

Is "Political Murder" the Answer to the Baffling Crater Mystery?



Seven years ago Justice Joseph Force Crater (right) stepped into a taxicab, waved a jovial goodbye to friends and drove off into oblivion.



(Photo copyright, New York World-Telegram)

Mrs. Stella M. Crater, wife or widow of Judge Crater. . . She now believes her husband was murdered because of political connections.

SEVEN years have passed and Mrs. Stella M. Crater is bringing action to have her husband declared legally dead—but Justice Joseph Force Crater still is missing and unaccounted for.

This despite the fact that a 300-pound desert prospector, 100-pound night club nifties and many other people have told their tales of seeing the missing judge since that August night in 1930 when he left a New York restaurant, stepped into a cab, waved a goodbye to friends and drove off into the darkness of oblivion.

Since that night reports have had Crater in Cuba, Nova Scotia, New Jersey, Ohio, the Adirondacks, Maine, back in New York several times, and in many other places.

Police have dragged lakes in Maine; they have searched the southern California desert. They have sent "dodgers" into every police station in the world. Every day of the last seven years they have moved relentlessly, if unsuccessfully, to find the missing jurist.

And following Mrs. Crater's recent sensational statements at her summer home in Belgrade Lakes, Me., they will continue the search. Mrs. Crater said she now believes that her husband was murdered for political reasons. She also charged the police with inefficiency after her husband's disappearance.

Perhaps the case would not be termed one of the greatest mysteries of all time, if Justice Crater had not been such an important figure in New York.

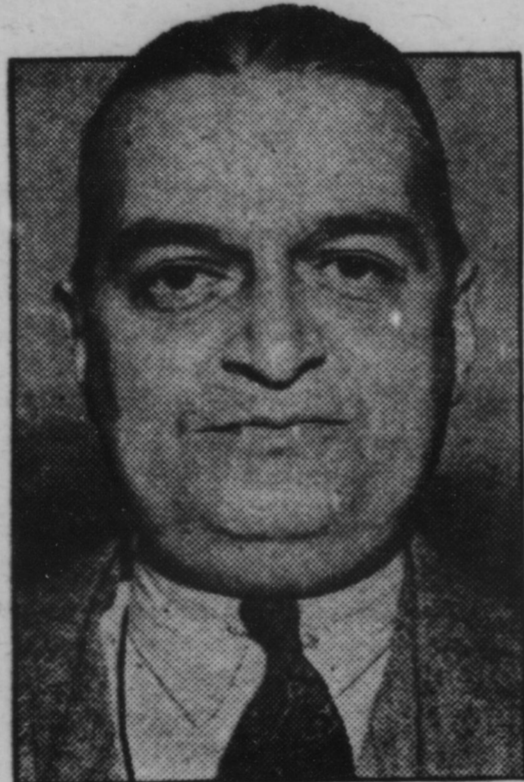
Here was a man appointed to the New York Supreme Court by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, then governor of that state. Crater was the law partner of Senator Robert F. Wagner, and considered Wagner his political sponsor.

He was prominent in political circles, having been active in politics since 1920.

AND so the New York authorities will continue the search, although the general belief now is that Crater, if he is not dead, is destined to become a life member of the "missing"—that phantom 2 per cent of those who disappear and stay that way. Ninety-eight per cent of all missing persons are found eventually.

Perhaps Judge Crater simply hid himself off to some faraway and peaceful place where his troubles would be no more.

Such an escape to nowhere might be



easily understood: The judge had plenty of both worries and dollars with him that night.

He was known to have carried more than \$5000 when he got into the taxicab.

And as for worries:

He was up for re-appointment to the 14-year Supreme Court term that fall. (He was named to the court after the retirement of Justice Joseph M. Proskauer.) Indications were that he would not be re-appointed. Such a political slap in the face would be difficult to explain away.

Then it was charged that Judge Crater had been friendly politically with former Magistrate George F. Ewald, who was charged with buying his office for \$10,000 from Martin J. Healy, Tammany district leader and member of the Cayuga Democratic Club, to which Crater had belonged.

And there was the Libby Hotel business.

One paragraph of a note written by Crater to his wife before he disappeared read:

"Libby Hotel—There will be a very large sum due me for services when the city pays the condemnation."

Since Crater had acted as receiver in the hotel's bankruptcy proceedings and had referred earlier in the note to the \$10,000 due him for those services, it was charged by investigators that his connection with the condemnation was not a legal one. They hinted that the justice had disappeared voluntarily to avoid possible ouster and disbarment.

THEN there were the night club girls. Judge Crater seems to have enjoyed even wider acquaintance in those circles than in political ones. The girls who knew the jurist were not few, it seemed from the number of stories they told after his disappearance.

But if Judge Crater is alive today, wherever he may be, he would be conspicuous because of his physical appearance.

He was a big man, 185 pounds and 6 feet tall. But his head and neck were extremely small in proportion to his general body build. He wore a size 14 collar and size 6½ hat.

That collar size would be about right for a man weighing around 130 pounds, and very few adult men, whatever their build, wear hats smaller than size 6¾.

The corollary chapters in the story of Justice Crater would fill several bound volumes. Some of them are perhaps stranger than the disappearance itself.

There was, for example, the tale of Connie Marcus, who told police that she knew the judge very well indeed and that the cause of his disappearance was a religious fervor which had of a sudden possessed him and which had impelled him to seek a monastic life in old Mexico.

But this theory is about as thoroughly discredited today as is the story of "Lucky Blackie" Blackeit. It was "Blackie" who inspired the craziest of all the searches for the jurist.

"Blackie," a grizzled desert prospector weighing more than 300 pounds and proud possessor of two awesome mutton chop sideburns, told his story in the summer of 1936. He had, he insisted, encountered the bullet-headed missing justice in the desert country near Warner's Hot Springs, Calif.

"We talked a while, and he admitted he was Judge Crater," Blackeit informed police. "Then he told me, 'In one more year I'll be legally dead. I hope I can stick it out.'"

Two policemen and 15 newspapermen started out with Blackie to search for Crater. Next day five more newspapermen and another official joined the party.

But Blackie delayed things a bit. Asking the assemblage, "Think I got nothing better to do but play nurse to a bunch of city coppers?", the prospector eased his 300 pounds into a sitting posture and refused to move until he was paid \$50. He relented for the \$25 which reporters and photographers chipped in, however, and the search was renewed.

But despite Blackeit's mutterings

about a "ghost's house" where Crater had gone "sure's shooting," the hunting party netted nothing more than numerous sore feet and a lot of sunburn.

At frequent intervals the headlines have told similar stories during the years that Crater has been missing.

Last told and possibly most important of them all, was Mrs. Crater's recent outpouring from her Maine summer home.

"It's time to talk," Mrs. Crater declared. "I would like to talk about all the rottenness there is in politics. I would like to be able to prove all my suspicions."

AND despite the fear that "the sinister something that took Joe away from me might come after me if I talk too much," Mrs. Crater voiced her belief that her husband had been murdered, and blamed politics. "I am convinced that Joe is dead. I am convinced that he went away because of a sinister something that was connected with politics."

Leo Lowenthal, a police headquarters detective at the time of Judge Crater's disappearance, termed the theory of a political crime "absurd."

"In my opinion Judge Crater is dead," he said. "It is absurd to think that he was killed for political reasons."

It is Lowenthal's belief that Crater was killed for the money he carried and that the murder was the work of the driver of Judge Crater's taxicab or the driver's confederates. Crater had hailed a "night hawk" cab (not a company cab, but one operated individually). Neither the cab nor its driver has been found.

But despite the complicated mixup of theories, reports, rumors, charges and counter-charges, there is a new hope that the mystery may be solved. That hope is based on the action Mrs. Crater is bringing to have Judge Crater declared legally dead (under the New York seven-year disappearance statute).

Refusal by the insurance companies to pay the \$20,000 life insurance which Crater carried for his wife might bring out new and important angles in the case.

In the event of a legal contest both Mrs. Crater and the insurance companies would subpoena Crater's friends and business associates. They might be compelled to tell their stories under oath.

Far from closing the case, the court action may bring out all the suppressed facts.