Patrolman Arthur E. Sponsel | Hamilton Police Department



Age: 36
Served: 6 years
March 19, 1931 to April 12, 1937

OFFICER

Arthur was born during April 23, 1900 to Henry J. and Margaret Sponsel of Mohawk Street in Cincinnati. Henry, a first-generation German, was a day laborer in Cincinnati and moved his family to Hamilton where he found work as a lock setter. Margaret had been born in Germany and immigrated to the United States when she was two years old.

Arthur was the third of seven children born to the Sponsels. His father died of chronic bronchitis when Arthur was 9½ years old on November 8, 1909. His last sibling, Henrietta, was born seven months later.

During 1910, his oldest sisters, Clara (17) and Martha (15) were

working as laborers to support the family. As soon as they were of age, his older brother, Robert, and Arthur found work as carpenters.

Arthur was drafted into the United States Army on November 8, 1917 out of Ft. Thomas. He was assigned to the 162nd Aero Squad and on February 26, 1918 was sent overseas as part of the American Expeditionary Force and based in England as a Pursuit Squadron. Private Sponsel returned home February 2, 1919 and discharged on February 13, 1919.

Arthur was back home and he and his brother, Robert, were working as carpenters through 1920. On May 12, 1941 he married Minnie F. Rose. For the next ten years, he worked as a carpenter and, for a few years, as a general contractor and/or building and selling homes. They lived at 884 Forrest Avenue.

Hamilton City held a civil service examination for the position of Patrolman during February 1931. Three weeks later, on February 25th, they announced that Arthur finished with the highest grade, after 20% was added for his veteran credit. The top eight candidates were World War I veterans; seven of which scored above 100% with the added credit. He was appointed Patrolman on March 19, 1931.

MURDERERS

At 17, John Agnew probably killed his parents. During November 1919, Hamilton Police him to be their chief suspect in an incident which found his parents hospitalized with skulls fractures. His father, Peter Agnew, died two days later and his mother died the following January. The investigation was hampered by the fact that Peter Agnew was still conscious when

admitted to Mercy Hospital and told investigating officers that the attack was perpetrated by three black men.

We know very little about Vincent Rose or William Hobbs.

INCIDENT

Rose went to Hobbs' home on the night of April 11, 1937; soon thereafter followed by Agnew. There they planned to burglarize the National Dairy on Middletown Pike. When they arrived, they saw a light in the dairy and went in search of another target.

They pulled up to Frank Vertich's restaurant at Mill and 3rd Streets. Rose and Hobbs approached the building while Agnew stayed in the car.

About 2:30 a.m., on the morning of April 12, 1937, Patrolman Sponsel had just returned his police cruiser in the Hamilton City garage on North Third Street and had gotten into his personal vehicle to go home. At about 3 a.m., he saw something suspicious at the Frank Vertich's restaurant. He stopped his car to speak to two men that he saw in front of the restaurant. At least one was armed, and a gunfight ensued.

According to Rose's statement after his arrest, he heard four shots followed a minute later by three shots. He fled to the car, followed by the other two, and the three drove off.

Fellow officers, Patrolmen Herschel Seward and Levi Justice, on their way to the city garage at 4:30 a.m., found Patrolman Sponsel's car in the middle of the street with its lights on and engine running; and Patrolman Sponsel deceased on the ground. Four shots had been fired from his .38 caliber revolver which was found four feet from his lifeless body. He had been hit by a single shot that pierced his heart, stomach, and spleen. His

flashlight was also found on the ground still burning. He was the sixth Hamilton officer to die in the line of duty in the 20th Century.

FUNERAL

Patrolman Sponsel left a wife, Minnie F. (Rose) Sponsel, and sons, Walter Ervin Sponsel (15) and Neil A. Sponsel (11).

Thousands visited his remains on April 14, 1937 at the Kuebler-Dawson Funeral Home on Pershing Avenue. Then, a 52-car procession carried him to his burial, after funeral services, in the American Legion Lot at the Greenwood Cemetery. Patrolmen Levi Justice, Adrian Stricker, Reginald Stone, Hershel Steward, Chester Schick, William Blair, Ernest Dunivan, and George Van Lien served as pall bearers.

INVESTIGATION

Another bullet was found embedded in a house 30 feet away, so at least two shots were fired at Patrolman Sponsel. Two watchmen at the Niles Tool works reported hearing shots shortly after 2:30 a.m. but did not report it to police at the time. A reward of $300 was immediately offered by the Hamilton Police Mutual Aid Society.

On the morning of the murder, Hamilton Chief John C. Calhoun formed a Special Squad to hunt down his killers; including himself, Assistant Chief Byron Fargingson, Detective Sergeant Hershel M. Haines, Bertillon Sergeant Joseph MeFall, Detectives Robert Leonard, Herbert Crowthers, Oscar Decker, Robert Dinwiddle, and Patrolman Charles Nugent.

By the next day, rewards offered totaled $5,350 (over $94,000 in 2018 dollars); $5000 of it offered by Alexander Thomas, chairman of the Champion Coated Paper Company.

Butler County Coroner W. F. Deubel said that nose of the bullet removed from Patrolman Sponsel's chest had been flattened by filing, calling it a "dum-dum" bullet, causing it to spread upon impact, and that it ranged downward, possibly indicating a taller shooter.

Also by the 13th, Police were theorizing that the shooters were caught stripping automobiles on the lot. By the 14th, every member of the Hamilton Police Department had been working night and day toward solving the crime. Theories now ranged from catching people in a crime to Patrolman Sponsel hastily leaving his vehicle to rescue someone from assault.

Beginning about April 15, 1937, Hamilton Police had been tracking Williams Hobbs (32). They finally caught him and his wife at 3:35 p.m. on April 19, 1937 at Dixie Highway near the Springdale Dog Track. They were preparing to flee to Manchester, Kentucky. Helen Hobbs was held, without bond, as a material witness. A pistol believed to be involved in the shooting was found in his vehicle.

Later that afternoon they arrested John Agnew. That evening, they arrested Vincent Rose at his step-father's home. On April 20, 1947, Hamilton Police announced the arrests. Chief Calhoun, Detective Sergeant H. M. Haines, and Joseph McFall (fingerprint expert) were credited with the arrests along with other patrolmen. The Chief also gave credit to information provided by citizens and cooperation of the newspaper. Hobbs and Rose confessed that they were trying to burglarize the restaurant and Hobbs admitted to firing shots but asserted that he did not know if he shot anyone because he was drunk. He added that he and

Rose carried revolvers. All three were charged with 1st Degree Murder. Butler County Prosecutor Paul A. Baden announced the he would be going for the death penalty.

The .32 caliber revolver found in Hobbs's car was sent to Cincinnati Police Department to compare with the bullet taken from Sponsel's body. Records showed that the revolver, one year earlier, had been seized by the Hamilton Department in another investigation, but returned to Hobbs.

Judge Elmer N. Davidson scheduled a preliminary hearing on April 26, 1937 but continued the hearing until May 5, 1937. On May 4, 1937, the Butler County Grand Jury announced the indictment of all three for First Degree Murder. They appeared for arraignment on May 9, 1937, before Judge P. P. Boli, but he did accept their pleas because they had no counsel.

Eventually, all three were convicted. Hobbs, identified as the gunman, was sentenced to death and executed in the electric chair in the Ohio Penitentiary July 6, 1938. Agnew and Rose received life sentences.

During February 1963, after 25 years in prison, outgoing Ohio Governor Michael V. DiSalle commuted Agnew's crime to Second Degree Murder, thereby making him eligible for parole during March 1963. He moved to Roann, Indiana where he enjoyed the rest of his life, children, and grandchildren until his death from natural causes in 1976 at the age of 74.

It appears Rose was released more than ten years before Agnew, married in Franklin, Ohio during 1952, and died there during February 1987, also at the age of 74.

If you know of any information, archives, artifacts, and/or

images regarding this officer and incident, please contact the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum's Memorial Committee at Memorial@Police-Museum.org.

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