



photo: Bill Britnell, long time volunteer genealogist at St James Cemetery

THE GRIND THU DEC 8, 2011 BY: JACOB RUTKA

## Ghost City: The Pitezel grave

Ten metres from the corner of Parliament and Bloor, in an unmarked grave in St. James Cemetery, lie the final victims of North America's first known (and maybe most prolific) serial killer.

Alice and Nellie Pitezel, aged 13 and 14, were murdered by Chicago hotelier H.H. Holmes in 1895. They had come to Toronto from Missouri, accompanied by their mother and Holmes, a business associate of their deceased father (who Holmes also murdered, unbeknownst to the family).

A life-long con man, Holmes moved around the U.S., wanted at various times for insurance fraud, murder and even a horse theft in Texas. In 1893, he operated a hotel near the Chicago World's Fair—a dingy, cramped, three-floor death trap that had false floors, trapdoors and soundproof, windowless rooms.



On the run from the law for his various offences, he eventually set up house with the Pitezal family at 15 St. Vincent St. in Toronto, near Bay and Grosvenor. But not for long—the girls’ bodies were discovered in a shallow grave in the basement, and Holmes fled back to the U.S. He was eventually arrested in Boston and admitted to killing 27 people, though he almost certainly killed many more. He was hanged on May 7, 1896.

The Pitezal girls’ grave is among the most popular in St. James Cemetery. “On tours people always ask, ‘Do you have any famous people here?’” says Bill Britnell, a long-time volunteer genealogist at the cemetery.

“It’s a sensational story. It’s *National Enquirer*-type stuff.”





The weak spot in Holmes' armour as an enemy of society was a dangerous tendency to loquacity, the defect no doubt of his qualities of plausible and insinuating address and ever ready mendacity.

In looking over the newspaper files, I discovered that there was a house to rent at No. 16 St. Vincent Street and to inquire of Mrs. Frank Nudel, at No. 54 Henry Street. Detective Cuddy was personally acquainted with Mr. Frank Nudel, who is connected with the Educational Department of Toronto, and he suggested that we stop and see him before going to the St. Vincent Street house. We found Mr. Nudel, who told us that his wife was the owner of the house No. 16 St. Vincent Street and that she had rented it to a man some time last October, who only occupied it for about one week. Thanking him for this information, we started for the St. Vincent Street house, but instead of going to No. 16, we called at No. 18 to see an old Scotchman named Thomas William Ryves, who had notified one of the inspectors of police that a man answering Holmes' description, and whose picture with the Pitezel girls he had seen in the Toronto papers, had occupied the house No. 16, next to him, and had told him he had rented it for a widowed sister, who was at Hamilton, Ontario, and that he expected her there in a few days.

We found Mr. Ryves a very pleasant old man to talk to, and after propounding the usual questions to him, he immediately recognized the photograph of Alice, but he was not positively sure of Holmes. He said he never got a good look at Nellie and could not say whether or not it was her picture. He told us that the man asked him to loan him a spade, as he wanted to arrange a place in his cellar for his sister to put potatoes in. He said that the only furniture that was brought to the house was an old bed and mattress, and a big trunk. The trunk was taken away from the house, but the bed and mattress were left there. By this time we had heard sufficient to convince us that we were on the right track, and bidding the old gentleman good day, we requested him to meet us again at his house in one hour. We lost no time in going to Mrs. Nudel's house, and ringing the bell the summons was answered by her daughter. We asked if Mrs. Nudel was at home and received an answer in the affirmative; "Tell her," I said, "we want to see her at once, it is very important." We were requested to take a seat in the parlor, and in a few minutes Mrs. Nudel made her appearance, and without giving her a chance to say much, I produced the photograph of Holmes, and asked her if she had ever seen the original of that picture. Mother and daughter both looked at it at the same time, and answered together, "Why, yes, that is the man who rented the St. Vincent Street house last October and only occupied it for a few days." Mrs. Nudel said the man represented that he wanted it for a widowed sister, who was coming on from Detroit, Michigan. This seemed too good to be true, and our anxiety to examine the house was so great, that we hurriedly thanked her and left. We at once returned to No. 18 St. Vincent Street where we met Mr. Ryves anxiously awaiting for our return. Requesting him to loan us a shovel, he went into the house and came out with the same spade he had loaned to Holmes. We rang the bell at No.

16 St. Vincent Street. The door was opened by the lady of the house, a Mrs. J. Armbrust. Mr. Ryves introduced us and told her we would like to go into the cellar. She kindly consented and ushered us back into the kitchen. Lifting a large piece of oilcloth from the floor, we discovered a small trap door, possibly two feet square in about the centre of the room.

Raising this, I discovered that the cellar was not very deep but it was very dark, so I asked Mrs. Armbrust to kindly provide us with some lamps. In a short time she had them ready, and down into the cellar we went. The cellar was very small, about ten feet square, and not more than four and a half feet in depth. A set of steps almost perpendicular lead to it from the old-fashioned trap door in the middle of the kitchen floor.

Taking the spade and pushing it into the earth, so as to determine whether it had been lately dug up, we finally discovered a soft spot in the southwest corner. Forcing the spade into the earth, we found it easy digging, and after going down about one foot, a horrible stench arose. This convinced us that we were on the right spot, and our coats were thrown off, and with renewed confidence, we continued our digging. The deeper we dug, the more horrible the odor became, and when we reached the depth of three feet, we discovered what appeared to be the bone of the forearm of a human being. Throwing some dirt into the hole, in order to keep down the stench as much as possible, we left the cellar and went into the kitchen, where I had a conference with Cuddy and advised him to communicate with Inspector Stark and tell him of our discovery and have him suggest over the telephone what undertaker we should employ to remove the bodies. Cuddy acquiesced in what I said, and we started for the nearest telephone, which we found in a telegraph office on Yonge Street, a short distance from the St. Vincent Street house. Cuddy called up the inspector, told him of our discovery, and requested him to recommend an undertaker to take charge of the bodies.



The inspector after congratulating us, told us to go to **B. D. Humphrey, an undertaker on Yonge Street**, and make any proper arrangements with him. We found Mr. Humphrey at his establishment, and requested him to assist us in the exhumation of the bodies. I suggested to him to take several pairs of rubber gloves with him, as the bodies were in such a state of putrefication, it would be impossible to lift them out of the hole without them. We then returned to the St Vincent Street house, accompanied by Mr. Humphrey and into the cellar we went again. Mr. Humphrey after preparing himself for the task, jumped into the hole already made by Cuddy and myself and assisted us in the work. In a short time we unearthed the remains of the two little girls, Alice and Nellie Pitezel.

Alice was found lying on her side, with her hand to the west. Nellie was found lying on her face, with her head to the south, her plaited hair hanging neatly down her back. While we were making preparations to lift them out of the hole, a messenger was dispatched to Humphrey's undertaking establishment to send two coffins to No. 16 St. Vincent Street. In a short \*»te the wagon arrived and the coffins were taken into the kitchen, and we proceeded to lift the remains out of the hole. As Nellie's limbs were found resting on Alice's, we first began with her. We lifted her as gently as possible, but owing to the decomposed state of the body, the weight of her plaited hair hanging down her back, pulled the scalp from off her head. A sheet had been spread in which to lay the remains, and after we succeeded in getting it out of the hole, it was placed in the sheet, taken upstairs, and deposited in the coffin.

Again we returned to the cellar, and gently lifting what remained of poor Alice, we placed her in another sheet, took her upstairs, and placed her in a coffin by the side of her sister. The bodies were immediately removed to Mr. Humphrey's establishment, after which they were sent

to the noigue. By this time Toronto was wild with excitement. The news had spread to every part of the city. The St. Vincent Street house was besieged with newspaper men, sketch artists, and others. Everybody seemed to be pleased with our success, and congratulations, mingled with expressions of horror over the discovery were heard everywhere.

I then telegraphed the first result of my search to District Attorney Graham and to superintendent of the Philadelphia police, and thus it was proved that little children cannot be murdered in this day and generation, beyond the possibility of discovery.

### CHAPTER XIII.

The house where the children were found, is a quaint little two-story cottage of an old and simple style of architecture. It stands back a few feet from the sidewalk, — the narrow plot of lawn in front being enclosed with a wire net fence five feet high and beautified with a few blossoming flowers. A veranda tastefully decorated with a clinging clematis, adds much to the homelike appearance of the place. The front doorway opens into a hallway, which divides the house in half and continues to the kitchen. The cottage contains six medium sized rooms, below, including a kitchen and a pantry, three on either side of the hall, and there are four small rooms above. A single gable window looks from the upper story to the street. At each end of the house are three small windows, none of them much larger than the window in the front. The back yard is small, and is reached from the kitchen by a short set of steps.

Feeling somewhat fatigued over the day's work, I determined to spend the evening at the Rossin House in writing to my superintendent and others, and to map out a plan for the next day, as our work was not completed. As the bodies were badly decomposed, personal identification might be difficult and I determined if possible to find some

evidence which would aid in establishing their identity, — so I concluded to learn if possible, who had occupied the house after Holmes had left it. The next day, after meeting Cuddy at police headquarters, we started off to find the tenant who succeeded Holmes in the St. Vincent Street house. We were not long in ascertaining, that after Holmes had left, the house had been occupied by a family named MacDonald, who only remained a very short time, but no one was able to tell us where they had moved to.

However, by diligent search we located them at No. 17 Russell Street. We called at their home, where we met Mrs. MacDonald and after introducing ourselves, told her the object of our visit. She said that all she had found at the house No. 16 St. Vincent Street, was an old bedstead and mattress. I then questioned her as to whether she had any children, and she informed me that she had a boy about sixteen years old who was not at home at that time. I requested her to send him to police headquarters as soon as he arrived home, and bring with him anything he had found in the St. Vincent Street house. Bright and early the next morning young MacDonald, appeared at police headquarters with a little wooden egg, which when parted in the middle, would disclose a snake, which would spring out. He said he had found this egg in a small leather caba, in one of the closets on the second floor. I had been supplied with a list of the playthings the children had with them, and one can imagine my surprise and elation when I found in this list, a description of just such an egg as the MacDonald boy found. It was one of the links which contributed to making the identification sure. Another link in this chain was supplied by Mrs. Armboust. The children were found buried in a nude condition, and the manner in which their clothing had been disposed of was one of the points of my inquiries. A part of a waist, and what appeared to be a piece of ribbon were found when the children were exhumed. When Mrs. Armbrust was cleaning the house after moving in, she noticed some



rags and straw hanging from the chimney in the north front room. These she pulled down and found a part of a striped waist of a grayish color, a piece of a woolen garment of brownish red, and a part of a dress of bluish color. The straw had been lit but had not burned, as the clothing had been shoved into the chimney too tightly. A pair of girl's button boots were found in the wood box ; also one odd boot and other parts of the clothing of a female. All this had been thrown away by Mr. Armbrust, but they answered the description of the clothing worn by the Pitezel girls, given by their mother.

The missing trunk had not been forgotten during all this time, and it was frequently spoken of by Cuddy and myself. After having heard from Mr. Ryves, that a large trunk had been brought to the house, the idea suggested itself to us, that possibly Holmes might have murdered the boy in Detroit, placed him in the trunk, and shipped him to the St. Vincent Street house to dispose of the body. I determined if such were the case, not to leave Toronto until I had satisfied myself on this point, — consequently we employed several men to dig up every inch of the entire cellar and we thoroughly examined the barn and out-houses, but without result.

The finding of the bodies, as I have said before, caused great excitement in Toronto, and if the good people of that city had been furnished with an opportunity, I am sure they would have made short shrift of Holmes. Preparations were made for the inquest, which was to be conducted by Coroner Johnston, and in the meantime I was receiving dispatches from District Attorney Graham, of Philadelphia, regarding Mrs. Pitezel, who was at Chicago, Illinois, and whom he had instructed to go to Toronto, Canada, to meet me, and if possible identify the children.

On Tuesday morning, July 16th, Coroner Johnston summoned a number of jurors to be present at the morgue that evening at half-past seven o'clock, also requesting my attendance there at

the same hour. This was to be the preliminary inquest to view the bodies.

7:30 P. M. we all appeared at the morgue, and Coroner Johnston opened the inquest, after which the jury was sworn. Then the superintendent of the morgue was sent for and everything being ready, the coroner directed the jury to examine the bodies. In the dead house they went, but I assure you that their stay was a very limited one, as the odor from the decomposed remains was unbearable, and Coroner Johnston adjourned the inquest until Wednesday evening, July 17th, to be held in the Police Court, City Hall. On Wednesday evening I attended the inquest and was requested to recite the story of Holmes, and the insurance swindle, and the disappearance and the finding of the children. I was kept on the witness stand about two hours and a half, and then after hearing several other witnesses, the investigation was adjourned to await the arrival of Mrs. Pitezel. Thursday morning, July 18th, I received a dispatch from her, stating that she had left Chicago and was on her way to Toronto. I watched all incoming trains during the day, and at 7:30 P. M. I again went to the Grand Trunk Depot, and was surprised to see so many people there. This was due, however, to the fact that Mrs. Pitezel had been interviewed by a number of newspaper men before leaving Chicago, and they had wired her time of departure for Toronto to the Toronto papers. Shortly after my arrival at the station, the Canadian Pacific train from Chicago came in, and I observed Mrs. Pitezel getting off the car. I had a difficult task to make my way through the crowd to reach her, but as quickly as possible I placed her in a carriage and took her to the Rossin House, where I had made arrangements to have her placed in a room opposite my own, and I requested that no one should disturb her. Mrs. Pitezel reached her room in an absolutely prostrated condition. The chambermaid had very kindly volunteered to render her such assistance as was possible, and after applying restoratives, she soon revived sufficiently to talk to me. Amid her tears and moans, she said,



" Oh, Mr. Geyer, is it true that you have found Alice and Nellie buried in a cellar ? " I did all I could to calm her, and told her to prepare for the worst. She told me that she would try to bear up with it and would do the best she could. I then told her as gently as possible, that I had found the children, but did not describe to her their horrible condition, nor under what circumstances they were discovered. After remaining with her a short time, I asked several of the ladies connected with the hotel to visit her room and say a comforting word to her, which they did, and it seemed to have a good effect upon her. Frida}^ morning, July 19th, I knocked at Mrs. PitezeVs door, and I found that she had improved. She said she had not slept very well, but felt somewhat rested. I then left her and told her I would go out and make arrangements for taking her to the morgue during the day to look at the children. I then went to Police Headquarters and met Cuddy, after which we called at Coroner Johnston's house. He informed us that he would have the bodies so arranged that we could bring the mother to look at them at four o'clock that afternoon. Cuddy and I then returned to the hotel, where every care that human forethought could suggest, had been taken to prepare Mrs. Pitezal for the awful task necessity imposed upon her.

I told her that; it would be absolutely impossible for her to see anything but Alice's teeth and hair, and only the hair belonging to Nellie. This had a paralyzing effect upon her and she almost fainted. At -i P. M. we had a carriage at the Rossin House, and I informed her that we were ready to proceed to the morgue. In a few minutes she was ready, and after supplying ourselves with brandy and smelling salts, we started for the morgue, where we found a number of curious people on the outside awaiting our arrival. Mrs. Pitezal was seated in the waiting room, while I went into the dead house to see that everything was in readiness, before we conducted her in.

I found that Coroner Johnston, Dr. Caven and several of his assistants, had removed the putrid flesh from the skull of Alice ; the teeth had been nicely cleaned and the bodies covered with canvas. The head of Alice was covered with paper, and a hole sufficiently large had been cut in it, so that Mrs. Pitezel could see the teeth. The hair of both children had been carefully washed and laid on the canvas sheet which was covering Alice. Coroner Johnston said that we could now bring Mrs. Pitezel in. I entered the waiting room and told her we were ready, and with Cuddy on one side of her, and I on the other, we entered and led her up to the slab, upon which was lying all that remained of poor Alice. In an instant she recognized the teeth and hair as that of her daughter, Alice. Then turning around to me she said, "Where is Nellie?" about this time she noticed the long black plait of hair belonging to Nellie lying in the canvas. She could stand it no longer", and the shrieks of that poor forlorn creature are still ringing in my ears. Tears were trickling down the cheeks of strong men who stood about us. The sufferings of the stricken mother were beyond description. We gently led her out of the room, and into the carriage. She returned to the Rossin House completely overcome with grief and despair, and had one fainting spell after another. The ladies in the hotel visited her in her room and spoke kindly to her, and expressed their sympathy with her in her sad bereavement and this seemed in a measure to ease her mind. At 7 P. M., I received word from Coroner Johnston, that if it were possible, he would like to have Mrs. Pitezel attend the inquest that evening and give her testimony. While I did not think she was in a fit condition to leave the hotel, I communicated to her what Dr. Johnston had said, and she said she thought she would be able to go and get through with it. About 7:30 P. M. I called a carriage and we started for the City Hall, where I gave Mrs. Pitezel in charge of the matron and then went into the court room and informed Coroner Johnston that Mrs. Pitezel was ready to testify. He requested



me to bring her into the room, whereupon Detective Cuddy and I led her in and placed her on a seat beside the Coroner, and in a few moments, after taking the necessary oath, she began her story. For two hours and a half this poor woman was kept on the stand and prodded with all kinds of questions. So weak did she become, that at times her voice was inaudible, and several times we feared she would totally collapse. Finally the Crown's Assistant Attorney thought he had heard enough and consented to allow her to leave the stand. She was returned to the matron's room and was scarcely there, when she became hysterical, and her shrieks for Alice, Nellie and Howard, could have been heard a block away. Several doctors present at the inquest immediately prescribed for her, and after working with her about one hour, we got her in a condition to move her to a home. The matron at the City Hall was a professional nurse, and volunteered to accompany Mrs. Pitezel to the hotel and remain with her during the night, if I so desired it. I was only too willing to have her join us and render the poor woman all the assistance and sympathy possible. I sent for a carriage and we returned to the hotel, where Mrs. Pitezel spent a terrible night.

#### 248 TESTIMONY OF MR. EWES.

The story as revealed by the witnesses at the inquest was very clear, after it had been unravelled. Holmes and his wife had left Detroit on October 18th, arriving in Toronto the same day, registering at the Walker House as G. Howell and wife, Columbus. Mrs. Pitezel and Dessie and the baby, left Detroit the same day, but two hours later, registering at the Union House under the name of Mrs. C. A. Adams and daughter.

Alice and Nellie left Detroit the following day, October 19th. Holmes met them at the Grand Trunk Station and turned them over to George Dennis, a hotel porter, who took them by direction of Holmes to the Albion Hotel, where they remained until the morning of October 25th.

Holmes called for the girls on the morning of the 20th and returned them to the hotel about six o'clock in the evening of the same day, and this he repeated every morning and evening except Sunday until the morning of the 25th, when he took them away finally, for they did not return. He paid for their board every morning and the last payment was made on the 25th.

On October 20th Holmes rented the house No. 16 St. Vincent Street of Mrs. Christiana Niidel, and said he wanted it for his widowed sister, who was coming from Detroit. He rented the house for six months, at ten dollars for the first month, and twelve dollars per month for the remainder of the term. He took the key and went awa}^ Mrs. Nudel heard nothing more until nearly the end of the month, when she learned that the house was empty, and that the key liad been left with Mr. Ryves, the next door neighbor.

Mr. Ryves saw the little girls on the veranda of the house and once in the yard. He saw Holmes there. Holmes told him different stories. The first day he met him he said he was renting the house for a sister who was coming from Hamilton. He said she had a family of four children, and that he would board with them as he had secured a situation in Toronto. He brought a trunk with him first, and later on a mattress and bedstead Avere brought and remained on tlie veranda for two days. Tiie day Ryves saw the girls in the yard, Holmes came over and borrowed a spade from him, saying that lie was going to fix a place ill the cellar to hold potatoes. He borrowed the spade about four or five o'clock in the afternoon and returned it between eight and ten o'clock the next morning, handing it over the fence to Mr. Ryves. Mr. Ryves never saw the girls again after seeing them in the yard. The day after Holmes returned the spade, he came to the house and removed the trunk, and left the key with Mr. Ryves. The latter went into the house the next day and into the cellar to look where the potatoes were to go and he found fresh earth scattered around the bottom of the cellar and some loose



boards lying on top. Mrs. Pitezel identified the little wooden egg as a trinket which Alice had, and which she used to carry in a little leather caba.

Nothing could be more surprising than the apparent ease with which Holmes murdered the two little girls in the very centre of the city of Toronto, without arousing the least suspicion of a single person there. It startles one to realize how such a hideous crime could be committed and detection avoided. Surely if the investigation and search for the children had not been made by the Philadelphia authorities, these murders would never have been discovered, and Mrs. Pitezel would have gone to her grave without knowing whether her children were alive or dead. This was the one consolation she had in the very darkest hour of her life. She knew the fate of her unfortunate daughters—the mystery of their disappearance had been solved, and the only remaining problem was the discovery of her little son, Howard. She could not believe he was dead, and clung fondly to the hope that he would ultimately be found alive.

Holmes was successful in maintaining the same conditions in Toronto, as he had in Detroit. Mrs. Pitezel was at the Union Hotel, and Alice and Nellie at the Albion, although each party was ignorant of the proximity of the other.

**On the afternoon of July 19th, 1895, the remains of the little girls were buried in St. James' cemetery, the expense being borne by the authorities of Toronto.** It was a sad scene. In the meantime I received orders from District Attorney Graham to return to Detroit and resume my search for the boy Howard. I left Toronto, Sunday, July 20th, (in company with Mrs. Pitezel) and arrived in Detroit on the afternoon of the same day. Mrs. Pitezel did not stop in Detroit, but continued on to Chicago in charge of some good women, of a Christian Endeavor Society, who volunteered to see to her.

I had finished a part of my task, and the fulfillment of the other part now confronted me. Where was the boy Howard? Had he been placed in some institution, as Holmes had intimated his intention of doing, or was he hidden in some obscure place beyond reach or discovery? Was he alive or dead? I was puzzled, nonplussed, and groping in the dark. I could not turn back, — I was directed to go on, and I determined to do so, hoping that patience and persistent hard work might finally lead me to the light.

About 5 P. M. I went to the Detroit Police Headquarters, where I met Detective Meyler, who, after congratulating me upon my success in Toronto, informed me that the Superintendent would not be in his office until the following morning.

That Sunday evening I spent in recounting to Meyler the story of finding the girls, after which I retired for the night.

BUT HOW TO FIND THE BOY.