

Special Agent Nelson Bernard Klein | Federal Bureau of Investigation



Age: 37

Served: 9 years

1926 to August 16, 1935

AGENT

Nelson was born in New Jersey and fought in France during World War I.

He joined the Bureau of Investigation in 1926 (before it was renamed "Federal Bureau of Investigation"). Special Agent Klein was involved in a number of high-profile investigations, including the John Dillinger mob chase and the Alice Berry Stoll kidnapping in Louisville, Kentucky. By 1931, he was assigned to the Cincinnati Field Office.

During 1935, Agent Klein, working on a tip from a Covington locksmith, set his sights on George Barrett.

ASSASSIN

George W. Barrett was born 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 was shot by the arresting officer, but it was just a flesh wound. After a small fine and short jail sentence, he participated in feuds and crime until, in 1917, he left for Cincinnati; probably until things cooled off for the five or six men he claimed to have killed.

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. There he got into a shootout with his brother-in-law. Barrett had a revolver and his brother-in-law a shotgun. Barrett was wounded in the face and lost an eye. He then quarreled with his 73-year-old mother and shot her dead; then his sister who tried to intervene. He left his country home and did not return until he had paid enough money to witnesses to assure a satisfactory outcome in his trial. He was tried twice without a conviction in 1931.

After the trial, the district attorney hired him as a bodyguard. In 1933, the district attorney was assassinated. His bodyguard dove under a car.

He left Kentucky and started stealing cars. He changed the serial numbers and operated his newfound criminal enterprise across the country – from the Midwest to San Diego.

INCIDENT

Having dogged Barrett for some time, Agent Klein on August 16, 1935 found that Barrett was in Hamilton, Ohio. He telephoned the Hamilton Chief of Police and told him that agents were on the way and asked that Barrett be detained. Someone sitting at the stationhouse overheard the conversation and went to Barrett to tell him. Barrett replied, "Guess I'll go over to

College Corner and get my gun. I ain't been carryin' it lately."

When Agents Klein and Donald McGovern arrived in Hamilton and found Barrett had fled, they guessed where he was going. They drove toward College Corner, followed minutes behind by Butler County Sheriff John Schumacher and Deputy Charles Walke.

When Barrett got to the farm, he parked his car, walked into his brother's home, opened a dresser drawer, and retrieved a long-barreled 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 saw another approaching him.

Agent Klein got out of that car and said, "Just a minute, Barrett! We're federal officers." Before he finished, Barrett ran up an alley with the officers in pursuit. Barrett turned and, using a tree as cover, began shooting at Agent Klein. Agent Klein stumbled and fell. While on the ground and as Barrett continued to shoot him, Agent Klein pulled his semiautomatic pistol and shot Barrett in the knee. Barrett shot his final two shots into the Klein's all but lifeless figure as McGovern shot him in his other knee. Barrett took aim at McGovern and pulled the trigger, but his revolver was empty. Agent Klein was struck with all six rounds in the head, throat, chest, and arms.

Sheriff Schumacher and Deputy Walke arrived minutes later at 6:15 p.m.

Agent Klein and Barrett were rushed to Fort Hamilton Hospital. Barrett bragged at the hospital, "I beat him to the draw! Sure I shot him while he lay on the ground. It isn't the first time I've killed a man."

DEATH

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." He was the fourth agent killed in the last two years.

Agent Klein left a wife, Catherine Klein (37), and three children, Nelson Klein, Jr. (8), Richard C. Klein (6), and Barbara Ann Klein (3). His body was taken to Christ Hospital in Cincinnati, then onto the A.C. Dobbins and Son Funeral Home in Fort Thomas. He was buried in Evergreen Cemetery in Southgate, Kentucky.

JUSTICE

Barrett was treated at Fort Hamilton Hospital and released as a paraplegic on August 21, 1935. After several weeks of recuperating, he was taken by automobile to Indianapolis to stand trial. During the first week of December 1935, a jury returned a guilty verdict.

On December 14, 1935, he was wheeled before the bar of Judge Robert C. Baltzell and sentenced to be hanged. Barrett became the first person to receive the death penalty under a recent federal law that made it a capital offense to kill an FBI agent.

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 execution in the county in 49 years.

EPILOGUE

Nelson Klein Jr. would later join the FBI and die in a car crash in 1969. Barbara Klein also joined the FBI in a civilian capacity.

After the Cincinnati Office Special Agent in Charge found Agent Klein's monument toppled and broken during the summer 2008, the marker was restored through the generosity and efforts of the Cincinnati Chapter of Former Special Agents and the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum. After determining no other family members were buried in the plot, a new inscription was etched into the stone marking the heroic ultimate sacrifice of 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 a short ceremony and cognac toast.

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 September 2, 2013, by Cincinnati Police Lieutenant Stephen R. Kramer (Retired). All rights are reserved to him and the Greater Cincinnati Police Historical Society.