

ALBERT MERK, TWICE A MURDERER AT SIXTEEN, HAD MAKINGS OF A FINE MAN FOUR YEARS AGO

By E. C. Rodgers.

St. Louis, Mo., Feb. 21.—Four years ago Albert Merk, aged 12, had the making of a fine man in him.

Today, Albert Merk, aged 16, is twice a murderer. At 16, he is a penitentiary bird.

The man in Albert Merk has been utterly ruined—the future good citizen destroyed—between the ages of 12 and 16.

The boy of the city is getting to be a greater problem every year. The boy is indeed the greatest problem of every city today.

Each decade doubles the temptations of the boys of the decade before.

Twenty years ago the boy who stole had reached the limit of depravity.

Today the most desperate, most savage of our city murderers are little more than boys—the auto bandits, the car barn bandits, the cruel street robbers—all boys.

I came to St. Louis purposely to find out, if I could, the reasons why Albert Merk is twice a murderer at 16, and to tell those reasons with the hope that the people of Chicago may read a lesson in them. I have no theories. I will merely give the facts of this lad's life during four short years.

Albert's mother is a widow, left four years ago with five children.

The double yoke of raising her little children and supporting

them too broke her health, and she is now an invalid. The two oldest daughters quit school and went to work.

In their upstairs flat near the city limits there was no room for Albert to play; his mother was sick and she couldn't stand the boisterous fun boys have to get out of their systems. There was no yard about the house, and no public play grounds. But there was a lumber yard, covering several acres, a railroad switching yard, and "hell's half acre," just outside the city limits, and several saloons, a bowling alley and pool room.

Albert started to run with the "lumber-yards bunch" and played "hookey" from school often. He began carrying a gun, bought from a lumber yard man for \$1. Other boys of the "bunch" carried revolvers and during the evenings they used to imitate the ready shooters shown in lurid, uncensored wild west pictures.

While on a car going to the widow Merks' home I counted 12 cheap motion picture theaters. Outside 10 of them were flaming signs showing firearms in the hands of bandits, detectives, policemen, gunmen, counterfeiters or others.

Books telling of the bloody deeds of Jesse James and his gang, the Younger boys, the Dalton gang, and other desperadoes, are sold in many St. Louis stores to mere babies if they have 5 or 10 cents to pay for them.