

# HACKENSACK MEADOWS A HIDING PLACE FOR FUGITIVES

Little Island, in the Tall Reeds a Safe Retreat for Those Who Are Hunted.

Skeletons of Long Missing Outlaws Found in the Swamp Tell Stories of Starvation.



The cats' tails are seven feet high in some clumps, like great bunches of gunners' rods, and the wild rice, which brings yearly to the meadows of New Jersey covers of black, mallard, and teal ducks, rears eight feet above the salt water.

The commuter on his way to work or returning home toward the time of the setting of the sun sees only a great reach of soft, green flatland, with here and there the top of a fisherman's cabin or the black deck of a sloop's mast. From the railroad embankments and from the rising land that forms the meadows the traces of a field only. There is no fence or sign of the many little hummocks that nestle in the marsh, secure and sold little islands, or of the hundreds of tiny creeks and estuaries of Newark Bay that reached far and deep shoreward. A rise of the tide ground, dotted with bushes and trees, separates the two.

In these meadows are romance and mystery enough to fill volumes, and the stories have been enacted there from far back in the criminal history of New York, when the murder of Mary Cecilia Rogers was made into a great analytical crime story by Edgar Allan Poe under the title of the "Mystery of Marie Roget," until only a few days ago, when Bertrand Pond, murderer, found a refuge in the salty swamps and remained hidden there for the better part of a week.

The amateur criminologist always maintains that the wilderness of a great city is the finest of hiding places for the man who is running from the law. It sounds reasonable until the amateur gets a glimpse at a police map of New York and realizes how closely the city is gridded with police lines and how it is laid off in precincts and beats.

What is called in Mulberry Street a "general alarm" will result in every man on every beat in the city getting a minute description of a person wanted and instructions from every Police Captain to every platoon starting on duty to watch for the man and bring him in. Then, too, there is the great maze of the salt marshes about New York has defied everything but the geodetic surveyor, and all the geodetic work necessary has been done long ago.

The Jersey meadows cannot be beaten for game like forest or underbrush. The murderer, escaped convict, or thief who lives starts from the shore line into the great stretch of marsh land can count on security as long as he can find food. Convicts familiar with the jungle facilities of the meadows have long made them their objective after an escape so that they might find a place of hiding until a change of clothes and a new growth of beard and hair might be acquired before venturing once more upon the open roads of streets.

It is a custom at Sing Sing to notify the police of the New Jersey towns touching the meadows whenever there is an "escape" for the West Shore freight trains of the New York Central offer a fine means of travel from the shadow of the grim walls of the prison to the peaceful marshland.

Two ten-year convicts escaped not long ago and one of them was a former New York policeman. Both were familiar with the meadows and knew their value as a hiding place. Once in the tall wild rice and marsh grass they would be safe until they could hold up some late travelers crossing the narrow trestles or unbanked roads and change clothing with them.

They headed for the meadows by way of the West Shore and got to them safely. Every village got the warning from Sing Sing and every country constable and every town policeman or Marshal began tours of duty along the edges of the marsh. The men were unable to get food or water. Old friends of the underworld failed to show up, and after two days of hunger and thirst they parted the curtain of reeds and stepped to solid earth only to be arrested and taken to the jail at North Bergen.

The marshes make the safest and surest means for the getaway for New York criminals who have been closely followed across the North River. It is a familiar means of escape for all Jersey criminals. Trains and boats are always watched after a crime or after an escape from prison, but once at the edge of the meadows the hunted man knows that the advantage is all his. He leaves no footprints behind. The mud closes up on his tracks, the wild rice and the cats' tails swing back into place, and he is swallowed up for the time being. His path is the wake of an arrow in the air or of a ship on the sea.

One of the marshside towns along the northern division of the Erie is the old settlement of Homestead. The village is spread from the high ground near North Bergen down to the railroad tracks and over them to where dry land ends and bog begins. An old church built of great square rocks shows softly through the weeville willows of the lowlands, and a tiny white spire pierces the blue of the sky. Little white houses seem to clamber up the hill like a drove of sheep that had forded a stream and have become cleansed.

Here happened the latest romance of the meadows.

A week ago last Monday night Bertrand Pond shot and killed Mrs. Mary Umscheid in her home in the village. The murder was done in the heat of passion wrought by love. Pond and the woman's husband both had sought her hand and Umscheid had won. Pond went away, got in trouble, served a term in prison, and came back to the village somewhat chastened. He went to board with his old friend and his wife. The old love awakened, and he envied his friend his wife, and besought her with many pleadings.

While Umscheid was away from home Pond went to Mrs. Umscheid's bedroom. She had with her here her six-year-old son Joseph. Pond shot and killed the woman as she lay in bed and walked out of the house. The little boy ran to the home of a neighbor and gave the alarm.

Pond walked through the quiet village streets, across the tracks by the old stone church, and into the meadows.

The murderer knew the marshes well. He knew the danger of beds of ooze and quicksand, but he knew that in the tall reeds he could hide with safety until the police gave up the search. Once the hunters relaxed their efforts he could leave the marshes, board a freight, and get safely away. He counted on outstaying the watchers. Without even a flask of fresh water he made his way from solid land to the meadowland, and for four days was utterly lost within eight of scores of villages.

Pond knew the marshes and, knowing them, knew also that no two men know them in the same way. A little rise of semi-solid ground for which he might steer with the instinct of a meadow trapper or hunter might be entirely beyond the ken of another. As a boy he had lived close to the edge, had hunted nests, had crabbled and fished and swum in the little ponds. He knew the marshes and when he faced the most dreadful of all fates to life, death in the chair, he made for the sheltering tall, wild rice, the bog and the stream, there to draw a curtain about himself and hide until he could get the chance to reach solid ground once more.

Chief Leonard Marcy of the North Bergen police sent the word from village to village as soon as he got the details of the crime. The word traveled by telephone as far to the north as Cresskill, where Tom McCue, who has had fifty years of life in the lowlands, turned out with his men to work southward in forming a cordon about the marshes. Danny Small and a squad of Englewood marshals and deputies took the border line of the lowlands farther south, Ridgedfield, Leonia, Morsemere, Fallsdale, and other towns out on their own starting him up for a chase. In the daytime you might plow through the marsh and pass a man



Leonard Marcy, Chief of Police of North Bergen.



Joseph Kennel, Sergeant of Police of North Bergen.



In Hiding.

within three feet and not see him. At night, as long as he stood still, you could pass within a foot of him.

"Some of the men got high rubber boots and started to try to stir him up, but that was useless. Others used boats and paddled about, but they could not hope to see the murderer if he stepped back a foot in the wild rice and marsh grass. And if they did see him they could not get him, for the pursuer would lose himself as well as his quarry.

"I did not go into the marsh. I know these meadows, too well. There was only one thing for us to do, and that was to keep the meadows surrounded and prevent any one from going in and providing him with food and water. We had no reason to feel sure that Pond had taken to the meadows for a hiding place except that we all know how safely he could hide there, and we believed that he would hide there for a getaway in the event of the watchers giving up the job or starting on a false trail."

Kennel learned that night that Pond had been in Sing Sing. None of the police knew the man they wanted, and the description they had of him might have applied to many a citizen of the humbler type. Kennel hurried to Sing Sing and got the Bertillon measurements and records of Pond and to a photograph. While he was busy with this Chief Marcy and the police of other towns were keen to start their hidden quarry.

A murder in New York may make headlines for a day or a week, but in a country town any tragedy shocks the community and jars it and keeps it worried and anxious for months. The placidity of life, the neighborliness, and the easy dissemination of personal affairs through the gossips of the front porches or the cracker boxes in "general stores" bring a murder or suicide right to the front steps of every one.

"He's gone to the meadows," was the one conclusion.

"He'll get away if the mosquitos don't eat him alive," was another certain and sure deduction.

Kennel, who knows his business, although he is a village policeman, had only one fear, and that was the fear that some of Pond's cronies would run into him and have convenient a demijohn of fresh water and a loaf or two of bread.

"If a man can get food and water in the meadows," he told Tom Trix reporter, "he can stay there for years. We can't get him. Nobody can hope to get him unless it is winter time."

"How could you get him in winter?" he was asked.

"The marsh grass is dry," he said. "It would be a cinch. We could set fire to it."

"Have you ever had to do that?" he was asked.

"No," he replied, and he seemed glad to answer in the negative.

"Being an ex-convict," Sergt. Kennel continued, "I feared that Pond would



Overpeck Creek, Where the Meadows End and the Woodland Begins.

be able to get help from outside the meadows. Among criminals there is a means of communication and aid that none of the prisons has been able to break up. It is a defect in the prison system. Pond knew the meadows as well as any man. He might have been preparing for some thief or for this murderer and might have arranged for a getaway by means of the marshland, which will baffle any pursuer. I did not know whether he would be able to command such aid.

"A signal whistle to a fisherman or crabber in a passing skiff might mean supplies for him. He could have remained in the meadows until the whole thing had blown over if he could have had food and water. Many a man has hidden in the meadows safely for days. Some of them may never have got out for all we know, for a dead body might rest there in the reeds for years without ever being found. Occasionally a skeleton turns up. There are 'soft spots,' and if a man ever strikes one of them he can never hope to get out alive."

The day after the murder every creek

and little stretch of open water was dotted with small boats. Some of the harder of the hunters, men used to going after rail and reed birds and ducks, allowed about in the meadows in high rubber boots. Occasionally a great flock of blackbirds would rise from the wild reeds with a rush of fast-beating wings. The hunters would prod about the place of their starting, but no man could see more than five feet on either side of him once away from the water space. The proverbial needle in a haystack was just as elusive as was Bertrand Pond, whose hands were stained with the blood of the woman he coveted, and who did not want to die for his crime.

Night came. The man in the meadows must have been tortured with thirst, for the salt sticks to the skin with the rising tide that brings up the spill of the depths of the sea. Then, too, with the going down of the sun came the great swarms of mosquitos to sting and fasten upon anything fleshy. Almost as bad was the hunger that tore at the empty stomach of the murderer, for the salt air of

mind and that out of the mists of the evening a wrath might have come to haunt him not at all improbable, for the law a lot of trouble by blowing out what brains he had.

Sidney Lanier, who knew the marshes of the South, described such a moment in one of his poems:

The creeks overflow; a thousand rivulets  
Twist the roots of the sod; the blades of  
the marsh grass stir;  
Passeth a hurrying sound of wings that  
westward whirl;  
Passeth and all is still; and the currents  
cease to run;  
And the sea and the marsh are one.

There, hidden, the murderer covered his head and hands as best he could to save himself from the attacks of the pests that sprang from miasmatic waters. Only the stars and the young moon could see him, and only his God glimpse his soul. With the morning came again the hunters and the murderer slipped from the hummock back into the wild rice and the soft mud, like a thing of Saurian type.

Not far from the point at which Pond must have entered the meadows is the Oakdale Boat Clubhouse. It is only about 800 yards away from Homestead, and here were shotgun and rifle and things yet more to be treasured—bread and cheese and water.

Kennel and his chief thought that the second day of thirst and hunger would drive Pond thither. Men were waiting for him. He did not try for the treasure. In all probability Pond approached the clubhouse as closely as he dared, listened, heard the watchers gossiping, and turned back.

Further up and opposite Leonia rests The Ark, a trapper's cabin, where bunks Capt'n Lou Minnerly, duck hunter and muskrat trapper, Capt'n Lou is also a marshal of Leonia, and his little bunk is a strategic point for a fugitive of the marshes. It is always well stocked with food as it flops half in the mud and half in Overpeck Creek at the bridge which connects up the cross-meadow road between Leonia and Hackensack. Here Pond would have had food and water and a chance for a trolley ride beyond the danger zone had not the Englewood police under Danny Small been on the lookout. The hunted man did not try this avenue of escape.

Earlier in the Summer Pond would have had a chance for a longer sleep. There

would have been bird eggs and fledglings and perhaps brackish rainwater on the hummocks. He might even have caught sufficient rain in his hat and coat to have tided him over a few more days. But the birds have long raised their broods and taught them to care for themselves, and Jersey has fairly parched with a long drought.

Toward the end of the fourth day two boys reported to the North Bergen police that a man had pounced on them from the edge of the marshes and torn from their hands the little packages of luncheon they carried with them for a day's crabbing. The man had turned next tails, cutting their bread and meat like a starved beast.

The police, constables, marshals, and chancemen redoubled their watch along the edges of the lowlands.

The night of the fourth day came.

A man came out of the marshes at Homestead. He went to the nearest public place where lights shone. He looked less human than beast. His face and hands were swollen until but for the red blisters he might have been taken for a leprous patient of the loonnie type. The village toppers fell back.

The man was Bertrand Pond. He may have walked into the place in a moment of delirium, only to regain his sense and human that become possessed once more with the natural instinct of the hunted animal to escape.

He wheeled and left the place, walking up the Hudson Boulevard toward the water works north of Homestead. A crowd of men and boys followed him. Marshal Hochstein called to Pond to halt.

The quarry had come to the end of its race.

Pond was seen to half stagger into a covert of bushes.

There was a pistol shot. The crowd scattered. Hochstein impressed a passing automobile, jumped into it, and started for police reinforcements, believing that Pond was going to take a last stand for his life, and that he had fired at him from the bushes.

The police gathered quickly. They crept up to the little dump of bushes. Pond lay dying with a bullet hole in his skull, his miseries of love and meadowland siege fast ending.

"Some of 'em never get out," said Danny Small in Capt'n Minnerly's bunk. "Sometimes we turn up a skeleton while ducking. Then we get a suicide once and awhile, and in the Bergen County part of the meadows a murdered Italian shows up every now and then. One of the last murder cases was discovered through a letter sent to Police Headquarters. It was written in Italian, and said that a body would be found in a certain part of the meadows. The New York police sent us a translation. We got out and hunted for the body. It showed up all right. The man was murdered. Another Black Hand case, I reckon."

"Yes, and there are springs in the meadows," added the Captain. "We found one bubbling warm water that tasted of sulphur. We tried to sound it, and sent down thirty feet of pole, but couldn't touch anything but soft, oozy sand. To any man that steps in one of those it means all over. But we don't have so many tragedies on Overpeck Creek. Sometimes some one with too much trouble will drop off the bridge. There's a splash. The current is very strong and the body is gone into the wild celery or wild rice in some corner of the meadows. The meadows hide the living and the dead mighty well."

How still the plains of the waters be!  
The tide is in his ecstasy.  
The tide is at its highest height;  
And it is night.  
And now from the Vast of the Lord will  
the waters sleep  
Roll in on the souls of men,  
But who will reveal to our waking ken  
The forms that swim and the shapes that  
creep  
Under the waters of sleep?