

History Note – Was it heartless humor or clever commentary?

by [Luther Granquist](#) // March 10th, 2016

Throughout the first two weeks of September 1889, the St. Paul and Minneapolis newspapers reported that no jurors had yet been selected for the trial in Chicago of five men charged with conspiracy to murder Dr. Patrick Henry Cronin, a respected physician and a member of Clan na Gael, a secret Irish-American revolutionary organization. Cronin had failed to return home after being summoned to treat an injured worker at an icehouse on the night of May 4, 1889. His friends and supporters suspected he had been murdered. Three weeks later, public works department employees found his naked and decaying body jamming a sewer drain. Late in June, five members of a rival faction in the organization were charged with conspiracy to murder him.

The press speculated about Cronin's whereabouts when he was missing, then about possible perpetrators. Chicago newspapers reported and investigated every aspect of the case. Anyone who read them would have learned little new when the case was tried. The trial judge rejected many prospective jurors who had already made up their mind as to guilt or innocence. Lawyers for both sides then exercised peremptory challenges. "No jurors selected" was a headline day after day in Chicago and around the country, including San Francisco.

Later that that month, Hastings Hart, the energetic secretary of Minnesota's Board of Corrections and Charities, traveled to San Francisco to attend the annual meeting of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections, an organization that morphed some years later into the National Conference on Social Welfare.

Hart was the pastor of the Congregational church in Worthington in 1883 when he was selected by the newly-established Board of Corrections and Charities as the sole staff person to implement its legislative mandate — to examine "the whole system of public charities and correctional institutions" in the state, including the prisons, jails, poor farms, hospitals, insane asylums, and the schools for the deaf, the blind and the feeble-minded at Faribault.

For on-the-job training, he observed comparable institutions throughout the country. He participated in the conferences of the national organization and soon became one of the leaders of the national group. In Minnesota, he portrayed in his reports disgraceful conditions in jails, lockups, and poor farms. He garnered the respect of the governor, legislators and the press.

Hart participated in a discussion at the San Francisco conference on "training of idiotic and feeble-minded persons." He told his colleagues that Minnesota had opened a training school for these children 10 years previously with the idea that they would become self-supporting, but that now it was clear a custodial department was needed to care for them permanently, especially the older girls. Hart had long been a member of the chorus of persons insisting that feebleminded girls and women, if not confined to an institution, would reproduce more of their own kind.

When Hart turned to what he called the “humanitarian aspect” of the issue, he did not mention any benefit to the children sent to the institution. Rather, he said, there was no better thing for the community and for parents than an institution for imbeciles. Many mothers, he explained, were practically exiled from the community; they could not go out because of the shame of having such a child at home.

Then Hart told a joke. He mentioned the great difficulty finding jurors in Chicago in the Cronin case. Perhaps, he said, a department should be opened in our institutions to train boys for an occupation in which they would shine: “If the Illinois School for Feeble-minded would establish a department of this kind, they might train up a class who could be taught not to read the papers, to sit straight, look wise, and to write guilty without spelling it ‘gilty!’”

Hart may have intended only wry commentary on the jury selection process or, perhaps, on the lack of effective training in these institutions, but humor must be coupled with respect for persons who are the butt of the joke. The context is crucial. Hart and his colleagues advocated and planned for permanent separation of the “boys” of whom he spoke from their families. He made no pretense of wanting to provide them skills to live in the cities and villages from which they came. He made light both of their intellectual limitations and their plight in the institution.

A month passed before jury selection was completed in the Cronin case, a month during which Hart might have chuckled as he read more “No jurors selected” headings in the local newspapers. Or just possibly Hart might have recognized that his little joke denied the men and women he wanted maintained in institutions the respect and dignity they deserved. Gillian O’Brien tells the story of the murder and trial in *Blood Runs Green: The Murder That Transfixed Chicago*, University of Chicago Press (2015).

Hart’s comments are in the Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction, Sixteenth Annual Session, pages 327-328. [here](#).

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