

BILLIE SOL ESTES

Swindler and con man

BORN: January 10, 1925; near Clyde, Texas

MAJOR OFFENSES: Swindling, fraud, interstate transportation of securities taken by fraud, and conspiracy

ACTIVE: 1950's-1960's

LOCALE: West Texas and Washington, D.C.

SENTENCE: Eight years in prison for swindling, reversed by the U.S. Supreme Court; fifteen years for mail fraud and conspiracy, upheld by the Supreme Court

EARLY LIFE

Born in 1925 near Clyde, Texas, Billie Sol Estes (BIHL-ee sahl EHS-teez) grew up on his family farm. His financial genius was revealed at an early age. While still in high school, he borrowed thirty-five hundred dollars from a local bank to buy government surplus grain to sell for profit. After he married in 1946, he moved to his own farm near Pecos, Texas. When electricity costs for irrigation pumps rose excessively, he formed a company providing natural gas-powered pumps to farmers. Then Estes started a business distributing cheap anhydrous ammonia fertilizer. By 1952, he was a millionaire and was named one of the Outstanding Young Men of the Year by the U.S. Junior Chamber of Commerce.

CRIMINAL CAREER

In the late 1950's, the U.S. Department of Agriculture established allotments and quotas for cotton farmers in order to control production. To offset resulting business losses, Estes turned his fertilizer business into a multimillion-dollar scam. In 1958 he owed \$550,000 to Commercial Solvents of New York for fertilizer. Estes made a deal with the firm to defer the debt and lend him \$350,000, plus \$225,000 to build storage facilities. He used money from fertilizer sales to build grain storage facilities, then collected storage fees under federal price-support programs. He assigned the fees to Commercial Solvents to get more fertilizer for distribution. He undercut the prices of competitors until they went bankrupt, then bought the failed firms' assets cheaply and absorbed their businesses. In 1959-1961, Commercial Solvents collected \$7,000,000 in grain storage fees paid to Estes by the federal government.

Estes, however, still owed Commercial Solvents \$5,700,000. He devised another scheme involving anhydrous ammonia storage tanks. He persuaded a Texas tank manufacturer to let area farmers buy nonexistent tanks, sign bogus mortgages on them, then lease them to Estes. Estes collected \$30 million in loans and storage fees and used nonexistent storage tanks and fake mortgages as collateral to borrow an additional \$22 million from finance companies in Chicago and New York.

Still in debt in 1960, Estes began yet another scheme using cotton allotments and the eminent domain exception for farmers whose lands were taken by government for public projects. Estes persuaded displaced farmers in Texas, Oklahoma, Alabama, and Georgia to buy Texas farmland from him, transfer their cotton allotments to the new land, and lease the lands and allotments to Estes. The lease default clause virtually ensured that Estes' initial fifty-dollar-per-acre lease payment would effectively transfer ownership of three thousand acres of land and allotments to Estes. He then used nonexistent cotton crops as collateral for bank loans and claimed subsidies from the government for growing and storing the nonexistent cotton. The Agriculture Department finally investigated the deals and found them to



Billie Sol Estes, as depicted on the cover of Time in 1962.
(Courtesy, Time, Inc.)

be fraudulent. Estes was fined for growing cotton under illegal allotments.

Throughout the 1950's and 1960's, Estes made large contributions to the Democrat Party and to candidates for office, including Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson. It was Estes' defeat in a Pecos school board election that led to the exposure of his massive fraud. A local newspaper, the *Independent*, had opposed Estes' candidacy; to get revenge, Estes established a rival paper. The *Independent* investigated Estes and publicly exposed his storage tank fraud. The finance companies immediately sent investigators to Pecos, as did the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

LEGAL ACTION AND OUTCOME

On March 29, 1961, the FBI arrested Estes on charges of interstate transportation of bogus mortgages. He was released on bond under federal indictment for fraud and state indictment for theft. In March, 1962, the FBI arrested Estes on charges of fraud and theft in a multimillion-dollar swindle involving storage tanks, phony mortgages, and cotton allotments. On April 5, 1962, a federal grand jury indicted Estes and several associates on fifty-seven counts of fraud and conspiracy. Trials were scheduled in Tyler, Texas, for September 24 and in El Paso for December 10, 1962. Estes' trial in Tyler began on October 30, 1962; he was convicted of fraud and sentenced to eight years in prison. The U.S. Supreme Court reversed the conviction on June 7, 1965, because of pretrial publicity.

In the El Paso trial, Estes was charged with twenty-nine counts of mail fraud, interstate transportation of securities taken by fraud, and conspiracy. On December 11, 1962, the judge split the indictment, ordering trial to be held in Pecos on alleged violations that occurred in that jurisdiction. Trial in El Paso was set for March 11, 1963.

On March 28, 1963, the jury found Estes guilty of mail fraud and conspiracy. On April 16, 1963, he was sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment. After the Supreme Court refused to hear his appeal on January 15, 1965, Estes was committed to the federal penitentiary at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, and served seven years. After his release on parole in 1983, Estes and his family settled in Brady, Texas.

IMPACT

Congressional investigations revealed widespread political complicity in the Billie Sol Estes scandals. The U.S. Department of Agriculture subsidy

programs came under intense scrutiny. Three agriculture officials were forced to resign, as was Assistant Secretary of Labor Jerry Holleman. Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman, with his own career in jeopardy, created the first Office of Inspector General, which led to legislation in 1978 establishing twelve federal Offices of Inspector Generals. The Estes scandals became so embarrassing for Democrats that President John F. Kennedy considered dropping Vice President Johnson from the ticket in 1964 because of his close association with Estes.

FURTHER READING

Barmash, Isadore. *Great Business Disasters: Swindlers, Burglars, and Frauds in American Industry*. Chicago: Playboy Press, 1972. Chapter 3 discusses Estes' initial success in agriculture and subsequent turn to illegal activities.

Estes, Pam. *Billie Sol: King of Texas Wheeler-Dealers*. Abilene, Tex.: Noble Craft Books, 1983. A daughter's sympathetic account of Estes' schemes.

Williams, Roger M., ed. and comp. *The Super Crooks: A Rogues' Gallery of Famous Hustlers, Swindlers, and Thieves*. Chicago: Playboy Press, 1973. Places Estes among the foremost scoundrels of the twentieth century.

—*Marguerite R. Plummer*

SEE ALSO: Tino De Angelis; Susanna Mildred Hill; Joseph Weil.

ALBERT FISH

Child molester, serial killer, and cannibal

BORN: May 19, 1870; Washington, D.C.

DIED: January 16, 1936; Sing Sing Correctional Facility, Ossining, New York

ALSO KNOWN AS: Hamilton Albert Fish (full name); Frank Howard; Robert Hayden; Boogey Man; Gray Man; Moon Maniac; Brooklyn Vampire; Werewolf of Wisteria

MAJOR OFFENSES: Murder of eleven-year-old Grace Budd; additional child kidnappings and murders

ACTIVE: June 3, 1928-February 11, 1927

LOCALE: New York City; claimed to have attacked children in twenty-three states

SENTENCE: Death by electrocution for first-degree murder

EARLY LIFE

The father of Hamilton Fish (fish), who claimed descent from “Revolutionary stock,” was seventy-five years old at Hamilton’s birth. When the boy was five, his father died, and his mother sent Albert to St. John’s Orphanage, Washington, D.C. There Fish changed his name to Albert; he also began stammering and wetting the bed. Worse, his sadomasochism flowered: “I saw so many boys whipped,” he said, “it ruined my mind.”

Fish may have been a homosexual prostitute in his teens. At fifteen, he left school to work in a grocery store; soon after, he was apprenticed to a painter and decorator. Fish married an eighteen-year-old woman, Anna, when he was twenty-eight. They had six children, but his wife left him after almost twenty years of marriage in 1917. They were never divorced; Fish raised the children and was a good father. He had three subsequent marriages, short and bigamous, and played quasi-sexual games with a stepdaughter, Mary.

CRIMINAL CAREER

The entirety of Fish’s crimes may never be known. Detective William King, who tirelessly tracked down Fish, suspected Fish murdered four children in New York City alone; psychiatrist Frederic Wertham believed Fish killed at least five, and the police estimated he killed between eight and fifteen children.

However, Fish attacked perhaps hundreds of children. After Anna left him, he worked around the country; he was never arrested but was often driven off by close calls or attention by police or locals. Many of his victims were poor, including African Americans, whom he said the police were less apt to care about. His activities with them, as with himself, involved inflicting pain more than sexual acts, though Fish's gratification was clearly sexual. Influenced by a religious mania, he became obsessed with castrating boys; in St. Louis in 1911, he left one boy bleeding and fled the city. However, Fish's six arrests by 1930, resulting in one prison term and two mental-hospital stays, were for passing a bad check, embezzling, and continually writing graphic, sadomasochistic letters to women.

His most famous victim was eleven-year-old Grace Budd. Fish pre-

A TELLTALE LETTER

Albert Fish was finally caught after he mailed the following anonymous letter to Grace Budd's parents on November 11, 1934, and the authorities traced the stationery:

MY DEAR MRS. BUDD:

In 1894 a friend of mine shipped as a deck hand on the Steamer Tacoma, Capt. John Davis. They sailed from San Francisco for Hong Kong, China. On arriving there he and two others went ashore and got drunk. When they returned the boat was gone. At that time there was famine in China. Meat of any kind was from \$1-3 per pound. So great was the suffering among the very poor that all children under 12 were sold for food in order to keep others from starving. A boy or girl under 14 was not safe in the street. You could go in any shop and ask for steak-chops-or stew meat. Part of the naked body of a boy or girl would be brought out and just what you wanted cut from it. A boy or girl's behind which is the sweetest part of the body and sold as veal cutlet brought the highest price. John stayed there so long he acquired a taste for human flesh. On his return to N.Y. he stole two boys, one 7 and one 11. Took them to his home stripped them naked tied them in a closet. Then burned everything they had on. . . . [They were] roasted in the oven . . . boiled, broiled, fried and stewed. . . .

At that time, I was living at 409 E 100 St. near-right side. He told me so often how good human flesh was I made up my mind to taste it. On Sunday June the 3, 1928 I called on you at 406 W 15 St. Brought you pot cheese-strawberries. We had lunch. Grace sat in my lap and kissed me. I made up my mind to eat her. On the pretense of taking her to a party. You said yes she could go. I took her to an empty house in Westchester I had already picked out. . . . How she did kick-bite and scratch. I choked her to death, then cut her in small pieces so I could take my meat to my rooms. Cook and eat it. How sweet and tender her little ass was roasted in the oven. It took me 9 days to eat her entire body. . . .

Fish, Albert

sented himself as a wealthy farmer named Frank Howard and received permission to take Grace to a birthday party. When she did not return, all the papers covered her kidnapping. Years later, Fish was caught after he sent a repulsive, detailed letter to Grace's parents, mailed November 11, 1934, and King traced the stationery. Grace's bones were found behind Wisteria Cottage, an abandoned house in Westchester County. Fish then confessed to eating parts of Budd's body as well as to beating, killing, and cannibalizing Billy Gaffney, age four, and to killing Francis McDonnell, age eight.

LEGAL ACTION AND OUTCOME

After his arrest, Fish said he no longer cared for life yet subtly appealed to officials and reporters for sympathy. Tried in March, 1935, Fish pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity. He was convicted; some jurors thought Fish was insane but should be executed anyway. An appeals trial and plea to the governor both failed, and Fish was electrocuted.

IMPACT

Albert Fish is known primarily for his bizarre and extreme sexual appetite and for breaking the primal taboo against cannibalism. He also represents the transition of American society from one of trust to one in which strangers became feared. His missing victims, who disappeared around the time that aviator Charles Lindbergh's baby was kidnapped, fueled widespread fear of kidnapping and hence promoted changes in law enforcement.

FURTHER READING

"Albert Fish." *World of Criminal Justice*. 2 vols. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Gale Group, 2002. Short, accurate summary of names, dates, and impact of Fish's crimes.

Brottman, Nikita. *Meat Is Murder! An Illustrated Guide to Cannibal Culture*. New York: Creation, 2001. Good exploration of motives for quasi-sexual cannibalism; erroneously implies that Fish had intercourse with Grace Budd.

Martingale, Moira. *Cannibal Killers*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 1994. Slightly inaccurate but provides insight into Fish's crimes and mental abnormalities.

Schechter, Harold. *Deranged*. New York: Pocket Books, 1990. Well-researched coverage of the acts, police investigation, trial, and social context.

Wertham, Frederic. *The Show of Violence*. New York: Doubleday, 1949. A source from which many writers draw, based on interviews with Fish.

—Bernadette Lynn Bosky

SEE ALSO: Kenneth Bianchi; Angelo Buono, Jr.; Richard Allen Davis; John Wayne Gacy.

PRETTY BOY FLOYD

Bank robber and murderer

BORN: February 3, 1904; Bartow County, Georgia

DIED: October 22, 1934; near Wellsville, Ohio

ALSO KNOWN AS: Charles Arthur Floyd (full name); Chock; James Warren; Mr. Douglas; Jack Hamilton; George Sanders

MAJOR OFFENSES: Bank robbery and murder

ACTIVE: 1925-1934

LOCALE: Midwestern United States

SENTENCE: Four years in prison for robbery; escaped a subsequent sentence of twelve to fifteen years

EARLY LIFE

Pretty Boy Floyd (floyd) was born Charles Floyd on a Georgia farm, the fourth of eight children. His family moved to Oklahoma in 1911, to a farm on the edge of the Cookson Hills. The farm was four hundred square miles of wilderness with few dirt roads, in an agricultural area known for its poverty. By the age of fourteen, Floyd was a harvest laborer, fistfighter, and moonshiner. He hated farming but liked clothes and girls. He married sixteen-year-old Ruby Hargraves in 1924; they had a son the same year.

CRIMINAL CAREER

In 1925, Floyd left home for the harvests again; this time he teamed up with an experienced robber. The pair held up Kroger stores in St. Louis. Floyd was described by victims as young, with apple cheeks. The nickname of another criminal, Pretty Boy Smith, was applied to Floyd. Floyd was sentenced to four years in prison, and his wife divorced him before his release in 1929. While in prison he made criminal friendships and after parole went to Kansas City to renew them. He met twenty-one-year-old Juanita Ash,

Floyd, Pretty Boy



Pretty Boy Floyd. (Courtesy, F.B.I.)

who divorced her husband and became his mistress. He alternated between living with her and with his ex-wife until his death.

As an ex-con, Floyd was harassed by police, for which he grew resentful. In 1929 Floyd's father was shot to death in an argument and his killer acquitted; the man disappeared shortly thereafter—presumably murdered by Floyd. Floyd robbed a bank in Ohio in 1930 and was sentenced to twelve to fifteen years in prison. He jumped from the train taking him to the penitentiary and escaped back to the Cookson Hills. In 1931 he and a partner drove back to Ohio, robbed more banks, and had a gunfight with city police in which Floyd's partner was slain. Floyd killed his first policeman. He again fled to the Cookson Hills.

Floyd went on an Oklahoma bank-robbing spree with a new partner, becoming the most famous bandit in the state. He spent generously to maintain the goodwill of the hill folks among whom he lived. He used his gun more than most professional bank robbers of the era; he also killed for revenge. He was extremely lucky, coming through several shoot-outs unhurt or wounded only superficially. Floyd wore bulletproof vests, sometimes front and back. During his 1931-1932 Oklahoma crime spree, authorities and newspapers blamed him for any large robbery that occurred in the state—which Floyd protested in an interview with a newspaper reporter. Fifty-one bank robberies occurred in Oklahoma in 1931, and Floyd was involved in perhaps half of them.

While home in Oklahoma, Floyd behaved erratically and took odd chances: He visited his mother, robbed a bank in his hometown of Sallisaw, threatened the local sheriff, went to movies, ate lunch in cafés, and attended church. Family members and acquaintances protected him, partly out of loyalty and partly out of fear. In 1932 his partner was killed while robbing a bank without Floyd.

Floyd's final partner was Adam "Eddie" Richetti. In 1933, outlaw Vern Miller contracted Floyd and Richetti to rescue bank robber Frank Nash from being transported to prison by police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The plan went awry as Nash sat inside a police car: The outlaws opened fire with machine guns. Five men, including Nash, died, and two were wounded in what would become known as the Kansas City Massacre. Before Kansas City, Floyd was a regional criminal. Afterward, his name was known nationwide. In 1934, a thousand men raided and searched the Cookson Hills, but Floyd escaped. By August of that year he was the last major outlaw in Oklahoma. He and Richetti, with their girlfriends, drove to Albany, New York, and hid in an apartment.

Several times, Floyd offered to surrender to law enforcement authorities in exchange for life in prison. Oklahoma and the FBI declined the deal. By June, 1934, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover had intensified efforts to find Floyd and ordered him killed on sight. In October, 1934, Floyd and Richetti decided to return to the Cookson Hills. Their car hit a telephone pole in early-morning fog in rural Ohio. Their girlfriends set out for help on foot, while the outlaws hid in the woods. Floyd and Richetti were spotted lying on blankets on the side of a hill, and the police were notified.

LEGAL ACTION AND OUTCOME

In a confused firefight, Richetti was captured, and Floyd ran into the woods. FBI chief Melvin Purvis and two dozen agents hunted him with a hundred local police. Around 3:00 P.M., Floyd walked to a farmhouse, bought a meal of pork chops, and asked for a ride to Youngstown. FBI agents and police suddenly appeared in two cars. Floyd ran across a field toward woods two hundred yards away. Police shot him three times. He died fifteen minutes later, with \$122 on his person. His body was shipped home after money to do so was raised by Oklahoma neighbors. About twenty thousand people attended his funeral.

Richetti was executed in the gas chamber in 1938, weeping with fear.

Floyd, Pretty Boy

Widows of the Kansas City Massacre received five thousand dollars apiece from Congress. Floyd's wife, girlfriend, and family were not prosecuted after his death.

IMPACT

Hoover fired Melvin Purvis for receiving too much newspaper publicity over the death of Pretty Boy Floyd. As a result, Hoover remained the only nationally known personality in the FBI. He stayed on the job until his death in 1972 at the age of seventy-seven. Purvis shot himself in 1960.

Floyd had a significant impact on the public imagination: He was the subject of a ballad by the famous folksinger Woody Guthrie, was mentioned in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and has been the subject of several films. One, *The Story of Pretty Boy Floyd* (1974), starring Martin Sheen, was introduced by Floyd's mother and included Floyd's younger brother in the cast. Floyd was also the subject of more recent films such as *Public Enemies* (2006), starring Leonardo DiCaprio.

FURTHER READING

King, Jeffery S. *The Life and Death of Pretty Boy Floyd*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1998. A well-researched biography based on newspaper and magazine interviews.

Stewart, Tony. *Dillinger: The Hidden Truth*. Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2002. Includes a chapter on public enemies, including Floyd.

Wallis, Michael. *Pretty Boy: The Life and Times of Charles Arthur Floyd*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992. Describes Floyd in the context of the social conditions of his day and argues that he was not involved in the Kansas City Massacre.

—*Jim Pauff*

SEE ALSO: Clyde Barrow; John Dillinger; Baby Face Nelson; Bonnie Parker.