

Sidedoor: S11E01 – Jim the Penman

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

Lizzie: It was springtime when the \$20 bill showed up. The man behind the desk turned it over in his hands. Rubbed his fingers over the paper. Squinted. He was a teller at the US Treasury in New Orleans, so he'd seen a lot of money. And this bill *looked* all right. And yet, something was off.

Lizzie: On the left, Alexander Hamilton's braid fell down his back. That was correct. On the right, a woman in a warrior's helmet and white gown raised her shield. There were the signatures of the register and treasurer. It all checked out.

Lizzie: But then he turned the bill over again, pulled out a magnifying glass, and the inky green lathework on the back side revealed the truth: this \$20 bill was drawn by hand, line for line, with pen and watercolor.

Lizzie: Back in Washington, officials confirmed what they could hardly believe themselves. It was a masterpiece of imitation, but it was counterfeit. They alerted the banks to be on the lookout, and then there was nothing to do but set it aside and stay watchful. The year was 1879.

Lizzie: Six years later, in 1885, a similar fake made it through the hands of shop owners and bank tellers all the way to the treasury without detection. And then in 1891, another. That year, the *New York Times* reported:

[ARCHIVE CLIP, New York Times: Officials believe that all these bills are the work of one man.]

Lizzie: This time on Sidedoor, we bring you the story of one of the most notorious counterfeiters in American history: Jim the Penman, the "King of the Counterfeiters." A criminal who left law enforcement chasing a ghost for two decades, and whose artistic skill won the hearts of the American public, leading many to wonder if you're that talented, maybe crime *should* pay.

Lizzie: That's coming up after the break.

Lizzie: In the 1890s, the most wanted artist in America was "Jim the Penman." His counterfeit bills were so detailed, from the weight of the paper to the coloring to the Presidential portraits, they fooled nearly every newsboy, store owner and banker who passed them along. And for years, Jim the Penman had bedeviled law enforcement. They didn't know who he was, but they sure knew his work.

Ellen Feingold: *I mean, look at the little teeny dots around the key, and the stars, which are a little blurred out.*

Lizzie: *Wow!*

Lizzie: Tucked away in the vault of the National Numismatic Collection at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, curator Ellen Feingold pulls out what looks like a \$100 bill from 1880. It's a little dingy-looking, with a fold mark at the corner. There's a portrait of President Lincoln in the vignette on the left.

Ellen Feingold: *You can really see, like, each wrinkle.*

Lizzie: *Yes, the wrinkle of his smile and his mouth.*

Ellen Feingold: *Exactly. You can see the way they ...*

Lizzie: *His forehead.*

Ellen Feingold: *His ear. Compare that to the portrait here.*

Lizzie: She shows me a different fake of the same bill, made by an unknown, shall we say, 'lesser,' counterfeiter. She points at Lincoln.

Ellen Feingold: *It's blurry. It's almost like a halfhearted effort to kind of get a portrait that looks like a portrait. You can immediately tell that they're trying to copy in a way that would lead to the utility of spending it.*

Lizzie: But Jim the Penman's work leaves you with a different feeling

Ellen Feingold: *With Jim the Penman, there's a challenging oneself to produce as close to an identical match as one could.*

Lizzie: I think we're both in awe as Ellen points to the ornate red ink seal of the United States Treasury.

Lizzie: *Every single part of the seal has some little fine line shading work. I didn't realize a pen existed that had a tip this fine.*

Ellen Feingold: *I didn't either. What incredible skill this person had! Let's compare it to this less-skilled counterfeiter for a second.*

Lizzie: Ellen puts Jim's bill next to the other counterfeiter's.

Ellen Feingold: *It's like there's a red blob here!*

Lizzie: Yeah.

Ellen Feingold: *And it's not terrible.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Ellen Feingold: *But ...*

Lizzie: *It's a lot better than I could do, that's clear.*

Ellen Feingold: *Right. It's better than—it's certainly better than I could do. But now again, look at Jim the Penman's work, right?*

Lizzie: *[sighs]* Jim the Penman.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, New York Times: *The coloring is excellent, the design clearly reproduced.]*

Lizzie: Even the *New York Times* reporter seems to swoon in this article from 1892, exclaiming over the latest \$50 counterfeit to surface.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, New York Times: *A marvelously fine piece of work. The paper is good and has almost the right feel.]*

Lizzie: But for all his attention to detail, Jim the Penman left something out—something big.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, New York Times: *'Engraved and Printed at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing' is missing, possibly because the artist didn't care to burden his soul with unnecessary lies.]*

Lizzie: Because after all, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing did not make this bill. He did.

Ellen Feingold: *So this consistency of not giving the Bureau of Engraving and Printing credit is the*

throughline.

Lizzie: His calling card, if you will. And judging by this trademark tell, law enforcement traced seven different types of bills back to Jim the Penman's hand.

Lizzie: And this made them extremely concerned, because here was a guy who wasn't just looking to make a quick buck. This wasn't about picking one thing he could get away with and doing it over and over again.

Ellen Feingold: *He's obviously a talented artist. He, on some level, wants ownership and credit for his art, right?*

Lizzie: *Yeah.*

Ellen Feingold: *And artists typically don't want to do the same thing over and over again. They like to challenge themselves, try different things. He's playing, in a way, a game of exploring whether he can do what the government's artists can do. And the answer is yes, he can do it. And not only that, but he can do it with watercolor and pen. So I think there's more here than just could he make a lot and make a lot of money from it?*

Lizzie: Jim the Penman was not about to give up credit for his work, even if it meant leaving a trail of breadcrumbs behind him.

Lizzie: *Like, that he was willing to risk imprisonment.*

Ellen Feingold: *Risk it all .*

Lizzie: *Yeah! For that one—it's like such a move of defiance, you know?*

Ellen Feingold: *It's a move of defiance. I think it's an act of pride. This is a prideful counterfeiter.*

Lizzie: And Jim the Penman had reason to be proud. He stood out from the crowd—because he was far from the only person counterfeiting money in this time. In fact, the mid-1800s was known as the "Golden Age of Counterfeiting." At that time ...

Ellen Feingold: *We have over eight thousand different entities in this country producing paper money over the course of the first half of the 19th century.*

Lizzie: *Eight thousand different ...*

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Ellen Feingold: *Entities.*

Lizzie: *Entities. So banks ...*

Ellen Feingold: *Private businesses. Anyone who sought a charter and received it could print their own money.*

Lizzie: *Ellen says when the country was founded, the US Constitution gave the federal government the power to create coins but not paper money. Instead ...*

Ellen Feingold: *Each state could give charters to banks and private businesses who could produce their own paper money with no real rules around what denomination, what design or what quality.*

Lizzie: *No rules?*

Ellen Feingold: *No rules! They could put whatever they wanted on it.*

Lizzie: *Like, say, if I had an upholstery business, I could print dollar bills with llamas lounging on fainting couches drinking lemonade and people would use them! Banknotes, like bumper stickers and tattoos, were an opportunity to say something. And like bumper stickers and tattoos, you can imagine there was a lot of variation in content and quality.*

Ellen Feingold: *Maybe a bank that wants to invest a lot in this process invests in higher quality paper or higher quality ink. And a small business who just wants to produce some notes for their local customers, maybe they don't put as much into it.*

Lizzie: *I'm picturing on one hand gorgeous calligraphy, and on the other hand, it's like Monopoly money. Or like as a kid when you make your own money and you just sort of write a little dollar bill sign on it.*

Ellen Feingold: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: *And you're like, "Here you go, Mom. This is for my ..."*

Ellen Feingold: *Most of them weren't quite that bad.*

Lizzie: *Okay.*

Ellen Feingold: *But yes, the interesting thing about these notes are that sometimes they really represented local identity and pride.*

Lizzie: Bills featured everything from shipbuilding to farm scenes, steam engines, little children hugging bunnies, women weaving, a shirtless George Washington. Money could look like anything! And if you think that sounds like a lot to keep track of, just wait! It gets even more confusing during the American Civil War.

Ellen Feingold: *Because during the Civil War, the federal government decides that it needs to print banknotes in order to help pay for the war.*

Lizzie: You may have heard of these early federal bills. They were called Greenbacks.

Ellen Feingold: *They have a green back and a fairly simple design on the front. At the same time, the Confederacy is producing its own banknotes.*

Lizzie: So between the paper money coming from private banks and stores, federal greenbacks, and Confederate currency ...

Ellen Feingold: *There is no unified system that everyone can rely on.*

Lizzie: *Wow, that sounds incredibly confusing!*

Ellen Feingold: *It's very confusing.*

Lizzie: And because there were so many different kinds of money, it was easier for counterfeiters to get away with passing fake money. Imagine being a shopkeeper and having to decide if a bill is real or not when it could be one of thousands of different designs and sizes.

Ellen Feingold: *It was probably really stressful trying to keep up with everything that was coming in, and trying to assess it and trying to navigate relationships with the public while doing that.*

Lizzie: This gave counterfeiters a huge opening—and they took it. In 1865, up to a third of all paper money circulating in the US was thought to be fake. A third! This was a major problem. A few fake bills here and there is a bummer, but this much counterfeit threatened to undermine the entire economy. So to get a handle on the counterfeiting craze, the federal government created a new law enforcement agency: the United States Secret Service.

Lizzie: And when you hear 'Secret Service,' you probably think of the President's bodyguards. But that's actually a newer function of the Secret Service, and not why it was originally created.

Ellen Feingold: *It was initially created to protect the government from fraud. And one of the biggest forms of fraud that the government was concerned about at the time was counterfeiting. So it makes sense that it was created to be part of the Treasury Department, initially. Anti-counterfeiting was one of their primary roles.*

Lizzie: The United States Secret Service established its headquarters in Washington, DC. So to catch the scores of counterfeiters running wild across the country, they needed to partner with people on the frontlines.

Ellen Feingold: *The Secret Service is not huge. They don't have agents hanging out in every town around the country, right? So they need partnership, and the business owners have every motivation to partner with them because they don't want to be defrauded.*

Lizzie: The United States Treasury created "Dickerman's Counterfeit Detector." And when I heard 'counterfeit detector,' I was picturing a machine that you stick a bill into and if it's fake it squawks and spits the bill out and sets off an alarm or something. That was wrong.

Ellen Feingold: *It was sort of like an alert bulletin around counterfeiting.*

Lizzie: Picture a booklet filled with drawings of different banknotes, with closeups of what the little images should look like in the vignettes. If we use modern money as an example, the booklet might show that today's one dollar bill has a glowing eye floating at the top of the pyramid on the back, and the words "annuit coeptis" right above it. Maybe a counterfeiter would misspell the Latin, or draw the eye closed instead of open. So if you were a shopkeeper ...

Ellen Feingold: *You could pull out the book and you could compare the vignette without having the authentic note on hand.*

Lizzie: *I see.*

Ellen Feingold: *There's so many different notes at this time.*

Lizzie: *Right!*

Ellen Feingold: *Every business is not gonna have every note. So it's like a reference guide.*

Lizzie: *A reference guide.*

Ellen Feingold: *Focusing on the notes that they felt were most vulnerable or where they were starting to see counterfeits of.*

Lizzie: The Secret Service updated the counterfeit detector weekly with particular counterfeit notes to be on the lookout for. And by the 1890s, Jim the Penman was at the top of their lookout list.

Lizzie: Their only hope was to somehow catch Jim the Penman with his counterfeit in hand—a longshot, for sure. But there's one thing they felt confident about: he was not about to stop. He was the best—and getting better. But who was he? A painter? A banker? Someone working inside the treasury? Well, not quite.

Lizzie: Just outside New York City, a man plunges a hoe into a field of dirt, drags it through the soil, lifts it over his head and heaves again. As the sun goes down, he stows his tools in the shed, washes the dirt from his hands. Eats dinner. Kisses his kids goodnight, and then disappears into an upstairs room of the farmhouse.

Lizzie: There, he pulls out another set of tools—lead pencil, ink, watercolor, paintbrush. This was Jim the Penman. Though his neighbors would have known him as Emanuel Ninger. Quiet. Friendly.

***Ellen Feingold:** Family man and an upstanding citizen. Someone who would lend a hand or even a loan to a neighbor in need.*

Lizzie: Ninger had emigrated from Prussia—now Germany—with his wife Adele in 1882. They settled in New Jersey, where they bought a small farm and lived with their four children. They went to church, donated to local charities, and mostly kept to themselves.

Lizzie: For farmers though, the Ningers didn't do all that much actual farming. They had a few dozen chickens and a pig here and there, but they didn't grow enough to live on. Anyone curious enough to ask would have been told that Ninger got a pension from the Prussian government for his service in the Franco-Prussian war. Nobody, not even his wife, knew how Ninger really made his money—by hand.

Lizzie: Unlike most counterfeiters of the time, Ninger worked alone. He'd sit by the window in an upstairs room of the farmhouse. He used coffee to stain the paper and make it look older. Then he'd lay the still-damp paper over an authentic banknote, and against the window glass, trace the lines of the original with a lead pencil. Then he retraced with pen, added watercolor with a camel's hair brush, and used red and blue ink to imitate the silk threads that were unique to the Treasury Department's paper.

***Ellen Feingold:** He's not trying to create a criminal network and have a bunch of people that work for him. He's not a mafia head. He's not an evil genius. He's like a quiet genius who's doing something that happens to be illegal.*

Lizzie: *Who's doing criminal stuff.*

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Lizzie: Ninger would make about six counterfeit bills a month. But he didn't try to use these bills close to home. At the end of each month, he would head off to New York City.

Ellen Feingold: *And he tells his wife he's speculating in the stock market, and doing so fairly very successfully over the years.*

Lizzie: *She's like, "Okay, honey. Great."*

Ellen Feingold: *But he's not flashy. He's not suddenly then building, you know, five new barns or, like, throwing cash off the top of his silo.*

Lizzie: *[laughs] You know, what farmers do when they get rich.*

Ellen Feingold: *Right. Exactly. He's not—he doesn't suddenly have all of these new farm animals. You know, he's doing fine. He's keeping his family well clothed, and everybody's eating and they have what they need, and they can help others. And that's really, in many ways, a privileged position, but he's not taking this to an excessive place. He's not performing his wealth in public, and that's really important. It's an important part of how he gets away with it.*

Lizzie: But with the Secret Service on the prowl, would this friendly farmer finally push his luck too far? We'll have more on that after the break.

Secret Service archivist: *Did you want the honors, or you want me to pop it?*

Lizzie: *Oh, I want—well, I'm allowed to open that door?*

Secret Service archivist: *If you wish.*

Lizzie: *Yeah! [laughs]*

Lizzie: It is such a fun thing to get behind a locked door and poke around in boxes.

Lizzie: *Oh, ho ho !*

Lizzie: Especially when you're looking for arrest records.

Lizzie: *I can only imagine what's inside each of these boxes! [laughs]*

Lizzie: And that's exactly what Ellen Feingold and I are doing here.

Secret Service archivist: *We're here to help you. So we are located within the US Secret Service, our headquarter building in Washington, DC. And this is our archives.*

Lizzie: And that is our friendly Secret Service archivist. I would tell you his name but then I would have to kill you. Just kidding—or am I? Anyway, he is going to stay anonymous.

Lizzie: Ellen and I are here, surrounded by boxes of over a century's worth of administrative and investigative records, on a quest.

Lizzie: *So Emanuel Ninger, who went by Jim the Penman, when he was finally arrested, I'm just dying to know what happened. Is there an arrest record for—like, do you have records that will tell us exactly what happened on that day here?*

Secret Service archivist: *Yes.*

Lizzie: *Can you—can you show us those?*

Secret Service archivist: *Well, I would like you to—if there's interest, you may locate them yourselves.*

Lizzie: *Oh, yeah! Let's do it! Okay.*

Ellen Feingold: *I'm guessing they're on this table.*

Secret Service archivist: *Well, yes and no.*

Ellen Feingold: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: The archivist shows us a record locator to help us figure out where the documents are in the archives, including the arrest book and newspaper articles.

Lizzie: *The arrest book entry is going to be in aisle five?*

Secret Service archivist: Yes.

Lizzie: Okay.

Ellen Feingold: Compartment one, shelf one, box seven. Got it?

Lizzie: Yeah.

Ellen Feingold: Let's go!

Lizzie: Through another set of closed doors is a whole room with walls of filing shelves on tracks.

Lizzie: Oh wow, there is way more back here!

Lizzie: Which took a bit of figuring out.

Lizzie: I can't believe you're letting me move this shelf. I've never been able to move one of these zoomie moving shelves.

Ellen Feingold: Okay, so we're in aisle five.

Lizzie: But we found the arrest book.

Lizzie: There it is! 'Arrest Books, New York.'

Lizzie: It's leatherbound, about the size of a large index card.

Ellen Feingold: All right.

Lizzie: Ellen opens it.

Ellen Feingold: You have to be so careful. These pages are over 100 years old.

Lizzie: Inside, the smell of leather and old paper, and the swooping cursive of a Secret Service operative's fountain pen:.

Ellen Feingold: Okay. "Pocket Memoranda, Judicial Action. Emanuel Ninger. When reported ..."

Lizzie: The officer wrote down the basic facts of how the Secret Service finally caught up to the King of the Counterfeiters. It happened like this.

Lizzie: On March 28, 1896, Emanuel Ninger, age 49, set off for his monthly sojourn to New York City. He had with him six counterfeit bills: five \$20 bills and one \$50. In the city, he'd stopped at three stores and successfully passed off the first three of his \$20s when he walked into a grocery store at the corner of 3rd Avenue and 16th Street.

Lizzie: Dickerman's Counterfeit Detector published a full account of what happened next, calling it "As thrilling as the old dime novel romance which used to charm the youthful mind." Whatever that means. The account says when Ninger walked into the grocery store, he looked pretty unassuming.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Not a man whose appearance would suggest that he was engaged in cheating his fellow man. He would rather be taken as good meat for the confidence man and bunco steerer.]

Lizzie: In other words, he looked more like the affable target of a con than a con man himself. His arrest record describes him as "stout."

Ellen Feingold: Five feet, seven and a half inches, 176 pounds. Fair complexion, light blue eyes, blonde hair and full blonde beard. Mole under right eye ...

Lizzie: And he may not have looked suspicious to most people, but when he handed his next \$20 to the cashier in exchange for a bottle of whiskey, she ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP: An exceedingly bright and intelligent young woman, had been counting money and her fingers were moist. And as she handled the bill, she noticed that the printing became blurred.]

Lizzie: By the time the cashier noticed the smudged watercolor, Ninger had vanished. She immediately called the store owner, who confirmed the bill was fake and rushed out to the street.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Ninger was out of sight, and there seemed to be little chance of ever seeing him again.]

Lizzie: A little ways off, Ninger made his way toward the Liberty Street ferry, popping into a saloon at 87 Cortlandt Street. He bought a cigar from the cashier, Mr. Paul Zipper, and then went to the bar for a glass of wine. He finished his wine, stood to go, and on his way out—almost as an afterthought—he stopped at the cashier's desk and asked Mr. Zipper if he would change a \$50 bill for smaller bills. He said he needed to pay his farm hands.

Lizzie: Mr. Zipper obligingly took the \$50 and handed Ninger back some dollars and change. And this

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is where Ninger went wrong.

Secret Service archivist: *He was just so happy to get the money, he didn't take the time to look at the money and count it. He just said, "I got it, thanks" and left. And Zipper's like, "Whoa, what's going on here?"*

[ARCHIVE CLIP: *Ninger's haste at once excited Mr. Zipper's suspicions, and the latter examined the note again and came to the conclusion that there was something wrong about it.]*

Lizzie: The chase was on!

[ARCHIVE CLIP: *The cashier rushed out of the store and ran up Cortlandt Street to Washington Street, but could find no trace of the man.]*

Lizzie: He rushed back to the saloon for his hat—because you cannot apprehend a criminal without your hat—and then hurried to the ferryhouse thinking the counterfeiter might be looking to escape to New Jersey. But Ninger wasn't there.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: *He asked the policeman stationed in front of the ferry if he had seen a man of Ninger's description, but the policeman did not recall meeting such a man.]*

Lizzie: Not to be deterred, Zipper zipped off to the Jersey Central Ferry at the foot of Liberty Street. And there inside ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP: *He found Ninger quietly sitting and engaged in counting the money he had got from Zipper.]*

Lizzie: Zipper cordially invited Ninger to go back to the saloon with him. Ninger declined this invitation. But Zipper wasn't going to take no for an answer. Dickerman's describes Zipper this way.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: *He was an undersized man of youthful age and light weight, but with pluck enough to supply a half dozen giants. He gave Ninger to understand that he proposed to take him back whether Ninger liked it or not.]*

Lizzie: When Zipper accused him of passing counterfeit, Ninger looked surprised. He apologized, offered Zipper back his money, with an extra five dollars thrown in.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: *But Zipper wasn't taking any bribes, and was bound to take Ninger.]*

Lizzie: Possibly not wanting to make a scene at the ferry station, Ninger eventually did get up and went outside with Zipper where they met a policeman.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Policeman James F. Lorigan of the Twelfth Precinct.]

Lizzie: Zipper asked the policeman to arrest Ninger, and the three went off by foot to the precinct. But on their way there ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Ninger suddenly dropped his valise and ran. Officer Lorigan tripped over the valise and fell, but Zipper followed Ninger and soon overtook him. Jumping on his heels, he brought Ninger to the ground and fell on him. He held him down until Officer Lorigan reached him.]

Lizzie: With Ninger pinned, Lorigan called for backup, and Ninger was taken back to the police station, where they searched him and found a counterfeit \$20 note. Ninger was put in jail.

Lizzie: *So this is his mugshot, basically.*

Secret Service archivist: *This is his mugshot. Exactly, yes.*

Lizzie: In the Secret Service archives is a glossy black and white photograph of a slightly bewildered-looking man in coat and tie, round cheeks under his beard, hair thinning on top—the Secret Service's white whale.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: The most dangerous counterfeiter of the present day.]

Lizzie: News of the infamous Jim the Penman's arrest made headlines, and I got a peek of this media circus in the Secret Service's own highly-crafty, super-official scrapbook.

Secret Service archivist: *Newspapers, they kept a scrapbook of anything counterfeit related, any investigative stories, and they pasted them or glued them in. So that's what ...*

Lizzie: Our archivist pulls out what looks like a giant family photo album, except inside is a collage of news clippings from the spring of 1896.

Ellen Feingold: *"1896. A case that has baffled the detectives for 20 years is at last solved."*

Lizzie: *"Jim the Penman is now in custody, and for the first time, the most marvelous counterfeiter this country has ever contained is behind the bars."*

Ellen Feingold: *"The prisoner has always operated alone. All of his work was done with pen and ink, and was so perfect that it deceived the most expert eye."*

Ellen Feingold: *And you know what I'm noticing on this page?*

Lizzie: *What?*

Ellen Feingold: *Is all the different cities where this news is shared.*

Lizzie: *Whoa!*

Ellen Feingold: *Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia. This is national news. This is not just New York news.*

Lizzie: *In jail, Ninger's bail was posted at \$20,000. That's like three-quarters of a million dollars today. Secret Service Operative Roy Bagg sat with Ninger to get a confession, which turned out not to be very hard to do. Bagg wrote:*

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Ninger became very much alarmed for fear his wife would be arrested. He stated in these words, "I am going to tell you all now. I made the notes myself."]

Lizzie: *But Bagg had his doubts.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP: I called his attention to his big, clumsy hands and to the fact that his handwriting, some of which he had given me, was coarse and poor penmanship. He replied that he only did that to deceive us and he could write very differently.]

Lizzie: *To prove it ...*

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Ninger promised me that in my absence he would draw enough of a \$20 note to convince me that he did the work.]

Lizzie: *So he really owned it.*

Ellen Feingold: *He owned it. I think the desire to make sure that the law enforcement knew that he was a lone wolf was really important. Maybe his ego plays a role here, but it sounds like also in protecting his wife and family.*

Lizzie: *We turn a page in the scrapbook to find a drawing not of Jim the Penman's face ...*

Ellen Feingold: *Up here's the hand.*

Lizzie: *[gasps]*

Ellen Feingold: *Okay.*

Lizzie: *Oh my gosh. 'Sketch of the alleged counterfeiter's right hand.' [laughs]*

Lizzie: What is this obsession with his hands?

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Ninger handles the pencil very readily with his big, clumsy farmer-like hand.]

Lizzie: A newspaper clipping from April 6, 1896 reads ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP: While writing, he leaned over until his eyes were but a short distance from the paper. He is very nearsighted now, his vision having been much impaired by the fine workmanship that made his counterfeits the puzzle of experts.]

Lizzie: The articles go on.

Lizzie: *'An alleged criminal of remarkable genius. He was a homely tiller of the soil.' [laughs]*

Ellen Feingold: *'Wonders of Ninger's Pen: How the Remarkable Pen and Ink Counterfeits Were Made.'*

Lizzie: Ninger was a media sensation. Here was the most dangerous counterfeiter of the time, the Secret Service's *bête noir*, unmasked to be this mild-mannered German farmer with bad eyesight and sausage fingers—who didn't even smoke! And loved his wife! The media reported on his hardworking nature, how much his neighbors and his children loved him. But most of all, how amazing his work was.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Emanuel Ninger proves himself a real genius. He made quote-unquote "money" that deceived the very elect.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: A party of artists call to see the work of the farmer counterfeiter, and they pronounce the bills 'perfect.']

Ellen Feingold: *It's like the news—the reporters and the public are sort of wondering at this as*

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opposed to being outraged by it.

Lizzie: *Yeah, he's like a celebrity criminal.*

A prominent New Yorker, Silas S. Packard, wrote to the The New York Sun saying he did not believe it was possible for anyone to create a convincing counterfeit with pen and ink alone. He offered to pay \$100 for the Sun to send him one of Ninger's counterfeits so he could inspect it himself. Two days after receiving Ninger's fake bill, he wrote to the editor of the Sun.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: *Sir, you have me cornered, no doubt. And I don't mean to squirm. Ninger and the Sun are too much for me. The \$20 greenback you sent me I would have taken without a second thought in ordinary exchange.]*

Lizzie: But then he goes on.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: *I call this little short of genius. I think it would be a shame to punish him.]*

Ellen Feingold: *The public is very uneasy about the idea that someone who is so talented will be—will be punished, instead of out in the world creating things that impress them.*

Lizzie: Packard offers to contribute to a fund to quote, "Defend the artist."

[ARCHIVE CLIP: *Now cannot something be done for Ninger? He is a very small offender at most, and I don't know of any holder of his 'circulation' who would part with it for double its face value. He's not harmed anybody, not even the government, but has really conferred a favor on the public.]*

Ellen Feingold: *This question of is it counterfeiting if people regard it as art, and thus are willing to purchase it as a piece of art for more than the face value of the note comes up in the coverage and the debate about him at the time and since.*

Lizzie: The question kept coming back: was he a criminal? Or a criminally good artist?

Ellen Feingold: *Has he done anything harmful, or has he actually just created, like, a new collectible.*
[laughs]

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Ellen Feingold: *Or a new type of art that you hang on your wall?*

Lizzie: But nobody—not even a great artist—is above the law. Ninger stood trial a little over a month later, in May 1896. He pled guilty, received a fine of \$1, and was sentenced to six years in the Erie County Penitentiary.

Lizzie: *Does it say anything about the public reaction to the sentencing?*

Lizzie: A news report described the scene in the courtroom.

Ellen Feingold: *"Ninger wept and wrung his hands. His counsel pleaded for mercy." I feel kind of sad reading that.*

Lizzie: *Yeah.*

Ellen Feingold: *Even though he clearly broke the law, it's kind of hard not to admire him.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP: *Ninger shed tears. His little daughter kissed him and said she would go to prison with him.]*

Lizzie: The papers reported ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP: *Neighbors warmly stood by him. They saw him toiling daily, and he was too good to do wrong.]*

Lizzie: *It's like strangely heroic coverage, right?*

Ellen Feingold: *Absolutely. I think they're really questioning how bad is counterfeiting in this case? It's not being mass produced, it's not gonna destabilize our economy. Isn't he just a talented guy who maybe did something he shouldn't have done?*

Lizzie: Ninger spent four years in prison, and was released early on good behavior. According to a writer who spoke with his grandson, after his release he did try his hand at copying a couple British banknotes, but when that upset his wife, he gave it up forever.

Secret Service archivist: *There's also speculation that he was hired by the federal government to work at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing and serve as a consultant—the do's and don'ts of preventive measures of people doing some counterfeiting. Well, he's an expert. And he would've looked into these different things to make it hard for people to be able to counterfeit.*

Lizzie: That would have made a certain amount of sense, but we don't have documentation to support it. What we do know, according to census records, is that Ninger moved from New Jersey and moved to Pennsylvania.

Ellen Feingold: *They purchase a new farm, and he lives out his years on his farm with his family, and he dies there.*

Secret Service archivist: *This is his death certificate, and this is his obituary notice. And so he's buried up outside of Reading, Pennsylvania these days, in an old cemetery.*

Lizzie: I scan the obituary.

Lizzie: *Oh, wow! There's nothing in his obituary about his crime.*

Secret Service archivist: *No! Of course not! [laughs] People in Reading didn't know about him, and he didn't want to stuff up again.*

Ellen Feingold: *He loses the public's attention once he's in prison, and he—and I think he kind of fades into—fades into the past.*

Lizzie: *A quiet end for the quiet genius.*

Ellen Feingold: *A quiet end for a quiet genius. Which is maybe very fitting, right? Because he was never looking to create some big criminal enterprise. He wanted to quietly counterfeit notes in his farmhouse, and he did.*

Lizzie: Ninger is thought to have made between 400 and 1,000 counterfeit banknotes in his time. Today, a dozen or so are likely still out there, collector's items worth far more than their original value. They're tucked away in private collections, and you won't see them, because having counterfeit in your possession—even as a collector's item—is illegal. So you'll just have to come to the National Numismatic Collection to see his work in person. And it's hard not to be awed by it. Ellen called me on it.

Lizzie: *I'm projecting as I say this ...*

Ellen Feingold: *You like him. [laughs]*

Lizzie: *I know! I can't help it! I like him.*

Ellen Feingold: *I like him too. It's okay! I think that this is the luxury of being, you know, completely protected from his crime. We don't have to worry about him defrauding us.*

Lizzie: *We can like him from a distance.*

Ellen Feingold: *Of course, we can like him from, you know, 130 years distance. Yeah.*

Lizzie: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

Lizzie: To see Jim the Penman's work for real for real—or for fake for real—come visit the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History! We'll also link pictures of his work in our newsletter. You can subscribe at [Si.edu/sidedoor](https://si.edu/sidedoor). And find us on social media at Sidedoorpod.

Lizzie: Counterfeiting looks pretty different today—you can't copy the \$100 with a pen and some watercolor. New security features are coming out all the time, but the Secret Service reported that in 2023 it seized \$21 million in counterfeit. We'll include some links in our newsletter to read sources about how counterfeiting has changed, how to be on the lookout for counterfeit cash, and what to do if someone passes you funny money.

Lizzie: Murray Bloom wrote the book *Money of Their Own: The True Stories of the World's Greatest Counterfeiters*, which was a big part of our research. For help with this episode, we want to thank Ellen Feingold, Valeska Hilbig, Jocelyn Knauf and Maureen Brown at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Thanks to Maria Hawkins and Richelle Stento at the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. Thanks to our friends at the United States Secret Service for all their assistance with research and for welcoming us into the archives. They have their own podcast over there too. We'll link to it in our newsletter. Special thanks to PJ Tabit, Stephanie Logan and Michael Wheeler.

Lizzie: Our podcast is produced by James Morrison and me, Lizzie Peabody. Our associate producer is Nathalie Boyd. Executive producer is Ann Conanan. Our editorial team is Jess Sadeq and Sharon Bryant. Tami O'Neill is our newsletter wizard. Russell Gragg writes our transcripts. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

Lizzie: Extra support comes from PRX. If you have a pitch for us, send us an email at [sidedoor\(@\)si.edu](mailto:sidedoor(@)si.edu)! And if you want to sponsor our show, please email [sponsorship\(@\)prx.org](mailto:sponsorship(@)prx.org).

Lizzie: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

Ellen Feingold: *We also have this raised printing feature, which—this note you won't touch, but you can touch a \$100 at home.*

Sidedoor: S11E01 – Jim the Penman

Lizzie: *Mm-mmm.*

Ellen Feingold: *This is on ...*

Lizzie: *Like I have a bunch of \$100s at home, Ellen! Who do you think I am? I work for the government!*

Ellen Feingold: *All of your lucrative Sidedoors!*