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## 'Finding Judge Crater' Review: Hot Town, Cold Case

The dapper 41-year-old Judge Crater, an icon of Jazz Age New York, got in a cab on the night of Aug. 6, 1930, and was never seen again.



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By Edward Kosner  
June 20, 2022 4:47 pm ET

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New Yorkers of a certain age and cast of mind have embedded in their memories a litany of headline names: the reclusive Collyer brothers, entombed in 140 tons of junk in their Harlem brownstone in 1947; the gangbanging Cape Man, who killed two teens in a playground in 1959; the gangster "Crazy" Joe Gallo, murdered at Umberto's Clam House in 1972; the Central Park Jogger, raped and nearly killed in 1989. And, of course, Judge Crater.

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Finding Judge Crater: A Life and Phenomenal Disappearance in Jazz Age New York

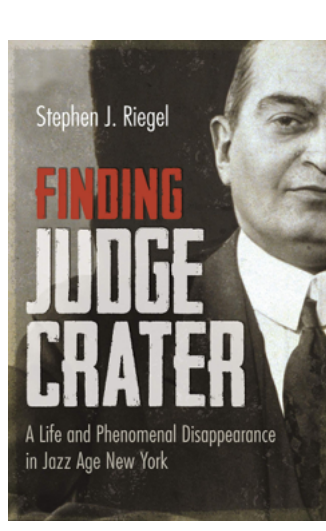
By Stephen J. Riegel

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All were victims or perpetrators of notorious crimes or characters in bizarre episodes that are part of the shadow history of the city. But it is Justice Joseph Force Crater of the New York State Supreme Court who is the quintessential figure of murky New York mystery—the man who took a cab one hot August night in 1930, never to be seen again.

Crater was a character out of a Jazz Age story F. Scott Fitzgerald never wrote. Tall and dapper, he was a highly regarded 41-year-old lawyer and rookie jurist close to the Tammany Democratic machine that had milked the city for millions for over a century. His admirers included such luminaries as U.S. Sen. Robert Wagner, all of whom turned a complaisant eye

to the married Crater's other life as a randy stage-door johnny with a mistress and a harem of chorus girls and Polly Adler hookers.

For decades, "Judge Crater call your office!" and "Paging Judge Crater!" were surefire gag lines, but his memory has disappeared almost as completely as his carcass. Now the judge and his flamboyant era have been resurrected in "Finding Judge Crater: A Life and Phenomenal Disappearance in Jazz Age New York," by Stephen J. Riegel, a litigator and former federal prosecutor. Mr. Riegel is a diligent researcher and writes well for a lawyer although with considerable tolerance for clichés. Quotable lines aren't his strength. No matter. It's a good yarn and the author even provides his own credible solution to the mystery at the end.

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## Books

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PREVIEW

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The bare facts are the simplest part of the Crater enigma. On the night of Aug. 6, 1930, the judge was back in Manhattan after abruptly leaving his wife, Stella, at their vacation cottage in Maine. He headed for one of his hangouts, Haas's Chop House in the theater district. Ducking inside, he found a chum, William Klein, the Shubert family's top lawyer, having dinner with Sally Ritz, a chorus girl. Crater joined them, and later they watched him go off in a cab toward the Hudson River.

As the author writes, Crater's odd conduct just before he disappeared made the case tantalizing from the start. Although he'd planned to spend the month in Maine, he called New York in early August, then told Stella he had to go back to town to "straighten out" a couple of people, but would return soon. In the city he went to his chambers, cleaned out his desk and files and had his law clerk help him tote the papers to his co-op at Fifth Avenue and West 11th Street. He also cleaned out his safe-deposit box and had the clerk cash two checks for him totaling more than \$85,000 in today's currency. In the apartment, he stashed his will, insurance policies, the co-op deed and lots of cash. He also left the monogrammed pocket watch, calling-card case and pen that he always carried with him.

He told his law clerk that he was headed "up Westchester way," but he then reserved a seat for a musical (he never used it) and joined Klein and Ritz at Haas's. Klein told investigators that he found Crater "very nervous and disturbed."

The judge's vanishing act touched off a frenzied search. Posters featuring Crater's mug were distributed around the country and eventually the world. The New York police fielded more than 2,500 tips—from Cuba to Shanghai and many points between. The cops spent more than \$3.5 million in today's money on their search. The district attorney empaneled grand juries, questioning dozens of witnesses—and came up empty.

The investigations, Mr. Riegel writes, coincided with probes of Tammany Hall corruption under Mayor Jimmy Walker. One focus was on the system under which nominees for judgeships and other city sinecures kicked back a year's salary to their Tammany district leaders. It turned out that one of the hottest cases involved Martin Healey, leader of the Cayuga Democratic Club in Harlem—Crater was the figurehead president—and another Crater pal, new judge George Ewald. Another case involved a Tammany scheme to profit from the takeover of an expensive new Lower East Side hotel. Crater had just been named the receiver of the property—one of eight such lucrative assignments that helped him earn in one year \$1.5 million in today's money. The judge himself had freed up the equivalent of his first year's salary on the bench in cash just before he was nominated.

No real lead materialized for more than two decades. But in 1954 a dying Harlem butcher named Henry Krauss, who had once owned a house in Bronxville, told cops that Crater, Healey and Ewald had used his place to party with whores and that they'd once buried \$90,000 in city graft in the backyard. He said he had gone to the house the Sunday after Crater disappeared and found the kitchen a bloody shambles and the backyard dug up. In another flabbergasting turn, a magazine writer found a clairvoyant in the Netherlands who professed to confirm the story in detail and added that Crater's body was buried in the basement of the house.

Of course no body, nor any other trace of Crater, has ever been found. Mr. Riegel concludes that the judge went to Westchester to tell Healey and Ewald—the men he'd told Stella he was going to "straighten out"—that he was going on the lam to avoid involvement in their investigation and to get more cash for his new life. Instead, he was murdered, perhaps by Krauss.

We'll never really know. Perhaps Judge Crater's shade will finally call in and end the mystery.

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Mr. Kosner's "It's News to Me" is a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire, and the New York Daily News.

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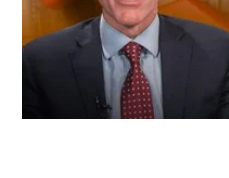
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