Five religious icons, one cryptic signature, and the ‘Crime of the Century’ create a ...

Mystery in the Vault

by Dale Harter
“To attempt to describe Harold Row, I have to do violence to the English language. I have to coin a new superlative for the adjective good. For Harold was the goodest man I ever knew.”
– Nathan Leopold, 1971

Earlier this year, President Phillip C. Stone called me into his office to examine some items he had found in the president’s office vault. When I arrived, he showed me three different objects that can be generally classified as religious icons. He didn’t know the history of the icons or how they came to Bridgewater College. It would be my task to find the answers.

As we stood there, we found only two clues to help resolve the mystery of how these icons ended up in the vault: a small, green bath towel with the initials “H. R. Sr.” and an inscription on the back of the largest icon that said “A gift from Nathan F. Leopold.” The clues eventually would lead to two men who also could be classified as icons, but for entirely different reasons. They also would lead back in time to one of the most heinous crimes of the 20th century. In turn, the story became one of redemption, the Church of the Brethren, and ultimately, Bridgewater College.
On May 21, 1924, in Chicago, 14-year-old Bobby Franks was walking home from school when two men in a car pulled up beside him and persuaded him to get inside. Early the next morning, a factory worker found Franks’ naked, lifeless body stuffed inside a culvert on the southeast side of Chicago. A coroner deduced the boy had been beaten over the head with a blunt object (it turned out to have been a chisel with tape wrapped around the blade) and suffocated.

A pair of eyeglasses was found near the body. While it was initially presumed that the glasses belonged to the boy, an investigation revealed otherwise. These glasses belonged to Nathan F. Leopold Jr., a 19-year-old University of Chicago law student. State’s Attorney Robert E. Crowe brought Leopold in for questioning, along with his friend, Richard Loeb, who was the son of a top executive at Sears, Roebuck and Co. Franks, Leopold and Loeb all lived in Chicago’s prestigious Hyde Park neighborhood.

During the interrogation, Loeb, then Leopold, admitted to the murder. Their motivation for the crime was both simple and sinister: they did it for a thrill. The victim, who was a schoolmate of Loeb’s brother, was picked at random. Their deed would become known as “The Crime of the Century.”

As the news broke throughout the nation, popular opinion said that Leopold and Loeb should hang for their crime. Their families, while obviously shocked and saddened, didn’t want to see their sons executed and sought legal assistance from one of the best-known attorneys in the nation, Clarence Darrow. The distinguished Chicago resident took the case, but not for the opportunity to make money from the boys’ families, who were two of the most affluent and respected Jewish families in Chicago. Darrow saw the case as a chance to strike a blow against capital punishment, of which he had been a long-time opponent.

The trial began July 21, 1924, in Chicago’s Criminal Courts Building. In his opening statement, Darrow withdrew the not guilty pleas previously entered at the arraignment in June and pronounced Leopold and Loeb guilty of murder and kidnapping for ransom. Darrow said that “no one in this case believes that these defendants should be released or are competent to be.” Instead, Darrow said it was his duty to the defendants, their families and society “to see that they are safely and permanently excluded from the public.” Only by changing their pleas did Darrow think they could avoid death sentences. This shrewd piece of legal maneuvering prevented Leopold and Loeb...
from being tried by a jury, which most likely would have ended with them being hanged.

Using evidence from what Hal Higdon, author of The Crime of the Century: The Leopold and Loeb Case, called “the most comprehensive psychiatric study ever made of two defendants in a murder case,” and his own formidable skills as a lawyer, Darrow set out to convince Judge John R. Caverly that Leopold and Loeb shouldn’t be executed because of their youth and psychological aberrations. Throughout the hearing, the defendants smirked, laughed and showed no sense of remorse for their deed. Meanwhile, in a historic, three-day oral summation, Darrow saved their lives. If not for his performance in the celebrated Scopes-Monkey trial one year later, his defense of Leopold and Loeb would have been viewed as his most brilliant case.

On Sept. 10, 1924, Caverly sentenced Leopold and Loeb to life in the Illinois State Penitentiary for murder, and to an additional 99 years each for the crime of kidnapping for ransom. Additionally, Caverly urged the state “never to admit these defendants to parole … If this course is preserved in the punishment of these defendants it will satisfy the ends of justice and safeguard the interests of society.”

After their jailers took the pair to their temporary jail cells, Leopold requested steak dinners with chocolate éclairs for dessert. Loeb asked that the steaks be smothered in onions.

The story of Leopold and Loeb didn’t end with their incarceration. As the years passed, newspapers would often revisit the case when similar crimes occurred. Other criminals would say they imitated Leopold and Loeb. On Jan. 28, 1936, a fellow inmate murdered Loeb, slashing him nearly 60 times with a razor blade. Commenting on Loeb’s death, Darrow said he “had always hoped that both would live long enough to get out of prison. . . . Death is the easier sentence compared with a life behind the walls of a prison. He is better off than Leopold – better off dead.”

Despite Darrow’s comments, Leopold made the best of his situation. Before Loeb died, the two men established a correspondence-school system for other prisoners. Leopold also reorganized a prison library, acted as a human guinea pig as part of a project to find a cure for malaria during World War II and learned to be an x-ray technician. In the early 1950s, he began writing his autobiography. All of these activities would lead to his eventual, and what many would think unwarranted, parole in 1958.

**Parole and Redemption**

The Church of the Brethren, and especially W. Harold Row, played an important part in Leopold’s parole. In 1953, when Leopold was preparing for his first hearing before the parole board, his brother contacted the Brethren Service Commission to see if they would help him if he were paroled. Row, who graduated from Bridgewater College in 1933, was executive secretary of the BSC at the time. While Row and the BSC wouldn’t weigh in on whether or not Leopold should be paroled, they did offer a job and a home to him in Castaner, Puerto Rico. After Leopold was finally released from prison on March 13, 1958, Row flew with him to the new home and new life that he had promised.

Leopold remained in Puerto Rico for the rest of his life and continued his association
with the Church of the Brethren. Eventually, he would be allowed to travel to the United States and internationally. He also remained friends with Row. In an article published in the Messenger after Row’s death, Leopold wrote, “Protestantism does not have a catalog of saints, but in my own private hagiology, Harold Row will always be St. Harold of Elgin.”

Leopold’s connection to Row and the Church of the Brethren would lead to a connection with Bridgewater College. In the mid 1960s, while meeting with members of the World Health Organization in Geneva, Switzerland, concerning research on parasitology, Leopold was the house guest of Dr. William Willoughby, a Bridgewater College professor of philosophy and religion who was temporarily working for the Brethren Service Commission. His visit with the Willoughby family was recorded in the November 1991 issue of Bridgewater magazine.

Willoughby was impressed by Leopold and invited him to speak at Bridgewater in 1968. In March of that year, Leopold visited and spoke at a morning convocation for juniors and seniors in Cole Hall. He also was the guest speaker at a Lambda Society dinner meeting at the Belle Meade Restaurant (now Pano’s), in Harrisonburg, Va. The themes for the addresses dealt with life after prison and the future of the penal system in a free society. Retired professor Robert McFadden, who was director of religious activities at the time, remembered walking with Leopold on campus and recalled how he was able to identify specific birds by the sounds they made. Leopold was considered an expert ornithologist and wrote a book on the birds of Puerto Rico.

As he had with the Willoughbys, Row, and many other members of the Brethren community, Leopold made a favorable impression upon people during his visit to Bridgewater. On May 28, 1969, the College’s Council on Education recommended to the faculty that Leopold receive an honorary degree, in either ornithology or parasitology. Willoughby, who spearheaded the movement, envisioned a one-day seminar, “The Church and the Offender,” that would include an address by Leopold followed by an official conferral of the degree.

At the faculty meeting the next day, Willoughby presented the council’s recommendation and asked for a vote by secret ballot to approve Leopold for the degree. Although the vote was in favor of granting the degree, a number of faculty abstained. Several conversations followed, including one “in which vigorous objection to the honorary degree was voiced,” according to the meeting minutes. Later in the meeting, then President Wayne F. Geisert suggested that the matter be held in abeyance until a faculty meeting in the fall. At the first meeting of the new school year, the faculty tabled the matter and never considered it again.

Nathan Leopold never returned to Bridgewater College. He died of heart disease on Aug. 29, 1971, in Puerto Rico, where he had spent the last 13 years of his life. News of his death appeared in newspapers throughout the country, including the New York Times. While the article told of his contributions to society since his parole, it also ran a famous photograph of him, Loeb and Darrow at the arraignment in 1924, with a headline that declared, “Nathan F. Leopold of 1924 Murder Case Is Dead.” Despite more than 40 years of trying, Leopold could not outrun the ghost of Bobby Franks.

Harold Row, perhaps Leopold’s biggest supporter, had died of cancer a little over a month
earlier. A much smaller obituary in the *Times* identified Row as “Capital Churchman” and mentioned his connection with Leopold. And of all the tributes paid to this Brethren legend, perhaps one by Leopold summed up Row best. “To attempt to describe Harold Row, I have to do violence to the English language,” wrote Leopold. “I have to coin a new superlative for the adjective good. For Harold was the goodest man I ever knew.”

**Icons**

While Nathan Leopold – icon of one of America’s most notorious crimes – never returned to Bridgewater College, Harold Row – icon of the Brethren faith – posthumously ensured his memory. In the mid 1980s, when Bridgewater created the W. Harold Row Memorial Endowment, Chicago attorney Elmer Gertz was selected as an honorary member of the endowment committee. Gertz, who represented Leopold in his successful parole effort in 1958, helped the College raise money for the endowment and spoke at the third annual W. Harold Row lecture series in the fall of 1985. In two speeches, “The Inspiration of Public Service” and “Life With a Purpose,” Gertz honored Row, spoke of his relationship with Leopold, and, à la Clarence Darrow, voiced his opposition to capital punishment.

Row’s widow and his two children also had a hand in keeping the Leopold-Row connection alive at Bridgewater College. Between 1981 and 1993, Leona Zigler Row Eller donated 30 artifacts to the Reuel B. Pritchett Museum. Mainly Russian memorabilia acquired by her husband through his work in the 1960s with the Russian Orthodox Church and the Church of the Brethren, the items also included a small, wooden cross icon given to Row by Leopold. In 1994, Row’s children, William H. Row Jr., and Betty Joanne Row Green, donated a 16th century Greek icon that had been purchased by Leopold and given to Row within a year of both men’s deaths.

As you probably have guessed by now, the icons found by President Stone are connected to Harold Row and Nathan Leopold. The initials on the towel belong to W. Harold Row Sr., and the inscription on the icon reveals that it was a gift to Row from Leopold. According to Brydon DeWitt, former vice-president of development at Bridgewater, Leona Row Eller brought the three artifacts to the College and presented them to former President Geisert.

Although an appraiser may be able to assign a monetary value to these religious objects, there is a value to them that transcends dollars and cents. They remind us that good and evil will always exist. They remind us that few, if any, of society’s problems are black and white, or cut and dried. They remind us that forgiveness isn’t always easy to give, and that love and understanding can sometimes bridge the greatest divide.

*Dale Harter is Bridgewater College archivist and curator of the Reuel B. Pritchett Museum.*
Dr. Kathleen G. Arthur, professor of art history at James Madison University, visited Bridgewater College to appraise and evaluate the three icons found in the president’s vault. While earning her Ph.D. from New York University (Institute of Fine Arts), she minored in Byzantine Art. She teaches Early Medieval Art at JMU. A summary of her findings follows:

**Deisis Icon Painting on Wood Panel**

Written on the back of this icon is the inscription “A Gift from Nathan F. Leopold.” Of the three icons, it is the only one that definitely was owned by Nathan Leopold then given to Harold Row. According to Arthur’s research, this is an 18th–19th century Greek or Cretan icon.

Portrayed on the icon are: God the Father Enthroned with the Virgin Mary and Saint John the Baptist on the top level; on the lower level is pictured a monastic saint with a white beard, a Bishop saint holding a Bible and blessing with an Eastern Orthodox hand gesture, and a female martyr carrying a cross.

Arthur believes this may have been used as a portable icon or as a decoration for the iconostasis of a smaller church or chapel. The identity of the saints might indicate a monastic environment.

**Russian Lacquer Box**

Arthur believes this box was made sometime between 1930 and 1970. It represents a typical example of the type of Russian folk art developed by icon painters after the Russian Revolution and the dissolution of the monasteries. This appears to be an example of the lacquerware that Russian icon painters began to produce after the destruction of icons and outlawing of religion in the Russian revolution.

Depicted on the box is an artist shown painting or copying the painting of the Holy Trinity by Andrei Rublev (1360-1430). Rublev was the most famous icon painter in history. The actual icon depicted on the box is owned by the Tretyakov Gallery, in Moscow. Arthur said this box is “particularly interesting because under the guise of painting a famous artist, they were able to incorporate a religious scene, even though icons and icon painting was against the law.”

**Christ Pantokrator Icon**

This icon appears to be a 17th–18th century Russian icon, depicting the Christ Pantokrator (all-powerful God). Christ is shown holding the Bible open in his left hand and blessing with his right hand. It is a painted image covered with a gilded metal cover called an “oklad.” According to Arthur, the Pantokrator is one of the most important themes in Late Byzantine art.

Like the Deisis Icon Painting, it probably was used as a portable icon or as a decoration for the iconostasis of a smaller church or chapel. It also could have been displayed in the “icon corner” of a private home.

The first of two other icons found in the president’s vault is a 16th century Greek icon featuring three metallic imprints. This icon was purchased by Nathan Leopold, given to Harold Row in 1970 and donated to the Reuel B. Pritchett Museum by Row’s children, William H. Row Jr., and Betty Joanne Row Green. The final icon is a wooden Orthodox cross, undated, which was also given to Row by Leopold. Row’s widow, Leona Row Eller, donated it to the museum in 1981.