

Adulterers, Bigamists, & Organized Crime: The Evil-doers of 18th Century Ridgefield

by Silvio Bedini

(In a lecture to the Women's Town Club shortly after his history, "Ridgefield in Review," was published in 1958, historian Silvio Bedini described some of the crimes and criminals of Ridgefield three centuries ago. His typed copy of the talk that appears here is among the many Bedini papers donated to the Ridgefield Historical Society.)

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The one part of RIDGEFIELD IN REVIEW that I do not believe that anyone has read is my preface. In it I stated that history is many things. In actuality it is much more than the dictionary definition, or a mere systematic account of events. History is a composite of the deeds of the men who have gone before and of the thoughts and needs and desires that motivated their actions. The passage of time alone does not make history — history is the coincidence of time and the thoughts and deeds of men with dreams — and weaknesses.

Consequently there are several aspects or facets to the history of any community. In addition to the chronicle of historic events, the development of the community by means of industry and enterprise, there is also the record of those incidents which could be called crime and scandal, but which we will refer to merely as weaknesses.

There is considerable distress in the present generation over juvenile delinquency, the alarming increase in the rate of crime, and the newspapers are filled with accounts of violence. Considerable concern is expressed over the prevalence of crime in the modern era, and various causes are blamed for the situation. The common reaction is: What is this world coming to!

In actuality, there has been little change. There was almost as much criminal or immoral activity two hundred years ago as there is today. Perhaps not as much violence but then there were not as many implements available perhaps.

An account of this phase of Ridgefield's history would very well be the book that can never be written. Too many of the incidents which have come to light in the course of preparing RIDGEFIELD IN REVIEW relate to families that have continued in the community to the present time. However, a few cases can be described as an illustration which have no connection with any of the present families.

Most of you know that Ridgefield was established by a group of men and women that came from Norwalk in 1708. Their purpose in establishing a new community may have been in search of new farmland, but there is evidence for the belief that they were seeking religious freedom.

These early settlers formed the First Congregational Society and they found the influence of the Church of England too strong in Norwalk, and sought to escape it. The Congregationalists believed that church authority was inherent in each local body of believers, in the autonomy of the local church, and they wished to be free of external human control. They were extremely strict and puritanical in their manner of living.

In Ridgefield as in other communities which they founded, they maintained a punishment book. In this record was entered every misdemeanor of the members of the Society, from adultery of adult members to whispering or giggling in church by one of the children.

The miscreants were brought before the pulpit and publicly accused and punished. Consequently every misdemeanor became public knowledge and in this way it was possible to control the members of the community. The Punishment book of the Ridgefield Congregationalists would provide a fairly thorough record of the personalities of the town and their weaknesses.

Parts of this record are still preserved in the Congregational Church but I doubt that it would be available for general reading. As an example, it was noted by a number of members of the church that the first doctor in the community was in the habit of attending an ailing attractive young widow in a certain part of town. It was noted that she appeared to ail only after sundown and that the doctor seemed to be aware of her indisposition without being notified.

It is not surprising to discover that he was eventually called before the church fathers and asked to explain his numerous visits. He was surprised to discover that the church record was even more accurate than his account book, and that furthermore, the duration of each visit almost to the minute had been noted. The end of the story is not recorded but obviously the lady recovered immediately and the doctors confined his calls to the daylight hours whenever possible.

Among various items noted in the records of the Town Meetings which are preserved in the Town Hall is the notation that on the 25th of January 1751 the subscribers or proprietors warned Annie Hix, ye wife of old Hix, to depart out of ye town of Ridgefield upon penalty of suffering as ye law provides. Poor old Hix presumably remained, more sinned against than sinner.

Similar problems existed in the town even in the very earliest period of its establishment. In the course of tracing the family of one of the first proprietors who had moved to Ridgefield, built himself a home in the center of town during the first decade and was considered to be among the most respectable of the town fathers, an interesting incident came to light.

It seems that on the 21st of April 1719 there came to the town a lady who identified herself as Mary So-and-So. She sought out the sheriff and together they went to the home of So-and-So. He was not at home but they were met at the door by Elizabeth, the purported wife of So-and-So.

Mary was shocked and then furious. She was the legal wife of So-and-So and she had a number of children back home to prove it. It seems that her husband had left her and the children behind in Waterbury, where they lived, when he went to work in Fairfield. He lived alone in that community for a while and then migrated to Ridgefield when the settlement was made. Mary became tired of waiting and she set out to look him up. From Fairfield the trail led her to Ridgefield.

Upon her complaint she obtained a judgment against her husband and the court awarded her his plow land by execution. She moved with her children to Ridgefield and settled on the land which she acquired in this manner.

Thus they lived at opposite ends of the town, for it is certain that they were never reconciled. He presumably gave up his purported wife, and his wife and children remained to develop and populate one of the districts of Ridgefield.

There is little record of violence in the early period. Two suicides were noted during the first century but no murder. But, you might say, these are incidents relating to individual misdemeanors. How about organized crime as we know it today?

Well, don't go away. We had that, too.

Before the state of Connecticut printed its own bills of credit, the currency that was used consisted of Massachusetts silver pieces and Mexican pieces of eight. At the beginning of the 18th Century, Connecticut, Massachusetts and other New England states began to issue bills of credit to pay their public debts.

It is a matter of record that where there is money, there is counterfeiting. The Massachusetts silver pieces were reproduced by enterprising persons and one of the greatest counterfeiting cases was tried in Connecticut in 1699.

With the advent of paper money or bills of credit, however, counterfeiters sprang up all over the place. From time to time gangs were formed to produce false bills and to distribute them throughout an area.

One of the most notorious of the counterfeiting gangs was Sanford's gang of Ridgefield which operated between 1750 and 1760. David Sanford lived with his family in North Salem in the Oblong which was [once] a part of Ridgefield.

The first record that exists of the man's illegal activities relates that on January 25, 1754, he set out from Waterbury to Woodbury with two other men, Barnabas Merwin and Elisha Hall. On their travels Sanford told his companions that unless he would be able to change a 20 shilling New York bill, they would be unable to eat or sleep that night. When they arrived at the tavern of Isaac Brounson, Sanford pretended to be intoxicated in order to get the landlady to change the bill but she refused. However, someone else who was stopping at the tavern changed the bill for him.

When they resumed the journey the following day, his companions told him they suspected that he was passing counterfeit bills and Sanford confessed that he knew two notorious counterfeiters named Jacob [and?] Mace and that he knew where the plates were. He told his companions that if they would stick with him, he would make them wealthy.

As they proceeded on their journey, Sanford passed other bills and eventually a complaint was issued against him in Waterbury and he was arrested. He admitted to the Justice that he had obtained the bills from Nathaniel Nichols of Woodstock and from a man named Sullivan. Both of them were counterfeiters which he well knew and they had lived in his house, where they had the liberty of one of the rooms from which they carried on their counterfeiting business.

Sanford was committed to jail in New Haven, indicted, tried, convicted, and sentenced in accordance with the penalties of the law at the time.

In May 1754 a large number of the residents of Ridgefield sent a complaint to the Assembly at Hartford. It seemed that David Sanford had been in jail in New Haven before, and he had broken out and returned to his family. He had gathered a gang at his house and they counterfeited bills of New York and Rhode Island as well as Spanish dollars. In the fall of 1755 one of his house guests had been Owen Sullivan, a notorious money-maker, and together they had concentrated on putting out a great quantity of New York bills.

In April 1754 Sanford and his band tried to rescue some neat cattle which had been attached for debt but the officer in charge had been forewarned and he had twenty men assigned to protect the animals. The attempt failed, but the same night Sanford's men tried to set fire to the barn in which the cattle was kept. The counterfeiters were fired upon and this second attempt failed. Then Sanford set fire to some fences in a neighboring field and as the wind fanned the flames and brought the neighbors, Sanford fired other fences on the other side of the field.

A week later in the dead of night the counterfeiters came to the parish of Wilton to the home of a Mr. DeForest who now had the attached cattle in his keeping. Sanford cut the tongue of one of the cows and set a brisk fire near the house. The blaze was discovered just in the nick of time before the house and barn were consumed.

Two of Sanford's band were Jacob Wiley and Joseph Nichols. Nichols had been convicted of forgery and both men had been prosecuted for counterfeiting. The men were bent on taking revenge on those who had been responsible for exposing their villainy. With this in mind Nichols crept up to the back side of a house which was mentioned in a deed he had forged. He found the daughter of the house weaving and he forced her to give him all the shot in the house. She demurred, but he forced her with a pistol to do so. He threatened to kill her if she told anyone of his visit or of his plans for burning the house that night.

The poor girl was terrified and managed to tell a neighboring woman. The word spread and a watch was set. That night fires were set at some distance from the house and before they could be put out, considerable damage had been done. Nichols also threatened the life of Samuel Olmstead of Ridgefield, who had prosecuted him.

The people of Ridgefield became greatly incensed over the outrages and they petitioned to the Assembly for relief. They pointed out in their petition that the men were armed in defiance of the law. Sanford, for example, carried three pistols and a fourth which was always loaded and he swore to kill the first man to lay hands on him.

In spite of these threats, a number of young men from Ridgefield, together with the constable of Salem, captured Sanford without bloodshed and he was again imprisoned in New Haven jail.

The fires he had set with his companions had done about 4,000 pounds damage or 20,000 dollars. This was a time of serious drought and the people of Ridgefield had suffered considerably from the fires of retribution which Sanford had set.

The Assembly set up a special committee to report on the matter and make certain that Sanford's band was captured and so ordered the King's Attorney. The Assembly also went on record to commend the daughter of Joseph Nichols, Abigail of Ridgefield, who in great danger of her own life had reported the plans of the counterfeiting gang and made possible their capture.

Possibly the most important member of Sanford's gang was Owen Sullivan, who is noted as one of the most important counterfeiters of the Colonial Period. He had been a goldsmith in Boston. He lived beyond his income and for some time there was suspicion about his manner of living.

An argument he had with his wife finally brought attention to him; she had drunk a little too heavily and spoke of her husband as the 40,000 lb. money-maker. He was arrested and brought to trial but was acquitted. However, suspicion lingered and he found it advisable to move to Rhode Island where he counterfeited large sums of money together with several accomplices. His assistants were arrested and Sullivan urged them to say that the counterfeit money they had passed had been received by them as true money and he would get them all out of jail.

One of the accomplices turned King's evidence, however, and confessed all. Strangely enough the court did not believe him, and he remained in jail and all the others were set free while he and Sullivan only were found guilty and condemned to be cropped and branded. Sullivan managed to escape the maximum penalty and broke out of jail and returned home to a secret place in [North] Salem.

There he lay low until the hue and cry died down. He enlisted a number of accomplices and began to produce fake money in earnest. He was a master engraver. He carried on a great amount of trade, passing his money among the soldiers in particular and in Rhode Island especially.

It was not too long before the operation came to notice and a number of his men were captured and cropped [ears clipped] and branded.

Cornet Eliphalet Beecher was the man who had most to do with the capture and he also suspected two tavern keepers, one named Hunt and another named Elisha Morehouse, both in the area. Beecher trapped one of them into passing a fake bill and took him before a magistrate. There the tavern keeper confessed and led them to Sullivan's hideout.

This was in a swamp in the middle of a large woods where, in the side of a hill, there was a cliff. The stump of a tree and some brush concealed the opening, which led by means of a long passage into a large room inside the hill.

Sullivan had escaped from his hiding piece just in time and for a whole week he concealed himself in the woods. Then, on the verge of starvation, he approached a house where he was known and asked for concealment.

Meanwhile Beecher was checking every house in the neighborhood and eventually came to the house where Sullivan was concealed. A thorough search revealed nothing but then Beecher suddenly noticed some newly removed earth. He raided the place at one in the morning and removed a woman, bed and all, and in a hole in the ground they found Sullivan. He had excavated a small room under the hearth where he had been able to hide quite comfortably.

Although he tried to bribe his way out, Sullivan was again put into jail in New Haven and then moved to New York where he was sentenced — to be hanged. When the day came they were unable to find a hangman. The execution was postponed and in the interim the gallows was found cut down and again the hanging had to be postponed.

Finally a new gallows and hangman were obtained and Sullivan went to the gallows. Just before the rope was put around his neck he asked for a large cud of tobacco and remarked that he could not help smiling because it was the nature of the beast.

Although Sullivan died without naming his accomplices, a number of them were captured. One of them was a man named Keeler of Ridgefield, Elisha Morehouse, the tavern keeper.

The people of Ridgefield had suffered considerably from Sanford and Sullivan and their associates during the best part of a decade. In addition to the considerable losses suffered from the great amount of counterfeit money passed by the band, the local inhabitants suffered also from damage to property and injury to limb from the desperadoes.

Justice was just as certain then as it is now, but it took longer.

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I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Women's Town Club for the purchase of copies of RIDGEFIELD IN REVIEW for the classrooms in the public schools. It was most gratifying to have such prompt action taken on a suggestion.

Last year, mention was made of the need for a repository for historical material and the fact that the community did not have any facilities for preserving relics and documents of historic interest for the generations of the future. It gives me pleasure to be able to report that a historical room has been created at the Ridgefield Library for just this purpose. Some remodelling has taken place to make this possible, and it will at last be possible to preserve and display this material.

The Library owns an important nucleus in the Keeler Tavern Papers and relics and it is hoped that other items will be donated. A very attractive room, which is both fire and burglar proof, has been set aside and is now in the process of remodelling and decoration.

The support of the members of the Women's Town Club in this endeavor would be appreciated.

(The manuscript was transcribed by Jack Sanders who fixed minor typing errors.)