

IN YEARS GONE BY...

Two Officers Killed In Trap With Ro

Escaped Convict Dies, Two Others Escape

By HOWARD WHITE
Times-News Staff Writer

The time was shortly after 2 o'clock on the morning of December 7, 1938.

Police Headquarters in Burlington was on routine duty. Desk Sgt. J. E. Ausley wasn't busy, and there were a few officers to stop by the office to break the chill of their outside beats.

One of these, in from a call of his own, was Sheriff M. P. Robertson who only two days before had assumed his office on the retirement of H. J. Stockard. Sheriff Robertson felt at home in the Burlington headquarters. He had been an officer in the city for nine years and had climbed the ranks to become captain of police before taking his new duties.

These officers weren't talking about anything in particular.

And, of course, neither of them knew that they were about to become a part of one of the most sensational crimes ever committed in Alamance County history. Within a few minutes, three men were to die—two of them being Sheriff Robertson and Officer S. W. "Sonny" Vaughn of the Burlington department.

Norman Yates, a 10-year-old driver for Melville Dairy, came into headquarters. He was on his regular round, he said, and had noticed two men acting suspiciously at the Sprinkle Service Station, then at the corner of North Church and Trade Streets. One was around the door of the station, he said, and the other was banking the front. When they saw him, they started walking away. It just didn't look right, he said.

Sergeant Ausley called on Officers S. W. Vaughn and B. F. Bailiff to make an investigation. It was then that Sheriff Robertson, accustomed to answering any call when it came up, said he was going along. Someone mentioned that he should go on home to bed, that he needed sleep.

The newly-commissioned sheriff would not listen. If there were trouble, it would be better to surprise the would-be thieves in a private car rather than a patrol car. He would drive the officers to the scene.

The trio left, and Sergeant Ausley made a record of the time, then passed along to other routine matters.

The sheriff pulled his car into the drive of the service station, and left his lights burning. Someone was thought to have been seen inside. A yell from the sheriff failed to get response. The sheriff and Officer Vaughn approached from the front, Officer Bailiff from the side.

The night was still, with almost no traffic.

But the night, all at once, became alive. The stillness was broken by gunfire. One shot followed another. Neighbors knew they were not backfires from automobiles. They were real shots.

Seconds later, Sheriff Robertson and Officer Vaughn lay in the drive of the station. Their guns, unfired, were by their sides. The sheriff's half-smoked cigar lay just beside his hand.

On the inside of the station lay

believed at least one of the accomplices was Roy Kelly, who was one of 10 convicts to escape from the Anson County Prison Camp the previous October 23. He had been sentenced in Montgomery County in February of 1937 of from seven to 10 years for breaking, entering and receiving.

It had been established that Kelly had been seen in this area a few days before, in company with a woman. It also had been learned that a man answering Kelly's description had been seen in company with the slain gunman in this area shortly before the fatal night. Based on these and other facts, Roy Kelly was declared an outlaw. The FBI entered the case, and the dragnet to apprehend the alleged accomplice expanded.

In the meantime, as careful plans were being laid and as clues were being traced, the town paused to pay its respects. The people liked M. P. Robertson and Sonny Vaughn. They admired what they had done in the line of duty, and they felt a deep sense of tragedy in what had happened. Final rites were held for the two officers. Merchants closed their stores during the funeral hours in respect. Hundreds of citizens attended the rites.

The combination of law enforcement agencies moved to distant points, and it operated, too, right here in Alamance County. One fact after another was established. Gradually, the information began to form a pattern.

Then came a real break. Girl friends of the killers were taken into custody. They were questioned extensively, but they maintained innocence in the case. They knew nothing. But officers would not give up. They kept on with their questioning, and finally the girls broke. They told all they knew.

This gave officers their first real, concrete evidence on the case. On December 11, two men who were in the plot to rob the station—where they thought there was money, but where there actually was none—were apprehended in a rooming house in Washington, D. C. They were identified as George Smith and Ralph Hanford. This was a break the officers were needing beyond what the girls had told



MURDER SCENE—Here is the scene of the tragedy that took the lives of two officers and one gunman on the early morning of December 7, 1938. This picture was made shortly after daylight, showing the crowd that assembled at the scene.



SHERIFF ROBERTSON
... Killed



OFFICER VAUGHN
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OFFICER BAILIFF
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them.

Questioning of the two men finally led to a break in the testimony of Smith. He confessed that the man they were seeking actually was Roy Kelly.

Kelly, said Smith, was the "brains" of the plot to rob the station, while he, Ralph Hanford, Wade Hanford, and Roy Huffman were assigned to get the safe.

Officers, beyond question, then knew all the men they were after.

One development led to another. An unusual twist led to the apprehension of Wade Hanford in Emergency Hospital in Welch, W. Va., where he was in serious condition after being overcome with monoxide gas, and had been burned.

That meant that the only one remaining to be caught in the gang was Roy Kelly. And Kelly had been evading traps and officers since the big night here in Burlington. No one seemed to know where he was. He was turning up in several states. He was being stopped on routine checks, but he was making his getaway.

A state trooper in Virginia had been seriously wounded by a man who was thought to be Kelly. This was on December 10. The trooper almost died.

Stolen cars were being traced, as well as license numbers. Some of these leads led directly to Kelly.

Then came a new slant to the mystery on how Kelly was evad-

ing one trap after another. A hitchhiker reported that he had been picked up by a man answering the description of Kelly. He became suspicious of Kelly, he said, when he observed a police radio in the car. On the radio, Kelly could hear everything the police were saying and doing regarding his capture. The hitchhiker remembered a particular announcement. It was then that he was let out of the car

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In Trap With Robbers Here In 1938



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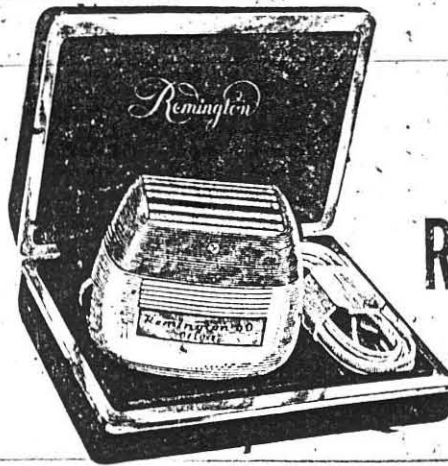
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three miles short of the announced destination. The car in which he was riding then was turned around and headed in the opposite direction. Later it was established that Kelly again was too smart. If he had traveled only a short distance further, he would have run into a road block. But these cars, and their de- (See Escaped On Page 4-C)

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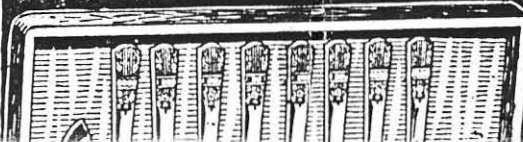
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On the inside of the station lay a young, 23-year-old escaped convict, later identified as Roy Huffman. He had fallen from bullets discharged from the revolver of Officer Bailiff. He was lying near an open safe that contained nothing. Beside him was a German Luger automatic which Coroner R. M. Troxler later ruled was the gun that had killed the two officers.

Examination showed that the two dead officers never had a chance to fire their pistols. They had been caught by surprise.

It turned out, on examination, that those — one or more — men who had escaped from the station had taken only two things. They had taken a quart of oil and a quart of anti-freeze. At least, that was all found missing.

Within seconds, Officer Bailiff surveyed the situation he faced. He was in the midst of killers, and he didn't know how many. He rushed from the scene to get assistance of other police. Chief Carl Stanford soon arrived, as did Mayor Earl B. Horner, Sgt. T. J. Davis was there, as well as several other officers. Lights had come on in the neighborhood. A crowd assembled.

What a tragedy it was, people said then and still say now. Sheriff Robertson and Officer Vaughn — 46 and 59 years old, respectively — were close friends. They were courageous and were two of the most respected officers ever to wear a uniform in these parts. By coincidence, they had been sworn into office on the same night nine years previously.

Yet there they lay. They had died in the line of duty.

The shock and deep concern of what had happened dug deep into city and county officers and city officials, as well as the general public. That was transferred almost immediately into action. Chief Stanford assigned Sergeant Davis to the case. Things started happening.

An alarm went out. Roadblocks were established first in the county area, and then spread all over the state. Later this stretched into nine states.

Former Sheriff Stockard was recalled to duty. Chief Deputy William V. Copland took on added chores.

Progress on the case was kept comparatively quiet at first, but soon came word that officers be-

in what had happened. Final rites were held for the two officers. Merchants closed their stores during the funeral hours in respect. Hundreds of citizens attended the rites.

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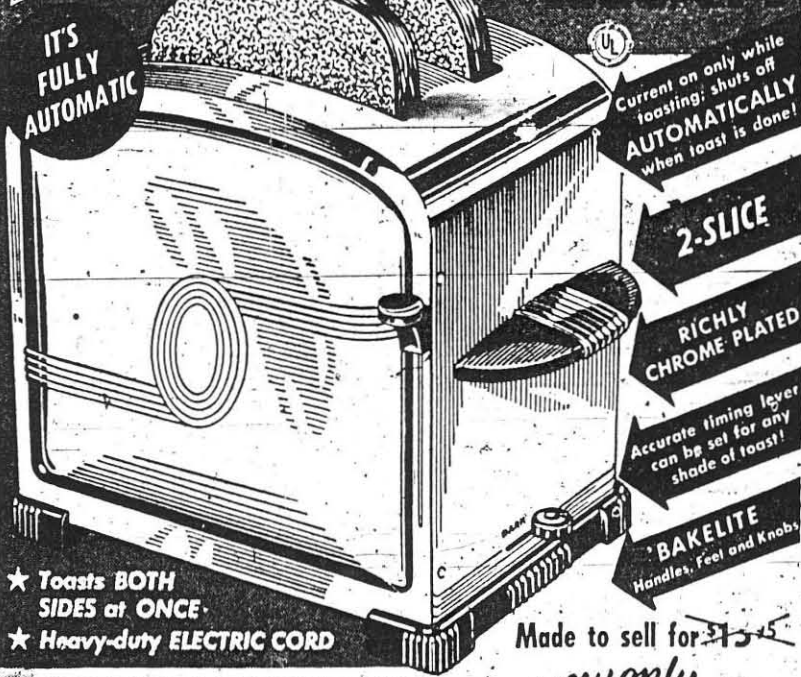
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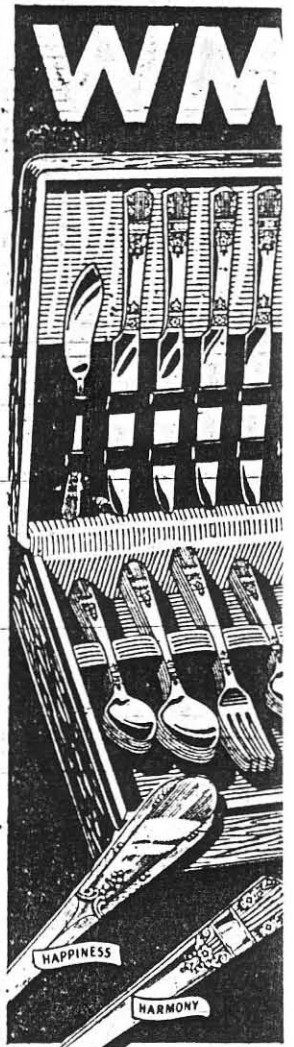
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Other state water resources. Officials of cities and towns at their Municipal League convention in Winston-Salem devoted considerable time to the discussion of water supply for their communities as they might be affected by provisions of the law which deny municipalities riparian rights on streams but accord such rights to farmers along the streams for diverting water to irrigation purposes.

It has long been accepted that politics entered into "pork barrel" appropriations for rivers and harbors and for irrigation and flood control projects in the west, but North Carolina has been singularly free from politics with respect to internal water resources. The increasing problem of proper utilization of declining adequacy of water, plus the confused situation of divided authority and multiple surveys and advisories—without authority to effectuate recommendations—affords a condition ripe for political exploitation, and calls for action by the next Legislature to concentrate authority and pinpoint responsibility.

RIDING HIGH

CHARLESTON, S. C.—The Cain Hoy racing stable of South Carolina plantation owner and New York philanthropist Harry F. Guggenheim has become a top name in racing circles. The name is a phrase in Gullah, the language of old-time Negroes that dates from slave-holding days. Cain means "grass," while "Hoy" is the Gullah word for "tall" or "high."

And the Cain Hoy stable the last year has been riding high in the tall grass.

Ten of Bob Lemon's 23 victories were against first division teams.

Dr. William A. Irwin
Perkins School of Theology
Southern Methodist University

ESCAPED CONVICT DIES

Continued From Page 2-C

scriptions, became known to officers. So did the license numbers he was using. He had several sets of tags. Each time he was stopped, however, on routine checks and then sped from the scene when officers were questioning him, a license number was recorded.

A car and a license number that matched them were seen by an officer who played it safe and right.

A state trooper in Virginia spotted it, and he kept his eyes opened. Kelly had stopped late in the afternoon at a cafe in South Hill, Va., on New Year's Eve. He went inside and was mingling with the crowd.

The trooper called for more help. Fellow-officers arrived and surrounded the cafe. Eventually, Kelly walked out. One of the officers ordered his hands into the air. Kelly tried to throw them off the track, but he saw his game was up. He surrendered without a fight. He was unarmed, but an automatic was in the car.

That completed the roundup. The Virginia trooper who was critically wounded recovered, so Virginia released Kelly to North Carolina and to Burlington.

Wade Hanford, however, still war in the West Virginia hospital. He was not strong enough to be returned to the county until April. A special session of Alamance Superior Court was opened on April 1, 1939, when the four young men—Roy Kelly, George Smith and brothers Ralph and Wade Hanford—were placed on trial.

Feeling was running high in the county. The judge, in turn, ordered the jury to be drawn from Orange County.

The prosecution was headed by Solicitor W. H. Murdock, assisted by City Attorney T. D. Cooper, County Attorney L. C. Allen, Emerson T. Sanders, and Cooper A. Hall. For the defense, local attorneys included Major J. J. Henderson, Elmer Long and Clarence Ross.

The trial continued for a week, including some night sessions. Then it ended, and the case was given to the jury.

Twelve men took one hour to find Roy Kelly, Wade Hanford and Ralph Hanford guilty of first degree murder without mercy. George Smith was permitted to plead guilty to second degree and received 25 to 30 years at hard labor.

These death sentences later were commuted to life imprisonment, and gradually they were lessened.

There weren't many people here who, as teen-agers or adults in 1938, cannot remember the tragic case of the two local officers. The news spread to all corners of the nation. Detective magazines jumped onto it, and it was given further circulation.

The reaction, according to those close to the case, was almost unanimous by the reading public. It was a tragedy. Two officers—on routine investigation and probably expecting juveniles because of the unattractive site they picked from a monetary standpoint—had been shot down before they could fire their own guns. Two distinguished careers in law enforcement that drew wholesome respect for each officer had been ended.

The young Norman Yates felt himself responsible. If only he had not provided the tip he said, these two officers would have lived. Everyone tried to tell him that he had done his duty, as any citizen should have done.

The families of these two men still live here. Mrs. Robertson resides at 405 Hillcrest Avenue, and Mrs. Vaughn lives at 316 Apple Street. Their years have been lonely since that tragic early morning. Yet a measure of satisfaction certainly has been with them. They have known—and they know the people of this area know—that their husbands, by meeting death, did so in the line of duty. And Burlington and Alamance County history will never forget it.

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