

Bon Appétit Ruling Class

The Anarchist Poison Soup Plot

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This wild account of a plan to decapitate the Chicago ruling class in 1916 first appeared on the website of the Hoosier State Chronicles: Indiana's Digital Newspaper Program.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20250401081025/https://blog.newspapers.library.in.gov/the-anarchist-soup-plot/>

The Fifth Estate rarely publishes reprints, particularly if they have first appeared online. However, this story of extreme class warfare seems unknown to most of those interested in the history of the anarchist movement, so an exception is being made.

The original longer version with many historic images is available on the Hoosier State Chronicles site.

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You like alphabet soup? Well, if an anarchist chef prepared it, you'd better take your spoon and dig out these letters first: A-R-S-E-N-I-C.

"Jean Crones" who, at a banquet in Chicago in 1916, attempted to assassinate the city's Roman Catholic archbishop, the Governor of Illinois, and three-hundred priests, bankers, and city officials—not with bullets, but with bouillon.

When anarchism came to the U.S. in the late 1800s, it was closely tied to the struggles of German, Italian, and East European immigrants. Iron-fisted reactions to Europe's 19<sup>th</sup>-century revolutions spurred philosophers and workers to declare that "Property is Theft" and to strive for the abolition of all governments, including democracies.

Since most anarchists had immigrated from countries with state religions, their animosity toward priestly authority should come as no surprise. During the Russian Revolution and on into the 1920s and '30s, radicals (anarchists among them) in Russia, Mexico, and Spain launched all-out wars on religion.

The scene of the crime: Chicago's prestigious University Club. Coming together to honor both Abraham Lincoln's birthday and George Mundelein's installment as Chicago Archbishop, about three-hundred guests attended, from Illinois Governor Edward E. Dunne and ex-Governor Charles Deneen to Chicago's ex-Mayor Carter Harrison, Jr. Most of the other guests were Catholic priests from all over the U.S.

As Chicago's health commissioner, city police investigators, and a chemist later determined, someone that day in 1916, slipped enough arsenic into a pot of chicken bouillon to kill two-hundred people or more. One version of the tale was that a miracle occurred. At the last minute, ninety-six guests showed up unexpectedly, prompting kitchen staff to resort to a time-honored remedy: watering down the soup.

Yet apparently the real disaster was averted by slow, talkative eaters. As Monsignor Evers, pastor of St. Andrew's Church in New York, told the Chicago Daily Tribune, some guests were "so engrossed in conversation" that they missed out on the soup altogether or had only eaten a spoonful or two by the time their neighbors started to have stomach cramps.

With many diners complaining of sudden stomach pains, a doctor at the banquet suspected that the animal fat used to prepare the soup stock must have gone sour; normal food-poisoning, in other words. He went to the

kitchen and quickly prepared an “emetic of mustard” to induce vomiting. The result is unappetizing to consider, but the elegant dining room must have become a surreal and disgusting scene. Yet the doctor’s speedy remedy probably saved many lives. Scores of guests were sickened, some violently, but only one guest, Father John O’Hara of Brooklyn, died. Archbishop Mundelein himself was unaffected by the lethal soup, but Chicago authorities kept him under a guard of 150 mounted police and detectives for the next few days.

Police quickly traced the foiled murder plot to a certain “Jean Crones,” assistant chef at the University Club, said to be about 30-years-old. Crones “often inveighed” against social inequality, said the Club’s officials. When police raided his apartment, Crones the “souper anarchist” was gone, but investigators discovered a stash of anarchist literature (“a library of hatred,” wrote one paper), a chemical laboratory and all the evidence of poison they needed to go after him.

As the manhunt for Crones spread out, he or someone masquerading as him, began to tease the police with flippant, irreverent letters, taunting the cops for being unable to find him. These letters and other baffling clues began to pour in from all parts of the country. When the story made national news the next day, a hotel in Binghamton, New York, reluctantly announced that it was confident Crones had been their assistant chef. “Crones was remembered by his fellow workers here as a dabbler in chemistry and photography... One day the whim seized him to have his own likeness snapped, and he had one of his kitchen comrades aim the camera.” That photo and an artist’s sketch were plastered over many American newspapers.

What happened next rapidly turned into a comedy of errors, one that went on for years.

During the run-up to World War I, when the loyalty of German-Americans constantly fell under suspicion, unfounded reports came in that Crones was a German immigrant, a saboteur and spy for the Kaiser. Other reports insisted that he was French or Italian. A biography of anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti claims that Crones was an Italian named Nestor Dondoglio. Chicago’s Police Department officially called off its search for the mysterious fugitive in 1919. Yet Dondoglio evaded police until 1932, when he died on a farm in Connecticut where an Italian family had given him shelter.

Whatever the elusive truth behind Crone’s identity was, for several years after the failed soup plot he became a sort of comedic bogeyman, stalking America from sea to shining sea. Souper spottings occurred all over: in rural Mt. Airy and Oxford, North Carolina; in the mining town of Leadville, Colorado; and in towns so obscure they weren’t even spelled right in newspapers (like Spalding, Nebraska, and Moberly, Missouri.) Crones, or a clever prankster, or a whole team of anarchists, harassed the police from New York City to Portland, Oregon. A chef from Iowa City was arrested simply because he looked like the photograph snapped at the kitchen in Binghamton, as was another chef from Chicago while passing through Springfield, Ohio.

Most of the so-called appearances of Crones, however, were probably imaginary or even deliberate hoaxes. In some cases, it sounds like the police might have used the poison-souper scare as an excuse to terrorize workers. Others had more comic twists.

Within a few days of his apparent escape from Chicago, the phantom assassin or his clever doppelganger was on the West Coast, teasing Chicago police from a distance, mailing them his own fingerprints and threatening to kill “some bishop” in Oregon:

On St. Patrick’s Day that March, Chicago Catholics were still so jittery that the Irish Fellowship Club had to appoint an official food taster for its annual banquet. He tasted every dish for over an hour. And, survived.

It’s very possible that prank-minded Americans were just having fun with the police and the press. Yet by the summer of 1916, the spate of “J.C.” sightings were still pouring in: Two of the most humorous and unlikely sightings occurred on the East Coast. In Pittsburgh, that May, locals were convinced that Crones had become a nun. In Luzon, New York, an undercover sleuth wearing false hair and whiskers was arrested by a town cop who was confident he had nabbed the elusive Crones at last. The man turned out to be a 26-year-old private eye from New York City, busy investigating a theft of \$250 from the Hygienic Brush Company. In spite of this legitimate alibi, county prosecutors charged the man with “masquerading.”

The real Jean Crones never surfaced. Yet the fictional specter he evoked, that of the violent, supposedly illiterate immigrant bent on destroying American institutions and lives, took on a frightening reality of its own at a time when immigrant loyalty was suspect. It’s often forgotten that the Communist witch hunts inaugurated by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s were preceded by a more substantial Red Scare after World War I.

A fiery and brilliant editorial in the Kentucky Irish American, a pro-immigrant paper published in Louisville, conjured up the fear that the figure of Jean Crones was actually created by nativists. For immigration's enemies, the anarchist threat was reason enough for the U.S. Congress to all but close down Ellis Island.



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