

WHY DO THEY DO IT?

JESSE POMEROY



AP Photo

Jesse Pomeroy was born on November 29, 1859, in Charlestown, Massachusetts. His father, Thomas, was a violent alcoholic. He would often go on drinking binges and then proceed to beat his two sons, Charles and Jesse. Jesse's mother, Ruth Ann, eventually divorced Thomas in the 1870s; divorce was extremely uncommon during this time. In fact, Ruth Ann revealed that

she divorced her husband after one of these brutal beatings:

Jesse later admitted to his doctors that his father had made him go to his room and strip totally naked, whereupon Thomas had proceeded to lash out with a leather belt . . . [Jesse] realized the beatings . . . were not that bad, not nearly as horrific as the relentless pummeling he had received almost four years earlier, when his father had taken Jesse, just eight years old, to an abandoned shed in the woods. There Thomas had become so enraged that the blows from a horse-whip had nearly killed his son.¹¹⁶

Ruth Ann realized that Jesse was a strong-willed boy. Jesse was often made fun of at school, primarily because of a deformity in his right eye. Jesse's teacher complained of his problem behavior at school. The teacher noted that he was a loner; he preferred to read cheap "dime novels." During this time, these novels were full of violence, sex, battles, and mayhem. Eventually, Ruth Ann was asked to remove her son from school.

Jesse's problems were not restricted to just school. His mother brought home two yellow canaries; she would come home looking forward to their chirping in the wooden cage. One afternoon, she came home to find the two canaries dead—their necks were twisted off their bodies. Prior to this, a neighbor had told Ruth Ann that

her little kitten had gone missing. A few days later, Ruth Ann watched Jesse walking down a nearby street with the dead kitten in one hand and a kitchen knife in the other. In 1871, there were reports that children in the next city over, Chelsea, were being beaten by an older boy. Some of these children were sexually assaulted. The victims reported that this boy would offer them money and treats; then he would suggest they go to a remote locate. There he would abuse the children.¹¹⁷ The newspapers referred to him as "The Boy Torturer" and "The Red Devil." After reading a description of this boy in the *Boston Globe*, Ruth Ann recognized this was her son; she moved her family to South Boston. In August of 1872, a young boy was found tortured in South Boston; a month later, a child was found beaten, assaulted, and tied up to a telephone pole. This victim, however, was able to give a very detailed description. This resulted in Jesse Pomeroy being arrested and sentenced to the State Reform School at Westborough for the remainder of his minor-status years (e.g., six years). Ruth Ann, however, diligently worked to have her son released earlier; Jesse was released months after.¹¹⁸

In March 1874, nine-year-old Katie Curran disappeared. During the investigation, it was revealed that the last place she had been seen was at the Pomeroy's shop; Jesse was interrogated, but there was no arrest at that time. In April, the body of four-year-old Horace Millen was found on the beach of Dorchester Bay. His throat had been cut and he had been stabbed 15 times; also, one of his eyes had been torn out. The police recalled the beatings of the other children two years earlier and arrested Jesse Pomeroy; he was 14 years old at the time. In July 1874, Jesse confessed to Horace Millen's murder. Jesse Pomeroy also confessed to the murder of Katie Curran. He had lured her into the basement of his mother's dress shop. He had then cut her throat and buried her body under an ash heap. When he was asked why he committed the murders, he stated, "I couldn't help it."¹¹⁹ On September 7, 1876, Jesse Pomeroy was sentenced to death. Subsequently, his sentence was commuted to life in prison—solitary confinement. In 1916, he was released from solitary confinement and was allowed to mix with other prisoners at the Charlestown Prison. On September 29, 1932, he died at the age of 73 years.¹²⁰

THINK ABOUT IT:

So why did he do it? As described by the theories presented in this chapter, specifically various social control

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