

A Life Ruined Among Saving Influences – Part 2

added by the editor, 2013

Rev. William T.S. Deavor dated the previous paper January 2, 1896. He died in November 2, 1898, of complications from typhoid fever, just a few days shy of his 34th birthday. As a consequence, he was unable to prepare any follow-up to his account of the ruined life of George B. Cooper. And so the question remains: What happened to Mr. Cooper? The following extended article from the front page of the September 20, 1901, Bedford Gazette provides some answers. That article is now given in its entirety, and then this narrative will continue.

A DARING ATTEMPT

To Kill and Rob Paymasters Souder and Kay

ONE HIGHWAYMAN KILLED

William Fry of Bedford Shot Through the Head

Singer Sewing Machine Agent George B. Cooper Arrested

A bold attempt was made at Mt. Dallas Saturday morning to kill and rob paymasters William F. Souder and Robert F. Kay. The former is in the employ of the Colonial Iron Company of Riddlesburg, the latter is manager of the Morrisdale Coal Company of Coaldale. Messrs. Souder and Kay came to Bedford Friday night. The next morning they drew money from the banks at this place to pay the men who work for the companies above mentioned. Mr. Souder procured \$5,438 and Mr. Kay \$1,900. They left for their respective homes on the train which arrives in Bedford at 9:15 a.m. They occupied the rear car of the train, Mr. Souder sitting on the last seat with his back toward the engine and Mr. Kay on the first seat from the end of the car facing the engine, so that they commanded a view of both doors of the car.

When the train stopped at Mt. Dallas and the trainmen of the two roads were exchanging reports, Mr. Souder saw two men running down the pike, as if they intended to board the train. When they came nearer, he noticed that they were disguised and armed. Before he had time to give the alarm, the two men rushed up to the car and sprang upon the platform and opened the door. One raised his revolver and, within three or four feet of Mr. Souder, fired point blank at him. The flash of the powder burned Mr. Souder's face, but, fortunately, the ball missed him and lodged in the woodwork of the car. Mr. Souder quickly turned his revolver toward his assailants and pressed the trigger. One of the robbers fell on the platform and then rolled off the car. The bullet from Mr. Souder's pistol had struck him in the head, killing him instantly. It appears that he was in a stooping posture, endeavoring to pick up the satchel containing the

money when he was shot down. When the dead man fell, his companion fled. As the fugitive was running up the pike, Mr. Kay took deliberate aim at him and fired twice, but missed each time and the desperado escaped. Both highwaymen had blackened their faces and wore false whiskers. The one Mr. Souder killed had two revolvers with an unexploded cartridge in each chamber.

Coroner Stoner went to Mt. Dallas Saturday morning and selected a jury. It viewed the corpse, after which it was taken to Everett. When the disguise was removed and his face washed, the dead robber was identified as William G. Fry, a young colored man of Bedford. The coroner took the testimony of a number of persons who witnessed the attempted hold-up and adjourned the inquest to Tuesday, September 17, at which time the jury met in the court house at Bedford. A large crowd of spectators was present. W.H. Clouse, Esq., of Woodbury, and Mr. Kay were examined. The latter testified, in substance, as follows: I took the train at Bedford on Saturday, the 14th, and sat on the first seat from the rear of the car, on the right hand side of the aisle, with George P. Weaver. At Mt. Dallas I heard a commotion in the back part of the car and heard a shot fired. I got up and out in the aisle. I saw the flash from the revolver in Mr. Souder's hand. I shot at the man running up the pike.

In a voluntary statement Mr. Souder, after telling about getting the money for the Colonial Iron Company's employees and describing his position in the car on his way home, said he saw two colored men running down the pike to catch the train. He kept his eye on them, and when they came close enough he saw that they were masked and armed. Before he had time to notify Mr. Kay, they rushed up the platform, drew a revolver, and when four or five feet from him fired in his face. Mr. Souder then fired at the door and his assailant ran from the car. At first Mr. Souder thought he was shot, powder from the robber's pistol having burned his face.

MR. SOUDER EXONERATED

After taking the above testimony of Messrs. Clouse, Kay and Souder, the jury retired to the petit jury room and prepared its verdict, which is as follows:

That one William Fry, late of this county of Bedford, in the state of Pennsylvania, ... and so further, the said William F. Souder is by this inquest exonerated of all blame and responsibility for the killing aforesaid and his conduct was justifiable.

M.A. Stoner, Coroner

G.B. COOPER ARRESTED

A reward of \$500 was offered for the arrest and conviction of the robber who escaped. A party of four men drove from Bedford to Mt. Dallas Saturday morning and started on the trail of the fugitive. They claim they tracked him through the lower portion of Snake Spring Valley to Bedford, but did not get near enough to catch him. Early in the evening, William Cromwell's son saw George B. Cooper, local agent of the Singer Sewing Machine Company, at the foundry. The boy told his father where he had seen Cooper and Mr. Cromwell, knowing

Cooper was under suspicion, went to the foundry with the intention of persuading him to give himself up to the authorities. Cooper agreed to do so if Cromwell would accompany him. Mr. Cromwell promised to go with him. Cooper was very tired, and the condition of his clothes indicated that he had walked through fields or woods where Spanish needle, etc. grow. Both men went to their respective homes to get ready to visit the magistrate's office. Shortly after this, and while Cooper was brushing his shoes, S.F. Stiver went to his house and arrested him on the charge of being implicated in the attempted hold-up at Mt. Dallas. Cooper was placed in jail. He has waived a hearing and will be tried at the November term of court.

WILLIAM GARFIELD FREY

William Garfield Fry, the dead highwayman, was a son of Samuel Fry (colored) of Bedford, and was twenty-one years old. He bore a good reputation and it is patent to all who knew him that he did not plan the attack on paymaster Souder. He joined the A.M.E. Zion church in 1899. He had been working for Cooper, accompanying him when he went out to make collections. The body of the deceased was brought to Bedford Sunday afternoon and interred in the Mt. Russ cemetery. In the absence of Pastor McEntosh, Rev. I.W. Hendricks of the Reformed church conducted the services.

Miss Katie Smith, of Bedford, was on the train, on her way to Johnstown, and saw the attempted robbery.

Dr. W.P.S. Henry, of Everett, performed the autopsy on the body of Fry and explained to the jury where the bullet entered his head, the course it took, etc.

If paymaster Souder had been sitting with his back to the rear door of the car, the robbers would likely have been successful in carrying out their dastardly plan. Paymaster Souder deserves a great deal of credit for his pluck and promptness in frustrating the designs of the robbers.

Mrs. D.A. Raegan, wife of engineer Raegan, of Altoona, was an eyewitness to the attempted hold-up and subsequent killing of the negro. Accompanied by her three-year-old son Cyril, she was returning from a visit at Mann's Choice.

Fry was buried in the two suits of clothing he wore when he was shot. On Wednesday the body was exhumed and the clothing removed. It will likely be used as evidence at the trial.

COOPER'S CAREER

The Altoona *Gazette*, in its story of the "affair" at Mt. Dallas, among other things says:

"Last evening G.B. Cooper, formerly of Gaysport¹, was arrested in Bedford and accused of being an accomplice. Cooper has a rather checkered career. He

studied for the ministry and graduated from Dickinson College.² He took a charge near Wilkes-Barre and was very successful in the work. Finally he applied for the Baptist charge in Tyrone and was in that town, on the point of being accepted, when an officer arrived from Wilkes-Barre and served a bench warrant on him. He was taken back to Wilkes-Barre, tried, and sentenced to the penitentiary on the charge of forgery.

“He was pardoned before the expiration of his term and soon afterward came to this county. He was best known as an agent for sewing machines, but he also figured in politics. He was finally elected justice of the peace in Gaysport, a position which he held until last May, when he resigned. There are various stories about explaining the resignation.

“Cooper became prominent in 1895 by springing on the unsuspecting public a new system of finance. It was built on the endless chain plan and supposed to make everybody rich without labor – particularly G.B. Cooper.³

“The originator and promoter of this financial revolution took it to Pittsburgh, where Roger O’Mara soon smelled him out. Cooper was arrested but not “shoved” on the promise that he would get out of Allegheny County in a given time. Then Blair County got him again.

“It is not at all certain that Cooper will be involved by the law in the Bedford county case. The companion of the negro was so well disguised that it may be a difficult matter to establish his identity.

“Fry, however, was employed by Cooper as hostler, and they had been together a short while before the perpetration of the crime. Cooper, when arrested, showed signs of having been through an ordeal of some sort.

The trial of George B. Cooper took place as anticipated during the November court session. Front page coverage by the Bedford Gazette⁴ indicates that the celebrated trial “attracted more people – men, women, boys and girls – to the court house than any other criminal suit in the history of the county.” The prosecution produced a seemingly endless parade of witnesses that testified

1. Cooper had ordered wigs and stage make-up from a company in New York.
2. Cooper’s face showed traces of black make-up when he was arrested.
3. Cooper’s shoes matched the footprints left in the fields by the fleeing robber.
4. A hat, kerchief, and clothes matching those worn by the robber were found at Cooper’s house, and they all bore traces of stage make-up.
5. William Fry (the dead robber) had told others that Cooper was working on a scheme that would get them both much money without having to work for it.
6. William Fry (who could write, but could not read) had confided to others that he thought Cooper was luring him into trouble.
7. Cooper and Fry had been seen together lately apparently checking out the

railroad from Bedford to Riddlesburg.

8. The invalid man who operated the toll gate testified George Cooper had told him that if he lied about certain times on the day of the robbery he would see that he was taken to New York or Philadelphia to get a new artificial leg.
 9. Several testified about incriminating conversations Cooper had with them after the robbery – threatening to harm those who testified against him, asking whether Souder could positively identify him, saying he planned to abandon his wife and flee to Cuba, and more.
- etc., etc.,

When George Cooper took the stand in his own defense, he made, according to the *Bedford Gazette*, statements similar to the following:

“I was born in Johnstown 31 years ago. When I was young my parents moved to Martinsburg; afterwards they moved to Hollidaysburg. My father is now a detective, or policeman, for the Pennsylvania Railroad company in that place.⁵ He has had that position for 10 years. I went to Williamsport Seminary, at Williamsport, when about 15 or 16 years of age. I was convicted of the charge of forgery in Luzerne County in April, 1892, and was sentenced to the Eastern Penitentiary in January 1893. I have been in the sewing machine business, kept store, and was appointed justice of the peace of Gaysport borough by Governor Hastings and was afterward elected to the office. I resigned that office and came to Bedford. I opened a sewing machine office...

“I did not fire the shot at Souder. I am not the man that ran up the railroad. I was not at Mt. Dallas on that Saturday morning. I never went up the railroad with a colored man. I was never in Saxton with Fry...

“I ordered those goods (referring to the wigs in evidence) for Fry... I never wore those grey whiskers.

“On Friday evening I went over to the train... I did not go over to see if Souder and Kay were on the train. I did not know when they paid their men. I did not know Souder came to Bedford every two weeks.

“I stayed in bed until about 9:00 Saturday morning. When I got up, I put my old clothes on, made a little fire and warmed some coffee, and started to take a walk... through a field until I came to Shover’s Run... to the mountain until I came to the Cove road... I came back about one o’clock in the afternoon... I came through the toll gate.

“I came up the pike and met Mr. Lech at Prosser’s mill. I had a conversation with him. He told me that there had been a hold-up and robbery at Mt. Dallas, and that a colored man and a white man did it, and that William Fry was the colored man, and he asked me if I was the white man. I told him I was not. A young man came along that I did not know. I came up to Bedford with him as far as the foundry. I stopped there and talked to Mr. Cromwell. He told me about the hold-up and that I was supposed to be the man who shot Souder. He said that I

had better give myself up. I told him if he would go along with me, I would do so...

“Mr. Cromwell went over to his house. I went in mine. The first thing I did was to warm some coffee... I then brushed my shoes. Stiver came in. I was at the end of the porch. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, ‘Cooper, you are under arrest.’ I made no resistance.”

During his cross-examination by the prosecution, he was asked to respond to certain specific statements that had been made against him. He made, according to the *Bedford Gazette*, statements similar to the following:

“I spent my life in different places. I was born in Johnstown. I lived in Hollidaysburg, kept store in Williamsburg. I was justice of the peace in Gaysport borough. I attended school for three years at Williamsport, also went to school at Wyoming seminary. I was a local minister, Methodist and Baptist; preached at Tyrone. I could always draw a crowd. I was married in 1891. In April 1892 I was convicted in Luzerne county of forgery. I served two years and three months in the penitentiary. I was sentenced in January 1893. I was a fugitive during that time. I paid back all the money for which I convicted of forgery.

“I came to Bedford in March last. I did not say to Harry Isett that it would be a good pull for us if we would rob Colonial Iron Company... Will Fry attended to my horse; he was at my office quite often. I was the promoter of the “Cooper System of Finance” at Pittsburgh. I quit when I found that it was against the law.”

The paper reported he admitted one of the handkerchiefs submitted as evidence was his. He admitted that he made threats in jail, but that he meant he would get even with people who were persecuting him. He said he didn’t intend to abandon his wife, but that he meant she would likely divorce him for the disgrace he had brought upon her.

In the end “a strong chain of circumstantial evidence was forged by the prosecution” and George B. Cooper was found guilty and sentence to fourteen years in the Western Penitentiary.⁶ The *Bedford Gazette’s* summary of the matter included the following two paragraphs.

“The case was most ably handled by counsel for both sides. The chain of circumstantial evidence, skillfully forged, link by link, by the prosecution was complete and convincing. There was not a single flaw in it. The defendant’s attorneys did all they could for their client, and, as the court said in pronouncing sentence upon the prisoner, Messrs. McNamara and Henderson conducted the defense with great skill and sound judgment. They succeeded in cutting off several years of the sentences imposed upon their client.

“A pathetic figure of the trial was the loyalty of Cooper’s wife, who was with him the whole time.⁷ Cooper’s sister also remained at his side during the week.⁸ Their fealty touched a tender chord in the hearts of the spectators. The sympathy of the community goes out to these brave women who passed through the trying

ordeal in a way that commands the most profound respect. Throughout the trial, Cooper was cool and collected.”

Efforts to discover more about the lives of George B. Cooper and his wife following his sentencing and incarceration have not been successful and *The Chronicle* would be grateful to any reader who is able to uncover “the rest of the story.”

¹ The borough of Gaysport was annexed into the borough of Hollidaysburg in 1924. It was the portion of Hollidaysburg west of the Juniata River. Cooper not only lived there, but he served for a time as its Justice of the Peace – first by appointment by the Governor, and later by election.

² The statement that he “graduated from Dickinson College” is not correct. Cooper attended Williamsport Dickinson Seminary preparatory school, but did not graduate from there. He never attended Dickinson College. Given the whole story, however, it is possible that Cooper had promoted himself as a graduate of Dickinson College.

³ This was what we now know as a Ponzi Scheme – named after Charles Ponzi who became notorious for using the scheme to defraud many in 1920. While Cooper employed the scheme well before Ponzi, he was certainly not the first to develop the method – it is described, for example, in Charles Dickens’ 1844 novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

⁴ The Bedford Gazette was published each Friday. The accounts of the trial may be found in the issues for November 22 and November 29 of 1901.

⁵ According to census records, the parents of George B. Cooper were Benjamin (born 1844) and Hannah (born 1840). Nothing else is known about his parents.

⁶ Located on the Ohio River just 5 miles from downtown Pittsburgh, Western Penitentiary opened in 1882 and was designed by architects Theodore Eicholz and Harry Viehman. Western Penitentiary was Pennsylvania’s oldest continuously operating prison until it was discontinued in January 2005 due to overcrowded conditions, periodic flooding, security concerns, and high operating costs.

⁷ George B. Cooper married Letta L. Schobert on March 3, 1891, in Wilkes-Barre PA. The ceremony was performed by the Rev. Dr. Henry L. Jones, rector of St. Stephens Episcopal Church in Wilkes-Barre from 1874 until his death in 1914. Letta was the step-daughter of Wilkes-Barre physician Reuben W. Schobert, being the daughter of Mrs. Amy Keen, who married Dr. Schobert between 1875 and 1880. A certified copy of the marriage record is given in the Appendix .

⁸ Census records indicate that George B. Cooper had one sister, Mary. Nothing else is known about her.