

Bartlett's News Briefs

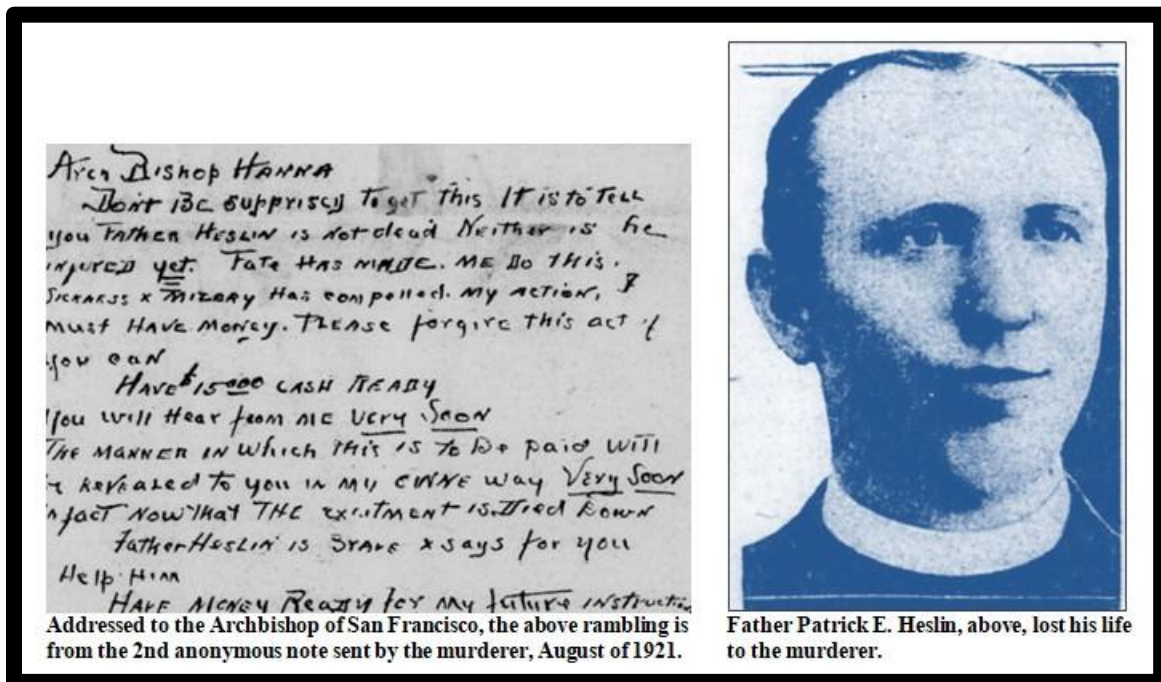
NOT JUST ANYBODY

community-sponsored stories

by Pacifican Jean Bartlett, longtime Bay Area News Group writer

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Returning to the scene of a crime – The 1921 Salada Beach murder of the good-neighbor pastor of Holy Angels Church



In honor of the 125th anniversary of Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery in Colma, I was brought on board by the Cemetery in 2012 to write a book, with multiple short biographical reads, presenting the lives of some of those interred. That's when Father Patrick E. Heslin, pastor of Holy Angels Church in Colma, first came to my attention. Tragically, Fr. Heslin lost his life to a murderer in 1921. It happened in what is today's Sharp Park neighborhood of Pacifica, but back then the area was known as Salada Beach. Recently I explored a little further into the life of Patrick Heslin and this story is that and an expanded revisit to the inexplicable loss of this clergyman's life.

* * *

Derrynacross (in Irish, Doire na Crosse), means "oak wood of the cross or grove of the cross." It is a townland in County Longford, Ireland, in the civil parish of Killoe, and is situated in what is known as the Irish Hidden Heartlands, an area which picturesquely glides across the Irish midlands and travels from Leitrim down to Lough Derg, along the River Shannon. When Patrick Heslin was growing up in Derrynacross, about a third of it was bogland and the rest was arable farmland. His father was a tenant

farmer and both of Patrick's parents, Patrick and Catherine (Hughes) Heslin, lived their entire lives in Derrynacross. It is a small, tranquil region of approximately 328 acres.

There were seven Heslin children and Patrick was the youngest. His brother Thomas, 16 years older, left for the United States in 1863, the year Patrick was born, to study divinity. Thomas would enter the priesthood in Mobile, Alabama, and eventually become Bishop of the Diocese of Natchez, Mississippi. Patrick's father would not live to see his youngest son enter the priesthood. He died when Patrick was 4. Patrick's mom died when he was 35, and so she was able to follow her son's pathway into the priesthood and on to California where he served Catholics for many years in Dixon, followed by six years in Turlock before he transferred to Holy Angels Church in Colma.

As to who he was as a human being, newspapers reported that the 5 foot 11 priest was a "man of striking personality, beloved by all he met."

What happened to this man of the cloth?

It was Tuesday night, August 2, 1921, and it was foggy in Colma. The man who knocked on Holy Angels' rectory door was dressed in layers. He wore a heavy overcoat and the collar was pulled up. His eyes were hidden behind motorist goggles. Miss Marie Wendel, Fr. Heslin's housekeeper, opened the door. She couldn't make heads or tails of the man, but she understood him well enough. His friend was dying. He needed Fr. Heslin to come with him to administer last rites. His car was just out front.

Fr. Heslin gathered what he needed. This included his sacred stole and a small case which contained the Holy Communion – the dying friend's "food for his final journey." The pastor hurried off with the suspicious looking man, Miss Wendel later told investigators, and she watched as they headed towards the nearby coast. It was just after 9 p.m.

It was not unusual for Fr. Heslin to leave without much notice to perform last rites, and Miss Wendel understood that the pastor might not return for hours. However, when the housekeeper did not find Fr. Heslin in the rectory the following morning, she phoned the authorities. On that same morning, San Francisco Archbishop Edward Joseph Hanna received an anonymous letter demanding \$6,500 for the missing priest's return. The note was half typed and half handwritten. The grammar was poor. "I had to hit him four times and he is unconscious from pressure on brain so better hurry and no fooling," the note advised. The note went on to say that the kidnapper would phone Archbishop Hanna that evening and explain where the money drop would take place. No phone call happened. By August 4, local authorities feared that Fr. Heslin had met with foul play. The police began combing the coast. They searched isolated spots, they knocked on doors for news of anyone known to have needed last rites, they systematically searched cliffsides and mountain shacks. They followed a tip that led them to search the freshwater lake and the surrounding park area of San Francisco's Lake Merced. On August 6, investigators told reporters they did not have any leads.

On August 8, the Diocese of San Francisco offered a \$5,000 reward for information leading to the safe recovery of Fr. Heslin, or the recovery of his body. Citizens of Colma pledged \$1,000 for the arrest and conviction of Fr. Heslin's kidnappers. Local newspapers reported that Father James A. Grant, pastor of St. Catherine's Church in Burlingame (now St. Catherine of Siena Parish), brought 100 men from Burlingame and personally supervised their search work in the hills surrounding "The Willows at Baden Crossing," a former marshland in South San Francisco, some five miles from Colma."

On the morning of August 10, Archbishop Hanna opened a second anonymous letter from the kidnapper. This letter demanded \$15,000 and it was 100% handwritten.

"Arch Bishop Hanna – Don't Be surprised to get this. It is to tell you Father Heslin is not dead. Neither is he injured yet. Fate has made me do this. Sickness and 'mizery' have compelled my action. I Must Have Money. Please forgive this act if you can. Have \$15,000 cash ready. You will hear from me Very Soon. The manner in which this is to be paid will be revealed to you in my own way Very Soon, in fact, now that the excitement is died down, Father Heslin is brave & says for you, help him. Have money ready for my future instructions. You will hear from me Very Soon. You will know I am the right person as I will have the piece of paper that fits on this letter."

Archbishop Hanna was baffled by the note. Why a second ransom note when there had been no follow-up to the first? Detectives read the second note and made the same conclusion as they did with the first, "the writer is deranged." But on this note, there was something else, unusual writing flourishes. These odd markings would later be used as forensic evidence in the case against the defendant.

On the evening of August 10, William A. Hightower arrived at the residence of Archbishop Hanna. There was a reporter from the *San Francisco Examiner* also outside the residence hoping to catch a lead. As the Archbishop was in a conference, William Hightower stopped to talk with the newsman. He told him he had information on the priest. The priest had been shot, twice. Hightower was sure of this. Hightower said the short of it was his girlfriend had heard a man shot the priest and buried him on the beach. She said she heard that he was buried below a man who "sits and cooks flapjacks." He told the reporter that he thought about those "flapjacks" and he remembered there was "a signboard near Salada Beach advertising 'Albers Brothers Milling Company's Flapjack Flour.'" He said on Sunday, August 7, he drove to that sign and looked around. It was then he noticed a "black scarf on a ledge of sand ten feet below the top of a cliff." He investigated. There he found "a .45 caliber revolver cartridge, and upon gently pushing the sand around, he found a blood-soaked piece of gunnysack." He did not dig further. The whole thing scared him and he left. He went to his hotel room and thought about what to do for a couple of days. On August 10, he went back to the spot on the beach and found that everything was as he left it. He then headed off to tell the Archbishop. His goal now was to have the police ascertain if the priest was buried there, and if yes, to collect the reward.

The reporter convinced Hightower to come with him to the office of the *San Francisco Examiner*. Once there, San Francisco Chief of Police Daniel O'Brien was summoned. After hearing the news, Chief O'Brien agreed to take charge of a search party. Along with Hightower and Chief O'Brien, four reporters joined the search as did Constable Samuel Landini of San Mateo County. They came to a stop when they saw the signboard. It was 11 p.m.

Borrowing lanterns from a nearby farmhouse, the search party made their way along the neighboring shore with Hightower in the lead. When they came to a shallow recess of a lonely cliff, about a mile south of the main beach, Hightower called out, "It's over here boys." The investigators gave Hightower a shovel. He began digging with enthusiasm but as he did so, he was advised to dig carefully, because he might strike the buried man's face with the shovel. Hightower told them not to worry as he was digging near the priest's feet. Not unexpectedly, the body of Father Heslin was recovered. The Colma priest had been shot once through the heart and once through the skull. In the pastor's pockets the police found a gold watch which had stopped at 9:42, a pastor's railroad pass book, some papers, a silver disk with a picture of Christ on one side and Mary and her infant son on the other, and "in a red morocco case, the wine and bread of the Blessed Sacrament which Father Heslin took with him when he left with the stranger." The priest was buried in about two feet of loose sand and wrapped inside of a tent. Despite claiming his innocence, Hightower was arrested and brought to the Redwood City County Jail.

Hightower gave the investigators the name of the woman who had told him what she had heard about the murder. She was interviewed and ruled out. Other leads that had arrived before Hightower showed up had also been investigated and ruled out. When the investigators arrived at Hightower's room in San Francisco's Larne Hotel, they made multiple discoveries. They found a swatch of material that matched

the tent cloth wrapped around the victim. They also found a typewriter. That typewriter's characters were a match for the typewritten words on the first ransom note. A knife was recovered from Hightower's room. When that knife was studied under a petrographic microscope by a forensic chemist, it was found to contain a few grains of sand that matched the sand where the pastor's body was found. A handwriting expert was brought in. He studied the unusual flourishes and marks on the ransom notes which he subsequently identified as a certain kind of decorative penmanship which bakers use on cakes.

At the time of these events, Hightower was close to broke and certainly jobless. Prior to that, he had owned a bakery in Bakersfield. One of his Bakersfield neighbors told reporters that the baker started out with a bread shop and it was extremely successful.

"He was so particular about his bread that if he turned out a batch that was not in his judgment just as it should be, he sold it for one cent a loaf. I bought it for my chickens, and often the bread I fed to my chickens was as good as some I have bought since at the regular price. He told me on many occasions he would rather waste a day's baking than to have one dissatisfied customer."

The neighbor went on to say that Hightower decided to quit making bread and devote all his time to the creation of fancy cakes. Customers didn't go with him on that decision and the baker went out of business. Still, Hightower's neighbor said when he read about the baker's connection to the priest's murder he could hardly believe it was the same man.

There was one more unpleasant discovery. Police found a bomb made out of buckshot and nails along a main roadway in Colma. It could be tied to Hightower and Hightower confessed to putting it there. He offered no explanation but police surmised he had planned to eliminate whoever brought the ransom. He didn't want any witnesses.

This all happened right during the time that John Augustus Larson had perfected William Moulton Marston's "Detect Deception" apparatus, which monitored an individual's blood pressure as an aid in uncovering the honesty of their statements. Larson's invention additionally monitored respiration, the pulse, and skin conductivity to make the results more reliable. Larson called his machine the "cardio-pneumo psychogram," but it is more commonly known today as the polygraph, and it was immediately christened by the press as a lie detector.

The "*San Francisco Call and Post*" arranged for Larson to use his invention on Hightower. It would be the lie detector's first big case. On the morning of August 17, 1921, the "*Call and Post*" banner headline read – "Science Indicates Hightower's Guilt."

On October 3, 1921, jury selection began in the trial of William A. Hightower. On October 4, 1921, a jury, consisting of four women and eight men, was secured to try Hightower for the alleged kidnaping and murder of Fr. Patrick Heslin. On October 5, 1921, District Attorney Franklin Swart began his opening statement. The trial took place in the Redwood City courtroom of Superior Judge George H. Buck. William F. Herron served as Hightower's attorney. Hightower pleaded not guilty. He named the person who he said did it, but that person had an alibi.

On the morning of October 13, 1921, the trial concluded. Judge Buck told the jury that "counsel for both sides had agreed upon the following forms of verdict: not guilty; guilty of first degree murder with nothing said; guilty of murder in the first degree with a penalty of life imprisonment." The judge finished his instructions at 2:07 p.m. and the jury retired.

Hightower told reporters that if he was found not guilty, he would go to sea as a cook. The jury deliberated for two hours and in the late afternoon of October 13, William A. Hightower was found guilty

of murder in the first degree in connection with the brutal slaying of Fr. Patrick E. Heslin. The jury recommended life imprisonment.

It was written that Hightower took the verdict calmly and then turned to reporters and his attorney and said, "Well, boys, I guess you won't see me for some time."

Hightower was then transferred to San Quentin, where he became the prison's top chef, specializing in baked-goods. Apparently he helped create the prison's dietary guidelines. Over the years he would go up for parole 26 times and be denied each time. On March 29, 1965, now 87 years old, Hightower was released from prison.

In those original "verdict" descriptions presented by the judge, what exactly does "guilty of first degree murder with nothing said," mean? It means that a defendant remains silent throughout the court proceedings, offering no explanation, or statement, of the crime committed. Nine years after his release, Hightower died in Los Angeles, and at no time, in all the days gone by since the murder, did he ever offer any comments on the death of Fr. Heslin.

The burial service for Fr. Patrick Heslin took place on August 13, 1921, at St. Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco. The church was filled to capacity. Catholic societies throughout the state of California sent tributes of flowers. A Pontifical High Requiem Mass was celebrated by Rt. Rev. Patrick Joseph Keane, Auxiliary Bishop of the Diocese of Sacramento, and the funeral sermon was delivered by Archbishop Hanna.

Father Heslin was laid to rest at Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery in Colma. (*Priest Plot-B-4-3*)

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By Jean Bartlett (© September 30, 2026)

Writer Jean Bartlett was recognized by the Board of Supervisors, County of San Mateo, for "her writing that connects community and preserves local history." She can be contacted through her website, www.bartlettbiographies.com. This story was sponsored by a grant through the Pacifica Historical Society – funded by the [Sam Mazza Foundation](#).