic about their baby. During their final hours at “Harris's Gold Mine,” the tavern located a couple blocks from their home, Robin, a lovely, shy blonde, discussed her favorite baby names with the girls while Jay played pool and drank a few beers with his buddies and identical twin brother, Ray. When Jay and Robin returned home a few hours later, someone was lying in wait. They were taken completely by surprise. It was a senseless tragedy, and no one could imagine why anyone would want to see Jay and Robin dead.

The first twenty-four hours of the aftermath were filled with bedlam. Emotions ran high and rumors circulated swiftly. In a desperate attempt to finger the perpetrator, anyone with the slightest grievance or dispute against Jay or Robin became suspect. There was even an assumption the assailant had intended to kill Ray Fry and shot Jay by mistake. My father was the

first to alert authorities (at 11:00 a.m. on 10-10-76) of a potential suspect with a plausible motive for the killings. Jay Fry and Ruth Martin were both witnesses to the same shoplifting incident involving expelled Lincoln College student Russell Albin Smrekar, a slight, 21-year-old sycophantic thief from upstate Joliet, Illinois. Smrekar was facing theft charges in two separate cases brought against him by the Logan County State's Attorney's office.



From left to right are victims: Jay Fry, Robin Pittenger Fry, and Ruth Louise Martin (Logan County State's Attorney files).

The previous year, on September 21, '75, Smrekar had been jailed for allegedly committing a dorm room burglary at Lincoln Junior College. Another student, Michael Mansfield, who was an acquaintance of Smrekar's, was also arrested and charged with Theft by Possession. Mansfield professed his innocence and claimed he didn't realize the record albums were stolen when he allowed Smrekar to store them in his dorm room temporarily.

On September 24, '75, the Lincoln College Judiciary Board had found Smrekar guilty as charged of violation Section 102, E.1 of College Regulations (theft of private property), and he was expelled. The Board instructed him not to return to campus under any circumstances, without the written consent of the Dean of Students.

Eight days after his expulsion, gutsy Russell Smrekar returned to Lincoln on October 1, 1975 and walked into Kroger grocery store, lifted a package containing two rib-eye steaks, and then casually made his way out of the store without paying. Ruth Martin was shopping at Kroger that day, and she witnessed Smrekar running through the store's parking lot as employee Jay Fry and two store managers were in pursuit. Smrekar was promptly apprehended and taken into custody—it was his second arrest in the span of just eleven days.

In mid-December of '75, John Foltz, one of my father's two assistants, offered to defer Michael Mansfield's charge for six months if he would agree to testify against Smrekar in court. Mansfield signed the agreement on December 18, 1975, although he did so with great trepidation because he feared Russell might seek revenge. The Deferred Prosecution Agreement was filed in the court on December 30, 1975.

On December 31, 1975, Mike Mansfield, a studious introvert and part-time college disc jockey, was at his parents' home in Rolling Meadows, Illinois, when he answered their ringing

telephone. Mike's mother, who was also home that day, said it was around two o'clock in the afternoon when Mike intercepted the call and told her he was going out and would be back in about an hour. He never returned, and no one has seen him since that bone-chilling day.

Russell Smrekar was more than likely responsible for Mansfield's disappearance, but the big question is did he act alone, or did he have help? Mansfield's remains have never been found, so his case remains open and unsolved. He was a student at Lincoln College when he disappeared so he, too, was a resident of Logan County. Since he most likely perished on the eve of the commencement of 1976, his demise should be included among the other Lincoln murders and should raise the count to a total of seven murders (or eight including the Fry's unborn child) having occurred in Logan County in the span of only ten months' time. Additionally, there's always the possibility that Mansfield could have been murdered in Logan County, or the possibility that his remains are in Logan County—perhaps hidden in the same location as Ruth Martin.



Victim: Michael David Mansfield (Chicago *Sun-Times* article June 1983).

Fortunately, Russell Smrekar was arrested on October 18, 1976 and charged with the murders of Jay and Robin Fry. He was later found guilty and sentenced to two consecutive terms of 100 to 300 years in prison. However, he'd only served 34 years of his life sentence when he reportedly expired in October of 2011 at Menard Penitentiary.

The murder of Michael Mansfield is significant because it all began with him, but insufficient evidence makes his case the toughest one to solve. One thing that's constant in this world, though, is *change*, and that guarantee emphasizes the need for continual reinvestigation of the Mansfield case, and all cold cases. Over the course of time, people also change. Witnesses who may have withheld information in the past might be compelled to come forward with greater details due to diminished fear or a guilty conscience—possibly both. There have also been significant technological advancements since '76 that have enhanced the science of criminal

investigation. These previously mentioned changes alone offer hope and validate that no unsolved murder should be ignored or stay dormant for an extended period of time.

The Mansfield and Martin case files provide information supporting that Smrekar used accomplices. If such was/is the case, then his accomplices remain at large. Do we merely live with and disregard that possibility, or do we, instead, take an active stance and support persistent reinvestigation of these unsolved murders?

Old murder cases are often left on the back burner because present-day crimes and prosecutors' current caseloads demand full and immediate attention. That argument is justifiably a good one, but it is not necessarily what should be. Current caseloads should not provide an *excuse* for neglecting unsolved crimes, and no past murder should ever be made to seem less important than a present-day murder. A murder is a murder, and it needs to be solved *regardless* of the passage of time. It seems there are not enough investigators assigned to unsolved murder cases for reasons previously stated and because of inadequate funding. If you feel there should be something done about this problem, write your state Attorney General, Representative, or Senator so that the guilty may be brought to justice and the families of the victims may come to find peace in their lifetime.

To those of you who were or currently are citizens of Logan County, do you feel completely assured and satisfied that all these 1976 murders were fully and adequately investigated? Do you actually believe there is no need to delve further nor any reason to apply our more effective modern investigative technologies to these (c)old murder cases? It is not enough that Michael Drabing and Russell Smrekar were convicted when we cannot be one hundred percent certain there aren't other guilty people *out there* who should be brought to justice.

I ask that you *please* reflect on these possibilities. It's very important that you read this trilogy in its entirety because it's the only way you'll come to fully realize just how little has been revealed about these specific murders and just how much there truly is to consider.

Now, you'd better hang on to your seat. It's gonna be a bumpy ride.