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# *In Cold Blood* Revisited: A Look Back at an American Crime

*Sally J. Keglovits*
*U.S. Probation Officer, Eastern District of Pennsylvania*

**THE WATER TOWER** still looms over the town much as it did on November 15, 1959, the longhorn adorning it (mascot of the local school) bearing silent witness to a half century of small-town life. The railroad tracks still split the town in two and the train still doesn't stop as it runs east and west hauling grain and other commodities produced in the area. Hartman's Café (located "up on the highway") is now the El Rancho Café, and the post office ("down by the depot") houses a grocery store. The old post office, a tiny, one-story affair, was once affectionately referred to as "the federal building" by respectful townsfolk. Tyson Foods has built an enormous meat-packing plant on the outskirts of town, and the Sunflower Electric generating station is nearby, but most outsiders are likely to see the wheat plains, the farms and ranches, and know that Holcomb, Kansas really hasn't changed all that much since the murder of the Clutter family forever altered American illusions of small-town serenity.

Nothing in the backgrounds of Dick Hickock and Perry Smith would cause one to predict the impossible notoriety later bestowed upon them. They were small-time "hoods," the kind of men that bloat the roster of parole caseloads across the country. Hickock, age 28 at the time of the murders, born to God-fearing parents in eastern Kansas, grows up on a farm deemed humble by Kansas standards, and dreams of a college football scholarship. He is considered to be of above average intelligence and a very good athlete, but is an underachieving student and a discipline problem. The scholarship never materializes and Hickock drifts through a variety of jobs—railroad worker, auto mechanic, ambulance driver—and two marriages. He is involved in a serious car accident in 1950, leaving his face slightly lopsided, his eyes asymmetrical. His criminal record is undistinguished, consisting mainly of bad check charges and petty theft. On March 15, 1958, he is sentenced to five years in the State Penitentiary at Lansing, Kansas for the burglary of a home in Johnson County in which a rifle is taken. Hickock's prison record is clean, and it is dutifully noted that he is "not dangerous" (original notes from Kansas State Parole 1959).

Perry Smith's story is anything but ordinary. Born to a Native American mother and a Caucasian father who seeks fame on the rodeo circuit, his early life is transient and marred by physical and mental abuse. Both parents are alcoholics, and Smith and his siblings are frequent victims of violence in their parent's failing marriage. He joins the army in 1948, serves in the Korean War, and is honorably discharged in 1952. Shortly thereafter, he is involved in a motorcycle accident that leaves him hospitalized for half a year. Surgery to repair his broken legs leaves him disfigured, with legs most often termed "dwarfish." The chronic pain also leaves him a self-described "aspirin addict." Smith has no formal education and seems painfully aware of his academic deficits. He is largely self-taught and, while in prison, engages in a "self-improvement" project of his own design wherein he reads voraciously and determines to improve his

vocabulary by learning a new word every day. His approach seems awkward but sincere.

Smith's criminal history is somewhat more sophisticated than Hickock's, but still not a harbinger of the shattering violence to come. In 1952, he is charged with reckless driving and resisting arrest. The charges are later dropped. In July 1955, he is arrested for the burglary of the Chandler Pavilion but crawls out of the Phillips County, Kansas jail three days later and disappears. In 1955, he is cited for vagrancy in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he is freed on a $10 bond and again vanishes. In 1956, he is identified as an escapee and is sentenced on March 13, 1956 to five to ten years in the State Penitentiary at Lansing for his previous burglary and "jail break." He is 31 years old when he murders the Clutter family.

If Dick and Perry were simply two men living in the same town going about their daily business, it is doubtful the two would have struck up a conversation. Dick the smooth talker, the guy who could float bad checks from one side of Kansas City to the other with just one flash of that loopy smile. Dick, the con artist who takes what he wants, whether a television set from the electronics store or a female who catches his eye. His actions are mainly impulsive and rejection seems to leave him undiscouraged. Work is for "squares." Dick only needs to find the "perfect score" to provide him with the lifestyle he knows he deserves. Despite his disfiguration, he is still oddly attractive, projecting boyish enthusiasm and the sort of sociopathic charm reserved for slick criminals.

Perry Smith is cautious, polite, as reserved as Dick is outgoing. Smith is a dreamer who loses himself in a fantasy world of his own creation. He buys mail order "treasure maps" and conjures up scenarios of deep-sea diving and discovery of sunken gold in Mexico. Perry knows he can make his dream a reality if only he can come up with enough money to buy a boat. Perry doesn't know how to swim or captain a boat, but with the "perfect score" he won't need to worry about such details.

Dick and Perry "celled" together at Lansing for a mere two weeks. Perry sees in Dick a deliberative, steady approach that he knows he lacks. Dick also realizes that these traits could be beneficial on the outside. He also sees in Perry a talent that he knows he doesn't possess, those of a natural-born killer. Prison conversations often compensate for other unavailable forms of entertainment, and fictions are woven with the precision of Hemingway. Perry Smith's abilities may be even better than most. He regales Dick with a tale (later determined to be false) of how he murdered a man with a bicycle chain in the Nevada desert just to see how it felt. Perry made enough of an impression to secure a place in Dick's future plans for the "perfect score."

After Perry Smith's parole on July 6, 1959 with supervision conditions that state he is not to enter the State of Kansas while on parole or face violation, he dutifully leaves Kansas and again drifts throughout the country performing odd jobs and living in rooming houses (original notes from Kansas State Parole, 1959). Dick Hickock finishes his tenure at Lansing with a new cellmate, Floyd Wells.

Wells, like Dick Hickock, is a thief, serving three to five years for breaking into an electrical appliance store and stealing lawn mowers. Their prison stint is uneventful, their conversations a blend of fact and fiction with one notable exception. Floyd Wells discusses at length his previous "legitimate" employment, working for Herbert W. Clutter, owner/proprietor of River Valley Farm in Holcomb, Kansas. He describes a safe located in a home office used by Mr. Clutter that contains large amounts of cash. The cash is always on hand, the story goes, to pay the many employees of the farm and numerous expenses. Wells' tale of Clutter family wealth is so compelling that Hickock tells Wells, "As soon as I get out on parole, I'm going to find me some transportation, get ahold [sic] of Smith and go to the Clutters' and see if there's still $10,000 in their damned safe" (original case notes from Kansas Bureau of Investigation contained in statement made to Agent Wayne Owens by Floyd Wells, 1959). Hickock is relentless in his questioning of Wells. He wants to know the ages of the children, and the lay-out of the house. He tells Wells repeatedly that he will kill the family, leaving no witnesses. Wells contends that he never believed him, chalking up the banter to just plain prison talk, stories to pass the time.

Herb Clutter, 48 years old, was one of the most respected men in all of Finney County, Kansas. He was a college graduate and successful wheat farmer, a community leader who could always be counted on to lend a hand. His wife Bonnie, 45, at one time Herb's energetic and supportive partner, was now given to prolonged periods of depression, "spells," and rarely left the confines of their spacious home. Her struggles did not stop her from doting on her two children who remained at home, Nancy, 16, and a son, Kenyon, 15. Two older daughters had married and moved away, starting families of their own. The Clutters are decent, hard-working folks who embody the lessons that Nancy teaches her Sunday school class at the First Methodist Church in neighboring Garden City.

Dick Hickock is paroled on August 13, 1959, and resides with his parents while securing a job as an auto mechanic at Bob Sands' Garage in Olathe. Floyd Wells later tells investigators, "Hickock told me that he had arranged for some kind of job in Kansas City in order to get his parole. That he'd have to make some kind of pretense of working there for awhile" (1959). Wells knew that Dick Hickock's real intentions had nothing to do with car repair. Hickock writes to Perry Smith several times before finally reaching him at a post office box in Idaho. Despite his awareness of parole conditions, and a sense of foreboding about a return to Kansas, he agrees to meet Dick and boards a bus for Olathe. Hickock has written about his plan to make big money, describing a scenario that, in Hickock's typically grandiose fashion, is termed a "cinch."

Truman Capote's masterpiece, *In Cold Blood*, proves once again that a true story well told can be as compelling as any work of pure fiction. The facts of the crime, the setting, the characters, and the inevitable conclusion, need no embellishment to heighten the drama. On November 14, 1959, Dick and Perry leave Olathe in a '49 Chevy "borrowed" by Hickock, taking a circuitous route to Holcomb. Four hundred miles and several hours later they enter Garden City, stopping for gas at the Phillips 66. A short ride and they cross the railroad tracks of Holcomb, knowing that River Valley Farm is but a mile and a right turn away. Under a full moon and nearing midnight, the two killers travel the dirt road to the Clutter home. The bright autumn night is partially masked by the Chinese elms that form a canopy over the road. The Clutter home is within view. Their path seems clear but for a light that flashes on in the nearby home of the Clutters' resident farm hand. The worker is merely tending to a sick child but the interruption is enough to cause Dick to momentarily reconsider and he turns the car around.

The interplay between criminals is a curious one. Left to his own devices, would Dick have continued down the road away from the farm, leaving the Clutters' to sleep undisturbed through the night? With a partner, a "prison buddy" at that, was there more to prove? Perry Smith relates, "Halfway down the road Dick stopped. He was sore as hell. I could see he was thinking, here I've set up this big score, here we've come all this way, and now this punk wants to chicken out. He said, "Maybe you think I ain't got the guts to do it alone. But by God, I'll show you who's got guts" (Capote, T., 1965, p. 235). Dick and Perry return to the house, parking at a side entrance and approach the unlocked door leading to the small home office kept by Mr. Clutter. They enter, Hickock carrying a knife and Smith a shotgun. Guided only by a flashlight, they search for the safe described so meticulously by Floyd Wells.

The house is quiet. The family asleep. The search of the small paneled office yields nothing. Where is the safe that Floyd Wells described, located just behind Herb Clutter's desk? The two continue through the house, less than careful about the noise they may be making. Herb Clutter, asleep in his bed, is awakened by a flashlight shining in his eyes. Dick and Perry have traveled the length of Kansas to steal the contents of Clutter's safe and they are not leaving empty handed. Mr. Clutter is taken by gunpoint into his office where he repeatedly tells the intruders that he has no safe. He offers to write them a check and give them the contents of his wallet (a mere $30.00) if they will only leave his family in peace.

In total, two hours are spent in the house. One by one the family awakens. Mr. Clutter and son Kenyon are taken to the basement where they are separated and hog-tied. Mr. Clutter is ordered to lie down on the cement floor while Kenyon is taken to a sofa kept in a side room. Nancy Clutter, in her bedroom on the second floor, is tied to her bedpost and Mrs. Clutter is removed from her bedroom and placed in the upstairs bathroom where she too is tied. Their mouths are

also taped shut. Absurdly, comfort is offered as Perry, fearing that Mr. Clutter is likely cold on the basement floor, places cardboard underneath him. Kenyon's restraints are loosened slightly as he complains they are too tight and a pillow placed under his head. Mrs. Clutter is offered a chair as she stands in the bathroom, waiting to be escorted back to her bed to die. One by one the killing starts. Returning to the basement, Perry goads Dick to use the knife on Herb Clutter as if to prove that Dick is too "chicken" to carry out his own plan. The man who vowed to "spread hair on them walls" (Capote, T., 1965, p. 37) seems incapable of doing so, but also does nothing to stop Perry Smith. Perry grabs the knife from Dick and, in what is rapidly becoming a bizarre competition between the two, sets the violence in motion. Kneeling on the floor, Perry slices the throat of Herb Clutter. Perry challenges Dick to "finish him off" but is unable, or perhaps unwilling, to literally get the blood on his hands and begs off. Mr. Clutter, making sickening gurgling sounds from the cut to his throat is shot at close range by Perry as Dick trains the flashlight on him. Kenyon, Nancy, and Bonnie Clutter reach identical fates as the killers methodically march through the house true to their pact to leave no witnesses.

The drama unfolding in the house has been the subject of conjecture by psychologists and criminal justice practitioners for almost 50 years. Much can be made of Perry's cruel and often violent upbringing, but what accounts for Dick's criminal behavior? Certainly not his family life. Geneticists can perhaps argue for the existence of a "murderous gene," which would certainly simplify the argument. Some would contend that Dick's exposure to the state prison system hardened him, turning a petty thief into a man capable of cold-blooded brutality. But his prison record indicates a favorable adjustment void of misconducts and disciplinary actions. One can speculate that acting as individuals, Dick and Perry may not have been capable of murder. Acting as a team, murder may have been inevitable. It seems that Dick's big talk and his detailed plans left him little room for back-tracking. When he turned around in the Clutters' driveway he could have kept going but he chose to carry through with his plan despite his sense of foreboding. Appearing to be a coward seemed to present more of a risk at that moment than the consequences of multiple murder. Perry Smith, slowly realizing that Dick Hickock might not be able to back up the tough image he liked to project, admits to trying to call Dick's bluff. He seems to exploit Dick's "weakness" when he asks for the knife. Perry later claims that he was "bluffing" Dick and expected him to talk him out of slashing Herb Clutter's throat. He wanted Dick to admit that he was a "phony." The wheels were already in motion and to try and deter Perry at this point would be akin to admitting cowardice. The murders really had nothing to do with the Clutters. From the moment they left Olathe in the stolen Chevy, the drama was all about Dick and Perry. Perhaps the most chilling words ever uttered were offered by Perry Smith when he later described his brief encounter with Herbert Clutter. Leaning into him with a knife in his hand, Perry "really doesn't want to harm the man. I thought he was a very nice gentleman. Soft-spoken. I thought so right up to the moment I cut his throat." (Capote, T., 1965, p. 244).

The coroner's photographs reveal the destruction of four lives (original notes and photographs, coroner's office, Finney County, Kansas, 1959). The shotgun blasts all but obliterate what were once human features. The girl who baked apple pies and rode her old farm horse "Babe," the boy who tinkered with his vintage truck, the mother and father who instilled respect and the value of hard work in their children, are reduced to swollen, devastated caricatures. The cost of four lives? A pair of binoculars, a Zenith portable radio, four silver dollars, and approximately $40.00 in cash. The killers overlooked Nancy's church envelope, dutifully placed on her bureau for services the next morning, containing two dollars. There was no safe. There was no $10,000.

By the afternoon of November 15, 1959, word of "trouble out at the Clutter place" has traveled through Holcomb and most of Finney County. By the end of the week, word has traveled throughout most of the United States. Murder of this magnitude just didn't happen to farm families in the heartland of America. The historical importance of this crime cannot be underestimated. Although not officially documented as such, the murder of the Clutter family hits the popular imagination as the first mass murder in America. This crime comes close on the heels of Charles Starkweather's murder spree that began in Nebraska in December, 1957 and also captured media attention across the country. Starkweather, accompanied by his teenage girlfriend Caril Fugate, who literally appears to have been along for the ride, stalked the West in a stolen

vehicle shooting to death numerous victims until their capture in Wyoming in late January 1958. The Starkweather killings are unofficially touted as the first serial murders in the U.S. and became the inspiration for Bruce Springsteen's seminal work, "Nebraska," as well as the Terrence Malick film, "Badlands." (The role the media played at this particular time cannot be underestimated. The idea of "mass media" was just starting to take hold. The reporting of crime was no longer a parochial event. Until the Starkweather, Hickock and Smith crimes, killing of this magnitude was viewed as politically motivated. Until the late 1950s, and with the obvious exception being war coverage, one of the few mass murders to receive national attention was the 1927 bombing of a school in Bath, Michigan in which 42 people died. This crime also had its roots in political unrest, however, as the perpetrator, Andrew Kehoe, allegedly ignited dynamite he had planted in the school's basement as a protest of new school taxes. What perhaps made the Starkweather killing spree and the Clutter murders significant and seen as the baseline by which other crimes were measured was the personal nature of the acts. America had not yet heard the names Richard Speck, Charles Whitman, Charles Manson, or John Wayne Gacy.) Nationwide attention now focuses on the events in Kansas. Truman Capote, sitting in his apartment in Brooklyn, reads an article in *The New York Times*, "Wealthy Farmer, 3 of Family Slain." (1959, November). The article recounts: "A wealthy farmer, his wife and their two young children were found shot to death today in their home. They had been killed by shotgun blasts at close range after being bound and gagged." So begins Capote's odyssey, culminating six years later with the publication of *In Cold Blood*.

Floyd Wells, Dick Hickock's former cell mate, hears of the murders when listening to his radio while lying on his bunk at the Kansas State Penitentiary where he remains after Hickock's parole. Despite the incessant conversations with Hickock on this very subject, Wells later claims to be shocked by the news. Two weeks pass and eventually Wells can no longer live with the burden of his secret. The fact that a well-publicized reward is being offered may also be weighing on him. Wells arranges to be "called out" to the warden's office under a false pretense. He doesn't want to be known as a prison snitch and is about to give very damaging information about two former inmates. The following statement is made by Floyd Wells to Agent Wayne Owens of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI) on December 10, 1959 and is taken from original (unpublished) case notes:

> I spent considerable time with him (Herb Clutter) in his "office" where he had a desk and I believe a safe. This was the old house where the Clutters lived in 1949 (also located on the Clutter farm property). This was just about the time their new house was completed. I distinctly remember Mr. Clutter paying a large lumber bill and I thought he paid it in cash with money from the safe. The reason I remember is because Mr. Clutter made the remark to me that evening when we left his den the he'd paid out more than $10,000 that day.
>
> After entering Kansas State (Penitentiary) I "celled" with Dick Hickock. Hickock said he liked western Kansas and maybe would try to get a job with the Clutters. I described the location of the house. I suspect I talked too much about the money Mr. Clutter had. Hickock talked a lot about Perry Smith. Said after they got out of the 'joint' they could pull some jobs to get enough money for a down payment on a boat. They would run a charter service for deep sea fishermen and eventually make contacts and use the boat to bring in narcotics. I didn't believe Hickock but he kept talking about it. I tried to talk him out of it, said he would get caught. But he said he had a plan, and, after the robbery would kill everyone there and leave no witnesses.

As it turned out, Wells did speak "too much about the money" and tragically, much of what he had to tell Dick Hickock was, at best, clouded by the passage of time.

His statement is extremely significant and not only because it introduces the detectives to Dick Hickock. Volumes have been written about this case and Capote's meticulous research and access to the principals is without parallel. Is it possible that Capote did not have Wells' statement available to him? It appears that a very meaningful piece of information may have

been overlooked: Wells fills Dick Hickock with stories of Herb Clutter's wealth and how cash is contained within an office safe. But he is speaking of "the old house where the Clutters lived in 1949, just about the time their new house was completed." Hickock and Smith burglarize the new house, where there is no safe! Perhaps Floyd Wells truly thought that strict attention to detail really didn't matter, after all he was just passing the time in prison. Could he have thought that his blending of details was irrelevant as he didn't really believe Hickock's boasts of how he would one day rob and likely murder the Clutters? Wells' protestations stretch the bounds of believability. After all, he provided intimate details of the family members and a map leading to River Valley Farm. He may not have thought Hickock capable of this level of violence, but he surely knew that Dick Hickock was indeed capable of burglary. Wells was likely concerned about being implicated in the crime as he had clearly provided information about the Clutters that literally led Dick and Perry to their door. His statement to detectives, although self-serving and deliberately vague in parts, breaks the case. After their eventual capture, Dick Hickock tells KBI agents that Floyd Wells was not just passing the time in prison by telling him about Herb Clutter. Interestingly, Hickock claims that Wells was to receive $2500 from the robbery. The money was to be spent to hire an attorney to work on his appeal (original case notes from Kansas Bureau of Investigation interview of Dick Hickock, Las Vegas, Nevada, 1960).

On December 30, 1959, at approximately 5:25 pm, Dick Hickock and Perry Smith are apprehended in Las Vegas, Nevada, by patrolmen on routine duty who are in possession of an "all points bulletin" and mug shots of Hickock and Smith. The assailants are driving a 1956 Chevrolet stolen in Iowa shortly after their aborted trip to Mexico.

Their dreams of buying a boat and diving for sunken treasure ran up against reality with remarkable swiftness. Forty dollars and a few items suitable for the pawnshop were not enough to bankroll the type of operation they had envisioned. In short order, the two returned to the U.S and lived out of stolen cars while traversing much of the country. They even returned to Kansas briefly where Dick boldly engaged in another surprisingly successful check-writing spree. Time was running out however, and at the time of their arrests, they had nothing of value but the stolen car in which they were sitting.

Dick Hickock and Perry Smith were returned to Finney County, Kansas where they were housed on the fourth floor of the courthouse in two of the six cells that comprised the county jail. In March, 1960, a trial was held but was viewed as anti-climatic. After testimony of several days and forty minutes of deliberation, the jury returned with guilty verdicts and set the punishment at death. Interestingly, Perry Smith eventually admitted that he had killed the four members of the Clutter family. He didn't want Dick Hickock's parents, elderly and in poor health, to go to their graves thinking their son a killer. Hickock and Smith were transferred to the Kansas State Penitentiary in Lansing where they remained on death row until April 14, 1965. Slightly after midnight the two were partners for the last time as they walked the thirteen steps leading to the wooden platform and the hangman's noose.

Dick and Perry were buried on the prison grounds but were later moved to make way for a prison expansion project. Their current resting place, section 34, row 29 in the Mount Muncie Cemetery in Leavenworth County, is identified by simple markers. Their original headstones, bought by Truman Capote, were stolen. The beauty of this pastoral site is disconcerting. The conflict between the violence of their lives and the serenity of this resting place defies cliche. It's jarring to be here.

The Clutters, Herbert, Bonnie, Nancy and Kenyon, were laid to rest in Valley View Cemetery in Garden City. The graves are still graced with flowers and a fresh bouquet marking Mother's Day is placed at the headstone of Mrs. Clutter. A visit to the cemetery oddly brings the crime to life. "Nancy Mae Clutter, born 1943, died 1959." Nancy was a real girl. She had a real boyfriend, Bobby, and a best friend, Susan. She rode her farm horse, Babe, and baked really good apple pies. Nancy was brutally murdered in 1959. She was shot to death in her own bed having gotten up just long enough after hearing the intruders to hide her prized possession, a watch given to her by her father, in her shoe.

The Clutter farm has in some sense taken on the patina of "urban legend." Local teenagers drive down the dirt road leading to the farm late at night finding entertainment in the horror as teenagers often do. There is also a simultaneous respect and reverence about the place and the family. After first hearing that local residents don't want to talk about the crime and prefer to leave things alone, one is struck by how nearly everyone wants to talk about it! About their connection to the farm or the family or the crime. It is an event that is as much a part of the town as the water tower. It is not trivialized.

After the murders, the farm and its contents were sold at auction, the surviving Clutter daughters understandably deciding that trying to maintain the family farm was emotionally unbearable. The auction was considered a success with nearly everything associated with River Valley Farm sold (including Babe, for $75). The residence has since changed hands two more times. The home is occupied and the farm is worked to this day. A German Shepherd roams the property, serving as a sentry.

A crime that was motivated by financial gain had a very cheap payoff. The lives of ultimately six individuals were traded for a pair of binoculars, a Zenith portable radio, four silver dollars and approximately $40.00 in cash. There was no safe. There was no $10,000.

back to top

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