

Intriguing Kidnapping or Not?

By Kay Stahl

Who doesn't love an intriguing mystery in your family line? Especially one that involves a possible kidnapping of a married woman! While volunteering at the society, I ran across an article in the DeMott Scrapbooks No. 15 from the 1916 Bloomsburg Morning Press newspaper titled, "Woman Kidnapped." Several follow-up articles also appeared regarding this story in various state newspapers. These discoveries piqued my interest to find out more about this fascinating story.

The immediate question is, who were these real-life characters in this captivating story? First, there is the kidnapped "victim," only referred to as Mrs. Stackhouse or Mrs. Thomas Stackhouse in all the articles. You would think that someone who was kidnapped would at least have their first name published, but we must remember the times surrounding 1916 and how women were addressed. The victim's real name was "Bessie" Elizabeth Ritter Stackhouse. Bessie was the daughter of Jeremiah Douglas Ritter and Sarah Emeline Hill. Her father, Jeremiah, ran a hotel in Jordan Township, Lycoming County in 1910. By 1920 he removed to 1147 Front Street, Milton, Northumberland County, PA and became an iron mill laborer. Her mother, Sarah Emeline Hill, was the daughter of Michael and Elizabeth Hill from the Lairdsville area of Franklin Township, Lycoming County, PA. "Bessie" Elizabeth was born January 22, 1881 in Franklin Township, Lycoming County, PA.

Next, we introduce the spouse of the "victim," Mr. Thomas Isaac Stackhouse. Thomas Isaac is the son of Michael John Stackhouse and Phebe Boudman. He was born Dec. 31, 1872. Here is where I come into the family line and the story, be it somewhat distantly. Thomas Isaac is my second cousin, two times removed. His grandfather, Thomas Shellhammer Stackhouse, was the next older brother to my second great-grandfather, Abraham Stackhouse. Our common ancestors are my third great-grandparents, Thomas, Senior and Susanna Shellhammer Stackhouse. Thomas Isaac was married in 1897 to "Bessie" Ritter. He was 25 and she was 16. They first lived in Franklin Township, Lycoming County but by 1910 removed to Pine Township, Columbia County.

Finally, we must determine who was the "villain" kidnapper, referred to as H. A. Wochley of Greenwood Township in most newspaper articles. H. A. Wochley is officially, Henry A. Wochley, son of Frederick and Lydia Artz Wochley. At times he is also referred to as Harry A. and not Henry. His father, Frederick, was born in Germany but his mother, Lydia, was born in Pennsylvania. Frederick is listed as Fred Urchley in the 1880 Perry Township, Snyder County, PA Census and Henry is listed as his son, age 11. By 1900, Henry Wochley, age 31, is found in Greenwood Township, Columbia County with a wife, Mary E., age 36 and three children: Elmer, age 11; Jennie M., age 8; and Alberta, age 1, along with his brother, Charles Wochley, boarding in their home. The census states that Henry and wife Mary E. were married in 1887. He would have been 18 and Mary age 23. Mary E. was the daughter of Jacob and Sarah Cathryne Berger

Derr. Jacob Derr was a Civil War veteran, having been injured in the right leg in the battle of Cold Harbor and taken prisoner and confined several months at Andersonville prison. His leg was amputated after which he was discharged. He was crippled for life but farmed in Greenwood and was a long-time member of the Lutheran Church.

Before the kidnapping story flooded the newspapers in 1916, Henry Wochley appeared in several other news clippings. On July 21, 1889, Henry “built an extensive poultry house and expects to do quite a business in that line.” On April 24, 1903, it was reported that Henry drove over the mountain the first week of the month with a load of apples. This may or may not indicate that he owned a car. On March 27, 1903, Wochley was summoned to treat a mule and he administered the proper medicine, and the animal made a complete recovery. This is the first hint that he was an aspiring veterinarian.

Unfortunately, it was reported on July 10, 1907, that tragedy had struck the household. As the article reports, “Climbing over a fence about two weeks ago, Miss Jennie Wochley, the 17-year-old daughter of H. A. Wochley, of Millville, Columbia County, slipped and fell badly injuring herself internally. She was brought to the Joseph Ratti Hospital yesterday and died a few hours after she had been admitted.” According to the death certificate Jennie May, age 16, died July 7, 1907, of gangrene of small intestine. The newspaper death notice states she died of internal injuries from a fall and would be buried at Lemon’s Cemetery.

On August 13, 1909, it was reported that “Dr. W. A. Wochley, wife and daughter (most likely Alberta or Edith) of Greenwood, started Friday morning to New Columbia, Luzerne County and on Saturday pulled over at Kitchen’s Creek Falls which they say is a splendid sight for everybody to go to see. They took in all the sights and returned Sunday.” This is the first indication that he is referred to as Doctor Wochley and alludes to the fact that he had an automobile. This may be the vehicle later used in the kidnapping. In the first kidnapping article it was mentioned that “some time ago he (Henry) bought an automobile and made quite a splurge around the neighborhood.”

Again, on July 10, 1912, we find another accident reported. “Hornets stung a team attached to a hay rake on the farm of Henry Wochley, yesterday, causing them to run away. Before the frightened animals were finally stopped, the 14-year-old daughter of Mr. Wochley, who was driving, was slightly injured.” A few years later on May 29, 1915, we find the marriage recorded for daughter Alberta Wochley and Benjamin Kreisher of Berwick. This would leave his son, Elmer, and youngest daughter, Edith Sarah, as the remaining children at home.

Although enterprising reports, family trips, hornets, a wedding, and a tragic death occur the years before the kidnapping in 1916, what led up to this event? According to several accounts given in the newspapers, Wochley, a married man with grown children, had been infatuated with Mrs. Stackhouse. One article states that for several months prior to his departure he had been at odds with the Stackhouse family due to his failure to collect a trumped-up account, and he did not visit there as had been his custom for several years. This implies that at some point he must have been

friends with the family but had a falling out with Thomas Stackhouse. Another article reports that “he had been greatly infatuated with her for several years and had made threats as to what would happen if she did not go with him.” It is recorded that Bessie was “repulsed by his advances.” Another article reports that Wochley had seemingly multiple family, career and financial problems and perhaps suffered from depression. The Bloomsburg Morning Press reported, “He had not done any work for a couple of years, claiming he was not able to work, but there are many who believe it was due to his infatuation for this woman, and the fact that he was unable to practice as a veterinarian due to his inability to secure a diploma from the State. His son, Elmer, with Mrs. Wochely has managed the farm since Wochely has been on the bum.”

With all this background information, we will finally get to the actual kidnapping story which all of you readers have been waiting for. What exactly happened the day of the “kidnapping”? Be forewarned that there are several discrepancies in the reporting of the story between accounts. The kidnapping is described as “one of the most daring escapades to be heard of in the country, or in any civilized community.”

At some point in the middle of October 1916, Bessie Stackhouse went to visit her son, Howard, in Watontown to help him set up housekeeping there. From there she reports that she took a train to Muncy where she intended on visiting her aunt before returning to her home in Pine Township. According to the first article that appeared of the story, Bessie stepped off the train and Henry Wochley was there. He compelled her under threats of instant death to accompany him, and being thus frightened, she got in the car and off they went. In a later article, Bessie provided the details that when she got off the train and started across the river to the town, Wochley came out of the bushes and told her to accompany him. He took her to his car, which he had concealed in the bushes, and forced her to go with him. In the Philadelphia Inquirer rendition, Wochley was at the station with his car and threatened to kill her if she refused. In another article, it states that Wochley found out through the children in both families that Mrs. Stackhouse expected to go to Muncy the day she did, and he was on hand to meet her. He had left home early on a Wednesday morning to visit a physician. He had claimed that he was physically unable to work for a couple of years. He may have used the doctor visit as an excuse to track her to Muncy. Whether elopement or kidnapping, Bessie found herself with Henry Wochley and they were heading west.

The story picks up that as they headed west, Bessie was able to secretly send notes back home stating she had been kidnapped and pleading that she be rescued. Due to their constantly moving, the relatives were at a loss to know where to locate the couple. Mr. Stackhouse reported to the newspaper, that he was willing to do anything he could to get his wife released and have her return if he could locate them. Supposedly, Wochley used his revolver to threaten her if she showed signs of opposing him. She maintains that at no time was she with him willingly. According to the first account, Bessie had written a note in Wisconsin, another from Minnesota, and that she was being taken to North Dakota. Her letters were written on any kind of scrap paper, that she states she was compelled to write while he was away from her a short time. It was reported that she had no privileges and that she was guarded all the time and that he threatened her with all sorts

of violence if she resisted and that he had a loaded revolver with him and compelled her to obey. One article reported that Wochley does not stop in any place long enough to allow an officer to overtake him.

In a follow-up article regarding the return, it is reported by Bessie that they traveled as far as North Dakota when Wochley's car "ran low." He proposed that they seek employment and she found work in a restaurant. She reports that Mr. Wochley could not find a job to his liking so they decided to come back east. He then sold his car and they took the train to return. Questions as to whether this was an elopement or kidnapping again comes to one's mind. Why couldn't she get away if she was working in a restaurant and he was off looking for other jobs? How did they register at any overnight stops in an inn along the way? Was any hotel staff ever suspicious of the couple or did they look like an infatuated couple on a road trip? Couldn't she alert coworkers of her situation and they could get word to the authorities to arrest Wochley or was she too scared to provoke her "kidnapper"?

At this time in the story, we will take a slight detour to investigate cross-country travel in 1916. In 1903 the first cross-country automobile trip was recorded and it took 63 days. New car prices in 1910-1913 were from \$525 to \$900. In the span of 1915-1916 it has been estimated that there were 2.4 to 3.6 million registered cars and trucks. That number surprised this writer! In 1911 forty amateur drivers drove 4,617 miles in 35 days from Atlantic City to San Francisco. The trip was called the "Millionaires Trip" of 1911. The Lincoln Highway that ran coast to coast opened in 1913 and was still dirt roads in many places. In 1916 it took 4.5 days to cross country by train and 5 days by auto. Also, in 1916 a trip guide was printed titled the "Official Automobile Blue Book." This thick volume covered hundreds of routes, giving detailed turn-by-turn directions past landmarks, cemeteries, factories, etc. To this writer's delight, an article at www.motortrend.com was found titled "Transcontinental Travel in 1916 – Historical Flashbacks." It gave much insight as to what Bessie and Henry may have encountered and the adventure that awaited them.

On May 18, 1916, Mr. and Mrs. A.W. Robins left San Francisco in a camper built on a Ford chassis with a Ralston truck attachment and headed to New York. They traveled at the top speed of 13 miles per hour. The couple printed postcards that they sold along the way stating the object of their journey was: "Wanderlust adventure—to see and to learn." Their destination was "anywhere and everywhere" and the time they expected to make the trip was "indefinite." It does make one wonder if Bessie and Mr. Wochley may have read of these cross-country adventures and it tempted them to go for the "wanderlust" as well.

As all good things must come to an end, or they ran out of money, or Bessie finally persuaded her "kidnapper" to go home; they did sell the car and travel by train to return. A November 9, 1916 article indicated that Mr. Stackhouse was still hoping for his wife's safe return. It cannot be determined exactly how long this "kidnapping" trip took, but one article states five weeks later they returned. Once again, there are discrepancies in the account of the return depending on the newspaper.

In the Bloomsburg Morning Press a second article is titled, "Wochley Returns –Arrested." The account details that Mr. Wochley returned with Mrs. Stackhouse. She stopped in Watsonstown and sent word to her husband. Mr. Stackhouse went out Saturday morning and met her. Also, on Saturday morning Mr. Wochley was seen getting on the train at Northumberland but did not venture to get off at Watsonstown. However, according to the article, he returned later in the evening. That evening Mr. Stackhouse, Bessie, and son Howard were standing on the platform at the Watsonstown station when Bessie spied Wochley making gestures to her to come to him. She told her husband, and he and son Howard, with an officer that was with them, gave Wochley a "merry chase." As reported "He was soon caught and whined because he thought he would be killed on the spot." The officer searched him and found a fully loaded revolver in his hip pocket. He was then disarmed, handcuffed and taken to lock-up. The officers in Williamsport, who had a warrant for him, were notified and later that night Wochley was transported and lodged in jail for a hearing in Williamsport. In the November 24, 1916 edition of the Lewisburg Journal and The Milton Standard, additional details were provided. This article states that Mrs. Stackhouse returned to Watsonstown Friday night and then "possibly uncertain as to the reception she might receive, telephoned to Millville that her husband should be informed that he would find her at Watsonstown." Words to that effect were telephoned him, and on Saturday he went to Watsonstown for her. The story also repeats that Mr. Stackhouse, son Howard, who resided in Watsonstown, and Bessie were standing at the station on Saturday evening. It continues, "a few minutes after the Pennsy train had left about 8:30 o'clock the woman was horrified to see Wochley standing nearby, making motions to her to come to him. She told her husband and son, who immediately peeled their coats and started after the alleged kidnapper. A spirited race followed, in which Officer Gair joined, and the man, Wochley, was captured, whining pitifully that he was going to be killed. Officer Gair learned the cause of the disturbance, and telephoned to Williamsport to notify the officials there of his capture. The man was taken to Williamsport early yesterday morning. It is understood there will be sensational developments when the case comes up for trial."

Another later article titled "Conflicting Stories About Kidnapping" was printed on November 24, 1916 in the Mount Carmel Item. In this account, Wochley tells of a different story; that the trip was planned entirely by Bessie Stackhouse. He states they made a trip to North Dakota in his Ford car and returned together by train when Mrs. Stackhouse expressed a desire to see her daughter. This daughter would have been Edna P. Stackhouse who would have been about 12 years old in 1916. He claims that instead of his kidnapping her at Muncy, they met at Williamsport and that she was contented until they reached North Dakota. North Dakota in November could be quite unpleasant, so I don't blame her there! In yet another article Mr. Wochley claimed that Bessie was "perfectly willing to accompany him at first and continued willingly until they got far on the way, when she became dissatisfied and wanted to return." Regardless, Mr. Wochley was arrested. The account states that Mr. and Mrs. Stackhouse went to "Williamsport Tuesday morning where Wochley was to have a hearing, but returned in the evening and he (Mr. Stackhouse) stated the hearing was postponed until Saturday on application of defendant's counsel." This researcher has

not been able to find any more articles regarding the arrest, hearing, or release of Mr. Wochley. However, we do have some insight as to what happened to the families in the years after 1916.

When the “kidnapping” occurred in late 1916, Bessie Stackhouse would have been 34 years old and Mr. Henry Wochley would have been 47 years old. Thomas Stackhouse would have been 43 years old. By the time of the next census in 1920, Henry Wochley is again found in Greenwood Township with his wife Mary; son Elmer, and youngest daughter Sarah. He is listed as owning the farm without a mortgage and a farmer. Unlike the 1910 Census entry, he is not listed as a veterinarian. An article dated Oct. 4, 1928 in the Selinsgrove Times-Tribune reports that Mr. and Mrs. Henry Wochley, of Millville; William Wochley and family, of Milton, and P.W. Kratzer and family all visited at the home of A. W. Valentine, this being the old Wochley homestead. It goes on to say that this group has an annual gathering and they find the home well-kept in every respect. All the buildings are kept in the best repair and the land is in a “high state of cultivation”. A fine herd of thoroughbred Jerseys, Poland China hogs, Rhode Island Red chickens, a fine team of horses, and about 75 acres of fine growing timber belong to this farm. This article seems to be describing the homestead of Henry’s parents left to a sibling.

The Wochley household is found again in the 1930 Greenwood Township census, with Henry and wife Mary, and son Elmer. Once again, Henry is entered as a veterinarian. As you may recall, one of the earlier reasons given for Henry being depressed and not working was because he couldn’t get his state certification to be a veterinarian. Perhaps his luck had changed as he appears to be a full-fledged veterinarian in his later years. Henry died July 9, 1930 at the age of 61 of diabetes mellitus. He was buried at the Union (Lemon) Cemetery in Greenwood Township. The newspaper obituary read, “H.A. Wocheley Dies – Millville Veterinarian Dies After Long Illness.” The announcement goes on to say that Henry was “a well-known resident of the vicinity of Millville, where he had been a veterinarian for a number of years.” It is interesting to note that sixteen years had passed since the “kidnapping” event. Apparently, the community had since forgotten or forgiven the incident. He was “well known” not as an infatuated kidnapper who recklessly abandoned his wife and children for a wanderlust adventure but as a community veterinarian. Henry left behind his wife, Mary, who would have been about age 64; his only son, Elmer, age 41, who continued to run the farm; Alberta, who married Ben Kreisher in 1915; Sarah Edith, age 25, who later married in 1937 to Ernest W. Force. Henry also had three surviving brothers and three surviving sisters. Mary and son, Elmer, would pass away eighteen years later in 1948. All would be interred in the Lemon Cemetery, side by side, with all past life events soon forgotten.

The “kidnapping” victim, Bessie Elizabeth Ritter Stackhouse, and family would remove to Watertown, Pennsylvania around 1917 – 1918, shortly after her return. Perhaps the local gossip mill was too much for the family and they wished to make a new start and move closer to their son and Bessie’s parents. Her husband, Thomas, is registered for the draft for WW I on Sept. 12, 1918 with an address of Shay Street, Watertown, PA. His occupation was a rigger at the American Car and Foundry Co. in Milton. By 1920 the family can be found in Milton, Ward 1,

Northumberland County, PA. Her parents, Jeremiah and Sarah Ritter, had also removed themselves to Milton by 1920. On October 5, 1922, the wedding announcement of son, Howard, to Miss Estella Desda Sweitzer, of Danville, was announced. Howard is listed as being employed at the American Car and Foundry Company plant in Milton. A few years later in April 1926, daughter Edna married James Hassenplug in Milton at the St. John's Reformed Church. By 1930, Bessie is found on S. Front Street, Milton, House #306 with her husband; daughter, Edna and spouse James Hassenplug; and grandson, James, age 3.

Tragedy strikes the family again when daughter, Edna, dies suddenly from a septic blood poisoning wound in her left thumb from a puncture of a price tag clip while working as a clerk in a dry good store. Her death is recorded as June 9, 1933 at age 29. Thirteen days later on June 24, 1933, Thomas Stackhouse dies of atherosclerosis in their family home. What a sad time of loss this must have been losing both husband and daughter in the same month. In 1940 Bessie, since widowed, is living at #318 S. Front Street in a rental unit with grandson, James Hassenplug, and a Burt Seers, age 75. Bessie is listed as a wage or salary worker in government work, however her highest grade of education completion was grade eight.

The entire saga ends with the death of Bessie Stackhouse on December 23, 1957 at the age of 76. According to the newspaper obituary, Bessie died of a massive cerebral hemorrhage and heart attack. She was residing with a granddaughter, Mrs. Swartz Wagner, Jr. at 301 South Front Street in Milton. She was survived by one son, Howard, three grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. All of the family were buried at the Harmony Cemetery in Milton, PA.

The verdict is still out whether the entire escapade was a kidnapping, elopement of two married adults, or something else. Unless a current reader of this newsletter has additional information regarding these families and account, this tidbit will be but a newspaper clipping buried in the DeMott Scrapbook No. 15 at the society. At best, it still remains an intriguing mystery and story of times past.