

Grinnell Eccentric Lived In Poverty With \$20,000

H-R Apr 22, 1954
By Claude Grelling

After having lived in abject poverty in indescribably filthy quarters for many years, an eccentric former Grinnell interior decorator who was committed to the county home last week was found to be in the possession of large sums of money which could have provided him with a comfortable retirement.

County and local law enforcement officers and County Attorney Norman McFarlin, who searched James Totton's three rooms above the Arnold Shoe store here after the 89-year-old man was found insane, discovered a large number of bills tucked away amid rotting clothes and other debris which filled the "apartment."

Bundles of Bills

Although no official statement concerning the amount of money was released, informed sources placed the total at more than \$20,000. The money was

found mostly in bundles of bills of varying denominations, including some \$500 bills.

Totton was found two weeks ago Sunday wandering around the downtown business district wearing only a sweat shirt and suit coat. He was asking passers-by directions to the Miles Hardware store and Bates' pharmacy, both of which firms went out of business here more than 20 years ago.

Shut Out of Rooms

He was taken into custody by local police who washed and clothed him. In answer to officers' questions, Totton revealed that he had left his rooms for some purpose and that the door had swung shut behind him, locking his keys inside.

Obviously out of touch with reality, he was given a hearing before the insane commission and committed to the county

home. McFarlin was appointed temporary guardian.

A preliminary check of Totton's rooms last week revealed the nearly indescribable conditions in which the old man had been living for a number of years.

Junk and Moldy Food

All of the rooms were filthy beyond description and strewn with old clothes, discarded junk and scraps of food moldy with age. Some of the money was recovered then, but the remainder was not found until a thorough search was organized Saturday.

All of the cash was shipped at once to the Des Moines National bank. It gave off such a strong odor that bank officials there reportedly decided not to put it into circulation but rather to exchange it for new bills.

Always Eccentric

According to local sources, Totton had once been known as one of the most skilled interior decorators in town. Always eccentric, he refused to permit persons wishing to pay him to enter his rooms, instead having them push the bills and cash underneath the door. Appointments for work were made in the same manner.

A sister of Totton's once reportedly spent nearly a week in Grinnell trying to reach him, but the old man refused to meet her or permit her to enter his rooms. She left town without having talked to him.

Totton apparently never had any friends in town and was reported to have salvaged his food from garbage cans for several years. He refused for a long time to have electric lights installed in his room, preferring instead an old kerosene lamp.

'Electric' Light

When law officers searched his flat, however, they found a mock-up electric ceiling light, complete with socket, bulb and shade, but suspended from the ceiling by a double length of string.

Police are now looking for possible relatives. Totton, meanwhile, is at the county home where, according to Mrs. Kenneth Haynes, superintendent, he is slowly improving and causes no trouble.

James Totten Dies at Monte

Aged Eccentric Who Had \$20,000 In Apt. Here

H-R July 5, 1954

James Totten, eccentric former Grinnell decorator believed to be almost 90 years old, died this morning at the county home south of Montezuma.

Funeral arrangements are pending awaiting word from two sisters, one in Michigan and one in California. Friends may call James funeral home for information regarding services.

Totten was committed to the county home last April after police found him wandering on the streets in a disrobed state. At that time a sum reported to be about \$20,000 was found in his squalid quarters.

HAD \$90,000 BUT POSSESSIONS SELL FOR \$143

Monte. Rep. 12-15-55

Possessions of the late James Totton, who hid \$90,000 in his squalid quarters above a Grinnell shoe store, brought a mere \$143.55 when sold at auction Saturday.

Sold were about 80 lots of old furniture and boxes of miscellaneous articles. Many items had only "junk value." Some of the older pieces were purchased by the Grinnell Museum Society.

A former decorator, Totton died last year at the age of about 90. Subsequently \$90,000 in cash, securities and stocks was uncovered. Totton lived as a recluse, scavenged food from garbage cans and picked up coal along the tracks.

Two sisters and a nephew are heirs to the estate being administered by County Attorney Norman McFarlin.

Another \$50,000 Found In Totten Rooms

Money Cache In Hidden

Compartment

H-R Aug 15, 1955
Accidently Discover

Remainder Of Savings Of Deceased Eccentric

An additional \$50,000 belonging to the estate of the late James Totten, was discovered in the rooms formerly occupied by Totten over Arnold's Shoe Store Thursday afternoon by Chief of Police Waldo Johnson and John Burma.

The fortune, discovered in a hidden compartment of a chest, was in two open bundles and an oilcloth cover package. Nearly \$25,200 was found in currency, the bills ranging in denominations of from \$10 to \$500 bills. However, the bulk of the cur-

rency was in \$20 bills. Another \$10,000 was found in the form of government bonds while many other valuable securities were also found. Altogether, the cache totaled over \$50,000.

Earlier in the week, 100 shares of Milwaukee Railroad stock had been uncovered along with four dollars in cash. Par value of the stock was estimated at \$25 per share.

Totten, an elderly recluse who died nearly one year ago, had occupied the rooms for over 50 years and had been known to spend very little money although he had been regularly employed as a painter and paper hanger during most of that time.

Several previous searches of the rooms had brought to light nearly \$38,000 hidden in the same chest and scattered in various other hiding places throughout the rooms. After the last such find in the fall of 1954, it was believed that all of the money had been recovered. When

Thursday's find was made, Johnson and Burma had been disposing of trash and listing an inventory of the estate for the administrator.

In all, over eight truckloads of trash had already been removed from the building and Johnson and Burma were waiting for the last load to be hauled away when, by accident, the hidden treasure compartment was discovered. Johnson was showing Burma where the last find had been made when he accidentally tapped a hollow place on the chest. The secret hoard was revealed after the two men broke open the compartment.

County Attorney Norman McFarlin, administrator of the estate, was promptly notified of the discovery. McFarlin was away on a vacation at the time and the rooms were closed awaiting his return. Known heirs to the estate include two sisters and a nephew, all residing in other states.

Hay, It's Hot!—

TEMPERATURE 280

So you think 100 degree temperatures are hot?

Art McDowell of Paweshiek Mutual Insurance Agency at Grinnell, tells of some 280 degree heat recorded near Gilman last week.

McDowell said hay on the Delbert Sears farm near Gilman was checked and found to be 280 degrees, highest McDowell can ever recall.

In fact, two thermometers were used to check the hay. After the first one recorded 280 degrees, it was thought to be broken. The second check verified the temperature. The hay, in an outside stack, had to be wetted down constantly while being moved to prevent it from exploding and igniting, McDowell said.

\$17,000 Found In Apartment Of Jim Totten

Found By Police in Hidden Compartment;
Total Now \$38,000

A piece-by-piece check of articles, bureau drawers and odd containers in the late James Totten's apartment uncovered an additional \$17,560 in cash late Monday.

The packets of bills, in denominations from \$10 to \$100, were found in hidden compartments in a bureau drawer by Police Chief Waldo Johnson, who was making the check along with officer Fred Roop.

Johnson said the additional money, bringing to \$38,000 the amount found in the apartment since Totten was found half-naked wandering the streets here last April, was turned over to County Attorney Norman McFarlin, administrator of the Totten estate, and was placed in a bank here.

Johnson discovered the false bottom in small bureau drawers, while thoroughly checking every place available, on the assumption that more money was to be found in the ill-kept quarters.

Reaching into the small opening, Chief Johnson felt the bottom of the compartment give slightly. Checking further by prying up the board, he discovered a packet of money totaling \$5,000. That was enough for Johnson to make a similar investigation of the second small drawer, where additional money bundles were uncovered.

Meanwhile Johnson and Roop continue to clean out the quarters, going through each article of clothing, box and container, mindful that the eccentric Totten may have concealed money practically any where.

Police uncovered \$20,000 in April on checking the apartment soon after Totten had been found in a dazed state and sent to the county home.

Totten died July 5. He was believed to be 90 years old.