

*Author's note: The following are true events surrounding the murder of Jacob Jaconi, a fisherman living between Fairbanks and the village of Chena Town, which later became the northern end of Fairbanks as the city grew; this was the first major case handled by the newly created Fairbanks Police Department. The primary source for this story was the court transcript of United States v. Vuko Perovich, July 1905.*

Clouds rolled over the sun in a murky eclipse, and Mark Skorlich shivered in the sudden shadow, glaring up at the sky. It was dark enough in October without this.

Skorlich huddled down tighter in his sweater and trudged on to his friend's cabin, four low walls with a sheet of canvas for a roof. He'd known Jacob Jaconi since the two of them came to the Klondike together, and been partners off and on in the four years since, hopping back and forth between Dawson and Fairbanks, between fishing and panning and river-poling. Both immigrants, both struggling to scrape a living from the unforgiving landscape, they took care of one another. Now, with Jaconi settled on the bank of the Noyse Slough four miles between Fairbanks and Chena for the winter, Skorlich popped in for a visit every few days with news from town. And this time, an invitation to join him hunting.

The noon whistle shrilled back in Fairbanks, and Skorlich trudged along the bank of the partially frozen Chena River, his boots squeaking in the snow. Three men on dog sleds swept down the opposite shore toward town, the dogs baying happily. They disappeared around the bend, but Skorlich could still hear the dogs. It took him a moment to realize that the sound was coming from before him. And that instead of barking, the dogs were howling.

Skorlich caught the scent of smoke in the cold air.

Something was wrong.

He ran up the river, turning onto the slough, and finally saw the cabin through the trees.

Smoke bled up into the clouds, the canvas burned away. The front of the cabin was merely scorched, the damage worse toward the back, and the dogs were scattered around the remains, mourning. Skorlich ran to the cabin, clutching his rifle, and stepped inside. The back wall was nearly gone, and a burnt hide was draped across the crumbling remains of the bunk, all of it still smoldering. He fell back a disbelieving step, staring around the home he had stayed in countless days and nights.

Jaconi might not even know yet.

Skorlich leaned his rifle against the blackened wall and ran back out into the woods, calling wildly, “Jacob! *Jacob!*” He paused, panting.

How much of the cabin could they possibly salvage at this point?

And how long had Jaconi been out that he hadn’t noticed? Where was he?

Heart pounding, Skorlich turned back to the cabin. Jaconi’s biggest dog watched him with mournful eyes as he returned on stiff legs.

Skorlich picked up a stick and stepped back into the smoldering cabin, his eyes locked on the bunk. He started slowly toward the scorched hide, and finally realized what he was looking at.

Jacob Jaconi.

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Deputy Marshal George Dreibelbes shook his head in disgust, staring at a pile of warrants nearly as thick as his beard. A town like Fairbanks seemed too small for so much ruckus all the time. He'd hardly set foot back in the office from investigating the Jaconi cabin, and now the newly appointed Chief of the newly appointed Police, Edgar Wickersham, was sending him back out to sift through the warrants and see how many he could bring in before the scarce daylight was gone.

Like he needed another rung of management. Like he hadn't been running things fine before.

Dreibelbes scooped up the stack and flicked through them one at a time, not bothering to sit. He picked out the three he thought he could round up easiest and started for the door again. He stuffed the warrants into a pocket and pulled the mittens over his hands, then tugged the door open.

The sled dogs barked with joy to see him again so soon and he stepped onto the runners, tugging the anchor out of the snow. "Git!" The dogs shot forward.

He spent the day zigzagging throughout the icy streets of Fairbanks, dodging pedestrians and dogs every other inch, and was glad when his hunt finally took him out of town and up the Chena River. He wasn't having much luck so far. He'd only found one man to take back to the cramped jail behind the marshal's office, but he was hoping for a second before he gave up and went back to town for the evening. If that fellow at the Lacey saloon was right, Knud and Johnson might at least be able to point him in the right direction.

The sled arched around a bend in the river and Dreibelbes caught a glimpse of a man on the bank ahead before dipping down out of sight again. When he popped back

over another rise, the man was still watching him, wary, and Dreibelbes felt a small thrill of victory. Nobody stared at an approaching stranger like that unless he was guilty of something.

Dreibelbes shouted to the dogs and staked the sled into place. The man had backed up somewhat toward the cabin behind him and Dreibelbes glared up at him, daring him to run. “What’s your name, fella?”

He glared back, dark eyes full of secrets, and answered with a heavy accent, “Charley Mitchell.”

Dreibelbes laughed. “Ain’t you mistaken.” This man had talked to nearly everyone in Fairbanks about one planned robbery or another, and nearly everyone had been able to describe him down to his tattered overalls.

He blinked twice, calculating. “Charley... Perovich.”

“Close enough. I got a warrant for you, *Vuko* Perovich.” He stepped off the sled. “You mind emptying your pockets?”

The man didn’t move for a few moments, and then began to slowly produce the sorts of things that thieves always seemed to have. A pocket watch. A bag of money. And a gold nugget chain exactly matching the one Mr. Haidukovich had reported stolen. Dreibelbes nodded, but he still felt dissatisfied. With a man murdered just a couple nights previous, surely he had better things to be doing with his time than chasing light-fingered foreigners up and down the river.

“Alright,” he sighed. “I’m bringing you into town on charges of theft, and for breaking into Joe Sica’s place. Up on the sled.”

Perovich went without a fight, plunking down on the sled while Dreibelbes filled his pockets with stolen goods. He settled himself on the sled runners and shouted to the dogs, and they were off.

They rode in silence together, slicing along the grooves in the trail, the dogs pulling joyously, tongues hanging, heads bobbing. They followed the curve of the river, until a charred ruin came into view.

Dreibelbes leaned down toward Perovich and shouted, “You hear about the murder?”

He was silent for a moment, then asked, “What murder?”

“Jacob Jaconi. You know him? Slovenian fella, like you.”

“I don’t know him.”

Dreibelbes grunted. “Nasty business.”

Perovich didn’t reply, staring straight ahead.

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Dreibelbes opened the cell door and Perovich stepped silently in, joining the other lost souls sitting around the cramped quarters. Thieves, drunks, general lowlifes: the sort of societal dregs that Fairbanks seemed to attract. They came in the hopes of easy money, of having their dreams come true, but mostly they just turned out here like they had back home. In and out of jail, always poor, scraping for every scrap of food and warmth they could find, and sullen and bitter when they inevitably couldn’t find it.

Dreibelbes closed the cell door and locked it, turning back down the hall to start on the paperwork. He nodded to the score of inmates as he walked past the cells. Most of them he knew by name. The week just wouldn’t be complete without them paying a visit.

“Marshal,” a man called.

Dreibelbes paused. He didn’t know this one so well. Dreibelbes peeled the hat off his head, scratching his scalp. “Y’alright?”

He nodded down the hall. “Did he confess?”

“Who, Perovich?”

He nodded.

Dreibelbes shrugged. “Hasn’t said much. Hasn’t really explained any of the stuff on him either, though.” He shrugged again.

“You find his things on him?”

His eyes narrowed in confusion. “Whose things? Sica’s?”

“Jaconi’s.”

It took Dreibelbes about two heartbeats to understand what the man was getting at. He looked down the hall, and found Perovich staring back at him, watching the conversation with dark eyes. He lowered his voice and turned back to the man. “Did you know Jaconi?”

“I only saw him once, when he and Vuko were talking.” He shrugged. “I don’t speak Slovenian, but they didn’t seem too fond of one another.”

“Huh.” He looked back at Perovich thoughtfully. The man was still watching them, his eyes unreadable. Dreibelbes turned back to the inmate. “What’s your name again?”

“John Stratton.”

He fished the cell keys back out of his pocket. “You mind answering me a few questions, Mr. Stratton?”

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Dreibelbes didn't have to resort to *too* much begging and bluster before Wickersham let him forget the other warrants and chase a few leads. After all, the Jaconi murder was the most important case on the docket, without question. Anything Wickersham could permit to get it closed was as good as granted.

Dreibelbes knew it was Perovich. Now he just had to prove it.

Despite the tip off, Stratton hadn't been much help in the way of evidence. For that, Dreibelbes would have to get creative.

He started back at the cabin he had first arrested Perovich at. The woodcutters there hadn't been able to tell him much more than that Perovich had been going up and down the river looking for work for weeks, but that set off a long string of people who knew Vuko Perovich, and rarely in a good way.

Dreibelbes thanked God for Perovich's big mouth. Despite having only a shaky grasp on English, he'd managed to mire himself hip deep in the worst kind of talk. It seemed like every man Dreibelbes spoke to had something to say about Perovich's penchant for alarming blather. About who he was going to steal from and how. About how easy it was to get away with crime in this country. About men he'd lick and throw in the river. Dreibelbes chuckled as he took down yet another witness to Perovich's inability to shut up.

But he still wasn't finding much that he could take to court. Character witnesses were good, but proof was better.

Dreibelbes walked into yet another camp and raised his hand in greeting. "Good morning!"

The two men splitting wood stood, the taller one calling back, "Morning."

“Either of you fellas Mr. Lodge?”

The tall one hooked his thumb over his shoulder at his companion, who sank his ax in a sawed round. “I’m Lodge. Can I help you?”

Dreibelbes shook his hand. “I’m Deputy Marshal George Dreibelbes. Did you have a fella working here a few weeks ago by the name of Vuko Perovich, or maybe Charley Mitchell?”

“Sure did.” He pushed the hair back from his forehead. “You here for his stuff?”

Dreibelbes paused. “His stuff?”

“He left an army bag of stuff here, and after so much fuss about us not going through it while he was gone. I was starting to wonder if he’d ever be back for it.”

The marshal nodded, pasting on his friendliest smile. “Yes, sir. I’m here for the stuff. Thank you for holding it for him.”

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Despite his delight in all things criminal, Perovich wasn’t a very good liar. Dreibelbes and Wickersham would pull something out of the bag and he would blink at it for a few moments, then sputter out some convoluted story about where it had come from. Nothing ever just came from the store. No two things were ever from the same place. And no single thing ever came from the same place the second time he was asked about it.

Skorlich, however, was raw, still hurting from the loss of his business partner and friend. He collapsed into the chair at the police station and stared with haunted eyes at the army bag.

With each item pulled from the bag, Dreibelbes felt his confidence growing. Nearly every item was exactly the same as one Jacob Jaconi had owned.

Skorlich clutched a sweater, poking a finger reverently through a hole in the shoulder. “He tore it while we were out at fish camp a couple summers ago. He didn’t have any other, so he kept wearing it. Said it was still good.”

He turned the wedding band over in his hands and worried about Mrs. Jaconi, far away but never forgotten.

He brushed his fingers across the J.J. carved in the gold pocketwatch and didn’t need to say more.

Unlike Perovich’s stories, Skorlich’s stories rang with truth, and with pain, and if he didn’t know where a thing came from, he wasn’t scared to admit it.

Dreibelbes carefully recorded everything, and then thanked Skorlich and showed him out. He closed the door and turned back to the Chief of Police. “What do you think, Edgar?”

Wickersham nodded. “I think we’re there.”

“You sure we can get him with this? I don’t want him getting away because we were in a hurry.”

“If we don’t arraign him soon, he’ll get away because we didn’t hurry enough.”

Dreibelbes nodded, staring at the table littered with the belongings of a dead man. “You know Nathan Harlan?”

“I do. He’s a good prosecutor. Don’t worry, George. He’ll get him.”

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Mark Skorlich hitched the bag higher on his shoulder and trudged down the trail to the Chena River.

California winters were nice, he'd heard. None of this hellish cold and dark, months and months on end of it, enough to drive a man mad. Skorlich had had enough. He was getting out while he still could, before the wolves or the cold or the neighbors did him in.

He glanced down to the slough bank and the burnt out ruin beside it, green saplings peeking up over the charred walls.

It had been nearly two years since Jaconi's death. He still thought about him from time to time, but the memories came sparser and sparser as his patience for this land and the men who inhabited it wore thinner and thinner. The slough flowed slowly along, its banks thick with grass, its waters teeming with fish, and no fisherman there to bring them in.

He had heard what they started calling the slough up in Chena, and then later in Fairbanks. And with Jaconi's murder, and Perovich's subsequent hanging, he supposed the name fit.

Dead Man's Slough.

Skorlich wouldn't be sorry if he never saw it again. He shifted the bag and kept walking.