

# ON THE BOOKSHELF

## "The Axeman of New Orleans: the true story"

By Miriam C. Davis of Montgomery, Ala. (Chicago Review Press, distributed by IPG Books)

In the post-Civil War era, Italian workers were brought to Louisiana to do the tough manual labor that slaves had formerly done. They faced an alien culture and racial prejudice. By saving their meager wages, these Italian immigrants opened fruit stands and corner grocery stores. By 1920 Italians owned half of all groceries in New Orleans. They faced some opposition from native grocery vendors and a group of thugs who starting in 1890 called themselves "The Black Hand" and exhorted money with the threat of bombings and arson.

From 1910-1919, the worst thing these Italian store-owners faced was an anonymous serial killer who came to be called "The Axeman". This violent murderer would quietly break into the home next to the store by gently removing a pane of glass and slipping inside without shoes. Once inside they proceeded to the bedroom where they wielded a hatchet or axe found on the premises and brutally hacked at least one adult to death. Sometimes an infant in the bed would also be slaughtered, and often the mother as well.

Clues were almost non-existent in the primitive forensic police techniques, which seldom included even fingerprinting. The police considered the Axeman a maniac who employed an excessively violent weapon to maximize carnage. The victims didn't always die, but if they survived they were maimed or disfigured for life.

In one case, an innocent neighbor Iorlando Jordano who was also an Italian grocer and his teenage son Frank were unjustly arrested and convicted of the brutal attack on the Cortimiglias. Their daughter Mary died, husband Charlie was emotionally wrecked, and Rosie turned to prostitution to earn some money for the financially-distressed marriage. Distraught and haunted by her guilty conscience, she told the police she had misidentified the Jordanos. They were innocent. It took the DA almost a year to decide not to retry them for murder. Finally, they were free.

Police officials urged cooperative and advised against panic, but had no solid leads. In the few cases where there seemed to be a motive for the violent attacks, the accused had solid alibis. In 1920, a widow shot and killed a New Orleans man named Joseph Mumfre in Los Angeles. He might have been the Axeman, but the evidence against him was circumstantial.

Whatever happened to him? Who was he? No one knows. The killings stopped after 1920. The Axeman was probably a white man, blue collar, who held some intense grudge against Italian grocers as a group but not apparently as individuals. A sociopath,

he probably had experience as a thief. A coward and probable drug addict, he died as anonymously as he lived.