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**Tips and advice from experts on
Surveillance and Surveillance Equipment**

Mr. Mayor, the Arsonist Doctor

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As the poet Robert Browning wrote: “the best laid schemes of mice and men often go astray.” Such was the case with a planned safe robbery / arson / heist in Puposky, Minnesota in 1911.

Tipped off by a disgruntled ex-con informant, the Minnesota State Fire Marshal, along with Pinkerton detectives, carefully laid out a plan to surveil and apprehend the thieves in the act of safe cracking. It was the result “of a clever piece of detective work staged by Pinkerton detective J. C. Fielding,” reported the *Grand Forks [ND] Evening Times*. In the scheme of things, the story would have been a humdrum local affair but it became a headline-blarney national sensation when it was disclosed that Cass Lake, Minnesota’s Mayor Dr. Delbert Dumas was implicated. He was fingered as being the king of a statewide arson ring.

Two safecrackers--Mike “Curly” Davis and Martin Behan--planned on entering a general store in Puposky which also housed a post office. They were going to crack the safe, steal its contents including the postage stamps and receipts and then torch the building. The building owner, David C. Smyth, planted bottles of turpentine and kerosene and a rag on a shelf inside the store with which the fire was to be started.

The reality of what happened that June night, however, was a classic case of Murphy’s Law--a surveillance gone somewhat wrong. Pinkerton detective J. C. Fielding and his seven men laid in wait for two nights for the safecrackers “armed with shotguns loaded with buckshot.” They had even constructed a “blind door” (literally cut a hole in the wall) by which they were planning on entering the building to apprehend the criminals in the act.

One of Pinkerton’s men accidentally made a noise which tipped off the safecrackers who then ran out the “blind door.” Pinkerton’s men opened fire with the robbers firing back. None of the Pinkerton men or local law enforcement officers were wounded, but Davis and Behan were both shot. Davis fled into the sur-

rounding countryside and escaped. Behan fell wounded and was rushed by a special train to Bemidji (also in Beltrami County, MN) where he was treated and jailed.

Simultaneously, authorities arrested Mayor Dumas for burning his own house down the previous month. He was “accused of being implicated” in a string of arson fires over northern Minnesota. Detective Fielding declared the shooting and arrests were “but a slight part of the sensation” to follow.

For his part, Mayor Dumas asserted, “...the authorities are trying to job me and someone is going to suffer.” Dumas’ wealthy father interjected that it was “a frame up” and declared that during his son’s administration “many bootleggers have been convicted and sent to jail”

Dr. Dumas was a well-respected citizen of Cass Lake. He attended the University of Minnesota before entering and graduating from Chicago’s College of Physicians and Surgeons where he received his medical degree. Married, he had a young son.

Initial reports indicated that Dumas had entered into a conspiracy with Puposky store owner David C. Smyth to rob the safe and burn down the store as part of an insurance scam. Smyth claimed he told Dumas his business was bad and Dumas advised him to “...burn your store down and get the insurance.” According to Smyth, Dumas even offered to orchestrate the affair.

Smyth reported the conversation to the state fire marshal’s office. Smyth, in turn, at the direction of the state fire marshal, issued a \$200 check to Dumas cementing the pact. He also paid the mayor \$100 cash in marked bills. Mayor Dumas claimed the money was for medical services he provided Smyth.

A search of Dumas’ house uncovered six sticks of dynamite and blasting caps in the doctor’s safe, along with a letter “of a damaging nature” to a fellow gang member. Detectives promised that within a day or so “ten men high in business circles [would] be dragged into the case.” Adding that Dumas delivered “nearly a quarter million dollars [of fire insurance proceeds] in the [previous] six months” to his fel-



low conspirators, the state fire marshal claimed they had been working on the case for six months and had had Dumas under surveillance for at least six weeks.

A local hardware store owner further alleged Dumas had purchased fifteen sticks of dynamite the previous week. It was alleged that Dumas, a medical doctor with a working knowledge of chemistry, reverse engineered the dynamite, removing its nitroglycerine. The safecrackers then used the nitro to blow various safes.

It was revealed at the preliminary hearing that hidden Pinkerton stenographers had made a verbatim transcript of a conversation in a Bemidji, MN saloon between Dumas, Behan and Davis in which the mayor told them what to do. Dumas even “joked about other crimes [they had committed together].” The heist was delayed a day because Dumas had to operate on a patient with an appendectomy and didn’t have time to boil down the dynamite.

The wounded gunman, Martin Behan, confessed to his part in the heist and confirmed that he was present at the meeting in the Bemidji saloon. Besides his wounds, Behan was suffering from tuberculosis.

The *Cass Lake Times*, critical of the affair, opined “It would seem the authorities were out for manufacturing public sympathy rather than for detection of a crime...[and we] object to sending out [sensational] facts that many of our prominent men are suspected and will be arrested soon...it’s not fair to stir up the whole country against us.”

In the meantime, the wounded “Curly” Davis eluded the much-embarrassed Pinkertons who

