

Michigan Every Day
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Sept. 25, 1854
"Son" of Lord Byron sent to state prison

The residents of Adrian must have had a hard time figuring out what to make of Augustus Stuart Byron McDonald when he arrived in their town in the early 1850's claiming to be the son of famous poet Lord Byron. Could this be true? Apparently it was enough to get him a job as a printer at an Adrian newspaper, the *Michigan Exposition*. It was later reported that his work habits were irregular and he was often out late at night. Soon Byron injected himself into the mystery of a series of crimes that plagued the railroad near Adrian, threatening to undermine the public's confidence in train travel and nearly causing the death of railroad engineer T.T. Parker. A band of hoodlums were placing obstructions along railroad lines, hoping to derail trains. They would then take the money from the mail shipments. In one of these attempts, the locomotive of a mail train was thrown from the tracks near Adrian, seriously injuring the engineer. The only evidence investigators found at the scene was a print from a boot. That same day, the railroad superintendant received a letter. The writer said he knew of a gang intent on mischievousness. The writer signed himself A. Stuart (i.e. Byron).

A meeting was arranged where Byron claimed he had the proof needed to arrest the gang. He offered to provide it for a reasonable fee. He was suspected trying a con, but since his was the only lead, the railroad engaged Byron's services. About the same time, a

detective was hired by the U.S. Postal Service. He was Allan Pinkerton of Chicago, who quietly began an investigation of train derailments. Byron made frequent reports to the railroad superintendant, but failed to provide evidence against the gang. The railroad grew suspicious of Byron, who seemed to be collecting more information apparent that the gang had an inside source at the post office because attempted derailments invariably happened to trains carrying large amounts of money. During one of his visits with Byron, the superintendent laid down some dirt outside of his office to take an impression of Byron's boot print. They matched, but it was not enough proof for a court case. While on a visit to Chicago, Byron was arrested at Pinkerton's direction. Byron spent a month in a jail cell with an undercover police officer from Milwaukee who posed as a thief. Byron pleaded with the inmate to testify in Adrian on his behalf. Byron asked the man to tell the court that he, not Byron, was at the scene of the derailment. In return, Byron would set the man up in a lucrative position with the gang. Byron demanded a trial in Adrian, saying he would be exonerated. Perhaps, Byron wrote, the people of Adrian would give him a financial reward for protecting them from train bandits. Byron was returned to Adrian and tried for the attempted murder of Michigan Southern Railroad engineer T.T. Parker. He was shocked when the witness he expected to call for his defense appeared for the prosecution. Testimony from the Milwaukee police officer sealed Byron's fate. On Sept. 25, 1854, Byron was sent to the state prison in Jackson for life.