Patrolman James “Big Jim” O’Neill | Cincinnti Police Department



Age: 49
Served: 21 years
December 26, 1890 to April 20, 1915

OFFICER

Jim was l was born in Switzerland County, Indiana, and came to Cincinnati during the last half of the 19th Century.

He joined the Cincinnati Police Department in 1890 and was renowned – by other patrolmen, citizens, and criminals alike – for his ability to vigilantly and fairly control one of the toughest beats in the city. His beat was “The Bottoms” – a strip of land along the river containing nothing but warehouses,

steamboats, dives, and the worst of humankind.

In short, Big Jim was tough. Yet, while patrolling his beat one day, he came across a scruffy puppy huddled in some debris. He brought the puppy to a boarding house to feed him and then to the District Two stationhouse on Hammond Street to care for him. The puppy, sarcastically named “Handsome”, became a fixture at the stationhouse and patrolled with Big Jim for years thereafter. Handsome, after more than ten years of service, died in 1911, but Big Jim continued. He transferred to District 9 (at State and Dutton Streets) where he ran another river beat in Sedamsville.

INCIDENT

On April 18, 1915, at 2 a.m., while searching one of four suspects in a street car robbery at Liston and Riverside Avenues, one of the other suspects, William Clayton (AKA Robert Rose), shot him in the chest. The four suspects fled, and Patrolman O’Neill fired three shots at them, but none took effect.

Patrolman O’Neill walked a block and a half to a callbox at Liston and Ingalls Avenues and called for a patrol wagon. When the wagon arrived, he climbed aboard, unassisted, and was taken to General Hospital. The physicians believed that the bullet penetrated his chest and lodged in his back muscles and that he might survive.

On the following night, police arrested several suspects, including a Walter Turley. Turley admitted that he was one of the people with Clayton but stated that he had tried to stop the shooting. He also gave police Clayton’s name and description.

DEATH

By April 19, 1915, Patrolman O'Neill was in critical condition and x-rays showed that the bullet had ranged downward and into his liver. At 4:45 a.m. on April 20, 1915, Patrolman O'Neill passed away. His wife, Margaret O'Neill (53) and son, Lawrence J. O'Neill (19) were at his bedside when he died.

His funeral was held at his home at 2457 Elberon Avenue at 7:45 a.m., on April 23, 1915. Many came to view the body, including fifty blacks from "the levee"; some of whom Patrolman O'Neill had hunted down and arrested. Services were held at the Blessed Sacrament Church on Wilder Avenue near State Avenue. Denizens from the River shared the front pews with police brass and politicians. Three wagons were required to carry all the floral tributes to the cemetery. Pallbearers included Patrolmen Charles Beckman, Henry Crowley, Charles Fink, John Dowd, Maurice Brosnan, and John H. Martin. Patrolman O'Neill was laid to rest in St. Joseph (New) Cemetery on April 23, 1915. The badge of mourning was worn by fellow officers for a period of ten days from April 21 through 30.

JUSTICE

Also on April 20, 1915, a warrant was taken out against William Clayton of Longworth and Plum Streets. The investigation showed that after the shooting he hired a boat to take him across the river to Kentucky. He told the boatman, John McCarthy, that he had had some problem with a policeman in Cincinnati.

On May 18, 1915, one month after the murder, Clayton was captured in Mahnomen, Minnesota. While under arrest, Clayton

told a prisoner that he had shot and killed a policeman in Cincinnati and that there was a $500 reward for his capture. Patrolman Roscoe Lewis, who knew Clayton on sight, went to Minnesota to pick him up.

It took four days to select a jury, but by November 24, 1915, one was empaneled. During the ensuing trial, on December 1, 1915, Clayton testified in his own behalf and offered no defense other than an unsupported alibi that he was working as a waiter when the offense occurred and was with two other men who he knew only by their first names.

That was good enough for this jury. On December 7, 1915, they returned a verdict of Not Guilty "because the prosecution couldn't disprove that Clayton was not working as a waiter that night."

EPILOGUE



Upon his death, Handsome was so well loved by patrolmen and citizens that the officers of the 2nd District paid to have his remains taken to a taxidermist, mounted, and encased in glass. Tradition has it that it cost each man a day's wages.

He was in the District 2 lobby on Broadway for sixty years where people would come to see him. When District 2 merged with District 1 in 1969, Handsome moved to the Fraternal Order of

Police lodge hall on Eastern Avenue. When the FOP left there, he moved to a Park Department nature center in Burnet Woods and from there to the new FOP lodge hall on Central Parkway.

About 2002, Big Jim's century-old canine partner was moved to the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum storage room on 8th Street and was placed at its entrance in 2006 when the Museum opened. Once, during 2008, two older gentlemen came to the Museum and told the Docent that they were there to see Handsome; that they used to visit him at District Two and hadn't seen him in almost forty years.

When the Museum outgrew its space on 8th Street, Handsome was moved to Reading road to guard the halls of our new Museum. He is still there today.

If you know of any 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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