

Mounted Officer Charles Godfrey Petersen | Cincinnati Police Department



Mounted Officer
Charles Godfrey
Petersen

Age: 37
Served: 9 years
January 30, 1899 to May 23, 1908

OFFICER

Charles was born March 12, 1871 in Denmark. As a young adolescent, he served as an apprentice to a horticulturalist in the royal gardens of the King Christian IX of Denmark and was thereafter very interested in botany. He went to sea at the age of 13, passed through countless adventures, and traveled all over the world. He survived many shipwrecks and explored South

America all the way into the headwaters of the Amazon River.

Charles immigrated to the United States as a 20-year-old in 1891 and enlisted in the United States Navy. During July 1898 he fought in the Battle of Santiago de Cuba against Spain – the largest naval engagement of the Spanish-American War – which resulted in the destruction of the Spanish Navy's Caribbean Squadron. When his second enlistment ended in 1899, Charles moved to Cincinnati.

Charles was appointed to the Cincinnati Police Department on January 30, 1899 as a Substitute Patrolman. He was first assigned to the Bicycle Squad and then transferred to Mounted Patrol.

He soon married Helen Knecht and built a home across the street from her family's home at 3135 McHenry Road. By 1908, he and his wife had three boys, and he had served his adopted country and community 17 years.

MURDERER

Rosso Levato (42) had a less productive life. He was described by the Cincinnati Enquirer as a half-crazy recluse who emigrated from Italy, supposedly leaving his wife there. He made his residence with nine dogs in a ramshackle, framed, multifamily building at 2161 Queen City Avenue; in a settlement just beyond Metz's Wine Garden. There were often complaints from the neighborhood with regard to his dogs, but he rebuffed them with threats of violence.

On May 8, 1908, Levato imagined that someone in his room was trying to shoot him, so he jumped out of his second-floor apartment window, spraining his ankle. He was taken to City

Hospital, then to St. Francis Hospital, and was admitted for a few nights. On Thursday, May 21, 1908 he returned and, for days, told people that others were out to get him and that someone was going to shoot him. The 5th District Police responded a couple of times, but he spoke rationally to them and there was never cause to detain him.

INCIDENT

On, May 23, 1908, Levato became extremely agitated, armed himself with a sawed-off shotgun, and went through the building blowing doors off their hinges and ransacking each of the apartments. Women and children ran out in fear for their lives. Levato then spread coal oil throughout the second-floor hallway and set it ablaze, apparently in an effort to incinerate himself. He then set himself at the top of stairs and waited.

Valentine Bauer (50), a resident of the building next door, went to a saloon at 2173 Queen City Avenue and told several men there about the fire. He opined that it was probably set by "that crazy Italian." They ran with buckets of water and with Bauer in the lead. They ran up the stairs and Levato let loose with a round of buckshot that tore into Bauer's abdomen and groin, sending him falling back down the stairs.

While this was happening, Mounted Patrolman Petersen had reported to the 5th District Stationhouse with his steed. Upon arrival, he was informed that they had received numerous calls from the area about Levato and the fire. He took off toward the area and arrived about 1:38 p.m. He saw what had happened to Bauer and was told that Levato was crouched in the corner awaiting his next victim.

Patrolman Peterson walked to the front door. Several men tried to hold him back, but he replied to the crowd of almost 200 men, women, and children, "I can't help it. This is what we are paid for and I have to do it." As soon as he reached the top of the steps, the shotgun exploded again with both barrels. Buckshot tore through his heart, killing him instantly.

Witnesses assert that at the sound of the shot, the patrolman's horse was seen to "shiver and stagger." When his body was carried out, the horse was frantic and went to her master and nosed him.

FUNERAL

Patrolman Petersen was survived by his wife, Helen (Ella) Petersen, and children, Waldemar O. Petersen (6), Norman P. Petersen (4), and Harold C. Petersen (4 months). Funeral services were held at his residence on McHenry, May 26, 1908, at 2 p.m. He was buried in Spring Grove Cemetery, at 4 p.m. Pallbearers included Patrolmen Valentine H. Arata, John H. Springmeyer, and John P. Steinweiss. They were escorted by a Mounted Sergeant, eight Mounted Patrolmen, and his mount. Police personnel wore the badge of mourning ten days from May 25 through June 3, 1908.

INVESTIGATION

Within an hour of Patrolman Peterson's murder, reinforcements arrived, including a half dozen patrolmen and the crew of Patrol 5. They were posted around the building with revolvers pointed at windows and Patrolmen Gandenberger and Henry Fricke ran up the stairs. As they arrived on the second floor, they heard the

clicks of the hammers striking the firing pins – two misfires. Levato then attacked the officers, wielding his shotgun as a club; and they beat him using their revolvers like clubs. Two more officers arrived up the stairs and Levato was finally overwhelmed.

Then, the police had to fight the mob who was intent on doing Levato further harm.

Patrol 5 took all three wounded men from the scene. Levato was taken, kicking and screaming to the City Hospital.

Bauer, hovering between life and death was also taken to the hospital with what were deemed to be fatal injuries. Patrolman Peterson was taken to the morgue.

District Fire Marshal Streif held Patrolman Peterson's mare, but the horse broke free and galloped to follow the wagon. The whole next day, the horse refused to eat or drink.

JUSTICE

Two days after the murder(s), Levato was taken from the hospital in Patrol 1 to the stationhouse where he contended, "Me no shoot anybody." He was booked for a charge of Murder. At the time, Bauer was still seemingly at death's door.

On June 28, 1908 the Hamilton County Grand Jury announced its indictments, including a single count of Murder of the 1st Degree against Rosso Savoto, apparently "Levato's" real name.

We have found no record of the proceedings since. However, he was an inmate in the Lima State Hospital for the Criminally Insane as late as 1930 and we assume he was therefore found not guilty by reason of insanity and committed indefinitely to the

institution.

EPILOGUE

Mrs. Peterson was killed in an auto accident and joined her husband 20 years and 1 day after his death on May 24, 1928.

Since his immigration, his and his children's documents bear his name as Charles or Carl and Peterson or Petersen.

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

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