

everybody has one.

# Neighbors

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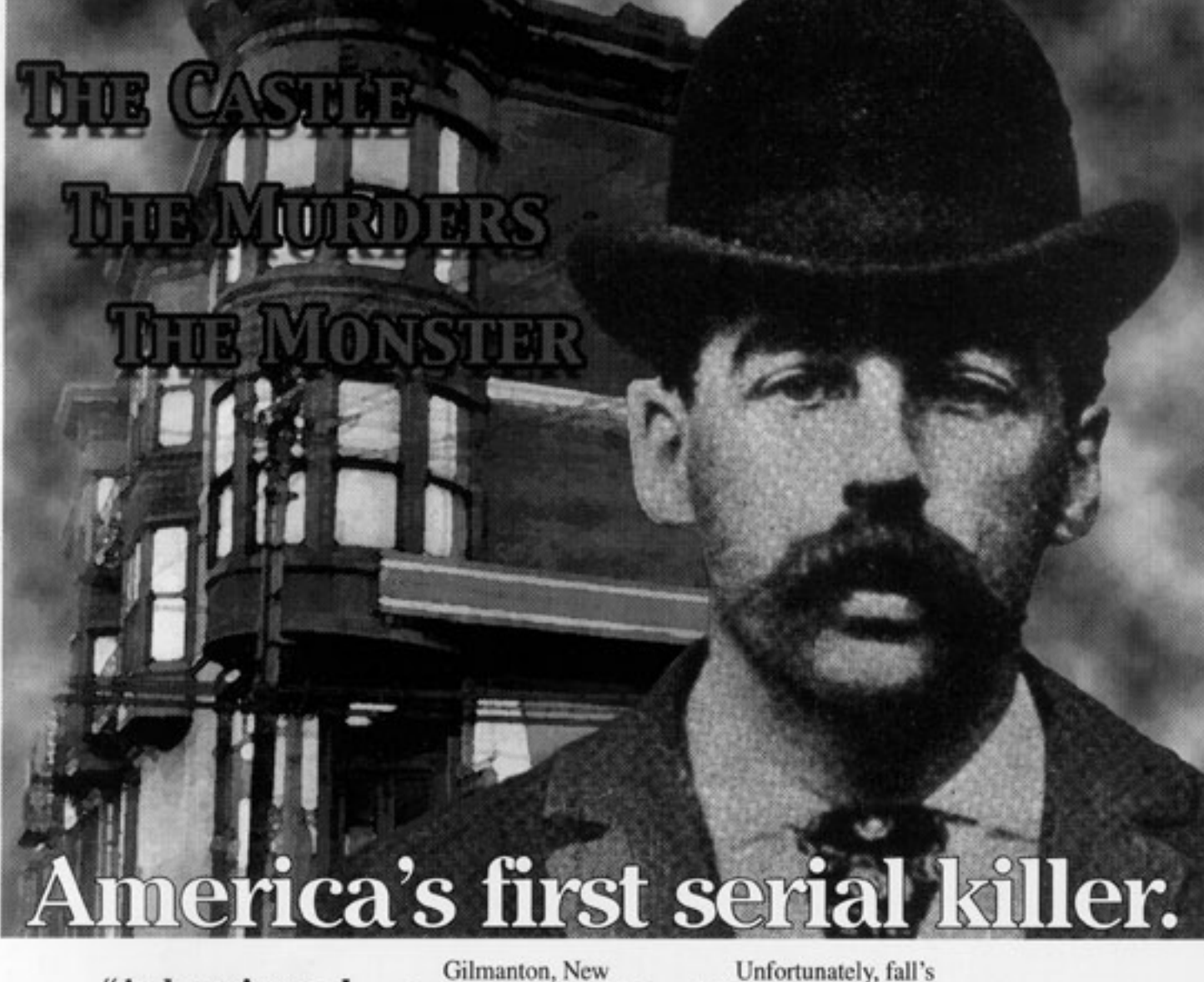
## WHO IS H.H. HOLMES?

For his much-anticipated film, "H.H. Holmes, America's First Serial Killer," director John Borowski (left) perfects his cinematic vision in one of the suburbs' notoriously dark and legendary places: The catacombs of Come Back Inn Pub in Melrose Park, thanks to owner Jim Cortino (below). Story begins on page 8.



INSIDE THIS ISSUE: Fun things to do this Fall • Hillside's "This Old Farmhouse" "Love Letters" at Dominican University • Health Info • Dining Guide • Wine News Chambers and Neighbors magazine plan October Maywood Park Race Track Outing!

### for the first time...



**"A charming and dapper man, he admitted to 27 murders, inhabiting a secret world of bloodlust that would forever define him as the most demonic criminal of his day."**

—Harold Schechter, author of the book "Depraved"

Gilmanston, New Hampshire seems to defy Nature's prelude to death in autumn. A tiny, untouched town in the countryside, Gilmanston is alive and ablaze with color this time of year: a literal canvass of golden yellows, burnt siennas, pumpkin oranges too ravishing to have been created by a human hand.

Unfortunately, fall's brilliant colors are not Gilmanston's claim to fame; Herman Mudgett is. Mudgett, now known to the world as H.H. Holmes, earned, through the most vile and demonic behavior, the title of America's first serial killer. His gruesome story,

**STORY BY TINA VALENTINO**

**PHOTOS BY TINA VALENTINO OR COURTESY OF WATERFRONT PRODUCTIONS**

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soon to be told through the first-ever movie of his life, will leave even terror-immunized 21st century audiences gasping at what they will learn. Independent film maker John Borowski, who has immersed himself in the project for more than seven long years is nearly ready to unveil the monster to an anxiously-awaiting public.

With the film in its final editing stages, Borowski has had a few moments to breathe deeply and reflect on the colossal undertaking, particularly its origins. "In 1992-93, I was researching a project on Chicago history while I was a student at Columbia. In a book examining the darker side of Chicago (I was always interested in the darker side of things), there was a chapter about Herman Mudgett and H.H. Holmes' Castle of Horrors in Chicago, which was all very fascinating to me, but I shelved the idea for some time until I stumbled on it again in the "True Crimes" section of a bookstore," Borowski recalls "I picked up Harold Schechter's book *Depraved*, read the back cover and that's when it hit me. Here it was, finally, his whole life."

Holmes, born in Gilmanston, New Hampshire, studied in Michigan, came to Chicago for a short time where he had scammed people as an encyclopedia salesman, traveled to Texas, Indiana, Toronto, New York, St. Louis, Boston and was put to death in Philadelphia on May 7, 1896 and buried in an unmarked grave. It was in Chicago, however, where Holmes' intelligence, planning and forethought came to fruition with the construction of his "Castle of Horror" on 63rd and Wallace. As Schechter describes it succinctly in his book, the Castle was a "labyrinth of trapdoors, stairways to nowhere, bedchambers

fitted with peepholes and asphyxiating gas pipes, greased body chutes, and a cellar equipped with acid vats, a crematorium and dissecting table."

Borowski's intelligence, planning and forethought—together with his keen creative vision—came to fruition more than a century later but only a short drive from the believed-to-be haunted 63rd and Wallace site—in Melrose Park, Illinois. "During the editing, the film looked great. But realizing that, in over 100 years, no one has ever seen any type of visual of this at all because the Castle's gone and there are no films, I needed to give people what they wanted to see. I myself would want to be enthralled. As a viewer, not as its producer/director, I wanted more from the film. I knew the Castle sequences, as re-

enactments were a must for the film, but how would I do it, particularly as the film essentially has no budget," said a struggling Borowski. The answer came via a friend Anthony DiCosola, who worked for a time at Come Back Inn Pub in Melrose Park. "I remembered how unique the Pub's catacombs are. It's like a Hollywood set in itself."

Enter Jamie Cortino, son of the late "Yukon" Jim Cortino, who founded and created the present-day Come Back Inn, inspired by his travels through Europe (by way of the rarely-taken Polar Route) and Canada. Come Back's catacombs are part of the original basement, remodeled in 1968 to resemble the catacombs under European cities, according to Cortino.

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Pictured above, independent film maker John Borowski (second from left), during the making of his Waterfront Productions' documentary "H.H. Holmes, America's First Serial Killer." Borowski admits that some of the movie's most memorable and significant sequences were shot in the

Catacombs of the legendary Come Back Inn Pub at 20th and Lake Street in Melrose Park. Characters in the film such as the detectives and Chicago Police Officers (also pictured above) wore authentic reproductions of the clothing worn during the late 1800s.

"Over 300,000 common bricks were used to form the walls and archways and the roomed derived its name, ironically, from a Yukon valley called "Devil's Hole" in which few ventured in ever came out," tells Cortino.

Such was the case with Holmes' Castle. Few who went in ever came out alive. Borowski could see it all in his mind's eye. "I had the vision—and the magic of editing. It took some time to get everything together: the crew, the actors, props, authentic Victorian reproductions of shoes, lanterns and even scalpels (lent to him from a doctor in Japan), but when Jamie agreed to let us shoot in the catacombs, I said without hesitation, "Let's do it." After four days in the

catacombs, I'm convinced that it looks exactly how the basement of Holmes' Castle looked," Borowski said confidently. "It was the brick structure of the catacombs that fit the documentary so well, no doubt it was like the infamous torture dungeon."

For Cortino, the movie shoot revealed many attributes in Borowski that were also character traits of his dad, "Yukon" Jim. "My first impressions of John Borowski were very good. Educated, knows his subject matter, cinematography, very well; he's an extremely well-organized individual with great character. My dad would have liked Borowski and his penchant for risk and adventure. He's self-made, willing to explore,

rolli the dice and take a chance, which a lot of us don't," professed Cortino.

Holmes, posing as a respectable doctor, hard-working druggist, idea man with great potential to the many women who were drawn to his good looks and persuasive ways, rolled the dice for decades. No one knows for certain how many people Holmes actually murdered before an elaborate insurance scam involving the grisly murders of Benjamin Pitezel and Pitezel's three young children caused his tangled web of deceit, cross country travels (that kept his lies in tact and his trail that much harder to

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follow) unraveled before the entire nation. His widely-publicized trial reached proportions equivalent to Jack the Ripper's in England only a few years earlier. As rumors were investigated, new facts unearthed—and more bodies—Holmes' life of seduction and destruction were reduced to the madness and solitary of jail confinement during his trial, a trial in which he insisted on defending himself. The evidence against him was overwhelming. As Schechter writes in his book, *Depraved*: "The acid vats and quicklime tanks. The death shafts and asphyxiation chambers. The stained wood dissecting table and chests full of blood-caked surgical tools. The underground furnace, converted to a private crematorium. The heaps of human bones."

As Borowski breathed a sigh of relief when he first stumbled on Schechter's book, thousands are waiting to exhale upon the release of Borowski's film. The website of Borowski's movie (hholmesfilm.com) as well as Borowski's own website for Waterfront Productions has attracted emails from all over the world. "Since the website, everyone from true crime and history fans to actual family members of both sides, the victims and his descendants, Mudgetts and Pitezels, can't wait for the movie. They expect that maybe it will finally give them some closure. At first, it seemed that people may have wanted to forget about it," surmised Borowski. "That's why there were so few efforts to tell Holmes' story. But now there's a real need to know and I believe it was meant for me to do this. It's fate that I would be the one to try to get to the roots of people like this."

John Borowski's research on Holmes has been all-

consuming for the past several years. As a result, he has become a leading authority on the subject, amassing a file of Holmes materials, documents, every major American newspaper with headlines and articles pertaining to the Holmes case, Holmes' autobiography written while he was in jail, mugshots and an extensive collection of primary source materials on Holmes from the 1800's and early 1900's. Borowski has visited Gilmanston, New Hampshire, and explored the nightmare home of this adult demon. For the film, he probed the minds of author Harold Schechter, who is also a former commander of the Chicago Police Department; with a forensics expert from an Illinois Crime Lab; with Commander Tom Cronin, a trained FBI profiler. And it was John Borowski who personally uncovered, through matching illustrations from 1896 newspapers, the actual courtroom where Holmes was tried in Philadelphia. The building's own personnel was unaware that any cases had been held in that exact courtroom prior to 1900.

Still, it is hard for him to imagine the life of someone like H.H. Holmes. "It's hard for me to fathom how these people can live a daily life—work, go to the store, have a family or do whatever they do, but then have the where-withal to skin a body or sell a skeleton for money. How does this happen? I just don't know," admits Borowski.

Borowski, a quiet child, content in a world of action figures and stacked up boxes with trap doors, ropes and windows, also loved to build things with his hands. He loves horror films and monsters, Dracula and Wolfman. Soon, he himself will be at the center of media attention as producers and film makers from as far away as New Zealand are wanting to tap into his vision. The accolades of Sundance and film festivals are destined to be his, and unlike Holmes in every way, Borowski pledges to never forget his roots in Chicago—and, for the Holmes film, in Melrose Park, Illinois.



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