

A BOMBING IN BLOOMSBURG — 1896

By Sandra J. Kehoe-Forutan

Normally a small rural town such as Bloomsburg would not be associated with sensational crimes. However, a trial for an attempted murder in 1896, involving some of the town's leading citizens, was described by a local newspaper at the time as creating as much public interest as the trial of the Molly Maguires twenty years before. Not only was a private home in Bloomsburg attacked with the intent to kill its inhabitants, but the method utilized in this crime, a bomb, was highly unusual in this country and typically was associated with anarchists.

During the middle of the night on September 11, 1896, dynamite exploded at the front of the home of prominent attorney Levi E. Waller at 3 East Fifth Street (formerly 1 East Fifth Street and known today as the Van Tassel house). A hole was blown through the wall by the front door, and the front porch and windows of the Queen Anne style home were destroyed in the explosion. Luckily the members of the Waller family were unharmed even though the attack was intended to do "mortal harm" to the family.

Levi Waller (1851–1934) was a member of one of Bloomsburg's best-known families. He was the son of Rev. D. J. Waller Sr. (1815–1893), who had had a leading role in most civic improvements for decades. He was also the brother of Rev. D. J. Waller Jr. (1846–1941), Principal of Bloomsburg State Normal School from 1877 to 1890 and 1906 to 1920. Levi Waller's wife was Alice Buckalew, daughter of Congressman and Senator Charles R. Buckalew, with whom Waller had studied law. The Senator and his wife also resided at the Waller home at this time. Levi Waller himself, in addition to being one of Columbia County's leading attorneys was Secretary to the Bloomsburg Silk Mills and served on the Bloomsburg Town Council from 1882 to 1883.

On the evening of the bombing only Levi, Alice, their six-year old son Charles, and the family's cook were home. The Buckalews and their granddaughter Jean were visiting overnight in Jamison City.

The Town of Bloomsburg immediately offered a \$500 reward for information leading to the apprehension of the person or persons who committed the crime. Already suspicious as to who that might be, Waller hired a private detective from Philadelphia to investigate further. On December 28, 1896 the authorities arrested Clifton C. Knorr (age 26) for the bombing and Knorr pleaded guilty. He was a son of Colonel Samuel Knorr (1836–1889), Civil War veteran, attorney, and leading citizen of Bloomsburg.

Knorr confessed that he was hired for the bombing by Lloyd S. Wintersteen, another Bloomsburg attorney. Wintersteen allegedly held animosity towards Levi Waller because Waller was counsel to Samuel Knorr's widow (and Clifton's step-mother), Mary Knorr, in a lawsuit arising from the settling of Colonel Knorr's estate.

Wintersteen (1849–1935), a native of Mifflinville, came to Bloomsburg in 1877 as a law student in the firm of Samuel Knorr and was admitted to the Columbia County bar in 1879. By the next year he was a partner in Colonel Knorr's firm. This firm purchased the Bloomsburg Iron Company in 1887 and in 1889 Colonel Knorr died leaving his widow and two adult children, Clifton and Mildred. Mary Ettla Knorr was the Colonel's second wife and also the sister of his first wife, Emma Ettla, the mother of the Colonel's two children.

Wintersteen became President of the company and from 1889 to 1894, it was later alleged, no election of officers was held nor were any financial proceeds distributed to the Knorr family. Mrs. Knorr, upon learning of the sale of the company to H.C. Pease in 1894, proceeded through her lawyer Levi Waller to take out an injunction to stop all business actions and a "bill of equity" to compel an accounting of the firm, charging Wintersteen with mismanagement. It seems that the firm, of sound financial health at the time of the Colonel's death (estimated at \$60,000 in assets), was now insolvent.

Wintersteen turned himself in to the authorities and he and Knorr were each released on \$5000 bail until the trial, which took place in May 1897. The two men were tried together even though Knorr had admitted his guilt and turned state's evidence against Wintersteen. Therefore, there were two defendants on trial but only Wintersteen was actually being tried during the proceedings.

The attempted murder trial boiled down to the question of whether Wintersteen was the instigator of this "diabolical plot" as headlined by *The Columbian* newspaper, or the victim of an intricate web of lies perpetrated by Clifton Knorr. Wintersteen, defended by two well-known local lawyers, Fred Ikeler (1870–1919) and Colonel John G. Freeze (1825–1913), amongst others, pleaded not guilty.

The prosecution's case, led by District Attorney John G. Harman, was largely based upon the testimony of Clifton Knorr as the primary witness. It was alleged that Wintersteen attempted to stall the equity suit while he tried to buy out the Knorr family interests starting with the weakest link, Clifton Knorr. Knorr, of no known occupation, had been residing on Cherry Street in Reading and needed income. Knorr had attended Lehigh College for three years (1889–1892) but he did not graduate. He lived at home for one year but then moved to Reading where he was not employed except for a short period when he owned and operated a cab company which eventually failed.

Wintersteen purchased Clifton Knorr's stock interests in the Bloomsburg Iron Company for \$2000 and then was supposed to have offered Knorr an additional \$1000 if he could get his mother to sell her stock. Mrs. Knorr had refused to sell and repeatedly stated that she would only do so upon advice of her counsel, Levi Waller. It was alleged that Wintersteen became embittered towards Waller for his influence on the widow.

Knorr's story was all the more convincing due to his excellent recollection of dates and events. After being unable to convince his mother to sell her stock and to withdraw the equity suit, Knorr continued in his tale, Wintersteen constructed a plot to

have Knorr's sister Mildred sell hers. Knorr and his sister inherited a house in Harrisburg that their grandmother resided in. Knorr told his sister that the house would be sold so that he could realize his half of the sale proceedings. However, to prevent displacing their grandmother, the sister was to buy his interest in the house through transferring over her stock in the company to Wintersteen. Mildred conceded and this transaction went through.

With only Mrs. Knorr left holding stock, Clifton said, Wintersteen plotted her early demise through a variety of plans including exposure to diphtheria germs and poisoning. However, it would be Knorr who actually purchased diphtheria germs from a New York City source, John Rothschild, but the plan failed because the germs needed to be inoculated. Knorr did try unsuccessfully to infect his stepmother by sprinkling the germs amongst her clothing.

It would also be Knorr who was suspected by a servant in the Knorr household, Dora Moharter, of putting a powder of unknown origin into Mrs. Knorr's drinking cup in 1895. The maid threw the powder out and thus prevented the intended result, whatever that was to be. Knorr said he gave the powder, phenocolhide of chloride, to his mother who was sick at the time. He had purchased the powder in New York City for himself while ill.

Moharter also testified that Knorr carried a revolver at that time and told her that he carried dynamite in his grip [suitcase] and thus the grip should be handled with great care. Knorr had threatened Waller's life in her presence, blaming Waller for Knorr's inability to acquire his share of his father's estate. Moharter also testified that she saw Knorr on the night of the bombing near the Knorr home, which was across Fifth Street from the Waller home, with a man she could not identify, who was also considered a possible accomplice by the defense. The prosecution tried to discredit Moharter's testimony by alleging that she was having an affair with Wintersteen, based on letters (contents unknown) that were supposed to have been sent by Wintersteen to the maid before she started her service at the Knorr home.

Knorr then told of Wintersteen's plot to kill Waller in 1896 and that Knorr was offered four to five thousand dollars to carry out this act. This seems plausible when six other witnesses testified that Wintersteen had made threats about how he would like to see Waller dead. Knorr continued by saying that he bought a gun in Danville with \$10 provided by Wintersteen. Knorr had an opportunity to kill Waller in the street one night but this attempt was thwarted by the fact that Waller had his son with him.

Wintersteen also was alleged to have instructed Knorr to go to Sunbury to purchase vitriol to throw in Waller's face, but the defense showed that the carboys [large container] of that substance was already available to Wintersteen in the Ironworks.

Knorr stated that for the bombing plot he obtained stolen dynamite from a shed at the Anderson Quarry as per Wintersteen's instructions. Wintersteen had himself obtained dynamite legally for the Ironworks from that same company. However, in addition to

Dora Moharter, other witnesses from Reading testified seeing Knorr in possession of a gun and dynamite before this time frame. A Cherry Street neighbour not only saw dynamite but also described Knorr's peculiar habits of staying hidden in the house unless he emerged in disguise. After the failed bombing attempt, Wintersteen was alleged to have given Knorr \$50 to get out of town. Knorr stated that he burned all of Wintersteen's letters that contained any instructions related to the crime.

Many prosecution witnesses and much evidence showed that Wintersteen had been in the company of Knorr on numerous occasions. The most damaging testimony came from a prostitute from Reading, Sallie Gast, with whom Clifton had lived during his time of residence in that city. The defense, on the other hand, called many witnesses to discredit her character and testimony and offered plausible explanations for all the meetings between Knorr and Wintersteen.

Many of Bloomsburg's leading citizens also attested to Wintersteen's good character. *The Bloomsburg Daily* (June 2, 1897: 1) questioned why Wintersteen would choose the method of dynamite which would put his own sister in harm's way because she resided only fifty feet away from the Waller household.

There was no doubt that Clifton Knorr was considered by all to be of dubious character and that the only income received since his father's death had been from Wintersteen, although considered by Wintersteen as an act of charity. The following description in *The Columbian* (June 3, 1897: 1) summarizes the general feelings about Knorr in the press:

Clifton C. Knorr proved to be a remarkable witness in two respects, his memory of dates was wonderful, and the complacency with which he confessed himself to be the most unmitigated scoundrel of modern times was astounding. He told of his willingness to rob his sister of her stock in Irondale, of his willingness to shoot Mr. Waller, and of his final attempt to murder Waller and his family with dynamite, all with a simpering smile on his face, and as coolly as though he was talking of the most commonplace occurrence. He confessed that he was willing to do all this for the money he says he was promised for doing it. Dime novel villains are at a discount. Clifton Knorr's tale of his own total depravity, of his consummate villainy, is the most blood-curdling disclosure of modern times. Whether there is another man equally as depraved, is the question now before the court.

Wintersteen's defense even alluded to the fact that Knorr was under suspicion for the attempted murder and robbery of a known prostitute, Agnes Devees, on January 28, 1895 by hiring an assassin from New York City. Except for Knorr's acquaintances testifying that Knorr bragged about the crime, there was no evidence submitted that Knorr was tied to this crime. Devees, at that time, was living at the same "bawdy house" as Sallie Gast. Witnesses also testified that after the bombing, when Knorr had returned to Reading, they overheard numerous conversations between him and Gast devising a scheme to blame the bombing on Wintersteen.

Obviously four jurors had doubts regarding Knorr's truthfulness and voted to acquit Wintersteen while the eight other jurors voted to convict, resulting in a hung jury. Knorr, still free on bail, was to be sentenced and Wintersteen was free on a renewed bail of \$7000 while waiting for a new trial which was scheduled for October 26 of that year.

However, an agreement was reached not to retry him based upon certain conditions stipulated by Waller, one of which was that Wintersteen should leave Bloomsburg forever and within two weeks. This turn of events was aptly described by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (November 13, 1897: 6) as "...the most remarkable settlement of a criminal case in the history of Pennsylvania." Wintersteen left town never to be retried, and the newspapers suggested that he relocated to New York City.

He and his wife Ada Eveline (1851–1933), daughter of well-known mercantilist Jeremiah J. Brower of Bloomsburg, are found listed as residing in Manhattan in the 1900 Census. By the 1910 Census they had moved to the New York City suburb of Hastings-on-Hudson Village, where they resided until their deaths in the 1930's.

It is not known what happened to Clifton Knorr and whether he served any time for the crime to which he pleaded guilty. He died of heart failure in 1904 at Fort Apache, Arizona, where he served at the rank of Sergeant with the United States Fifth Cavalry.

Sources

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