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Book review: Retired ISU professor's book delves into a ghastly true-crime tale

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By Steve Sullivan
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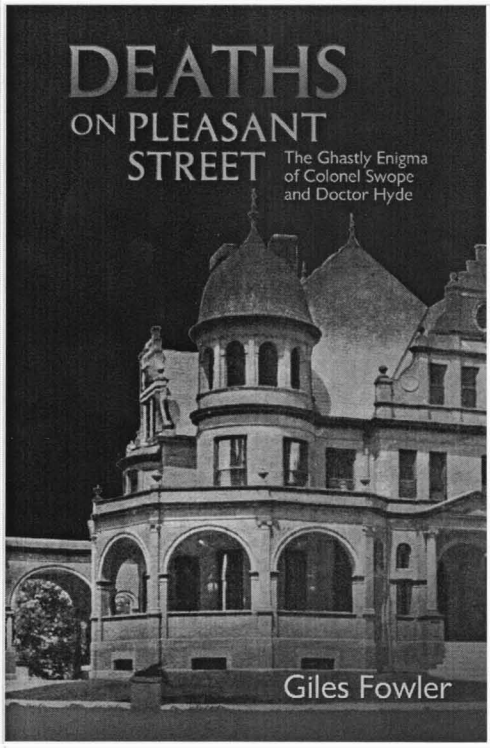

Image courtesy of Truman State University Press
"Deaths on Pleasant Street" is by Giles Fowler.

Giles Fowler absolutely had to know if Pleasant Street had gaslights.

The retired Iowa State University journalism professor was researching his terrific new book about a series of suspicious deaths in Independence, Mo., in the early 1900s. Appropriate lighting for his dark tale was essential.

"There's a key scene that actually takes place out on Pleasant Street, and I would not rest until I found out what kind of lights there were," said Fowler. "As it turns out, there were electric lights, oil lights and gaslights."

That reporter's attention to detail and accuracy is just one of many pleasures awaiting readers of Fowler's intriguing and deliciously macabre, "Deaths on Pleasant Street: The Ghastly Enigma of Colonel Swope and Doctor Hyde," out this month from Truman State University Press. Anyone who craves a good murder story will find Fowler's book hard to put down. Beautifully written and thoroughly researched, "Deaths on Pleasant Street" is true-crime that reads like a cross between Agatha Christie and Stephen King.

"I love murder, and I wanted to write this book since 1960 when I first heard about the case," said Fowler "It has everything. A big, horrendous mansion. An old, very rich family. Fascinating characters. Horrific deaths. This is gothic stuff."

Fowler grew up in Kansas City and for many years was on the staff of the Kansas City Star, serving as a reporter, a film and theater critic and, finally, editor of the paper's Sunday magazine. After years as a journalist, Fowler switched to teaching, taking a one-year appointment at Kansas State University in Manhattan.

"After three days of teaching, I never wanted to do anything else for as long as I lived," said Fowler.

He joined the ISU journalism faculty in 1982, and retired in 2002. Since retirement, he's published several short stories in literary journals, but most of his energies have gone into the book, which he's worked on for four years.

Highly suspicious activity

The oh-so-appropriately named Dr. Hyde of Fowler's title was a charismatic physician who in 1905, swept the comely Frances Swope off her feet. Frances was part of a prominent Kansas City family of the era. The city's 1,769-acre Swope Park, which is now home to a zoo, a theater and two golf courses, is named for Colonel Thomas Swope, who donated the land.

The Colonel lived in a sprawling Pleasant Street mansion in Independence with several other members of his family, including Mrs. Logan Swope, his widowed sister and Frances' mother.

Mrs. Swope, a classic dowager, wasn't overjoyed with her daughter's marriage to Hyde. Her displeasure may not have been unfounded, as the not-so-good doctor had a reputation as a cad. (Hyde also had lost a job as a police surgeon after he committed a disgusting act of what can only be called medical sadism against a black woman.)

"Hyde was elegant. He smacked of good taste. He charmed the heck out of a lot of people, but this dark side keeps appearing," said Fowler. "He's slightly repellent, and everything I learned about him has led me to the feeling that he was not a man of very high character."

Indeed. Not long after Hyde entered the lives of the Swopes, members of the family began falling ill, including the Colonel. He was already quite old, and he soon died of what was first thought to have been natural causes. Shortly after his passing, a nephew and a cousin met their maker. Other members of the family also faced horrible, undignified illnesses, but survived.

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Of course, when a millionaire dies, followed closely by some of his potential heirs, eyebrows can raise. And since he was kind of creepy anyway, and because the death of an heir or two meant Frances might inherit a bigger piece of the Colonel's substantial pie, some of those eyebrows were cocked toward Hyde.

What's odd is that Mrs. Swope, despite her distaste for the man, allowed Hyde to tend to her ailing family members. Access to the Colonel and the others gave him the opportunity to administer all sorts of medications and treatments. But despite the strange goings on, Hyde didn't really come under any serious suspicion until the nurses seeing to the sick Swopes finally sounded the alarm.

"I love the nurses. They are among the heroes of this book, no question about it," said Fowler. "They kept yielding to the doctor's decisions until they couldn't take it anymore and they rebelled."

An investigation ensued, leading to bodies being disinterred, a gruesome autopsy on the Colonel's frozen corpse (one of the book's most memorable scenes) and the discovery that Hyde may have been cultivating nasty bacteria in test tubes.

Hyde was ultimately suspected of poisoning the unfortunate Swopes. A load of circumstantial evidence led to a sensational trial that not only upended Hyde's life, but the future of the entire Swopes clan. Many thought Hyde guilty as sin, while others opined he was simply the victim of a powerful family that didn't much like him.

Digging through history

To tell this unsettling saga, Fowler combed through mountains of archival material, including trial transcripts, witness statements, unpublished memoirs of people connected with the case, medical reports and nurses logs. He made many trips to Kansas City, visiting cemeteries and spending hours at the Western Historical Manuscript Collection at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and the Jackson County (Missouri) Historical Society.

"This stuff was loaded with detail. I don't know how many details I threw away because I didn't have anywhere to put them," said Fowler. "I became so immersed in the case and so intimate with the characters that I would dream about them."

He also pored over back issues of the Kansas City Star and the now defunct Kansas City Post.

"The Star had a great reputation for accuracy, and the Post had a great reputation for garishness — both were well earned," said Fowler. "I wanted to see the extremes of the times."

Modern forensics

To get a current take on the evidence, Fowler needed to find someone who understood poisons and would be willing to look over the details of the Swope deaths. Dr. Edward Bottei, medical director of the Iowa State Poison Control Center, took it on.

"The material is so incomplete and the science back in those days was so primitive that we'll honestly never know if this was an act of deliberate poisoning or even an act of poisoning at all," said Fowler. "I knew Bottei wouldn't be able to reach a perfect conclusion, but when he looked everything over and told me his opinion of Colonel Swope's demise, well, I damn near levitated."

So what did Bottei conclude? Well, who wants to give away the ending to a truly ghastly tale of murder? To discover the shocking potential truth about Colonel Swope and Doctor Hyde, you'll have to read Fowler's book ... preferably by gaslight.

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