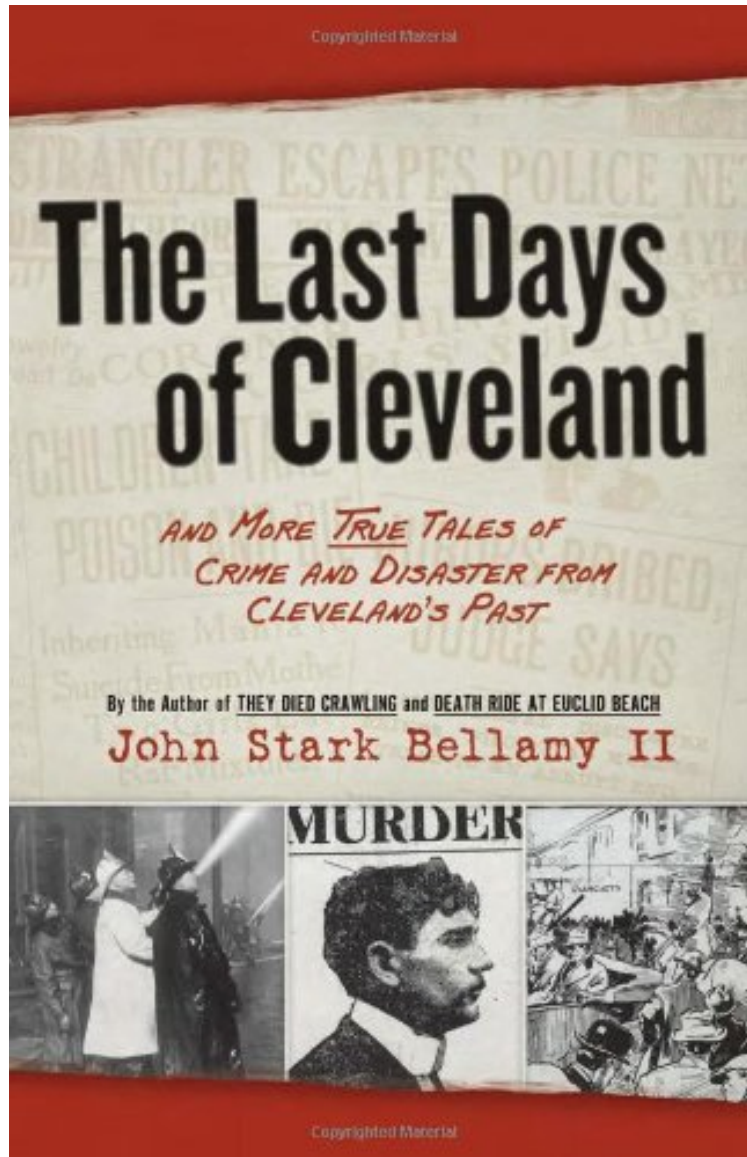


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The Last Days of Cleveland: and More True Tales of Crime and Disaster from Cleveland's Past

John Stark Bellamy II

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Heroes and rogues fill the pages of this book. The stories will hold your attention and chill you to the bone. Crime Shadow NewsCleveland's master of historical crime and disaster returns with 15 more true tales in this sixth volume of his popular series, including . . . West Park sisters Helen, 11, and Marguerite, 10, who died after eating Rough-on-Rats brand poison in their grandmothers basement victims of a genetic suicide mania, or driven to death by the cruelest caretaker since Hansel and Gretels stepmom? Joseph Specs Russell, who vaulted to fame in the summer of 1927 by staging as many as 52 stick-ups and making fools of Cleveland lawmen with his impossible escapes from their dragnets; Jeanette McAdamsjust unlucky, or the Lucretia Borgia of Ashtabula County? After the suspiciously similar deaths of her five siblings, neighbors began to take note of the crowded family graveyard; Salty and ageless George Wallace, who served the city as a fireman for 62 years, 30 of them as chief, and endured to become the oldest fire chief in the worldwith a mastery of incessant profanity that could be heard for four city blocks and made mule skinnners blush; And more true stories of courage, fear, deception, and villainyincluding a disaster caused by the author himself!Sometimes gruesome, often surprising, John Stark Bellamys tales are meticulously researched and delivered in a literate and entertaining style.

Bellamy does not merely recount twice-told stories. He writes like newspapermen used to write before journalists were trained to write formulaic, AP-style abomination. He writes as if his supper depended on the evenings headline . . . When Bellamy sticks to the subject, he is unimpeachable. And its not just his knowledge. More than anything it his enthusiasm and affection for his subjects (and their city) that makes Bellamy so compelling. (Jason Lea Newsherald.com 20101110)There are half a dozen murders, several suicides, a shipwreck and the story of a persistent Roaring Twenties holdup man whose prison career was as engrossing as his crime spree. As Bellamys other books are replete with tragedy on an epic scale, these tales of woe, a phrase he likes to use, seem somehow intimate. That is, if a beheading can be intimate. The bloodless stories are just as interesting (Barbara McIntyre Akron Beacon Journal 20101214)A must for fans of local crime and disaster stories. . . The stories are at times amusing, at other times heart-wrenching . . . and always engaging. (April Helms Hudson Hub-Times 20101215)Heroes and rogues fill the pages of this book. The stories will hold your attention and chill you to the bone. (Crime Shadow News 20101123)Even if you live in Cleveland, you dont know as much about this cityrich in culture and historyas John Stark Bellamy II . . . He exposes the darker side of Clevelandits murderers and petty thievesand a few of the Forest Citys heroes (firemen and policemen, not politicians). He has made a career of chronicling Clevelands rowdy and sometimes funny past. (Technorati 20101126)About the AuthorJohn Stark Bellamy II is the author of six books and two anthologies about Cleveland crime and disaster. The former history specialist for the Cuyahoga County Public Library, he comes by his taste for the sensational honestly, having grown up reading stories about Cleveland crime and disaster written by his grandfather, Paul, who was editor of the Plain Dealer, and his father, Peter, who wrote for the Cleveland News and the Plain Dealer.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.Chapter 1 Suffer the Children The 1907 Curtis Horror Seventeen years. Thats how long Ive been mining the inexhaustible vein of Forest City dismalia. Seventeen years, nearly 150 tales of crime and calamityand I have yet to discover a more heartbreaking story than the awful fate of the Curtis girls. Take it from me: there is simply no more poignant tale in the annals of Cleveland woe. Its difficult to have any sane perspective on the Curtis suicidesif suicides they were. The Cleveland of 1907 was a different place and a different time. Now-alien notions and values prevailed, and no chapter of human life was viewed more differently than childhood. What today would be considered child abuse was more often than not adjudged good discipline, and what was even then viewed as intolerable cruelty most often went unpunished. Diligent readers of these melancholy chronicles may remember the childhood of Tremonts Otto Lueth, the teenaged killer of little Maggie Thompson in 1889. A grim feature of his murder trial was abundant and unchallenged testimony that his mother had habitually, indeed enthusiastically, abused him throughout the duration of his young life, kicking and beating him, tearing his hair, and even repeatedly slamming his head in a door to underscore her admonitions. Perhaps the most startling aspect of such testimonyat least to modern earswas the fact that none of its auditors seemed to think her cruelty remarkably unusual, many of them simply discounting it as good German discipline. And on a personal note, let me relate a family story told by my maternal grandfather, who grew up in a similarly rigorous German home in 1890s Iowa. One Christmas morn in the early years of that gay decade, he and his brother Leo crept downstairs to peek at the family Christmas tree in the parlor, a transgression expressly forbidden by Frank Dessel, their stern Prussian father. Indeed, he was secretly waiting for themand he hit Leo so hard with an iron poker that he broke his leg. And

perhaps the most interesting aspect of the incident was that Leos brother, recalling the incident 70 years later, still considered their fathers brutal act a perfectly just act of paternal discipline. Frank was well matched with my mothers other Prussian grandfather, Frederick Radkey. Fred was so enraged when his daughter Margaret (the authors grandmother) sneaked off to a high school dance that he shaved her head when she returned home in the wee hours. So, bearing Otto, Leo, and Margaret in mind, let us journey back to the harsh world of 1907, more specifically, the Helen Curtis household in the Village of West Park. (West Park, now a neighborhood of Clevelands far West Side, existed as a separate village of Rockport Township until it was annexed by Cleveland in 1922.) It is the month of June and things are not going well in the Curtis family. Other residents of Greater Cleveland may be concerned with recent public events, such as the Memorial Day interurban train crash in Elyria (six dead and many frightfully injured) or Cleveland mayor Tom Johnsons controversial plan to eliminate the Erie Street Cemetery on East Ninth Street. But in the modest Curtis house at 40 Lakota Street in the newest Lennox Park allotment, a mile west of Cleveland proper, all concerns are domestic and chiefly focused on two of the four children there. They are Helen, 11 years old, and Marguerite (usually called Margaret), 10. Surviving photographs of the two girls subtly suggest their impending grim fate. Nicely dressed with beribboned hair, they stare at the camera, frowning forlornly, as if seeing something invisible to the viewersomething inescapable, something inhuman, something terrible. They probably dofor both Helen and Marguerite have been trying to kill themselves for some time. And despite family efforts to stop them, they will both get their death wish granted on June 7, 1907. The real truth of the Curtis family tragedy will never be discovered. Aside from a limited amount of the testimony at the inquest into their deaths, most of what is known about Helen and Marguerites life consists of mere neighborhood gossip, mostly malicious, and the stark medical details of their self-destruction. A century later, we know only that they were unhappy, but we will never know just how much they were pushedor pulledinto committing the final act that took their young lives. For us, the Curtis family story begins in Liverpool Village, Medina County, not long after the Civil War. There, William Curtis, sometime sawmill proprietor and tavern keeper, lived and reared his family, including his wife, Helen, and sons Leland, Frank, and Freeman. Sometime in the early 1900s, William succumbed to stomach cancer, but his death only accelerated the ongoing exodus of his family from Liverpool. His son Leland had long since settled in Kansas with his wife, Louise, and four children, and by 1906 Lelands two brothers were living with their widowed mother Helen in the newish, two-story frame house on Lakota Street. The dynamics of their household changed dramatically on March 12 of that year, when Lelands four childrenHelen, 10, Marguerite, 9, Frank, 7, and Claribel (Clara), 3came to live with their grandmother Helen. The simple explanation for the childrens arrival was that their mother was dead. Beyond that fact, her story gets morbid and murky. After the tragedy of Helen and Marguerites suicides, Lelands mother, Helen, would insist that a mania for self-slaughter ran like a red streak in Louises family. Louises German-born mother, Helen claimed to reporters, was obsessed with suicide and had often tried to kill herself. And the unfortunate Louise had inherited her mothers suicidal bent, continually threatening to kill herself. And Louise didnt stop at threats, according to her mother-in-law: She was accustomed [to] awaken [her husband] at midnight and tell him that she was going to take her life . . . Upon awakening, he often found his wife gone. He said searching parties then were formed to hunt through the woods and river banks, where it was her custom to go when resigned to melancholia. Ultimately and inevitably, Louise made good on her repeated threats. One winter night in 1905 while Leland was sleeping, she fled from their farmhouse in her nightgown. He tracked her down the next morning, but she contracted pneumonia from her exposure and died a few days later. Living on a rough rural farm with four young children age 10 and under, Leland naturally did what was usual in such family situations in that age. He sent the four children to his mother, Helen, in Cleveland, believing that they needed a womans care. Such arrangements were common, virtually automatic in that age of extended families; my own mother and her brother were duly shipped to their aunts home when their mother died suddenly in 1924. If Lelands mother was telling the truth in the aftermath of her granddaughters suicides, she must have understood the risks of her new family commitment. Leland, she later stated, had tried to keep his children with him after their mother died but soon found himself unable cope with their own suicidal tendencies. The two eldest, Helen and Marguerite, often talked of doing away with themselves, and Helen made at least one attempt, drinking most of a bottle of whiskey. Doctors saved her life by using a stomach pump, but it proved the decisive incident in their transfer to Cleveland. Life in their new Cleveland home would have been difficult for the children under any circumstances. The arrangement was for the children to live there and attend West Park schools while Leland continued his work at a Waukee, Kansas, grain elevator and sent his mother remittances for their support. But Mrs. Curtis was now 59 and, although not quite an invalid, suffered from both a heart condition and a painful lameness, which limited her agility and movement. But there may have been other circumstances specifically inimical to the mental health of the Curtis grandchildren. Although Freeman Curtis, when questioned at his nieces inquest, painted a portrait of his mother as a loving, tender parent, other voices were heard during that public investigation. Mrs. Angeline Worth, the proprietor of the Miller Hotel in Liverpool, had known Helen Curtis for many years, and she remembered some things Freeman may have forgotten: Well, I know that she tied Freeman to his chair when he was a little fellow and left him. He fell off the chair and against a hot stove. He would have been roasted to death if neighbors had not heard his screams and saved him. He carries the scar to this day. I know that Leland was driven away from home by his mother and went to

Kansas to shift for himself when he was a real young boy. Mrs. Worth also recalled Helen Curtis, who was given to jealousy, chasing her husband, William, with a butcher knife after deciding he had been too accommodating to flirtatious females. And another inquest commentary on Helen Curtiss parenting style came from John Wolf Sr., likewise a longtime Curtis neighbor in their Liverpool years. He recalled that she had so starved her own children that they used to come begging to his house for even a crust of bread. Not long after the arrival of the Curtis children, disquieting stories about life at 40 Lakota Street began circulating in the Lennox Park neighborhood. Mrs. Curtiss son Freeman would later state that it was the worst community he had ever known for vicious tale-bearing and the Curtis neighbors certainly had many tales to bear. Marie Bodenlos, who kept a grocery and school supplies store a block away from the Curtis home, often saw Helen and Marguerite as they stopped by on the way to and from school. When they first started begging her for something to eat, she assumed they were simply eating between meals. But one day she teasingly asked them if they didn't get anything to eat at home and was shocked when they told ...