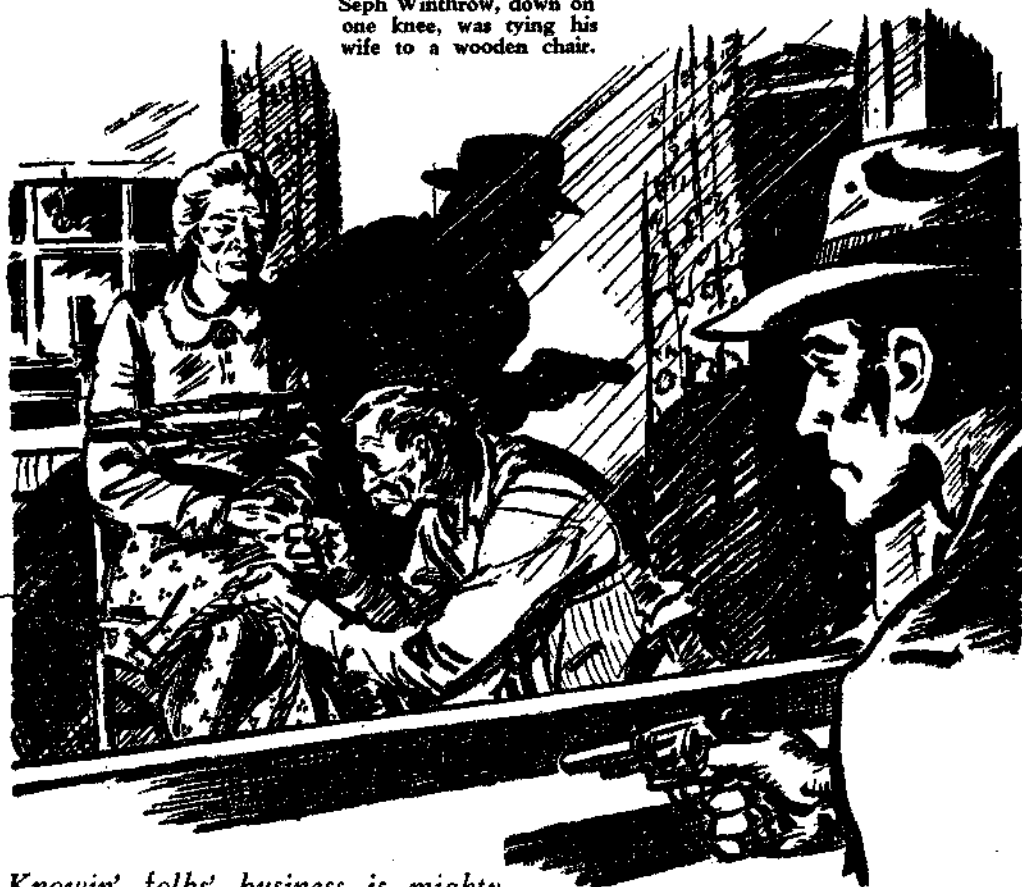


KILLER'S DEAD END

By NELSON A. HUTTO

Seph Winthrow, down on one knee, was tying his wife to a wooden chair.



Knowin' folks' business is mighty helpful sometimes—fer instance the time we caught that bandit only 'cause the sheriff knowed that Old Seph never missed Mountain Pete's Hillbilly Boys' radio program unless it was a matter of life—or death!

ABOUT five miles up the Willow Creek Road, we found the bandit's car. It was piled up in the ditch at one of the sharp turns—empty.

Sheriff Nate Brown poked around the coupe

with his flashlight. There was no sign of the fugitive. Evidently the crash, cushioned by the deep sand, hadn't hurt him much.

"Can't figger the direction he took by footprints," the sheriff said. "This stuff fills up tracks fast as you make 'em." He was a big, grizzled man, powerful as a bear, and about as slow and deliberate.

Bob Leming growled impatiently: "If he gets away, we'll be a laughing stock—"

"Don't figger he'll get far," Nate said calmly. "He wasn't more'n a couple of miles ahead of us. And he's afoot now."

"Maybe," Leming said. "And maybe he's grabbed a car from some farmer close by. Ever thought of that, Sheriff?"

There was a touch of a sneer in his tone. But the sheriff didn't seem to notice it. "Yep," he said mildly, "I'd sorta thought of that, Bob." He snapped off the flash and peered through the gathering darkness. "There's Seph Winthrow's, 'bout two hundred yards back. And Art Fenner's, quarter-mile or so up the road."

"Then Fenner's is the place," Leming said, very positive. "The killer wouldn't turn back the way we were coming."

"That's an idea, Bob," Nate said politely. "But I figger Seph's is more likely. The bandit probably saw Seph's light as he went by. What do you think, Jess?"

"Sounds reasonable," I said. I hadn't been a deputy long enough to assert my ideas much.

But I'd been around plenty long to know what Deputy Bob Leming thought of the sheriff. He'd told me, in fact. "Been in office so long he's in a rut. Methods all out of date. What this county needs is a young man with new ideas." By that, Leming meant himself, of course. He was planning to run against Nate in the coming election.

"Yep," Nate was saying, "we better take a look at Seph's."

Bob Leming snorted as we climbed into the car.

THE Winthrow place, a squat farmhouse in a post oak clearing, looked quiet and peaceful. Lamplight seeped from two windows at the front.

Half way up the gravel walk, the sheriff stopped and shot the powerful flash toward an outbuilding. A tiny red reflection winked back at us. A tail light. Winthrow's car was standing there in a doorless shed.

We walked on to the front porch and knocked. Slow footfalls sounded inside, and the door opened. A shrunken old man with a drooping mustache squinted out at us.

"Excuse us for buttin' in on you, Seph," the sheriff said, pushing inside. "We trailed a killer out this-away. Just dropped by to see if everythin' was O.K." His eyes roamed around as if he were looking for something. But all he saw was a living room, cluttered with old-style furniture. "By yourself, I see," the sheriff went on. "Where's Tess?"

"Spendin' the night at a neighbor's," Seph Winthrow said. His voice was like the dry rustling of the autumn leaves outside. "You say there was a killin', Nate?"

Leming scowled. "We better get going, Sheriff."

He was right, I thought. We were wasting our time here.

But the sheriff didn't seem in a hurry. "Feller stuck up Turner's Store at Parker City," he explained. "Must 'uv known it was pay day at the ordnance plant and Turner's

had a lot of money there to cash checks. Pulled the holdup about a half hour before the workers were due to start comin' in. Got scared when Hack Sinton reached down for a money box, thinkin' Hack was goin' for a gun, I guess. Shot and killed Hack and ran out in a sort of panic without the money."

"I declare," Seph commented. "How'd you get on his trail?"

"Luck mostly. The three of us was pullin' up in front of Turner's. I was gonna tell Hack he better let me send a deputy over each Friday afternoon, with all that money outa the safe. This bandit come runnin' out. Had pocketed his gun, but I was suspicious. Didn't take long to find out what had happened inside. Turner's being on the edge of town on Highway 90, we figgered he'd gone that way. Sure enough, he had. We'd 'uv caught him about six miles out, but a long freight cut us off at the crossin' and gave him a big lead. Then we topped Mud Hill just in time to see his car turn off on the Willow Creek Road. He tried to take a turn too fast up here and turned over."

"You'll get him, Nate," Seph said. "You allus get 'em."

Leming sighed weary-like. And I didn't much blame him. Nate wasn't likely to catch anybody at this rate. The killer maybe escaping right now in Fenner's car, and Nate stopping to chew the fat. It certainly bore out another thing Leming had told me. "The sheriff's too darned sociable. Knows every man and dog in the county and what they like for breakfast. Pretty handy for getting votes, but it won't catch any crooks."

He must have known all about Seph's business, all right, for just then he said: "Ever get your radio fixed?"

Seph glanced at an old battery set on a corner table. "Yup. Just ain't turned it on tonight."

"Gonna say, I found a feller over at Junction that has the tube you needed. Parts hard to get these days. Well, better be goin'." He pulled out a watch big as a biscuit. "Wanta set your mantel clock, Seph? It's three minutes slow. Should be seven-forty right now."

"Thanks, Nate. I'll run her up," the old man said absently.

"We'll get along. Glad you got the radio fixed. Lots of company for you old folks. Gets kinda lonesome since young Zeb joined the Marines, I guess. Where'd you say Tess was—over at Fenner's?"

"What—" the old man didn't seem to be following him. "Why, yes, Nate, she's spendin' the night at Art's."

OUTSIDE, Leming growled: "We lost five minutes in there. If that guy's got Fenner's car—"

"He wouldn't get far," Nate said. "Fenner's down to three tires. He was in town this mornin' seein' the ration board. Had to go home on a rim." Then he added: "It don't matter anyway. The killer is hidin' at Seph's."

We'd reached the car. Leming gasped: "You saw him! Then why are we—"

"I didn't see him," the sheriff said. "But I saw the door he was behind—that bedroom door—open just a crack."

Leming chuckled skeptically. "X-ray eyes, huh, sheriff? Well, we better investigate."

The sheriff's big paw shot out. It clamped Leming's arm and spun him around. "Just a minute." His low voice had a hardness I'd never heard before. "You've done some right smart talkin', Bob. You just listen a while. Get in the car and start it. Make a lot of noise turnin' around and drivin' back north. Then stop at the turn and drive back, slow and quiet, without any lights."

Leming didn't like it, but he obeyed orders. He certainly made plenty of racket as he spun the car around and gunned it up the road.

"That's so the bandit'll think we're gone," the sheriff told me. "We'd have gone bustin' in there, somebody woulda got hurt, and it wouldn't be the right person maybe."

I didn't say anything. I was still trying to figure how he knew so much. I hadn't seen anything suspicious at all.

"We better move in," he went on. "No tellin' what that rat might do. You stop at the left side of the porch and cover anythin' I miss. Keep your gun handy, and don't walk on the gravel."

We stalked toward the house. The sheriff stepped on the porch and cat-footed toward the door. I reached a point where I could see through one window into the lighted room. My heart jumped at what I saw.

Seph Winthrow, down on one knee, was tying his wife to a chair! I shifted a little, and then I saw the dumpy little guy with a flat nose—the same one we'd seen running out of Turner's. He was covering Seph with an automatic.

I'd almost forgotten about the sheriff until I heard the door bang open and the sheriff bark: "Get 'em up!"

This little killer was plenty fast. He whirled and crouched in front of the farmer and his wife and fired. I leveled my gun, but he was too close to the old couple. I couldn't shoot for fear of hitting one of them.

THEN, in the next split instant, I found out why they kept electing Nate Brown sheriff. I never saw a big man move so fast. He was already on the floor when the bandit fired, and I knew the bullet had missed.

The sheriff fired twice. His position sent the slugs at an upward angle that wouldn't hit Seph or the old woman. One of them smashed the bandit's gun wrist. The second ripped into his shoulder.

A few minutes later, Bob Leming was barging in, bug-eyed, and the sheriff was saying: "Lemme see if I can guess the whole game, Seph. He came in here to get the keys to your car. But when he heard us comin', he knew he wouldn't have time to get away without bein' seen. He'd have to lay low till you got rid of us. He made sure you'd do that by takin' Tess in the next room with him."

Seph nodded. "Told me if I said or did anything to give you a hint, he'd let her have it first." His old gray eyes shot venom at the bandit. "Then when he thought you'd left, he was makin' me tie her up. He was gonna tie me too, so we couldn't raise any alarm till he had time to cover plenty of distance."

The sheriff looked at the killer. "I know who this monkey is now. Lumpy Gould, sorta lone-wolf stickup man. The city police are powerful anxious to lay hands on him. Well, guess we better take him to a doctor."

I prodded Gould with my gun just for luck and said: "Just a minute, Sheriff. You haven't explained how you knew this punk was here."

Nate grinned at Seph and said: "It was that silent radio. I knew Seph hadn't missed a program of Mountain Pete's Hillbilly Boys in years. They go on every Friday at seven-thirty. It was seven-forty when we came in. When I found out for sure the radio was workin', I knew somethin' had to be wrong to make Seph pass up that program."

I turned to Leming. "I reckon knowin' folks' business came in handy, after all, Bob."

Leming didn't answer. He didn't look well.

"Just to make sure," the sheriff went on, "I handed Seph that cue about Tess, and he caught on nice. When he said yes, that cinched it. I knew, of course, she wasn't spendin' the night at Art Fenner's."

"But I still don't get it," I puzzled. "Why wouldn't she be staying at Fenner's?"

The sheriff turned a red-faced glance at the old lady. "That just didn't tally, Jess. You see, Art Fenner's an old bachelor."

A WORD TO THE WISE

Waste paper is still an important war material—it's essential for packing ammunition. So in order to make sure there's enough left over to go 'round for your favorite publication, don't forget to save all waste paper and turn it in for scrap.