

# A Detective Story with Teeth

BY **DANIEL J. DEMERS**



In September of 1883, the nation's newspapers reported an unnamed railroad detective noticed a disheveled passenger with a lopsided beard. The train was en route from San Francisco to Logan, Utah. The detective approached the fellow, thinking him a wanted railroad robber. He arrested the man as the train passed through Lovelock, Nevada. The suspect tried to swallow a couple "of morphine tablets" shouting out that he "preferred death to further existence in San Quentin."

Dr. Samuel Chalfant, a thirty-five-year-old San Francisco dentist, had been arrested four and a half years earlier and charged with the murder of forty-three-year-old Josiah Bacon. He was subsequently tried and convicted of second degree murder and sentenced to ten years at San Quentin State Prison.

Bacon had been the treasurer of the Goodyear Dental Vulcanite Company of Boston. The company held a patent which protected a "vulcanite dental plate, consisting of mineral teeth united to a base of vulcanize [rubber]"—i.e. dentures. The company sold licenses to dentists to use the proprietary technology.

Prior to the invention, dentures were made from materials such as hippopotamus ivory, human or animal teeth. The gum base portion was made using lead, gold and springs. These

dentures were cumbersome, and the materials tended to rot over time. Such dentures were expensive and thus available only to the wealthier classes.

The Goodyear Dental Vulcanite invention by a Boston dentist (together with the earlier invention of the porcelain tooth) eliminated the need for these materials. According to Josh Rubino, who has written a definitive work on the subject, vulcanite denture bases were a godsend to people of modest means, making it "possible for them to acquire a well-fitting and comfortable set of dentures." In 1877 the US Supreme Court ruled the invention "the greatest improvement in dentistry made in many years; and [is] an invention which is a great benefaction to mankind, whereby both health and comfort are promoted."

Josiah Bacon, as the company's manager and treasurer, had crisscrossed America, exacting an annual fee between \$35 and \$50 from all dentists using vulcanized rubber in their practices. Additional "per denture fabrication fees" of between \$1 and \$2.50 were also charged (\$1,175; \$1,680; \$34 and \$85 respectively in current values).

"The dentists of the country," according to the *New York Times*, "had rebelled against the payment of this royalty, and all kinds of devices have been resorted to in order to avoid it." Acting as his own detective, Bacon's principal occupation was to collect the fees. The *Times* added

that it was also his "method of discovering those who were infringing...[which] rendered him still more unpopular." He employed spies in every major American city and paid them liberally to "hunt down delinquent dentists."

"One of his favorite methods," according to the *Times* "was to employ a beautiful young lady, whom no dentist would suspect. She would call upon the dentist and have him take an impression; to be reproduced in rubber." Once she received her dentures, Bacon had his evidence to sue the offending dentist.

Dental supply houses were "visited to find the amount and nature of [rubber] goods bought...[employees] of dentists were bribed, next door neighbors were questioned and intimidation was often resorted to." One newspaper reported that "having the law on his side, and not being a man of pleasant manners, Bacon frequently made enemies needlessly." Such was the case of Dr. Chalfant.

Dr. Chalfant was a Civil War veteran and a graduate of Philadelphia Dental College. He had been in practice since 1871. His first set-to with Bacon was in 1873 in Wilmington, Delaware where Bacon succeeded in obtaining an injunction against him. Chalfant refused to pay and moved to St. Louis where, in 1875, Bacon corralled him again, sued and obtained another judgment against him. Refusing to pay, Chalfant fled to San Francisco. It was there in 1879 Bacon once again found him "still in-

fringing on the patent of his company without paying the royalty.” Bacon demanded payment of all past infringements and associated court costs. Chalfant refused and was sued. An examination by Bacon angered Chalfant who claimed he was “greatly hurt by the harsh and unfeeling manner in which Bacon had treated him in the courtroom and was determined to have an interview with Bacon about it.” This confrontation led him to “accidentally” shoot Bacon in his hotel room.

Before his escape from San Quentin, Chalfant was engaged by prison authorities to “look after the inmates’ teeth” and “was trusted about the prison.” Three years later, newspapers reported that a woman delivered a black suit and fake whiskers which he put on and “coolly walked out of the prison” and boarded the train to Ogden. When the train passed over the California border he unsuccessfully tried to remove the whiskers and in readjusting them “he was so awkward that [the railroad] detective arrested him.”

The woman believed to have helped Chalfant was Mrs. Eunice Perkins who denied any involvement. She had been a frequent visitor to San Quentin during his incarceration and had brought him “delicate morsels from her pantry [and] furnished him with reading material... [and ran] any errand with great ‘earnestness.’”

Chalfant had boarded in Perkins’ St. Louis house when he practiced dentistry there. When her husband died, she and her mother relocated to San Francisco. After the murder, she became his most ardent defender. At one point she and Chalfant sought to be married, but Judge Robert Ferrell refused noticing “a certain waxed mental condition in [the morphine addicted] Dr. Chalfant and refused to tie the knot.” Judge Ferrell (who had sentenced Chalfant) told one reporter that Mrs. Perkins’ interest in Chalfant was “the wildest and most untouchable womanly devotion he ever saw instanced in fiction or reality.” At the time drug-use was not illegal in America.

Thereupon Eunice Perkins began a petition of pardon to gain her paramour’s pardon. According to the *San Francisco Call* “people laughed at her...[but] one by one, each of the twelve [jurors] signed her petition...then [the sentencing] Judge Ferrell...[then] the names of the prosecuting attorney, officers of the court, city and county officials, from high to low were affixed [to the petition].” The *Call* reporter was dumbfounded by “the eloquence of the little woman’s earnestness that moved [the signers].” One prominent businessman asserted “her simple recitals drew tears from him.”

In August of 1885, California’s governor pardoned Dr. Chalfant. The love of this little woman had moved heaven and hell for her man. The entire judicial and legal system had bent to her demands. In reporting on the pardon, readers of the *Call* were told: “It is understood that Mrs. Perkins will soon become Mrs. Chalfant.”

Two months after his release, Dr. Chalfant issued a written statement to the *Call*. In it he asserted “Mrs. Perkins did not procure my pardon; but by her persistent interference... she [caused] my being held in San Quentin... two years longer than I otherwise would have been.” He went on to declare that his attempted escape was in reality “to escape this woman’s undesirable solicitations in my behalf...[and] he was in a dreamlike state” when he sought to marry her during his imprisonment. He condemned her for raising money to help in her attempts to free him and ended his diatribe “Rather than marry and spend my days with a woman of Mrs. Perkin’s order, I would return to San Quentin tomorrow and remain there during my natural life.”

Dr. Chalfant resumed his dental practice in San Francisco *sans* Josiah Bacon and Eunice

Perkins. He married another and fathered a son. In 1892, he was prominently mentioned in *Who’s Who in San Francisco*. The following year Eunice Perkins published an article in the *San Francisco Call* entitled: “Reflections of an Old Maid.” She lamented that “she had grown sweet tempered and fair, but that the ultimate end of all life is use and she had tried by love to be of use.”

During World War II vulcanized rubber-based dentures were replaced with acrylic resin bases. This was due to a rubber shortage created by the war. The acrylic resin-based dentures’ popularity increased when it was determined they were an improvement over the rubber ones—primarily their strength and dimensional stability. Rubber-based dentures, according to Rubino, “tended to have poor esthetics, taste and color.” Acrylic dentures became the popular choice of dentists and patients alike and still are. **PI**

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