

More Franklin Park Stories

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Crime Stories Part 1

[Information appearing in this article was obtained from published newspaper accounts. First names and last initials are used to identify perpetrators and victims. Please note that Franklin Township became Franklin Park Borough in 1961.]

Murder

Pittsburgh Daily Gazette November 18, 1848

An old harmless colored man named Jackson was brutally assaulted and beaten, on Thursday afternoon, at a German tavern in Floss Township, by some five or six drunken young men or boys from Franklin Township, in this county, and Cranberry Township Butler County. The old man was so horribly abused that he died at three o'clock on Friday morning. The names of four of the young men were given to us, yesterday by Coroner Richardson.

Attempted Matricide

Pittsburgh Daily Gazette May 17, 1854

William J, who lives with his mother, near the Zelenople Plank Road [Perry Highway], about three miles west of Perrysville, has, for the past three weeks been very much addicted to drinking, and in that time had averaged three quarts of whiskey every twenty-four hours! On Thursday last, in the afternoon, he was seized with the mania a polu, shut the door of his house and made an attack on his mother, an old lady, with a knife, inflicting three wounds, one on the left side of her neck, another on the breast, and the third on her foot. After he had thus inflicted the wounds, the old lady ran and threw herself on the bed, where the madman proceeded with a bucket of water, and attempted to drown her. The old lady's cry for help attracted the attention of a German, who happened to be passing, when he ran into the house and rescued the helpless mother from the murderous hands of her son. She appeared quite insane, and altogether unaware of her son's attack and intentions. The neighborhood soon became aroused, and in a short time twenty-five or thirty men were gathered round the house. Wm. J made no resistance whatever and his mother was removed to the house of Israel J where her wounds were dressed by a physician, and our informant tells us that she is now able to walk about, and is almost recovered. Wm. J is still at the house and was harrowing in the fields yesterday. No attempt was made to arrest him and his mother refuses to make an oath against him. He is certainly a desperate man, and should be taken into custody. [Occurred in Franklin Township.]

Wealthy Widow Slain

Based on *Pittsburgh Press* reports.

Between December 1915 and March 1916, newspapers reported on what was described as one of the most brutal murders ever committed in Allegheny County. The

victim was a seventy-year-old widow living in the Ingomar section of McCandless Township whose accused killers included her son-in-law.

Caroline V was the daughter of a wealthy Pittsburgh family whose fortune was made in a glue and tannery business. She and her husband made their home on a sixty acre farm, which she had received from her father. Following her husband's death in 1913, Mrs. V continued to reside on the farm with two hired men who shared her home. Emily F was Mrs. V's daughter and closest neighbor. She and her husband Aaron F, a poultryman, were the parents of a seven year old daughter.

On the evening of Saturday, December 11, 1915, the two hired men retired to their attic bedroom where they quickly fell asleep. Anticipating breakfast as they descended the staircase the next morning, the men discovered their employer's lifeless body bound and gagged on a dining room sofa. After finding the telephone line had been cut, help was quickly sought from a neighboring farm. From the disarray of the dining room and adjacent hallway leading from the unlocked kitchen door, it was determined that a struggle had taken place. It was further discovered that papers were strewn throughout the victim's second floor bedroom, yet nothing appeared to have been taken except three dollars and a pocket watch.

County detectives soon charged sixteen-year-old Joe W. with the murder of his former employer. In an attempt to escape capture, he joined the Marines and was preparing for basic training when arrested in South Carolina. It was during his return trip to Pittsburgh with police detectives that he tearfully confessed to choking Mrs. V. His twenty-five year old accomplice was soon arrested as was the victim's thirty-eight year old son-in-law, Aaron F.

According to the boy, Mr. F contacted him in November 1915, offering to give him \$100 if he would steal the \$4,000 promissory note Mrs. V held against her son-in-law. Mr. F reportedly suggested that Joe find someone to help tie and gag the woman before taking the note from the bedroom. In addition to the note, Joe was to take something of value from the house to provide a motive for the robbery. He was reportedly told to enter the house the evening of December 11th as it was payday and the hired men would most likely be passed out after having drunk too much alcohol.

A medical examination revealed the gag placed in the victim's mouth had loosened her false teeth, which led to choking. With his young accomplice standing over the bound victim, Joe searched the second floor bedroom, grabbing three dollars and a gold pocket watch when he could not find the promissory note.

On Monday morning, the boy reportedly met Mr. F at a pre-arranged time in downtown Pittsburgh when the older man stated he did not have the hundred dollars and that it would be best for Joe to leave the city until everything "blew over." the teenager quickly enlisted in the Marines and headed south for basic training.

After piecing together the evidence, prosecutors brought charges against Aaron F and the two boys. The youths quickly confessed to their part in the crime. Joe had asked his friend if he would like to earn fifty dollars, not revealing what was expected until after they debarked from the Harmony Line trolley at 10 PM on the evening of December 11 and were walking toward the victim's Perry Highway home. Pleading not guilty, Mr. F was held for trial.

Prosecutors tried to show Mr. F instigated the affair because he had not been able to make payments on the \$4,000 owed his mother-in-law. Despite parts of his story

not being corroborated, the jury took only thirteen minutes to find him innocent of the charges based on the testimony of prominent Ingomar residents, including a local minister. By coincidence, one of the jurors happened to be a local farmer.

Neither the defense nor prosecution wanted the boys to face death by electrocution, the penalty for a first degree murder conviction, as it was agreed the two had no intention of killing Mrs. V. Instead, they were each sentenced to between eighteen and twenty years in Western Penitentiary while Aaron F walked away, a free man.

Mrs. V's daughter, son-in-law and young granddaughter soon left Ingomar, moving to Bethesda, Maryland where they would reside for many years. The two boys presumably served their prison sentences before being released as they reached middle age.

Doctor Shoots Three, Then Suicides

Excerpts from *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* January 12, 1939

Driven to desperation when a constable and two real estate men tried to take his car because he had not paid his rent, Dr. Charles S, 60-year-old Ingomar physician, shot them and killed himself last night...Ridden with debt, the doctor apparently was completely unnerved at the prospect of being "sold out."

He shot the three outside his home as they were preparing to take the car from his garage, and then, coming into the house after his worried wife had separated them and brought them all into her home, he went with her to his room. He kissed her, according to her later account...and said, "Bring me up a drink of liquor, dear." She hurried downstairs, and suddenly, terror-stricken, she heard the roar of a revolver. Dr. S was lying on the floor of their bedroom when she ran up. A trickle of blood was spreading over their floor from a wound in his head. A violent battle had preceded his suicide.

A constable came late in the afternoon with [two real estate men]. They had a process for the seizure of the doctor's car for two months' rent [\$280]. Dr. S, who according to his wife was promised appointment next week to a \$7,500 a year job in the state health department, desperately sought to persuade the visitors from carrying out the dispossession order. He ran into the house from his garage and called the real estate officials, asking them to extend the time for payment. They refused, Mrs. S said.

Apparently, it was during this trip to the house that he got his revolver. When he returned to the garage, he engaged in a violent argument with the men. Mrs. S later told [the District Attorney] that the constable hit the doctor with a blackjack [across the face] and that Dr. S drew the gun and began to shoot. [The constable was hit in the abdomen while the others received flesh wounds.]

All of them went into the house, where the injured men washed the blood from their wounds, and an ambulance was called from Allegheny General Hospital for the constable. It was while this was going on the Dr. S went upstairs and shot himself...a neighbor called the McCandless Township police chief...

[The county detective] going over the scene of the fight found Dr. S' broken and blood-bespattered spectacles and a smashed tobacco pipe. Mrs. S in her statement to detectives said [the constable] struck her husband across the face with a mace when

he, unarmed, sought to prevent sequestration of the car. It was after the attack...that the physician returned to the house and obtained the gun.

Excerpt from *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* January 16, 1939

Vigorous protests against constables' practices against people who owe rent were arising yesterday as a result of Dr. S' suicide last Wednesday. County detectives headquarters said there "might" be prosecutions in the case.

At Dr. S' funeral service yesterday, the Reverend Eagleson, pastor of the Ingomar Community Methodist Episcopal Church, indignantly denounced the "vicious" system by which Dr. S lost his life. He said the seizure of Dr. S' automobile was a "malicious" attempt to destroy his practice as a physician and his means of livelihood.

"In civilized states," the minister said, "the tools with which a man works cannot be seized for debt. That man's auto was one of the tools of his profession. Its seizure was a malicious attempt to destroy him, and he cannot be censured for fighting as a man would fight for his life. He was fighting for the right to save other lives, as he had done for a generation..."

Excerpt from *New Castle News* January 19, 1939

District Attorney Andrew Park ordered a general investigation of all squires and constables in Allegheny County...prompted by the arrest of five men for making a racket out of bill collecting. JPs and constables are accused of using high-pressure methods. Arrests came as part of an investigation of the minor judiciary that started when Dr. S, Ingomar physician, committed suicide after shooting a constable and two real estate agents as they attempted to levy his car.

Excerpt from *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* February 21, 1939

Dr. S' suicide caused the greatest uproar in recent years against the "squire and constable" business, particularly in the matter of debt collection. Mass meetings were held demanding reforms and curbing of the squires' powers, and various groups are still urging action by the Legislature.

Unsolved Murder

Based on accounts in the *Pittsburgh Press* and *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* between December 1961 and January 1962.

A twenty year resident of Franklin Park, Mrs. P lived alone on a quiet dead end lane where she enjoyed privacy and did not socialize much with neighbors. High hedges screened her living room's picture window from view.

Mrs. P was the mother of three adult children. Every evening, her married daughter who lived nearby, phoned to make certain all was well with the seventy-three year old widow. When her mother did not answer the phone late in the evening of Thursday November 30, the daughter became concerned and with her son, drove the short distance to her mother's home where they discovered Mrs. P's body lying in the bathtub in twelve inches of water.

Mrs. P had been advertising a furnished bedroom and garage for rent in her neat brick home and earlier in the day, told her daughter that she was expecting a visit from a

young man who had phoned to inquire about the room. Neighbors later reported to police that a man twenty-five to thirty years old, 5'9", with reddish brown hair had asked for directions to the house. Two thought he resembled the popular singer Bobby Darin.

Because of the overall tidiness of Mrs. P's home, police were able to determine that her death occurred in the spare bedroom she wanted to rent. A throw rug was crumpled and the cord from the room's venetian blind had been cut and used to bind the woman who died as a result of a severe beating. The cord and her clothing were later found in the trash can sitting behind her house. Apparently, the perpetrator wanted to give the impression that the victim drowned in her bathtub.

Franklin Park's lone police officer was assisted in the investigation by McCandless Township police and Allegheny County homicide detectives. Roadblocks were set up in which passing motorists were questioned about what they may have seen days earlier.

Already in custody for the suspected death of a Cleveland woman, a thirty-four year old Hungarian refugee from Pittsburgh was questioned in Mrs. P's death, but was soon cleared. He spoke with a heavy accent and witnesses who conversed with the young man asking for directions to the victim's home reported that he had no accent.

A similar murder was committed in Baltimore a short time later by a man who was known to have been in Pittsburgh at the time of Mrs. P's death. County detectives and Franklin Park's police chief travelled to Maryland to interview the man, but he never confessed to the Franklin Park killing. Today, more than fifty years later, no charges have been filed in Mrs. P's death.

Godfather

Based on published reports in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

In January 1920, the United States officially went dry. Passage of the 18th amendment to the Constitution, which banned the production, sale and transport of liquor, unintentionally resulted in the growth of large scale criminal organizations that took control of the lucrative production and sale of illegal liquor known as moonshine.

Tiring of the rise in gang related violence and thirsty for a legal drink, our citizenry passed the 21st amendment to the Constitution (1933), bringing a welcomed end to the national temperance experiment. With alcoholic drinks once again easily and legally available, organized crime found a new source of revenue in gambling and loan sharking.

As part of the nationwide network of organized crime, the Western PA mob had its roots in 1920s bootlegging operations. One former head of this traditional Mafia family lived in Ingomar and is not likely to be forgotten by former neighbors who endured years of FBI surveillance and at one time circulated a petition requesting that the crime boss and his family leave the neighborhood.

As a young child, Mr. L arrived in Indiana, PA from his native Sicily. While in Indiana, he found work in a coal mine before spending three years in prison for assaulting a woman. After serving his sentence, Mr. L first moved to Scranton where he married then later to Jamestown, NY where he illegally transported moonshine between Jamestown and Buffalo. With the end to Prohibition, Mr. L and his wife moved to Pittsburgh where he set up a business and soon took control of the numbers rackets.

Several arrests and convictions followed, which were later cited as the reason Immigration and Naturalization tried in 1953 to deport him as an 'undesirable alien'. The outgoing PA governor caused a scandal by backdating a pardon for a 1939 gambling conviction, ultimately allowing Mr. L to remain in this country. Not long after, in 1956, Mr. L became head of the Western PA family, a position he would hold for the next twenty-eight years. In time, Mr. L tightened his control over operations in Western PA, WV, NY and Ohio.

In 1957, Mr. L attended a notable mob conference in NY where discussions were held relating to setting up a heroin distribution network along with plans to arm Cuba's Fidel Castro in hopes he would protect Havana's mob controlled casinos. Plans to set up a network of motels for money laundering purposes were also discussed, resulting in mob operated motels in Monroeville, including the former Holiday House. Appearing before a Senate Rackets Committee in 1959, Mr. L pleaded the Fifth Amendment when questioned by Robert Kennedy about his involvement in the NY meeting.

It has been reported that Mr. L's organization was relatively quiet when compared to other mob families. Facing no further arrests following his deportation hearing, the white haired Mr. L divided his time between homes in Ingomar and Florida.

In 1984, at age 82, Mr. L died from heart failure in his Ingomar home. Reporters and photographers were kept from his funeral mass at Saint Alexis Church in Wexford and the fifty car procession that followed his remains to the cemetery. Now occupied by others, his former Ingomar home has a history neighbors will not soon forget.