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CAST OF CHARACTERS

James D. Dickson, Ben’s father, taught chemistry at Topeka High School from 1908 until 1943. During World War II, he was a chemist for the Topeka waterworks. He died of a heart attack on January 8, 1959, in his home at 517 W. Fourteenth Street in Topeka. He was eighty-six.

Bertha (Alma) J. Dickson suffered a further mental breakdown after she was told of Ben’s death. She rarely left her bedroom and died in 1953, at the age of sixty-five. Bertha and James Dickson are buried in the Dickson family plot in the Auburn (Kansas) Cemetery.

Stella Mae Irwin’s stepfather, plasterer Lester Redenbaugh, died in 1959. He was sixty-two.

Stella’s mother, Hattie Redenbaugh, died in 1990, at age eighty-nine.


James Darwin Dickson, Ben’s brother, worked forty-five years for the Santa Fe Railway. He and his first wife, Frances Bonnell, had one son, James Darwin Dickson, Jr., in 1929. James Darwin Dickson, Jr., lives in Citrus Heights, California. Darwin and his second wife, Fanchion Pitman, had two sons, John and Richard. John is retired and lives in Chanute, Kansas. Richard is an attorney and practices in Wichita. Darwin Dickson died on July 14, 1999, in Colony, Kansas, at the age of ninety-one. He is buried in the Colony Cemetery.
After searching for years, I located Stella Mae Irwin in 1996, about a year after her death. According to Stella’s family members, it is just as well that I never found her in life. When I suggested to Stella’s great-nieces Renee Araiza and Gloria Seematter and their father, Richard Araiza, that had I knocked on her door Stella probably would have told me to “Go to hell,” they laughed and agreed that was highly likely. Their stern but loving aunt never spoke about her secret past as a public enemy with anyone. Stella’s mementos of 1938 and 1939 sat in boxes in a storage shed at her home in the Kansas City neighborhood of Raytown, Missouri, locked away and hidden from everyone, including her family. We have only a hint of what those boxes may have contained. A neighbor who inherited Stella’s belongings once sent me a series of color copies of photographs of Stella and her husband, Ben, copies of some of which I obtained separately from the Dickson family. There were images of Stella and Ben at the Topeka Free Fair in 1938, posing in novelty “Tiajuana” scenes. There was a colorized photograph of Ben taken in San Francisco that year. Those copied photographs provided me with my first glimpse of Ben and Stella as human beings rather than as the manufactured public enemies of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) lore.

My interest in the FBI portion of the Ben and Stella story dates back to my teen years in my hometown, Brookings, South Dakota. Ben and Stella robbed the Northwest Security National Bank there on Halloween in 1938. Brookings bills itself as “someplace special,” and to me that could not be more true. My earliest memories are of visiting my father at his office on the South Dakota State University campus in Brookings and of attending Jackrabbit football games with him on glorious fall
afternoons (and a few snowy ones, too.) As a teenager I began working as a dishwasher in a Main Avenue restaurant, The Ram Pub, located in a building that once housed the Northwest Security National Bank. A freestanding, round pedestal safe still stands in the back of the restaurant and was likely the safe opened by John Torsey on that day in 1938 when Ben Dickson, accompanied by his sixteen-year-old wife, Stella, robbed the bank. Perhaps because the restaurant there still celebrates and identifies with the robbery and perhaps also because major crime is so rare in Brookings, those two hours during which the Dicksons waited for the bank vault’s time lock to open remain among the most infamous 120 minutes in the city’s history. The robbery captured my imagination as I spent slow times at the restaurant reading and rereading the framed news clippings on the wall and imagining events that happened just a few feet from where I stood. Right there in the back of the restaurant was where Ben ordered Torsey to open the safe and empty the $2,000 it contained into a pillow sack while they waited for the vault to open. There, near the entrance of the restaurant, was where Stella Mae stood guard, awkwardly wielding a revolver wrapped in a newspaper. Over near the front of the restaurant was where Ben sat while the bank’s manager processed several loans during the robbery. The front door of the restaurant, which I passed through thousands of times, is where Ben poked a sawed-off shotgun in Torsey’s back and forced his way into the bank. My imaginary time travel was sparked by myriad details in the bank and dozens of other details around Brookings. Many times I drove home from work following the route Ben and Stella took after the robbery, passing the old boardinghouse near the Brookings County Courthouse where they dropped off their hostages. I stood at the corner of Sixth Street and Medary and watched the Hobo Day homecoming parade of South Dakota State University (SDSU) pass by, imagining the Dicksons’ lumbering black Buick making the turn north onto Medary Avenue, Stella tossing roofing nails out of the car to discourage pursuers. A combination gas station and restaurant near Hillcrest Park marked the location of the Macomb Gas Station where Ben and Stella stopped briefly on their way out of town so Ben could be
sure the nails hadn’t punctured his tires. The horseshoe pits in Hillcrest Park, where I played often as a child, marked the location of the rustic City Cabin Camp, where Ben and Stella stayed before the robbery.

My fascination with the Dicksons was something I kept private for many years before I obtained their FBI files. This slim volume, the best story I can tell about the Dicksons based on existing records, is a work of passion and fascination decades in the making. It is the kind of book that would not be possible without the help of many people. Wichita State University colleagues Jessica Freeman, Kevin Keplar, Bill Molash, Sandy Sipes, and Amy Solano provided endless good humor that lightened my writing hours in the office. I am grateful to officials in the Records Management Division of the FBI, who respond each year to tens of thousands of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, including the hundreds I have filed over the past two decades. Rebecca Bronson and David P. Sobonya are the names I know from that unit who have been particularly helpful, but obviously there are many others, and I am grateful to them all. The FBI’s Freedom of Information and Privacy Act staff has always been responsive to me and, while there have been a few disputes, I am certain that they have done their best within the limits of the law to provide me with the information I have requested.

Similarly, the FOIA staff of the Bureau of Prisons and the Department of Justice responded quickly and professionally to my requests related to the Dicksons. The National Archives and Records Administration staff was helpful as well during a fruitful visit to College Park, Maryland. Archivists at the Kansas State Historical Society in Topeka, the State Historical Society of Missouri in Jefferson City, and the South Dakota Historical Society in Pierre also provided timely research assistance. Michele Christian and the staff at H. M. Briggs Library Special Collections at SDSU provided photographs from the extraordinary George and Evelyn Norby Collection of local historical photos. The reference staff at the Missouri State Archives provided copies of Ben Dickson’s 1931 admission mug shot and prison ledger entry. I am grateful as well to Editor-in-Chief Michael Briggs, Director
Charles T. Myers, and the staff at the University Press of Kansas for
designing, marketing, and, of course, agreeing to publish the book.
This is my third book published by the University Press of Kansas, and
I am as grateful for their confidence in me as I am for their able help
in preparing this book and the two others, *Hoover’s FBI and the Fourth
Estate* (2014) and *Branding Hoover’s FBI* (2016).

Several people who knew Ben and Stella provided help, even though,
in some instances, it was painful or uncomfortable for them. Ben’s older
brother Darwin Dickson spoke to me twice on the telephone in 1995
for about an hour each time. Recalling his brother, whom he referred
to as “the little guy,” was emotional for him and I am grateful for his
help. Darwin died in 1999 at age ninety-one. Sharon Michael, Stella’s
neighbor for decades, twice spoke to me in 1999, fondly remembering
her friend. Repeated attempts to recontact Michael in 2015 proved
fruitless. Mary Ellen Dickson, whose husband is a second cousin to
Ben, graciously provided pages from a family history authored by Dar-
win Dickson.

Gloria (Araiza) Seematter, Renee Araiza, and Richard Araiza spoke
lovingly of their Aunt and Great-Aunt Stella and provided several of
the photographs in this volume. Their stories helped bring Stella to
life, and to their concerns that they might be betraying their beloved
aunt’s privacy by speaking, I can only respond that Stella’s story of
survival is one that inspires me and that I hope inspires readers. Ben
Dickson’s nephews John Dickson, of Chanute, Kansas, and Richard
Dickson, of Wichita, were also extremely helpful. Richard Dickson, a
Wichita attorney, entrusted me with a massive trunk full of precious
family photographs saved by his father, Darwin. The Dickson family
photographs constitute the majority of the images in this book.

There is one other historian who was immensely helpful, someone
who knows more about the history of Brookings than anyone else I
know, my father, Chuck Cecil. Dad answered my questions about ob-
scure Brookings-area landmarks as if those sites—the City Tourist
Camp, Macomb’s, the Tasty Shop—still stood. Of course, help with
a short book is the least of the things my parents have done for me.
For all of their help, I am eternally grateful. The finished draft manuscript was read by my wonderful WSU colleague Sandy Sipes, and I am grateful for her encouragement and skillful editing. Finally, the inspiration for this book came from the prodding of my wife, Jen, and son, Owen. Owen in particular urged me to write this story, reasoning that since I know more about the Dicksons’ exploits than anyone else alive, it would be a shame if their story wasn’t published. Well, Owen, here it is.