Patrolman Marion F. “Pete” Cunningham | Lawrenceburg Police Department

Age: 43
Served: 3 years
1935 to September 20, 1938

OFFICER

Pete was born August 7, 1895 in Lawrenceburg, the fifth child born to Charles, a carpenter by trade, and Sarah E. Cunningham. He was a lifelong resident of Lawrenceburg. During 1900, his family lived at 308 St. Claire Street near the Ohio River. By 1910, at 14-years-old, Pete was already working as a machinist in a saw factory. At 21, January 1917, he was working at the Bauer Cooperage Company in Lawrenceburg.

Pete enlisted in the United States Army to fight in World War I. He served in Company F of the 22nd Engineers. By May 1918, he had been promoted to Corporal. He left France after the war on June 30, 1919 bound for home. He was honorably discharged on July 21, 1919 and went back to work as a laborer.

Pete married Ruth Ellen Kitchell on January 28, 1922. On April 9, 1922, they had a baby, Evelyn Louise Cunningham, but she died within a year on March 5, 1923 of meningitis. They had no more children.

About 1935, Pete joined the Lawrenceburg Police Department as a Patrolman.

MURDERER

We know little about Lee Brandon. He was born in Indiana about 1910 or 1911. He married at 17 (about 1927 or 1928). We assume he had a tumultuous adolescent life, because by 1930, at the age of 20, he was already imprisoned on the Indiana State Penal Farm in Putnam County, Indiana.

INCIDENT

On September 10, 1938, Patrolman Cunningham encountered Lee Brandon (29) in a drunken state and, rather than arrest him, he took him home. He advised Brandon to stay home and not come back to town lest he be arrested.

Later that night, Lawrenceburg officers received a report that Brandon showed up at a dance and flourished a pistol. Patrolman Cunningham encountered Brandon sitting on the steps in front of Fire Company Number One. Patrolmen Cunningham, John Armbruster, and Robert Warburton approached to search him. Brandon suddenly pulled a .22 caliber pistol and fired it point-blank into Patrolman Cunningham’s abdomen.

Patrolmen Armbruster and Warburton had to fight Cunningham in order to take the pistol and put him in custody.

Patrolman Cunningham was rushed to Christ Hospital in Cincinnati.

Brandon was taken to a Batesville hospital where he was treated for his injuries. He was charged with Shooting With Intent to Kill.

DEATH

Ten days after being shot, on September 20, 1938, with Police Chief Louis Griffith and Mayor Arthur Ritzmann at his bedside, Patrolman Cunningham died.

Patrolman Cunningham was survived by his wife, Ruth Cunningham, and three or four of his five siblings. He was buried with full military honors in Greendale Cemetery, Dearborn County.

JUSTICE

Witnesses were heard at Brandon's trial on November 15, 1938. On November 17, 1938, a jury returned a verdict of guilty of First-Degree Murder. Judge W. D. Ricketts imposed a sentence of life imprisonment and Brandon's attorney, William L. Ogle, declared that there would be no appeal. Brandon continued to assert that he was not guilty when returned to the county jail.

Fifteen years later, during November 1953, the Indiana State Correction Board took up Brandon's case as one of six that they were looking into for clemency. Brandon still maintained his innocence. Regardless, on December 10th, Governor George N. Craig approved Brandon's clemency making him eligible for a parole hearing. Within two weeks, on December 23, 1953, he was paroled.

Freedom was fleeting. We do not know the offenses that caused him to be violated on his parole and returned to prison, but he was paroled again on November 10, 1954. He returned again and was again paroled on November 15, 1959. By then he would have been only 49 years old, but we cannot find any more information about him.

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

© This narrative was further researched and revised May 5, 2020 by Cincinnati Police Lieutenant Stephen R. Kramer (Retired), Greater Cincinnati Police Historical Society President, with research assistance provided by Chris McHenry of Lawrenceburg and Cincinnati Homicide Detective Edward W. Zieverink III (Retired), Greater Cincinnati Police Museum Curator. All rights are reserved to them and the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum.