Constable William P. Tressler | Fort Thomas District, Campbell County



Age: 48
Served: 13 to 14 years
1914 or 1915 to 1917 – Campbell County Police Department
1918 to 1925 – Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad
July 1925 to September 20, 1928 – Ft. Thomas District of Campbell County

OFFICER

William was born August 8, 1880 in Kenton County to William and Mary (Nagel) Tressler, originally of Cincinnati. He married Hattie Lewis of West Virginia about 1904 and in 1907 they had

one son, Orville Clay Tressler. Otherwise, his first 28 years are currently unknown to us.

For years, until at least 1913, he worked as a molder in a foundry. During 1910, the family was living on Water Works Road in the Cote Brilliante section of Campbell County.

Sometime between 1914 and 1915 he began working for the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad as Chief of Yards. By October 1915 William was a Campbell County Patrolman, but we do not know if that was consecutive or concurrent. He served as such until at least August 1917.

By September 1918, he was living at #2 Garrison Avenue in Fort Thomas and working as a State Police Officer, Special Agent, or Detective (depending on which document his occupation was listed) for the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. By September 1923 he moved his family to a nicer home down the street at 16 Garrison Avenue.

Every few months or so, Detective Tressler was involved in arrests off railroad property. So often that, while still working for the railroad, he was sworn in on August 8, 1924 as a Deputy Constable under Constable George Hoffman in Magistrate Walter Lukens Court.

During July 1925 Detective Tressler was elected as Constable in the Ft. Thomas (4^{th}) District of Campbell County. He was extremely active in Campbell County law enforcement, especially in raids and busting up stills. By January 5, 1928, he was additionally sworn in as a Covington Prohibition Agent and was still working as a Constable.

By 1928, Constable Tressler and his family were living at 20 Brentwood Place in Fort Thomas.

MURDERERS

Roy Crawford (37) was well-known among Danville, Illinois and Louisville, Kentucky law enforcement. He had served a prison sentence in Indiana State Prison in Michigan City in 1920. He had a varied criminal career according to Louisville Police.

Dewey Colvin, probably of Bedford, Indiana, had a prison record going back to the age of sixteen.

We know nothing of Herman Steele's history other than, five years before, he came from Withamsville, Ohio and was working at the Newport Rolling Mill steel plant. We assume that his occupation provided him a decent life, but in September 1928, he chose a life of crime – a life that would last about another 2½ weeks.

INCIDENT

During July 1928, Colvin and Crawford stole a vehicle in Danville and drove it to Newport with their common-law wives. There they met up with Herman Steele.

The three men decided to rob "spooners" – amorous males and females parked along county highways. Colvin carried a smaller caliber semiautomatic pistol; Steele carried a .45 caliber semiautomatic; and Crawford preferred a semiautomatic shotgun. The trio had two other shotguns at their disposal.

On the evening of Sunday, September 16, 1928, they found Charles Flynn, of 311 West Sixth Street in Newport and a "companion", Mrs. Adams, also of West Sixth Street, parked on Licking Pike. They surrounded the car and robbed Flynn of $8.50, forced Mrs.

Adams from Flynn's car and into their car, disabled Flynn's car, and took off with Mrs. Adams toward Newport. Mrs. Adams was later located by Detectives James Fuller and John Phistner and Night Chief Leo Livingston. She advised that they made no attempt to molest her and released her in Newport.

The robbers/kidnappers went back to the area looking for more victims. Constable Tressler and Ft. Thomas Patrolman Harrison Herms responded to patrol the area and, upon entering Pooles Creek Road from Licking Pike, the officers noticed a parked auto containing three men. Patrolman Herms drove just past the vehicle and stopped and Constable Tressler got out. Crawford, without warning, let loose with two shotgun blasts from the parked car. Constable Tressler saw the threat and turned to take cover but was struck with two loads of buckshot into the back and intestines.

The three men turned their attention to Tressler's car with an automatic shotgun and two handguns, keeping Patrolman Herms on the floor ducking for cover. When the shooting ceased, Patrolman Herms came out of the car with his revolver drawn, but the suspect vehicle was already racing toward Newport on Licking Pike.

Patrolman Herms took Constable Tressler to his home and summoned a physician. The physician ordered him to Speers Memorial Hospital in Dayton, Kentucky. By Tuesday, September 18, 1928, he was in "very serious" condition. One newspaper reported that he was near death.

DEATH

Constable Tressler died Thursday, September 20, 1928, at 9:30 p.m.

He was survived by his wife, Hattie (Lewis) Tressler (44); son, Orville Clay Tressler (21); and siblings, Robert Tressler and Mrs. Edna Fithen. Funeral services were held at Constable Tressler's home on September 24, 1928 at 2 p.m., led by Reverend Cloe. From there he was interred in Evergreen Cemetery in Southgate.

INVESTIGATION

Campbell County Patrolmen Fred Weber, John Higgins, and George Gugel and Newport Night Chief Leo Livingston and Detectives James Fuller and John Phistner searched the countryside all night after the shooting to no avail. Crawford, Colvin, and Steele had gone into hiding with Crawford's common-law wife, Mary Jackson, in Newport.

Thursday, September 20, 1928

Four days after Constable Tressler was shot, at 3 a.m., Newport Lieutenant Charles Tschudi and other officers came across Colvin near Third and Johnson Streets, breaking into a Kroger Grocery. They called to him and he ran. Lieutenant Tschudi dispatched Motorcycle Patrolmen Leroy Hall and Harry Haines to pursue him. Colvin ran down an alley between Third and Fourth Streets, parallel with Russell and Johnson Streets, and Patrolman Haines fired three warning shots into the air. Colvin stopped, held a hand up and yelled, "I quit!" But, as he turned, with a semiautomatic pistol in his other hand, he fired nine shots at the officers striking Patrolman Hall once in the left leg below the hip. Patrolmen Hall and Haines returned fire without taking effect and Colvin escaped on Fourth Street. Patrolman Hall was transported to St. Elizabeth Hospital and was admitted for more than a month.

The three left town later that day.

Friday, September 21, 1928

During the evening, Mrs. Tressler received a telephone call from an unknown man claiming, “I know who killed your husband.” Later, Orville Tressler received a call on the same phone and the male voiced, “We know who done the job.” Then several minutes later, he called back and said, “We are leaving town.” Similar calls were made to Speers Hospital. [Author’s Note: It makes no sense that the three would have called long distance which, at that time, could have been traced. It is more likely that the witnesses’ or newspaper’s timeline is faulty]

Sunday, September 30, 1928

Two weeks after Constable Tressler’s murder and Patrolman Herms’s attempted murder, and sixteen days after the attempted murders of Motorcycle Patrolmen Hall and Haines, on September 30, 1928 they shot and seriously wounded Louisville Patrolman James W. Hardin while he stood on a street during a vehicle pursuit. Two of the trio (probably Colvin and Crawford) were driving a large sedan that was involved in a series of robberies that occurred in Louisville and New Albany, Indiana and they were being chased by police after another robbery. During the chase, two women (Mrs. Colvin and Mary Jackson) were thrown from the car but officers stayed after the car and the women escaped.

Police later found the sedan, with Kenton County license plates, abandoned in an alley. The bandits had run into a nearby woods and escaped. Three sawed-off automatic shotguns and two revolvers were found in the abandoned auto. The auto was the one stolen in Danville, and used in Constable Tressler’s murder.

Hardin lingered between life and death for a time, but within three weeks it was determined that he would survive.

Tuesday, October 2, 1928

Newport authorities advised that the identity of the two men involved in the Louisville pursuit and attempted murder were known to them and that evidence was being presented to the grand jury.

Wednesday, October 3, 1928

Two and a half weeks after Constable Tressler's murder, at about 1:15 a.m., former Sullivan County (Indiana) Sheriff and former Shelburn (Indiana) Town Marshal Newman Guy was driving from a business meeting in Toledo and felt he was too tired to continue driving, so he pulled over to the side of the road to take a nap. Almost immediately, three men surrounded the car and, with guns pointed at him, forced him to get out of the car. That was their first mistake. Sheriff Guy had been elected to his former positions based on his reputation as a "clean-up" man with an itchy trigger finger.

After transferring items from their car to his, they told him to get in the back seat. Colvin went for the driver's door and Steele and Crawford went to the passenger side. Though they searched Sheriff Guy's car, the trio missed the revolver laying on the back seat under some bedding. Sheriff Guy feigned tripping, reached in, and retrieved the revolver, stood, and shot Colvin point-blank in the chest, through the heart. Colvin fell dead.

The other two dove into the weeds, though at least one returned fire causing a minor wound to Sheriff Guy's shoulder. Sheriff Guy emptied his revolver at the two, mostly Steele, and was fairly certain one or more of his shots took effect.

Sheriff Guy, now with no ammunition and knowing that the other two were still armed, made his way to a nearby farmhouse and

contacted Sheriff Harry Comstock. The two went to the scene and found someone had dragged Colvin's body off the roadway and into the weeds. Crawford and/or Steele did come back.

Thursday, October 4, 1928

Sheriff Guy's shots had taken effect. Shortly after noon, Steele's body was found beneath a railroad bridge at Charlottesville near Greenfield, Indiana. Sheriff Guy's shots had struck him in the abdomen and legs. Steele apparently decided that the pain or his future was too much to bear and ended his life with his own revolver shooting himself in the chest, through the heart.

Sunday, October 7, 1928

A vehicle was stolen from Lloyd Gray in Lafayette, Indiana. About a week later, Crawford was seen briefly driving the vehicle in Newport, but was not apprehended.

Saturday, October 13, 1928

After two weeks in session, four weeks following the murder, the Campbell County Grand Jury issued its report and indictments in the murder of Constable Tressler for Steele, Colvin, and Crawford – of which, only Crawford was still alive.

Friday, October 19, 1928

Crawford and Louis Gray, also of Danville, had been doing hold-ups in the region of Illinois and Indiana. On the night of the 19th, they were driving the stolen car on the outskirts of Gary, Indiana when they were pulled over by Gary Patrolman Leo Witkowski. He and his partner recognized it as the car reported stolen twelve days before. As they approached the car, Crawford and Gray got out and ran. Witkowski fired warning shots in the

air and Crawford turned and fired four shots at the officers. Witkowski, now with deliberate aim, fired and struck Crawford in the right chest near the shoulder and he went down. Gray escaped amid a hail of bullets. Crawford was taken to a Gary hospital and into custody less than five weeks after killing Constable Tressler.

JUSTICE

Campbell County Attorney Roger L. Neff, Jr. filed extradition papers for the return of Crawford to answer to the murder charge in Campbell County. When Crawford was well enough to travel, he was extradited to Campbell County to answer to Murder charges, et al.

On Wednesday, November 28, 1928, police foiled a plot by Crawford and his common-law wife, Miss Mary Jackson (24), aka Roberts or Rogers, of 26 West Fourth Street in Newport, whereby she had obtained dozens of hacksaw blades and was going to smuggle them into the jail. Lieutenant Charles Johns and Detective David Murphy arrested and interrogated her. She signed a statement regarding the crime sprees in Kentucky:

Jackson first met Crawford in June 1928 in Danville, Illinois and had lived with him as his wife and that she was living with Crawford at 206 West Third Street when he murdered Constable Tressler. On the night Crawford shot Constable Tressler, Crawford came home and excitedly told her he had fired the shotgun into Constable Tressler. She then explained how they had stayed in Newport but left after Colvin’s shootout with Motorcycle Patrolman Hall. They then went to Louisville, committed a number of hold-ups, and left after shooting Patrolman Hardin. She and Colvin’s wife went with them to Louisville.

Attorney Neff determined that with her information and the evidence found, he should be able to send Crawford to the electric chair. But he did not even try.

On December 5, 1928, Jackson was convicted of Vagrancy and sentenced to fifty days in jail.

On Monday, December 17, 1928, Jackson was awakened by a tapping on her jail cell window about 3 a.m. and irregularly thereafter in about half-hour intervals. She brought it to the attention of her jailers, and they turned the lights on in that section of the jail. They saw a man on the roof run away, jump onto a porch and make his escape. Clearly, Crawford, from his cell, arranged to have her quieted.

Crawford was arraigned in Campbell County Court on January 2, 1929. Lawrence J. Diskin, the Commonwealth Attorney, filed for the death penalty. Crawford was represented by James Millikin and J. Garvey Davis. Crawford pleaded guilty and was quickly sentenced to life in prison. A few days later, he was spirited away under the watch of five guards amid rumors that his confederates were planning to kidnap him. It was not long before he feigned insanity.

During March 1929, Crawford was placed on suicide watch at the Frankfurt Reformatory. Prison officials were considering moving him to the Lakeland Asylum for the criminally insane. During June 1929, he was transferred to the Kentucky State Hospital for the Insane at Lakeland near Louisville. He and Alex Runyon, an accomplished auto thief, bigamist, and murderer escaped from the facility October 6, 1929. It was Runyon’s fourth escape from the facility. Crawford was recaptured within days. Runyon was recaptured in Hamilton, Ohio October 17, 1929.

We have no record of Crawford’s existence past October 1929.

EPILOGUE

Motorcycle Patrolman Leroy Hall survived his second bullet wound of his career and by 1930 was promoted to Detective. He retired from Covington as their Chief of Detectives.

Louisville Patrolman James W. Hardin survived his wounds and was back to work before the end of 1928. He served another ten years.

On May 8, 1930, Constable Tressler's remains were disinterred and reinterred in Highland Cemetery, Kenton County. Hattie Tressler died 43 years after him in 1971 and is buried next to him.

Orville Tressler married 3¼ years after the constable's murder. Between him, his children, and grandchildren, Constable Tressler has more than thirty descendants whom he never met.

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

© This narrative was further researched and revised on May 3. 2020 by Cincinnati Police Lieutenant Stephen R. Kramer (Retired), Greater Cincinnati Police Historical Society President, with research assistance by Cincinnati Homicide Detective Edward W. Zieverink III (Retired), Greater Cincinnati Police Museum Curator, and Cincinnati Police Sergeant Thomas Waller (Retired), former Greater Cincinnati Police Museum Vice President. All rights are reserved to them and the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum.