

AP Interview: Fugitive hid 40 years in plain sight AP Associated Press

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HELENA, Mont. – The aging Frank Dryman, a notorious killer from Montana's past, had hidden in plain sight for so long that he forgot he was a wanted man.

In an exclusive jailhouse interview with The Associated Press, Dryman detailed how he invented a whole new life, with a new family, an Arizona wedding chapel business — and even volunteer work for local civic clubs.

"They just forgot about me," said Dryman, in his first interview since being caught and sent back to the prison he last left in the 1960s. "I was a prominent member of the community."

That is, until the grandson of the man he shot six times in the back came looking.

Dryman had been one step ahead of the law since 1951 when he avoided the hangman's noose, a relic of frontier justice still in use at the time.

Less than 20 years later he was out on parole. Not content with that good fortune, he skipped out and evaded authorities for four decades. After a while he even forgot about hiding and signed up for V.A. benefits from his days in the Navy in 1948.

Now the 79-year-old Dryman is back behind bars, likely for what remains of his life.

He was caught only after his long-ago victim's grandson got curious and started poking around.

Dryman was hitching a ride from Shelby cafe owner Clarence Pellett on a cold and snowy day in 1951 when he pulled a gun and ordered Pellett out of his own car and began firing.

Dryman does not deny the crime — just that he's not the same man today. He has been Victor Houston for decades. At the time of the murder, and after being discharged from the Navy for mental issues, he was going by yet another name: Frank Valentine.

"That kid, Frank Valentine, he just exploded," Dryman says of his crime. "I didn't shoot that man in the back. That wild kid did. That's not me."

"Victor Houston tried to make up for it by being an honor citizen."

Dryman says he served his time, which he did until paroled. But a Montana Parole Board not accustomed to leniency on those who walk away from supervision was not impressed with Dryman's subsequent good deeds. Last month the board sent him back behind bars to serve what remains of his life sentence.

Dryman said he disappeared from parole in California to get away from a wife he didn't like. He said he's not sure why he just didn't leave the wife and remain on parole.

But once gone, he said, he didn't look back. His new wife and family knew nothing of his past. He put down roots in Arizona City painting signs, a trade learned in prison, and performing weddings.

"I never thought I was a parole violator. I was Victor Houston. I never looked over my shoulder," Dryman said. "I just forgot about it."

On his birthday he used to get two cards from his brother: one for Houston and one for Valentine.

"I thought it was cute. I had no fear," Dryman said.

He said the details of his past are just coming back: the shooting, his original sentence and the cause he became for opponents of the death penalty, and his first stint in prison.

"Only since I have been back here did I start to think about it," said Dryman. "To be honest, I didn't even remember the victim's name."

Dryman understands he is not likely to get out again now. And he is not kindly disposed to the victim's grandson, the Bellevue, Wash., oral surgeon who became intensely interested in a piece of family history he knew nothing about. Clem Pellett compiled reams of old documents and tracked down his grandfather's killer with the help of a private investigator.

"I can't blame him for what he did," Dryman said. "But I think it was so wrong he spent so much money getting me here. I feel it is unfair."

Many in the Pellett family do remember the murder. A dozen descendants showed up at the parole hearing when Dryman was rearrested to testify against his release, saying the killing had forever changed the history of the family.

They said as kids they lived in fear of hitchhikers — even in fear of Dryman. Some remembered Dryman's courtroom outburst at his first trial that resulted in conviction and a hanging sentence.

"He turned to the judge and said, 'I'm going to kill you,' he turned to the jury and said 'I am going to kill you' and he turned to the crowd and said some stuff like that," said Clem Pellett. "He was an angry young man who felt powerless."

Pellett only learned the details of the case last year after cleaning out boxes of old newspaper clippings. His own parents never talked about the murder. He had never even really known the Montana side of his family, where the pain of the killing still lingers.

Pellett, without even talking to those relatives, began a quest to learn more, compiling old records, court transcripts, ancient arrest records for Dryman's petty crimes prior to the shooting — all of which he used to track down his grandfather's killer.

Pellett said he was driven by an intense curiosity, and would now like to meet with Dryman to fill in holes in the story that he may chronicle in a book.

Dryman doesn't think he will agree to the meeting.

He also denounces the allegation that he made a courtroom death threat, which Clem Pellett said was confirmed through his research.

Dryman lives in a low security wing of the Montana State Prison, wears prison-issue clothing and due to failing eyesight walks with a cane to avoid tripping. Being interviewed in the same parole board room where he was returned to prison for life, Dryman said of Clem Pellett, "He's already got me here, he should be happy. I think they got their pound of flesh, and I accept it."

One of the original prosecutors in the case also never forgot about Dryman.

"It was a very notorious case, perhaps the biggest of the time," said John Luke McKeon, now 85.

McKeon, a very young assistant attorney general assigned to the case despite his own opposition to the death penalty, said the Montana Supreme Court threw out the hanging sentence amid some of the most intense arguments over the death penalty the state had seen.

McKeon wrote a letter to the parole board in late May asking for leniency, telling the board he thinks Dryman has paid for his crime. But it got there after the board made its decision.

The former prosecutor doesn't see any way out for Dryman this time.

"I don't think the governor's going to give him exoneration," he said. "I think he is going to die in prison."

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