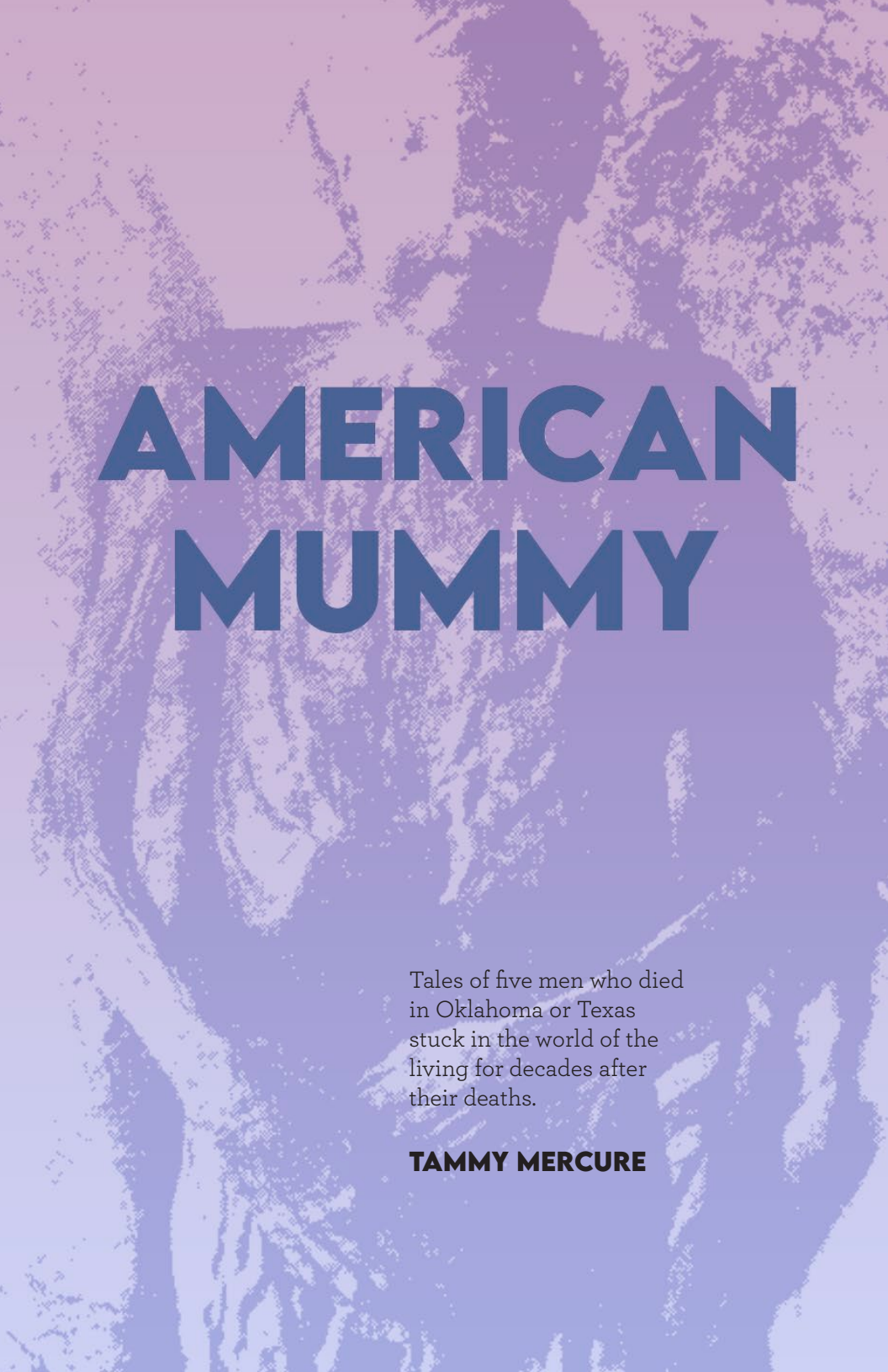




AMERICAN MUMMY

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in Oklahoma or Texas
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Elmer McCurdy
Sapulpa's Forgotten Man
A Teenager in Calvert
David E. George
Anderson McCrew

TAMMY MERCURE

*There was a mummy at the fair,
All crumpled in a folding chair.
The people passed, but didn't care
That the mummy was a man,
So tell me if you can.*

*Who are you? Who are you?
Where have you been, where are you going to?
Well, Andrew McCrew must have lost his way,
'Cause though he died long ago he was buried today.*

—Don McLean
lyrics to “The Legend of Andrew McCrew”

The word mummy conjures images of the glorious sarcophagi of ancient Egypt. Out of respect and worship, the Egyptians perfected preserving their dead around 2800 BC to help ensure a good afterlife. Yet, mummies are found worldwide as a product of natural conditions, like Ötzi mummified spontaneously in the frigid Alps, and deliberate intent, like the rituals performed by the Torres Strait Islanders in Australia.

The United States has had a few instances of spontaneously mummified people, like the Spirit Cave Mummy found in Nevada in the 1940s. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, there was a spate of intentionally created mummies. With slow communication, unclaimed people were taken to the undertaker, where the deceased would be cleaned, embalmed, photographed, and kept until relatives were found. Undertakers at the time used an arsenic-based embalming fluid that extended preservation. The family members would pay for the funeral expenses and bury their loved ones. If the body remained unclaimed, they would be interred in the local paupers' cemetery. A few had a different fate.

The Progressive Era saw the rise of American Dime Museums and traveling carnivals, which showcased living people with physical differences in the "freak show," and odditoriums that displayed wax and plastic figures with various conditions. This fueled a market for the American mummy.

Here are the tales of five men who died in Oklahoma or Texas stuck in the world of the living for decades after their deaths.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY W. J. BOAG.
PAWNEE
OKLA.



Elmer McCurdy

Born 1880 Washington, ME

Died 1911 Osage Hills, OK

Buried 1977 Guthrie, OK

In 1976, a crew was set up at the Laff in the Dark Funhouse in Long Beach, California, to film an episode of the popular television show *The Six Million Dollar Man*. While moving a tattered decoration from the corner, the arm fell off. They were horrified to find a human bone popping out. The haunted attraction staff had no idea the decrepit figure covered in glow-in-the-dark paint had been a real man.

Traveling for 66 years after his death, Elmer McCurdy is one of the most well-known American mummies. Elmer, also known as Frank Curtis, had been in the military for a stretch but mostly wandered alone robbing banks and committing crimes. He would get to a new town, scope it out, and pick a new crew for a heist.

His last robbery was in 1911 when he and his crew planned to loot the Katy Train traveling to the Osage Nation. They were anticipating \$400,000 in cash, but they got the wrong train and instead walked away with \$46, two jugs of whiskey, and a watch. Despite the small haul, he became a wanted man. A couple of local sheriffs tracked him down and killed him.

Joseph L. Johnson, the undertaker in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, embalmed Elmer. The *Muskogee Daily Phoenix* reported in 1915 that McCurdy was still on display at the funeral home four years after his death. They wrote, "You can look at him, touch him, and if you can establish your relationship with him you can take the body away by paying the \$200 funeral expenses." Johnson charged gawkers a nickel for a visit. The Pawhuska Chamber of Commerce also capitalized on the spectacle by selling a picture postcard with the caption, "The Only Dead One In Pawhuska." Dead outlaw postcards, like one with a photograph of bullet-riddled Bill Doolin, were a common sight in the territory.

Two men showed up in 1916, presenting forged papers saying they were related to Elmer. Johnson unwittingly released the body to the Patterson brothers of the Great Patterson Carnival Show. They showcased his corpse in their traveling show alongside acrobats and elephants. Louis Sonney inherited the body when he took possession of the carnival in 1922. For the next couple of decades, he was the "embalmed bandit" in Sonney's Museum of Crime.

He was occasionally lent out, notably for the premiere of a 1933 movie to sit in the lobby as a "dead dope fiend" due to his shrunken appearance. Upon Sonney's death, Elmer was stored from 1949 until 1964. He was brought out to be in the movie *She Freak*. After that, he was sold and moved a lot. His body had further decayed in storage, and he was now missing fingers, toes, and ears.

When the film crew discovered his body in 1976, he was taken to the L.A. County Coroner. Although the public quickly identified him as Elmer, Dr. Thomas Noguchi was slow to confirm it. During the thorough autopsy, he found a bullet and a tag reading "Property of Louis Sonney" in his abdomen,

and tests confirmed arsenic as the embalming fluid. Fred Olds, director of the Oklahoma Territorial Museum, led the effort to get Elmer back to Oklahoma for a proper burial.

On April 22, 1977, with much fanfare, a horse-drawn hearse paraded through the streets of Guthrie, Oklahoma. Elmer McCurdy was finally laid to rest in Summit View Cemetery's Boot Hill section alongside other notorious outlaws. The speaker apologized that the city hadn't claimed him before, but they embraced Elmer as one of them now. While concrete poured over his grave, they read Psalm 103:15-16, "The life of mortals is like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more."

His grave reads,
SHOT BY SHERIFF'S POSSE
IN OSAGE HILLS
ON OCT. 7, 1911
RETURNED TO GUTHRIE, OKLA.
FROM LOS ANGELES COUNTY
CALIF.
FOR BURIAL APR. 22, 1977

Sapulpa's Forgotten Man

Born ~1876

Died 1916 Sapulpa, OK

Buried 1946 Sapulpa, OK

Harold Rampp had quite a shock preparing his newly purchased funeral home for the grand re-opening in 1946. While cleaning, he found a mummified man in a rough pine box.

Rampp immediately went to the Creek County attorney in Sapulpa, Oklahoma. The attorney found that the former owner, Bert Buffington, had received the body from the city in 1916. When no family was found, Bert said he had gotten permission to use the body to teach others how to embalm. Buffington's daughter, Ruth, shared that she had brought curious friends to see the body usually propped in the corner or stored in the closet. She assumed her father had buried the body before he died in 1942.

The story of Sapulpa's Forgotten Man made national headlines the month he was discovered. The county attorney got letters from people in three states trying to find missing family members, like a man from Grundy City, Iowa, with an uncle who had sent him a letter postmarked from Sapulpa.

Townspeople gossiped about the man. Some said the forgotten man was shot and killed trespassing on someone's property, others said he was killed during a robbery, and many said he died of pneumonia. A worker on the Frisco railroad said the he had

seen the mummified man in 1906. The version of him dying of pneumonia turned out to be true. The *Sapulpa Herald* from October 9, 1916, stated that an unknown man had perished near the Sapulpa Brick and Tile Company two days prior. He had come down with a group of men and fallen ill. They described him as a man in his forties with reddish-gray hair, a mustache, a broken nose, and a nudie girl tattoo on his right arm.

Irene Payton saw the headline in Texas and filled in parts of the story. She and her husband, Charles, worked for the funeral home in 1916. She recalled the sheriff bringing the body to them. They called him I.W.W. John since he worked with the Industrial Workers of the World. The I.W.W. is a labor union with ties to socialism. The height of membership was in 1917, with 150,000 members, with many traveling to the U.S. West to spread the word.

After a proper death certificate was signed, Rampp had a small Christian service for the man and had him buried at South Heights Cemetery in Sapulpa.

Within a short time after the burial, Douglas Ripley of *Ripley's Believe It or Not* wrote Rampp, asking if there were photographs of the mummy so they could illustrate the story. A New York radio program, begun by attorney James Walters, wondered if the man was Jesse Sigal. He was a known member of the I.W.W. and a soap box orator due \$8,000 from the recent reading of a will. *The Court of Missing Heirs* found many similarities, but they also had a credible sighting of Sigal in Pittsburgh in 1921.

The story was out of the news by July 1946. Sapulpa's Forgotten Man rests patiently, waiting for his name to be returned.

A Teenager in Calvert

Born ~1909

Died circa 1923 near Calvert, TX

Buried 2002 Calvert, TX

While Harold Rampp did the right thing and got Sapulpa's Forgotten Man buried quickly after his discovery, the same cannot be said for the people of Calvert, Texas.

A Black teenager, who had the misfortune to die near Calvert, Texas, in the early 1920s, was called "the man who turned to stone" by *Ripley's Believe it or Not* and "Mojo" by townspeople who would visit him for luck before gambling or playing dominoes.

He died around age fourteen while jumping from a train near Mud Creek around 1923. Perry Tindall, the town undertaker, was beginning his career. He embalmed the boy with twice as much fluid as necessary. Reportedly, two months later, his family came to claim him. They couldn't afford the \$103 bill, so they told Tindall to keep him. Tindall should have buried him at this point, but instead, he put him in a coffin, dressed in a pale blue suit and a bow tie, and added a glass-covered viewing hole.

When Tindall died, the Stafford Funeral Home took him. When that funeral director died, he was moved to the Henry Allison Funeral Home. When H.W. Williams, a Black man, took over, he did not want the mummy but was told he came with the business.

Williams kept him in the broom closet for thirty years. Brent Cain, a lifelong Calvert resident, recalled as a child getting Williams to show his city friends “Mojo.” Williams, a one-armed man, would throw in an extra scare by flipping off the lights and leaving the children in the small dark room with the dead man.

Occasionally on Saturday nights, Williams would prop him up in the front window. In 1979, he told the *Austin American-Statesman* he was considering getting permission to bury the boy. The writer noted decomposition was visible at this point. Williams got some press but did not actually get permission.

Most of the thousand townspeople knew about the teenager and considered him their mascot. In 1985, two women started a Calvert tabloid and the first stories were about the outlaw Belle Starr and “Mojo”. Brent Cain even named his coffee shop Mojos.

In 2001, Rev. Robert Paul Sr. purchased the funeral home from H.W. Williams. He immediately sought permission to bury the child. Rev. Rodrick Jackson led the service and tried to help find living relatives. Unfortunately, a fire in 1924 destroyed all the records for the area. In 2002, they got permission to bury him, and Paul put the original pine coffin into a nicer cream-colored casket. The men chose Juneteenth, a holiday to celebrate Black freedom, to bury him because, symbolically “Mojo” would be free of the broom closet. There was one last public viewing of the child. About fifty people attended the burial at Chapel Hill Cemetery.

The people who had not heard about the mummified person being moved from place to place on Main Street were embarrassed at the attention. Earlene Carter, a resident and business owner, asked, “If he could be buried now, why wasn’t it done years ago?” And added, “It doesn’t make Calvert look good.”

David E. George

Born ~1838

Died 1903 Enid, OK

Buried Unknown

Blood-curdling screams came from a man at the Grand Avenue Hotel in Enid, Oklahoma. A doctor from across the street ran to try to aid the man in distress. The man convulsed with a short moment of clarity where he said, "I am John Wilkes Booth," and then died.

The problem with this deathbed confession was that it was January 13, 1903—almost forty years after Booth was killed in a barn in Virginia after assassinating president Abraham Lincoln. Booth's last words were, "Useless, useless, useless" or "Tell mother, I die for my country," depending on who you ask.

Almost immediately after his death in the barn in 1865, rumors began to swirl that the man killed was not Booth. Some people pointed out that as an actor he could have easily changed his appearance to elude the law. Others brought up that there were specific instructions to take him alive, so it was suspicious that he ended up dead. To add to the paranoia, the government never paid the reward money for Booth, though they did for the other two conspirators. Suspiciously, no photographs were made of Booth after his death.



The man who died in Enid had been going by David E. George. He had been in town for about six weeks before he purchased the strychnine to end his life. As officials gathered more details about his life and death, they moved him to Penniman's Furniture Store. As common in the day, the furniture store also provided the town with undertaking services.

Townpeople described David as a man who wandered from bar to bar quoting Shakespeare. In his personal belongings, they found several references to a friend named George E. Smith.

Smith traveled down from Iowa to identify his friend, but was not able to provide details besides they had been close friends for only a year and that David had said he killed a man in Texas.

Eventually, they found he came from El Reno, Texas, where he was known for drinking and reading theatrical journals. A young woman there had wanted to marry him. He refused and replied that no one knew him and that he “had killed the best man that ever lived.”

A growing swell of people thought this man could very well be Booth. The actor had a scar on his right brow from a staged sword fight gone wrong, a malformed thumb from a curtain falling on it, a scar on his neck, and a leg injury from leaping from the balcony during the assassination. The dead man seemingly had all of these. Visitors came from far and wide, and those who knew Booth were quick to say that the preserved man was him. Skeptics pointed out that people that knew Booth had not seen him for over forty years and that the undertaker had purposely styled George’s corpse to look like Booth.

In 1907, Finis Bates, a young Memphis lawyer, came to claim George saying he had been his lawyer when he went by the name John St. Helen. Bates said he had confessed to Lincoln’s murder several times to him. Bates wrote and published the book, “The Escape and Suicide of John Wilkes Booth, or The First True Account of Lincoln’s Assassination, Containing a Complete Confession by Booth Many Years After His Crime.”

To promote his book, Bates rented the mummy to sideshows and circuses. The body was displayed with photos of John Wilkes Booth and a large sign that said, “ON EXHIBITION HERE: THE TRUE ENBALMED {sic} ‘BODY OF JOHN WILKES BOOTH’ The Assassin Of Our PRESIDENT ABRAHAM LINCOLN. NOT A Skeleton. NOT An Imitation. An Educational, Scientific & Historical Exhibit for the AMERICAN PUBLIC.”

Bates died in 1923 without the fame and fortune he had been seeking. The mummy was sold to William Evans, the Carnival King of the Southwest. Evans and the mummy attracted more fines, like Texas charging him with the transportation of a corpse, than fame. Evans sold George's body to John Harkin, another carnival man, in 1930. A year later, *Pic* magazine shared pictures of the mummy getting an autopsy and x-rays, including one showing his ankle injury.

In 1937, Harkin sold him to Jay Gould's Million Dollar Circus. That same year, *Life* magazine did a piece about the mummified remains, showing the body looking worse for wear. The body continued to be displayed into the 1950s often "cursing" the people who possessed it.

The last confirmed sighting of David E. George's body was in 1976 at a Pennsylvania carnival. In the 1990s, the David E George Society, a group mostly from Enid, campaigned with some of Booth's family to exhume the body buried in Booth's Baltimore grave. They argued that this could, once and for all, put the rumors to rest or give them a reason to continue to link the men. The judge denied the exhumation citing no evidence and not wanting to disturb the three bodies situated above his casket. Many scholars, like Dr. Brenda Stevenson, point out that this legend is part of the Lost Cause's legacy of sympathizing with the Confederacy.

David E. George is believed to be in a private collection.

Anderson McCrew

Born ~1867

Died 1913 near Waco, TX

Buried 1973 Dallas, TX

Little is known about Anderson McCrew's life. He was thought to have been born in 1867 and, like the teenager in Calvert, died falling from a train, while riding the rails near Waco, Texas.

In 1913, when James Washington embalmed him, he used an experimental mixture suspecting it would be a while before his family showed up. After a year, he unceremoniously sold the Black man's body to a carnival owner. At the carnival, he was displayed in a tuxedo sitting in a folding chair, and was called "the eighth wonder of the world" and "the amazing petrified man." Unlike McCurdy and George, McCrew was met with some ridicule by white carnival goers.

He continued to travel with the sideshow until he ended up in a warehouse. Elgie Pace, a white woman, saw him in storage in the late 1960s and was saddened that her sister-in-law had plans to throw the man in a ditch. She moved him to her basement and called him Sam. While she claimed to have plans to bury him, she also attempted to sell the body to several medical schools. Federal authorities found Anderson while searching her home as part of an unrelated case involving her. When questioned about not burying him, she said being a widow with one salary wouldn't allow for it.

When Frank Lott Sr., owner of Lott's Mortuary in Dallas, heard about McCrew's fate he offered to bury him for free. Lott was able to identify the man as Anderson McCrew after some research. Unfortunately, little else is known about his life, so no living relatives were found. Lott, a Black man, lamented to *Jet* magazine, "I guess if you were the wrong color back then, they didn't bother to keep thorough files on you." Most newspaper articles from the time praised Ms. Pace and failed to mention Mr. Lott.

Ms. Pace, her family, and other community members filled the church for the service. He was laid to rest in a plain black suit at Lincoln Memorial Park in Dallas in 1973.

Songwriter Don McLean, of "American Pie" fame, read about the story when the news went national. He was moved to write a song about Anderson's fate. He changed Anderson to Andrew in order to have a better rhyme scheme for "The Ballad of Andrew McCrew." When people heard the song, some sent money for both a memorial. Unfortunately, the headstone and footstone used the name from the song. When the stones were placed, they held a another ceremony complete with two choirs.

*A wonder beyond words
A man who found more life in death
Than life gave him at birth*
—Don McLean

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