



ONCE UPON A TIME IN NORTH PARK
The Search for Harry J. Kelly, Continued
By Katherine Hon

Harry J. Kelly, the first owner of this writer's Dwight Street bungalow, was with the San Diego Police Department from December 1915 to June 1943. The second son of an Irish blacksmith, Harry served as Patrolman, Detective, Chief of Detectives, and Acting Chief of Police. In the last issue, I described my search for Harry and his wife Julia through the old city telephone directories and other records. In this issue, the story is about Harry's career and final resting place.

The San Diego Jail Register presents a fascinating hourly inventory of who arrested whom from 1912 to 1927. Twenty-four-year-old Harry Kelly makes his first arrest just after midnight on Christmas Eve, 1915. He collars P. Finnegan, an Irish laborer, for disturbing the peace. Nearly 20 years later, Harry recalls his first arrest in a March 1934 San Diego Union profile: "While on his beat he found a big Irishman choking a Jew. 'Well, it wasn't a joke, either,' he explained, 'because I had to take my countryman to the station.'" In the late nights and early mornings of 1916, Harry arrests waiters, cooks, and laborers for vagrancy and being drunk. One May evening he arrests a chauffeur for reckless driving. He teams with George Sears, who later serves as Chief of Police from

September 1934 to April 1939, to arrest two men for battery. He teams with others to make arrests for highway robbery and manslaughter.

In October 1917, Harry Kelly and George Sears, along with four others, are promoted to Investigators. In 1922, Harry is promoted to Detective Sergeant, and in 1929 he becomes a Lieutenant. In 1932, Harry is promoted to Chief of Detectives, and he leads the bureau for 11 years. When Harry retires in 1943, the bureau retires the title with him, appointing his second-in-charge M. J. Donnelly to captain of detectives.

One of Harry's most horrific cases occurs in 1933, when elderly Mrs. Straw is murdered and her dismembered body is found in two burlap sacks floating in the bay. The San Diego Union reports the story on October 16 with an inset article about how the newsboys' cries of "Extra! Extra! Extra!" stop Harry, who is on vacation at the time and in town only an hour to prepare for another week-long trip. He buys a copy of the Sunday paper, sees the headlines, and an hour later is "at central police headquarters, directing the hunt for the fiendish slayer of Mrs. Laura Ella Straw. His vacation was over!" Two years later, on May 24, 1935, the murderer is interviewed at Folsom Prison on the eve of his hanging. In an eerie parallel to Harry's Sunday alert to the crime, the murderer relates that it was the newsboys yelling extras about the finding of the body that signaled him to make his (temporary) escape.

Harry's nearly 30 years on the police force spanned considerable local political turmoil. When George Sears retired under pressure from the mayor in April 1939, Harry was named Acting Chief of Police, and served until July 18, 1939. When appointment of a new chief was imminent, rumors of a police department purge flew. In a "local politics" column, Richard Pourade wrote: "Certain not to be purged is Capt. Harry J. Kelly, chief of detectives, who is acting chief of police. He has lots of friends, his honesty has never been questioned, and there is no officer in the detective bureau rated capable of taking over his job. And, if Captain Kelly is left in the chief's job on a temporary basis long enough, there might not be any cleaning up left for his successor."

The 1934 San Diego Union profile of Harry commented he "knows many San Diego secrets, that he declines to divulge." His last secret was where he died and was buried. Through Ancestry.com, I found that he died on February 4, 1955 in Alameda. His death certificate from Alameda County noted that his body had been taken to San Diego. On a hunch from talking with descendants of Julia's brother, I found Harry buried with his wife and her sisters, brother, and mother at Holy Cross Cemetery. Completing the life arc, on the 50th anniversary of Harry's death, I brought flowers to honor a notable North Park resident.