

1956

## John F. Tyrrell, Pioneer Document Examiner--1861-1955

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# POLICE SCIENCE

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JOHN F. TYRRELL, PIONEER DOCUMENT EXAMINER

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1861-1955

The questioned document profession lost a great friend and spokesman when John F. Tyrrell of Milwaukee passed away November 11, 1955, at the age of 94. In a practice covering a period of over sixty years, Mr. Tyrrell advanced and influenced his beloved profession in a manner hard to equal.

John Fawcett Tyrrell was born in Australia, January 18, 1861. He came to this country as a boy, and as a young man was employed by the Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company—an association that was to continue for forty-five years. Almost immediately he developed an interest in handwriting as an art and in time became intrigued with determining indications of certain types of illness from handwriting and with identifying the signers of policies. As his interests sharpened, Mr. Tyrrell became an expert engrosser and was soon turning out some of the finest penmanship seen in Wisconsin or any other state. Of the many items that flowed from his versatile pen, one was a magnificent history of Wisconsin engrossed for the State Historical Society on a scroll well over six feet high.



As time passed, Mr. Tyrrell's inquisitive, energetic nature led him more and more into the field of questioned document examination. His first court case in 1896 involved a colored boy who had cut off his ears to elicit sympathy for his people who were being persecuted by the Ku Klux Klan. The anonymous letter threatening the mutilation was found to have been written by the boy himself. He was tried and convicted, but as Mr. Tyrrell has stated: "My young idealism was given somewhat of a jolt at his conviction, and I have wondered many times since if justice is always best served by our uncompromising courts of law."

In the first nationally publicized case of his career—the famous Molineux murder—Mr. Tyrrell was called to New York. Molineux, socially prominent and a

member of the fashionable Knickerbocker Club, was on trial for his life. He was accused of sending a murderous dose of Bromo Seltzer, embellished with cyanide of mercury, to his bitter enemy, Henry Cornish, Athletic Director of the club. The lethal poison had actually found a victim in Cornish's aunt who happened to be suffering from a headache when it was delivered. The only clue to the sender was the handwritten address on the package. Mr. Tyrrell established that Molineux had addressed it. While the other witnesses were sightseeing about New York, Mr. Tyrrell remained in his room at the old Astor House and, using a drawing board, copied the disputed writing over and over until he became familiar with every detail of its execution. This persistence rewarded him many-fold when on cross examination the defense attorney, Weeks, tried to break down Mr. Tyrrell's testimony but found to his dismay that Mr. Tyrrell was prepared for all possible questions. The newspapers next day screamed the headline, "Wizard Foils Weeks."

One of Mr. Tyrrell's many talents was his ability to recount vividly the high points and evidence of famous trials in which he had participated. Both as a public lecturer and to visitors to his office he delighted in showing his court demonstration photographs which helped to convict Bruno Hauptmann as the kidnapper of the Lindbergh baby—the trial in which Mr. Tyrrell was one of eight state document examiners. In reviewing his identification of the handlettering of Leopold, one of the two defendants in the famous Chicago Leopold-Loeb murder trial of the 20's, Mr. Tyrrell often recalled his encounter with the famous Clarence Darrow, the defense attorney. Mr. Tyrrell was prepared for the most searching cross examination but "Much to my astonishment Darrow stated to the court, 'No cross examination of this witness, Your Honor—We know Mr. Tyrrell's reputation and that he would not say what is not so.' That was unquestionably the finest compliment ever paid me, and coming from an adversary of Darrow's mettle, it was doubly gratifying."

Throughout his entire career John F. Tyrrell was never content to sit back and relax on his laurels. He was an inveterate researcher continuously looking for new ways to investigate documents and demonstrate his opinion in court. He was one of the first experts to use court photographs and also pioneered in techniques for the decipherment of charred documents. He, as one of a small group of pioneers, helped to create the questioned document profession, bringing it out of the dark ages of legal indifference and into the present status of an accepted aid to the administration of justice.

It could be said of John F. Tyrrell that he led an active and full life, devoted in a large degree to the promotion of justice and helping his fellow man. He was active in civic and church work; was a member of the Milwaukee Civic Alliance and many other community enterprises. A certificate for patriotic service in World War II was presented to him, a fitting tribute to his unselfish contribution to his country's welfare.

John Fawcett Tyrrell was an outstanding example of the great things that can happen in America when a young man with a fine mind, a big heart, and an inquiring nature decides upon a path and diligently follows it. The questioned document examiners of America owe much to this outstanding pioneer.

DONALD DOUD