

TALL TALE OR TRUE STORY

On page one of the December 21, 1887, *Montpelier Argus and Patriot* there appeared a strange account. The author, known only by the initials “A.M.,” described an odd event in a town some twenty miles from Montpelier. A.M. supposedly discovered the weird story in his Uncle William’s diary. The first entry, for January 7, begins like this:

“I went on the mountain today, and witnessed what to me was a horrible sight. It seems that the **dwellers** there, who are unable, either from age or other reasons, to contribute to the support of their families, are **disposed** of in the winter months in a manner that will shock the one who reads this diary.”

Uncle William goes on to describe six persons who lay drugged on the dirt floor of the cabin while their families and friends gathered round. When it was certain that they were unconscious, all of their clothing, except undergarments, was removed.



“It was night when the bodies were carried out, and the full moon . . . shone on their upturned **ghastly** faces . . . Soon their noses, ears and fingers began to turn white, then the limbs and face assumed a **tallowey** look. I could stand the cold no longer,” Uncle William wrote, “and went inside where I found the friends in cheerful conversation . . .

In time everyone lay down on the floor to sleep, all except Uncle William who sat awake all night “terror-stricken by the horrible sights [he] had witnessed.”

The night passed and January 8 dawned. Outdoors “the frozen bodies became visible, white as the snow that lay in huge drifts around them.” The diary makes careful account of the morning’s preparations. Breakfast was made and eaten. Spruce and hemlock was gathered, and a large box, about ten feet long and five feet high and wide, was built.

“When this was completed they placed about two feet of straw in the bottom [of the box]; then laid three of the frozen bodies on the straw. Then the faces and upper part of the bodies were covered with a cloth, then more straw was put in the box, and the other three bodies placed on top and covered the same as the first ones, with cloth and straw. Boards were then firmly nailed on the top, to protect the bodies from being injured by **carnivorous** animals that make their home in these mountains.”

The box was then hauled by ox team to the foot of a steep ledge. The job was done when the spruce and hemlock boughs had been piled on top of and around the box.

“We shall want our men to plant our corn next spring,” said the wife of one of the frozen men. She invited Uncle William to return on May 10 to see the six persons brought back to life. To this Uncle William agreed.

On May 10 Uncle William’s diary entry described his arrival to the place he had left four months earlier. Although the warm spring had melted much of the snow it still was deep around the bough-covered box.

“. . . The bodies, frozen and **apparently** lifeless, [were] lifted out and laid on the snow. Large troughs made out of hemlock

logs were placed nearby, filled with **tepid** water, into which the bodies were separately placed, with the head slightly raised. Boiling water was then poured into the trough from kettles hung on poles nearby, until the water in the trough was as hot as I could hold my hand in. . .

After lying in this bath for about an hour," Uncle William wrote, "color began to return to the bodies, when all hands began rubbing and **chafing** them. This continued about another hour, when a slight twitching of the muscles of the face and limbs, followed by **audible** gasps showed life . . . was returning. **Spirits** were then given in small quantities, and allowed to trickle down their throats. Soon they could swallow, and more was given them, when their eyes opened, and they began to talk, and finally sat up in their bath-tubs. They were then taken out and assisted to the house, where after a hearty dinner they seemed as well as ever, and in [no way] injured, but rather refreshed, by their long sleep of four months."



No one knows how many people believed the article when it was printed, but we do know now who "A.M." was. It seems that a farmer from Calais, by the name of Allen Morse, celebrated his fifty-second birthday on December 21, 1887. It so happened that his daughter was working at the *Montpelier Argus and Patriot* at the time. As a present to her father, she printed the **yarn** he was so famous for among family members on the paper's front page.

Allen Morse might be surprised to learn that today, many years after he made up his wild tale, doctors **routinely** lower patients' body temperatures in order to perform various kinds of surgery. Scientists

have also discovered that freezing will not injure certain body cells. However, the day when we can freeze people and thaw them out months later, healthy and happy, the way Allen Morse's characters did, seems far in the future.



PHOTOGRAPH OF ALLEN MORSE OF CALAIS

The closing words in Morse's diary were, "Truly truth is stranger than fiction." Perhaps these words are the only true ones in the whole story. But only Uncle William knows for sure.

VOCABULARY

dwellers - residents

dispose - to get rid of

ghastly - frightful, ghostly

tallowey - the color of tallow, the whitish fat used to make candles and soap

carnivorous - meat eating

apparently - clearly

tepid - lukewarm

chafe - to heat or warm by rubbing

audible - something that can be heard

spirits - used in this way means an alcoholic beverage

yarn - tale or story

routine - a standard procedure