

A century-old mystery

■ Fiery preacher's arraignment erupts in a deadly hail of bullets leaving 2 men dead in livery stable.

By Phil Dunlap
CORRESPONDENT

CARMEL, Ind. — After the roar of gunfire subsided, after the acrid smell of exploding black powder had drifted away in the late evening air, after the shouting turned to mutters of disbelief, two men lay sprawled on the floor of a livery stable near the center of the tiny village

of Carmel.

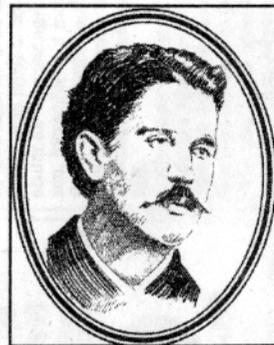
Both were dead.

A special constable, William Frank Carey, and a notorious itinerant preacher, Thomas J. "Cyclone" Johnson, had fallen victims to a hail of bullets.

Who actually killed whom is a mystery that remains unsolved a century later.

The date was June 8, 1900.

Civility lost its grip on Carmel early that evening as dozens of local citizens gathered in the Jackson & Jeffries livery barn to witness the arraignment of "Cy-



Submitted illustrations

Victims: No one knows who shot William Frank Carey (left) and "Cyclone" Johnson.

clone" Johnson, who had become a thorn in the side of many prominent people of the community.

At about 6 p.m., Deputy Constable Ed Carey and his cousin, William Frank Carey, had gone to Johnson's home to serve him with a warrant for assault and battery.

As the arrest was taking place and "Cyclone" Johnson was about to be taken from his home on the near southside, Johnson's wife pleaded with the officers not

to take her husband away. She claimed to have a horrible feeling she'd never see him alive again.

The officers tried without success to assure her he was in no danger, that he would be able to post bond and return home. Her tears and protests fell on deaf ears.

Johnson was taken to the livery stable office of Justice of the Peace Squire Collins. A crowd gathered, pushing into the livery to witness the preliminary trial of the outspoken preacher from Kentucky.

It was reported that some of those same citizens may have taken part in the events that would write a bloody page in the history of the sleepy little village.

Tense situation

The atmosphere was highly charged as people crowded into the building. It was about sunset, and the smell of harness leather mixed liberally with the aroma of hay and straw in the waning heat of the day.

Supporters and detractors of the outspoken preacher mingled, anxiously awaiting Johnson's arrival.

The dispute that resulted in the warrant being issued centered around a young man who, the previous evening, sat in his buggy just outside Johnson's revival tent.

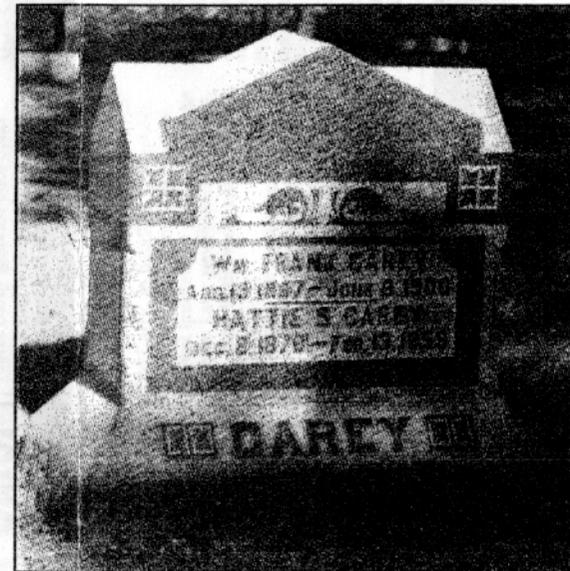


Photo / Phil Dunlap

R.I.P.: The graves of William Frank Carey and his wife, Hattie, are in an old cemetery at Range Line Road and 136th Street.

It is reported that the young man, Elmer Cass, had heckled Johnson as he tried to preach.

Johnson was a man known to exhibit an explosive temper despite his religious calling. He came after

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Cass, pulling him from the wagon and assaulting him. Johnson grabbed the buggy whip from its holder and thrashed Cass soundly.

Later that evening, after the meeting had broken up, Johnson was walking to his residence with a couple of his friends and supporters when out of the darkness two shots rang out.

Johnson had been fired upon from behind a church that was on his way home.

No one was hit, but Johnson returned fire with a blast from a shotgun he had been given by a friend who was concerned for the preacher's welfare. Johnson had been involved in several previous run-ins, and threats had been made on his life.

Cass was arrested for the shots being fired from the church. But he was released on his own recognition by the town marshal.

It was understood there would be no prosecutions if he stayed away from the revival meetings. But Cass' friends hounded him with charges of cowardice if he let Johnson get away with humiliating



Submitted photo

Crime scene: This drawing depicts the Jackson & Jeffries livery barn in downtown Carmel as it appeared in the early 1900s.

him in front of the community.

Against the advice of his attorney, Cass then insisted on signing a complaint. Justice of the Peace Collins had no choice but to issue a warrant on Johnson.

Veteran as prosecutor

David Patty, a Civil War veteran, said to have been a prisoner of war at the infamous Andersonville prison, was hired to act as prosecutor for the case against Johnson. Incredible as it may seem, Cass, the plaintiff, had hired his own prosecutor under the free-wheeling judicial system of the period.

After some wrangling, however, all parties agreed to postpone the trial after Johnson contended they had been too hasty in forcing an early trial. It was agreed to then hold the trial in Johnson's tent three days later.

But first came the arraignment. As the livery continued to fill with the curious, Patty began making a speech that he claimed was intended only to keep things calm.

As Patty spoke, "Cyclone" exploded in anger, shouting that Patty was to shut his mouth. "You want to try me before I am ready," Johnson said.

Johnson lunged at him, and, along with a friend in the crowd, Clinton Gue, hit Patty several times in the face and head.

When some of the onlookers tried to fend off Johnson's attack on Patty, Johnson pulled away, drawing a gun from his pocket. In an instant, a half-dozen revolvers found their way into the hands of the assemblage, pulled from pockets or waistbands.

How an accused man could bring weapons to his arraignment is unexplained by accounts from the period.

Gunfire erupts

Johnson began firing wildly as he ran for the rear of the stable. Frank Carey grabbed onto Johnson, trying to persuade him to give up his gun and prevent further trouble.

Frank Carey, who was unarmed, had been sworn in as a special constable that day to assist his cousin, Ed Carey, in handling any trouble.

Many shots were fired from different quarters as others joined the melee. Later reports confirmed bullet holes in the walls and roof of the stable.

During the confusion, Frank Carey fell, having been shot twice. The fatal bullet had entered his neck, severing the jugular vein from which he bled to death as Ed Carey cradled his head. The dying man's last words were, "Send for

Dr. Hershey."

"Cyclone" Johnson fell on top of Carey with four bullets in his chest. It was reported in one account that the bullet holes were "so close together you could cover them with your fist." Johnson died almost instantly from a bullet to the heart.

Disturbing messages

Johnson, who often referred to himself as the "Kentucky Cyclone," may have come to Carmel soon after being told to leave Indianapolis for creating disturbances during his street preaching.

The Kentucky Cyclone's style was overt and confrontational. When he got into a row with some "faith healers" in the area, Indianapolis police decided it was time for Johnson to move on.

During his many lectures, Johnson claimed often that his own youth had been wasted in sin. Born in Jackson County, Ky., he admitted to having been a gambler and engaging in highway robbery. It was for the latter crime that he said he had spent a year in 1888 in the Kentucky Penitentiary.

His lectures often hung on the events surrounding his prison life, and he had no hesitancy in telling of the many wicked things he had done prior to his conversion on the streets of Covington, Ky.

He claimed it was there that God had called him to a life of spreading the Gospel, teaching young men to avoid walking the path that led to the prison door.

When Johnson first arrived in Carmel, he was invited to use the old Western Methodist church on South Main Street. His fiery rhetoric soon alienated him from the church leaders, however, and he was forced to seek another pulpit from which to deliver his oratory.

He finally brought a large tent to Carmel, putting it up near the Friends Church on present day Range Line Road. (At that time, what is now Range Line was called Main Street, and what is now Main Street was then called Main Cross Street.)

But it was Johnson's accusations of immoral behavior by a number of Carmel citizens, and his condemnation of them and their deeds, that had put him at odds with prominent members of the community.

The town had become divided over his rhetoric, with about one-third supporting him and two-thirds against him.

Only two weeks before the shooting, Johnson showed up in Noblesville, giving an interview to the *Hamilton County Ledger* that was published May 25. In the article,

the paper referred to Johnson as a "noted evangelist."

Coroner's findings

The coroner's inquest was concluded on Tuesday after the shooting. Squire J.M. Stipp of Delaware Township then filed his report with the county clerk on Wednesday morning in which he had determined that Frank Carey had met his death at the hands of Thomas J. "Cyclone" Johnson.

Even though Stipp interviewed several witnesses to the events, none would reveal the name of the man they suspected shot Johnson, and the coroner was forced to conclude in his report that Johnson had been felled by an unknown assailant.

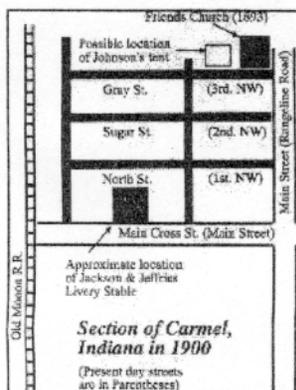
Johnson somehow had been allowed by the constables to carry two .32-caliber hammerless revolvers and a large dirk with a spring handle. The weapons were found on him after he fell.

Johnson had fired four times. Several witnesses said he had fired twice at constable Ed Carey, missing both times.

It is widely accepted that one of his bullets hit Martin Long, one of Johnson's followers, in the wrist. Whether that fourth shot was actually the one that killed Frank Carey, no one will ever know. It was determined, however, that the bullets that killed Johnson were also .32 caliber.

A news report in the *Hamilton County Ledger* said that as Dr. Hershey tried to take Martin Long to his office to tend to his wound, Long broke away from him and dashed back into the livery. He stood over Johnson's body, brandishing a large knife, as he shouted a challenge to the crowd. "D--- you, you have killed him. I am game, come on!"

Rumors of revenge on the town from Johnson's Kentucky relatives were widely circulated. But no further violence resulted, and the town which 54 years before was known as Bethlehem soon returned



to its former peaceful nature.

Johnson had four boys, ages 3, 5, 7 and 9. Before the Carmel meetings he had held similar gatherings in Eagletown, Hortonville, Westfield, West Liberty, and Fishers Station. He was supposedly buried in Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis, though a local historian who tried to find the grave was unsuccessful.

Thirty-eight-year-old William Frank Carey left three children. His youngest, twin boys, were only 6 months old when he died. Hattie, Carey's wife, died in 1959. Frank was buried in the old cemetery at Range Line and 136th Street.

To this day, William Frank Carey is the only Carmel peace officer to have been killed in the line of duty.

Metro North correspondent and history buff Phil Dunlap used resources including old copies of *The Indianapolis News*, *The Indianapolis Times*, *Hamilton County Ledger* and the *Noblesville Democrat*, plus files from the Carmel Clay Historical Society, to research this story. He pieced together the accompanying map of "really old Carmel" from various sources.