

Whatever happened to Ambrose Small?

By SHERRY CECIL

Ambrose J. Small was a gambling playboy millionaire in the raucous Toronto of the early 1900s.

His sudden and unexplained disappearance on the eve of Dec. 2, 1919, touched off a wild search that spanned the globe and preoccupied the curious for more than 40 years.

The success of a just-published book by a Mississauga man indicates interest in the bizarre, unsolved case is not dead.

The Strange Case of Ambrose Small, published by McLelland and Stewart, is the result of more than 10 years' research by Fred McClement, former reporter with the Toronto Star and now a journalism instructor at Humber College.

The 58-year-old author was only a toddler when the news of Small's disappearance hit the headlines, but he remembers it vividly.

Crime of the century

"Everybody talked about it. It was the crime of the century," he recalls.

Small had just received a \$1 million downpayment for the sale of his chain of theatres across Canada and completed the final details on the deal when he vanished.

His attorney was the last to see him and despite 40 years of investigation involving professional and amateur sleuths from as far away as Europe, excavations of a million tons of earth, examinations of thousands of corpses and several court cases, Small's body was never found nor suspicions of murder or kidnapping ever proved.

McClement's interest in the case grew from the time he joined the New Toronto Advertiser at the age of 14.

He started snooping during the 1930s as Lakeshore correspondent for the old Globe and at times, for the Mail and Empire.

In 1938, he joined the Globe and Mail and stayed until the beginning of the Second World War, when he switched to the Toronto Star.

It was during his 20 years with the Star — much of it spent in crime investigation — that McClement intensified his involvement in the Small case.

Obtain file

He became personal friends with the Star reporter who had followed the investigation from the outset and

during the 1950s obtained the entire investigation file of a private investigator hired by the government.

Much of the file, which included personal letters to and from Small and the \$1 million cheque bearing Small's signature, had never been made public.

McClement renewed his investigation with intensity.

He went to everyone who ever knew Small, investigated the background of Small's family and his wife Theresa, looked up old court records involving the disputed will of Small and the trial for theft of Small's ex-secretary John Doughty who disappeared at the same time with \$100,000 in Small bonds.

"I found out that all the newspaper reports were false," says McClement. His own account reconstructs very differently the events leading up to Small's disappearance and the spectacular happenings that were to continue until the case was closed in 1960.

Bungling exposed

He exposes the bungling investigation of Toronto Police detective Austin Mitchell who, on the advice of spiritualists and mind-readers, dug up garbage dumps, the Rosedale ravine, and, finally Mrs. Small's basement while at the same time, ignoring countless other, more obvious clues.

McClement raises numerous questions about the competence of Mitchell, Chief inspector George Guthrie and inspector C.D. Hammond of the Ontario Provincial Police Criminal Investigation Bureau.

Why was Theresa Small, the closest person to Ambrose, not questioned until six months after his disappearance? Why did John Doughty disappear at the same time as Small?

Who posted a notice in a city convent "requesting the prayers for the repose of the soul of Ambrose J. Small" before he was even reported to be missing?

Why was a statement by Theresa Small's maid claiming she saw Mrs. Small praying with candles over a certain spot on the basement floor of her private shrine, never investigated?

McClement answered many of these questions in the original draft of his book but, at the insistence of McLelland and Stewart, he rewrote the book to let the reader be the judge.

More than mystery

The unanswered questions wisely retain the strange mystery of the Small case as an unsolved crime. But The Strange Case of Ambrose Small is much more than a mystery story.

It is also the story of a city overflowing with gambling, liquor-running, prostitution and racial strife; a city that was ironically called Toronto the Good.

"A story of this kind could have erupted only in Toronto," claims McClement.

In those days, if you weren't a member of the Orange Lodge, you couldn't pick up garbage in the streets.

"Toronto was a wide-open city of wenching, drinking and betting and Small, who operated the girlie shows and fixed horse races, was sitting on top of it all."

The Strange Case of Ambrose Small is McClement's sixth and most successful book.

Already, it's a top seller in Toronto and McLelland and Stewart have created more interest by offering a \$100,000 reward for any information leading to Small's body.

McClement has made close to 15 television appearances in connection with the book.

Another book

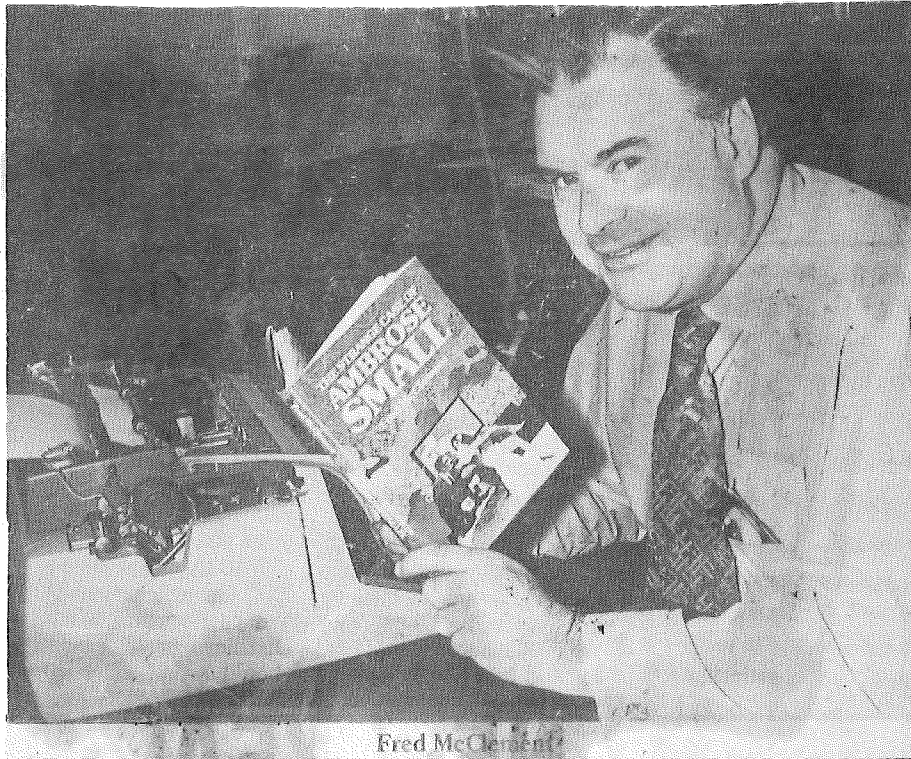
McClement is now working on another book about ghastly, unsolved Ontario crimes, in which he claims to have solved six murders that have eluded authorities, over the last 80 years, including the famous Evelyn Dick case in Hamilton during the 1950s.

McClement's research of the two crime books has strengthened his lack of confidence in Canada's police forces.

He claims our police are too restricted and jealousy between different forces such as provincial and municipal organizations, hinders investigation of complex crimes.

"What we need is a national crime department like the Federal Bureau of Investigation," he says.

The Strange Case of Ambrose Small is not likely to spark support for a Canadian FBI but it may bring back interest in crime novels.



Fred McClement