

Night Watchman William “Willie” Lewis | Pennsylvania Railroad

Age: 29

Served: 9 months

October 1894 to June 28, 1895

OFFICER

Willie was born during 1866 in Eight Mile Precinct, Campbell County to James (a farmer) and Frances M. “Fanny” (Corey) Lewis.

About 1890, Willie was hired by the Pennsylvania Railroad and later worked as a Night Watchman after October 1894.

By 1895, Watchman Lewis and his mother were living Gladstone, near Woodburn Street. He “bore an excellent reputation.”

INCIDENT

On the night of June 28, 1895, Watchman Lewis was making his rounds in the rail yards at the Little Miami Depot. As a night watchman, he was unarmed. He had a device which required fifteen electric buttons to be pushed at specific locations. The dial at the depot showed that he had visited more than half.

About 8:30 p.m., he was a short distance from Point Isabelle near the entrance to the Pennsylvania Yards, walking east, when two men approached him. There was a brief discussion and

then one of the two shot him.

About fifty feet from the scene of the murder was a train of freight cars. Engine No. 207 was hitched to the train, but the engine crew was not in the vicinity. A brakeman, John Rogers, was on the train and reported seeing two men running from the scene.

Frank Holly, a switch tender, also heard the shots. He found Watchman Lewis lying on his back with a bullet hole through his breast. Holly ran to the Six's Engine House and telephoned for a Cincinnati Police Patrol No. 2.

DEATH

Dr. Stevenson of the Marine Hospital was summoned. He examined Watchman Lewis and pronounced him deceased.

Watchman Lewis was survived by his mother and siblings, Charles Lewis (45), Abby Lewis (37), Elizabeth Lewis (33), and Alvinetta Lewis (26). His funeral service was held at McKendree Church at 2 p.m. on July 1, 1895 and he was buried in Evergreen Cemetery.

INVESTIGATION

His remains were taken to the morgue and Coroner Haerr was notified. Coroner Haerr found that there was just one wound, a .32 caliber bullet having pierced the heart and lodged in the back. Lewis had \$1.05 and a silver watch on his person.

About 11 p.m., at Pearl and Broadway, Railroad Detective Hossmer arrested Thomas Kelly of E. 3rd Street for stealing potatoes from a train car. He was taken to the Hammond Street Station where he was locked up for drunkenness. Hossmer claimed he had been near the Andrews Maltheaus shortly after

the Lewis shooting. Kelly was eventually dropped as a possible suspect in the murder.

By July 1, 1895, detectives had spoken to a number of employees of the Pennsylvania Railroad, but none were able to throw any light on the case. Coroner Haerr began his inquest. Witnesses heard three shots and saw two men running toward the river.

On July 5, 1895, Detective Hossmer and Cincinnati Detective William H. Jackson traveled to Newport to talk with a hobo that Newport Captain Phillips had arrested after selling a revolver to a local butcher. The detectives were able to obtain a confession of the sale of the revolver, but not the murder of Watchman Lewis. The hobo, Ed Coleman, refused to go back to Ohio with the officers and Captain Phillips refused to turn the revolver over to them. On July 6, 1895, the focus of the investigation was on Coleman and another hobo, Edward Frayne. On September 16, 1895 Detectives Jackson and Edward Moses took steps to extradite Ed Coleman and Ed Frayne to Ohio. But, the Prosecutor brought the case before a Hamilton County Grand Jury and they refused to indict Coleman or Frayne base on the evidence. So, no extradition attempt was made and leads were disappearing.

On July 10, 1895, with the investigation stalled, Superintendent Ralph Peters of the Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Chicago and *St. Louis Railroad*, posted a reward of \$200 for the arrest and conviction of the person(s) responsible.

On July 20, 1895 the evidence gathered by the Coroner and police was filed in the criminal archives with the Coroner closing the case as "gunshot wound in the heart, fired by some unknown person with malicious intent."

On August 2, 1895, police even collaborated with a trance medium who claimed to have discovered the slayer and offered to take Detective Jackson to his hiding place. With no other

leads, he agreed.

Two years later, on March 24, 1897, Detectives Jackson and Edward Callahan determined that the murder was committed by Ed Donahue, of Butler Street, and William "Mountain" Corbin of 836 Kilgour Street. Will Corbin, William's brother, while questioned, advised that it was Donahue that told Corbin where a car was loaded with valuable merchandise, that Watchman Lewis had surprised them, and Corbin, assuming he was armed, shot him. He also told them that they ran from the scene to Reardon's Saloon. Detectives Jackson and Callahan found and arrested Corbin and Donahue. Donahue told Detective Jackson that he would tell all. They locked him up in Central Station "held for the Superintendent".

On March 25, 1897, when questioned by Chief Deitsch, the prisoners refused to admit their involvement. Reardon denied they were at his establishment. Then Will Corbin denied that he knew anything about the incident.

On March 26, 1897 the detectives asserted that there was no doubt that these men were implicated, but they were no longer certain they could prove it. Superintendent Deitsch ordered both men released. To our knowledge, they were never prosecuted.

If you have information, artifacts, archives, or images regarding this officer or incident, please contact the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum at Memorial@Police-Museum.org.

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