Special Agent Nelson Bernard Klein | Federal Bureau of Investigation

NINETY YEARS AGO ON AUGUST 16, 1935

Age: 37
Served: 9 years
1926 to August 16, 1935

AGENT

Nelson was born on April 3, 1898 in New York, New York to a farmer, Harry Augustus Klein, Sr. and English immigrant, Mary Agnes (Creed) Klein. Within two years, the family was living in Manhattan and Harry was operating a fruit and vegetable truck. By 1910, they were living in Crawford, New York.

Nelson, not yet 15 years old, enlisted in the New York Guard on January 19, 1914 and served as a Private in Company F, 22nd Regiment, of the Corps of Engineers. He also worked for the Lackawanna Railroad Company in upstate New York as a ticket and station agent. He was discharged from the Guard on January 24, 1916 for an unspecified physical disability, possibly because his real age was discovered. After turning 18, he appealed and was reevaluated on June 22, 1916. But based on a Surgeon's Certificate of Disability, on July 12, 1916 he was discharged again from Camp Whitman in Green Haven. We do not know when he was permitted to reenlist, probably at the beginning of the United States involvement in World War I, but when he registered for the World War I draft on September 9, 1918, he was already enlisted in Company A in the 69th "Fighting Irish" Regiment of the New York Guard and stationed at Camp Smith at Cortlandtville, Peekskill, New York. He shipped off with Colonel Donovan's Rainbow Division to fight in France. He was honorably discharged, already a Sergeant, in 1919.

Nelson took correspondence courses in psychology, mechanical drafting, English, and commercial law. He gained investigative experience as a private detective for the Louis B. Snowden Detective Agency and for Schindler, Inc., including working at the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Atlantic City as the hotel detective. By September 1926, he was married to Catharina Isabella Cox and the new father to a baby boy, Nelson B. Klein, Jr.

On December 10, 1926 Nelson joined what was then known as the "Bureau of Investigation and assigned to the Portland Field Office. Special Agent Klein worked on a variety of cases, including motor vehicle theft, antitrust investigations, and

fugitive matters. He later transferred to the Nashville Field Office. He transferred again to Charlotte by the time his second son, Richard, was born in November 1928. He then went to the Birmingham Field Office. Agent Klein assisted with the investigation of the 1929 murder of Washington, D.C., resident Virginia Hurley McPherson, a case that captured national attention. For his efforts on this case, SA Klein received a letter of commendation from Director J. Edgar Hoover. By 1931, he was assigned to the Cincinnati Field Office as the "Number One Man," now called the Assistant Special Agent in Charge (ASAC), where he assumed the role of acting Special Agent in Charge (SAC) in the SACs absence. He was also involved in a number of high-profile investigations, including the John Dillinger mob chase and the Alice Berry Stoll kidnapping in Louisville, Kentucky.

When Director Hoover asked FBI employees for suggestions that might assist them in their work, SA Klein wrote a letter requesting that Bureau cars be equipped with fire extinguishers, first aid kits, and portable flashlights. Director Hoover wrote back to thank him for his suggestion and to inform him that the FBI had ordered his recommended safety equipment for all field offices. Special Agent Klein was also well known and liked by area law enforcement.

His third child, Barbara, was born north of Cincinnati in Catharina's hometown of Mt. Vernon, OH.

On May 18, 1934, the U.S. Congress enacted a law making the killing of a federal officer a capital offense. We doubt that George Barrett, a recently acquitted Kentucky murderer, took much notice of the new statute, but it would become paramount in little more than a year later for both.

On June 26, 1934, Congress and President Franklin D. Roosevelt

enacted the 1934 National Firearms Act enacted which focused on restricting ownership of machine guns, short-barreled shotguns and rifles, and silencers, but also exempted federal agents “designated by regulation of the Commissioner of Internal Revenue,” which included agents of the Bureau of Investigation. Though not specifically stated as such, the act also authorized, by nuance, Bureau agents to carry firearms and make arrests. Agent Klein armed himself with a Colt Model 1911 Super .38 semiautomatic pistol. In July 1935, the Bureau was renamed the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Within a month of their new designation, Federal Bureau of Investigation Special Agent Nelson Klein set his sights on George W. Barrett, a known murderer, jewel thief, and king pin of an interstate automobile theft ring. On August 16, 1935, a tip from a Covington locksmith put him onto Barrett’s trail. By then, he had served his country, from within and abroad, for about 14 years.

MURDERER

George W. Barrett was born about 1900 in a Kentucky mountain cabin. He left school after the 6th grade and was first arrested as a teenager for moonshining. During the arrest, he pulled a gun and received a flesh wound from a shot by the arresting officer. He paid a small fine and served a short jail sentence.

He was also involved in the famous, 60 years-long Baker-Howard Feud in the Clay, Owsley, and Jackson Counties region which resulted in more than a hundred deaths including murders of and by law enforcement officers, including, by January 1900, Kentucky’s governor. Also involved in those feuds was Kimber Baker, one of the murderers of Hamilton Merchant Policeman Harry Elmer Baker in 1919. After having killed five or six men during

the feuds, in 1917 Barrett fled to Cincinnati. Kimber Baker fled to the United States Army in 1918. Both would have fateful dates in Hamilton, Baker in 1919 and Barrett in 1935.

During his life, Barrett had one wife, whom he never divorced, and five common-wives. In June 1925, Barrett, contracted with Mrs. Margaret Durbin of Bloomington, Illinois to care for his daughter, Velma, for $300 a year, a debt which he failed to honor for at least six years.

In Cincinnati he got a job as a streetcar conductor and fenced stolen jewelry on the side. With a pocket full of diamonds and a flourishing diamond smuggling business, he went back to Kentucky a rich man; rich enough at least to bribe witnesses to further avoid prosecutions or garner light sentences for at least three separate felony incidents. There would be more.

Soon thereafter, with a revolver, he took on his brother-in-law who had a shotgun. Barrett lost that duel, and an eye.

Then, on September 2, 1930, he quarreled with his 73-year-old mother, Nancy Jane Barrett, at her home in Clover Bottom, Madison County because she spanked Barrett’s seven-year-old son, Jack Dempsey Barrett, for throwing a rock. Barrett flew into a rage and shot her five times, killing her instantly. He would later call it self-defense. When his sister, Rachel Maupin, tried to intervene with an axe, he shot her too, and then beat her with the pistol. She escaped by getting into a passing car and reported the incident at McKee, Kentucky. Barrett was charged with the willful murder of his mother. Again, he left Kentucky, this time with his son. The Jackson County Sheriff posted a reward of $500 for his “capture and livery” to his jail, or $200 for his arrest and conviction. The Kentucky governor put up $200, Jackson County $250, and Barrett’s brothers, John D. and Gilbert, the other $250. His sister died

from pneumonia and from being beaten, but she was the only eyewitness. In the summer of 1931, Barrett returned home with sufficient funds to ensure a satisfactory outcome at his trial. He was arraigned and released on a $11,000 bond.

While Barrett was out on bond, Prohibition Agents were tipped off to his cousin's still at Big Hill in Madison County. Soon after, the suspected tipster, Will Skinner, was shot and killed at his home. James Barrett, George's cousin, was charged. We do not know if George Barrett was involved, but it seems possible considering "the code of the feud."

Then, Mrs. Durbin sued George Barrett for the money he owed her for taking care of Velma. We do not know the outcome, but based on his reputation, he likely paid her off.

He was tried twice for the murder of his mother. After two hung juries, he was discharged without conviction. He was never charged for his sister's death. After the trial, the district attorney who "prosecuted" the case, Frank Baker of the feuding Baker clan, hired him as a bodyguard.

On September 18, 1932, Barrett was involved in two more deaths during the famous "Battle of Manchester," another in the series of skirmishes during the Baker-Howard Feud.

In 1933, while "guarding" the District Attorney Baker, he dove under a car just as Frank Baker was being shot to death, raising rumors that he was involved in the planning of the assassination. Barrett left Kentucky again and plied his criminal trade again in and around Cincinnati/Hamilton.

By 1935, Barrett's daughter, Velma, was still living in Bloomington, and his son, Jack, was in New York with his mother.

Heretofore, especially with national Prohibition being

eliminated, all of Barnett's legal problems were in Kentucky and unenforceable outside of Kentucky. But in his last scheme, Barnett and accomplices stole rental cars, altered them slightly, including their vehicle identification numbers, and sold them as used cars. One such vehicle was being investigated by the Cincinnati Police Division having been sold in Hamilton to a Cincinnatian. Another was sold in San Diego, making it a federal offence under the 1919 National Motor Vehicle Theft Act. He was now being concurrently investigated by the San Diego, Hamilton, and Cincinnati police departments and the FBI and Special Agent Klein.

INCIDENT

Having dogged Barrett for some time, Agent Klein, on August 16, 1935, established that Barrett was in Hamilton, Ohio. He telephoned the Hamilton Chief of Police regarding the fact and asked for assistance in detaining him. Someone sitting at the stationhouse overheard the conversation and went to Barrett to tell him. Barrett replied, "Guess I'll go over to College Corners (sic) and get my gun. I ain't been carryin' it lately."

Agent Klein took with him Special Agent Donald C. McGovern and, upon arrival in Hamilton they found Barrett had fled. Based on prior intelligence, they guessed where he was going. They drove to College Corner, Ohio followed minutes behind by Butler County Sheriff John Schumacher and Deputy Charles Walke.

Their hunch was correct. Barrett was in fact heading to College Corner and to his brother's farm on the Indiana border. When he got there, he parked his car, walked into his brother's home, opened a dresser drawer, and retrieved a Colt Bisley Model .45 single action revolver. His sister-in-law asked him what he was doing, and he replied, "Oh, I'm goin' to attend to a matter." He

walked back to his car and as soon as he put his key into the driver's side door lock, he saw Agents Klein and McGovern's car approaching.

Before the FBI car came to a halt, about 6:30 p.m., Agent Klein got out and announced, "Just a minute, Barrett! We're federal officers." Before he finished, Barrett ran west, up an alley, and into West College Corner, Indiana with the agent in pursuit. Barrett, having just crossed the state line into West College Corner and into Felix McDonough's garden. He stopped, took cover behind a tree, and from 20-25 feet began shooting at Agent Klein. Agent Klein returned ten shots from his Super .38 during the fusillade, eight of which either struck the tree or missed. Two took out Barrett's knees as they were all that was exposed to Klein. But Barrett's three big .45 Long Colt slugs took effect on Agent Klein, two to the abdomen and one to the shoulder. He stumbled, fell, and cried out, "Oh Lord, I'm shot!" Barrett then put two more slugs into the helpless agent through his neck.

McGovern arrived in time for one shot that did not take effect. Barrett took aim at McGovern and pulled the trigger, but his revolver was empty. Mrs. McDonough, having heard the exchange, went outside, approached Barrett who was on the ground, and he meekly surrendered his revolver to her. He told her, "It is a government man. I shot him. I was in a little trouble, and they were after me."

Sheriff Schumacher and Deputy Walke arrived minutes later at 6:15 p.m. Barrett surrendered to McGovern and Deputy Walke and uttered, "I beat him to the trigger. I shot him!"

Agent Klein and Barrett were rushed to Fort Hamilton Hospital. Barrett registered with an address in Lockland, Ohio, which turned out to be that of another common-law wife. Barrett

bragged at the hospital to Deputy Walke, “Sure I shot him while he lay on the ground. It isn’t the first time I’ve killed a man.”

DEATH

Special Agent Klein died a few hours after arriving at the hospital, becoming the seventh FBI agent “killed in the line duty as the direct result of an adversarial action” and fourth agent killed in the last two years.

He was predeceased little more than a year earlier by his mother, Mary Agnes (Creed) Klein. Agent Klein’s wife of some ten years, Catharina Isabella (Cox) Klein (37), survived him, as did his children, Nelson Klein, Jr. (8), Richard C. Klein (6), and Barbara Ann Klein (3); father, Harry A. Klein, Sr.; and siblings, Harry A. (Edna) Klein, Jr., Ana Klein, Bernice Klein, Agnes Klein, Eugene Klein, and Victor (Evelyn) Klein.

Agent Klein’s remains were transferred to The Christ Hospital in Cincinnati where an autopsy was performed, then to the Miller Funeral Home in Cincinnati, then to the A.C. Dobbling and Son Funeral Home in Fort Thomas, Kentucky. He was buried on August 20, 1935 in Evergreen Cemetery in Southgate, Kentucky after a 2 o’clock funeral service with fellow agents acting as pallbearers. There was no pomp and circumstance, at least none sufficient for mention in the newspapers.

JUSTICE

FBI Acting Special Agent in Charge of the Cincinnati Office H. D. Harris planned for an early trial for Barrett. Barrett was treated at Fort Hamilton Hospital and released as paraplegic on

August 21, 1935, and taken by automobile to City Hospital in Indianapolis.

He was arraigned on November 5, 1935 and a trial was set for December 2nd. Federal District Attorney Val Nolan would prosecute the case before Judge Robert C. Baltzell and Edward Everett Rice of Hamilton would defend Barrett. The only defense was Barrett's allegation that he was afraid the agents were adversaries from the Jackson County feuds. That did not fly. After 44 witnesses testified, on December 5th, the prosecution rested. On December 7, 1935, the defense rested, and the case was sent to the jury. Within 50 minutes, the jury returned a verdict of Guilty Without Mercy.

On December 14, 1935, he was wheeled before the bar of Judge Robert C. Baltzell and sentenced to be hanged in accordance with federal statute, the first such execution under that statute.

A week later, on December 21, 1935, Barrett appealed to the United States District Court in Chicago.

Barrett conducted himself poorly in the prison hospital, trying every scheme to escape judgment, including eternal judgment by being baptized on February 1, 1936 by Father John F. McShane, St. Bridget Catholic Church pastor. He convinced Fr. McShane that he had piously given up all interests other than Scriptures. About a month later, he denounced the Catholic Church.

As his execution approached, Barrett became anxious, and suicidal, and indicated that he might cause his premature death by crushing his glass eye and consuming it, so it was confiscated. He paced the cell and threatened to kill himself and take his two federal guards with him. Though he was seen pacing, he insisted he could not walk, requiring the two federal guards to take him everywhere. One day he insisted he could not

move his arms and needed to be hand fed. Throughout February and March he alleged various illnesses. With weeks to go, his guard was doubled for fear that his antics might be successful. He moaned for a month until he was given opiates each night. Then, he dismissed his attorney.

On March 17, 1936, the United States District Court ruled against his appeal. After a week of violent tantrums, he finally resigned himself to the inevitable and waxed philosophically, “Well, I guess my time has come and I’ll have to go.”

Decades before, Indiana transitioned to electrocution as a means of execution. But the federal statute specified hanging, so a set of gallows had to be imported from Illinois, along with the Illinois hangman who had plied his trade 68 times. The gallows were assembled in the Marion County courtyard under a great tent. For his last meal, he ordered the biggest steak in town, and then he did not eat it.

Other than the hangman, coroner, law enforcement, and family, only newspapermen were permitted into the tent during the execution. On March 24, 1936, at 12:01 a.m., seven months after the murder, Barrett was carried into the yard of the Marion County (Indianapolis) jail and hanged – the first official hanging in the county in 49 years and the last.

EPILOGUE

- **FAMILY**

Traditionally, for the deaths of active agents, all other FBI agents contributed $10.00 each to a fund for the widow. We do not know the amount that Mrs. Klein received from this death benefit club. On April 24, 1936, the United States Senate voted to award Mrs. Klein $5000 (more than $115,000 in 2025 dollars).

Catharina married widower Harry S. Wright of Mt. Vernon, Ohio, between 1942 and 1948. He died in 1969. Widowed twice, Catharina died in 1987 at the age of 90.

Nelson Bernard “Bud” Klein, Jr., after graduating from Danville, Ohio High School, and Ohio State University, in 1950, took a position as a probation officer with the Columbus Juvenile Court. He married Dr. Elizabeth Ann Crothers and together they had three children. He was appointed to the U.S. Probation Office in July 1951. Almost 20 years following his father’s death, Nelson Jr., on July 8, 1955, was sworn in as an FBI Agent at the Cleveland Field Office. His service mirrored his father, also dying tragically after 14 years of service to his country, when on May 29, 1969 he was involved in a fatal, off duty auto accident. Four grandchildren and at least four great-grandchildren survive him.

Richard Cox Klein married Barbara Lou Menke, and they lived in Charlotte, North Carolina, then Kissimmee, Florida. They had three children, one of which survives him, six grandchildren, and at least ten great-grandchildren. He died on June 27, 2020 at the age of 91. and is buried in Cape Canaveral National Cemetery in Mims, Florida.

Barbara Ann Klein also joined the FBI as a support employee and was assigned to Director J. Edgar Hoover’s Office and married William Edward Fleischmann. She died on September 29, 1978 in Mount Vernon, Ohio, survived by her husband, a daughter, and a granddaughter.

- **TRIBUTES**

On May 15, 2002, Butler County unveiled their Peace Officer Memorial and included Special Agent Klein, though without much fanfare.

The Greater Cincinnati Police Museum opened in June 2006. The museum included a Memorial Wall for officers killed in the line of duty. All that was known to them of Special Agent Klein was that he was killed outside their scope in Indiana. In January 2008, they were preparing a display to commemorate the FBI centennial (see A Brief History – FBI) when they discovered Agent Klein was from the Cincinnati Field Office and that he was standing in Ohio when he fell. Museum Director Steve Kramer was also a Cincinnati Police Lieutenant and the Police Division's liaison to the FBI. He contacted Cincinnati Field Office Special Agent in Charge (SAC) Keith Bennett for information about Agent Klein and a photograph. SAC Bennett was new to the office and did not know about Agent Klein's death, but he assured Kramer he would find out. Hours later two agents brought a photograph and short narrative. The Museum added Special Agent Klein to their Memorial Wall and electronic Memorial.

SAC Bennett also contacted the FBI Resident Office in Covington and asked them to confirm his burial in Evergreen Cemetery. Special Agent Tim Tracy found his headstone next to a toppled and broken family monument. During the following months, a collaborative of Covington and Cincinnati FBI agents and members of the Society of Former Special Agents of the FBI and Greater Cincinnati Police Museum, most notably, Special Agents William E. Plunket, retired Special Agent David Lichtenfeld, and Cincinnati officers Dic Gross, Tom Waller, and Steve Kramer, determined that no other family members were buried in the plot. They collected donations and had the family

monument repaired with an FBI badge inserted and a new inscription specific to Special Agent Klein. Retired and active local and federal law enforcement officers, Greater Cincinnati Police Museum volunteers, and surviving members of Agent Klein's family rededicated the monument on the 73rd anniversary of his death, August 16, 2008, with all the pomp and circumstance befitting a hero, including a traditional FBI cognac toast.

Having moved into their new building at 2012 Ronald Reagan Drive, on June 7, 2012, the Cincinnati Field Office dedicated the building in honor of Special Agent Klein. Greater Cincinnati Police Museum Director and retired Lieutenant Kramer gave the keynote speech detailing Agent Klein's life, death, and survivors. The Society of Former Special Agents of the FBI provided a plaque with Agent Klein's image and story which was unveiled in the lobby as a perpetual remembrance. The Hamilton County Police Association Honor Guard also participated.

On May 18, 2015, retired Cincinnati Field Office FBI Special Agent William E. Plunkett authored and published a book, The G-Man and the Diamond King, detailing the lives and deaths of Special Agent Klein and George Barrett. It can be found at the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum or on Amazon and other book retailers.

On August 16, 2017, the Society of Former Special Agents, Cincinnati and Indianapolis Field Offices of the FBI, and the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum hosted the dedication of an Indiana State historical marker honoring Special Agent Klein on the 86th anniversary of his death. The ceremonies were held at the State Ball Park/Town Grove on Church Street in West College Corner, Indiana, and the marker was placed approximately 100

feet from where Agent Klein was murdered. The Indianapolis, Louisville, and Cincinnati Field Office SACs all gave speeches, and Lieutenant Kramer again gave the keynote address. Members of the Hamilton County Police Association Honor Guard, 35th Indiana Pipes and Drums, and Friendly Sons of St. Patrick Glee Club also participated.

We believe Special Agent Klein is survived by his granddaughter, Sue Ann Klein; 11 great-grandchildren, including Karen Elizabeth (John) Allgood, Jason Ander (Marci) Rains, Christopher Loren (Amey) Rains, and Tyler Klein Rains; and at least 14 great-great-grandchildren, including Hayden Rains, Ansley Rains, Harper Rains, and Caely Rains.

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

This narrative was researched and revised July 14, 2025, by Cincinnati Police Lieutenant Stephen R. Kramer (Retired), Greater Cincinnati Police Historical Society President/CEO. All rights are reserved to him and the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum.