

UNMASKING THE “YEGGMEN”

By Marie Coady

During a conversation with my friend Ruth Boyden some time ago she used a term that intrigued me. She referred to “yeggmen” as having committed terrible crimes in Woburn when she was a child. But when I pressed her further she had little to add. After all she was only 9 years old in 1908 when the “yeggmen” made their appearance in the area.

I made a note of the term and promised myself that someday I would find out what the term “yeggmen” meant, or if there really were “yeggmen”, or if it was merely the overworked imagination of a 9 year old girl. After all the term came close to bogeymen, so I wasn't quite sure “yeggmen” existed at all. But recently I've uncovered some proof that “yeggmen” did indeed exist, and that they were every bit as scary as the bogeymen.

First of all you need to understand the meaning and origin of the word “yeggmen” and who better to explain that than Allan Pinkerton, the first real-life private eye in America. Pinkerton founded the Pinkerton Detective Agency shortly after the Civil War and his sons continued the enterprise, building it into the largest detective agency in the world.

According to a speech given by Allan Pinkerton's son, William, in 1900, the Pinkerton Detective Agency was well aware of “yeggmen”, a term it seems that originated from the gypsy culture and was used to designate the cleverest thief in the gypsy tribe. The term “yegg” meant “chief thief” and “yeggmen” were in evidence wherever gypsies set up camp.

But around the turn of the 20th century a new dimension had been added when a more sophisticated thief took on the term and gave it new meaning. This new breed of “yeggmen” was very organized. Their method of operation was to send out someone they termed a “Gay Cat” to case small towns. The “Gay Cat” would pose as a beggar, and in order to elicit sympathy from the unsuspecting locals he would pour creosote on his arm between his elbow and his wrist to produce what looked like a freshly inflicted wound. They called this tactic “jigging”.

Some of the things the “Gay Cat” looked for were whether the town had electricity, a police force on duty all night, or a night watchman at the bank as well as who carried large sums of money after dark. Then the “Gay Cat” would report back to the other “yeggmen”, and they would plan their operation accordingly.

Most of their nefarious activities were conducted after dark when they would come into small towns in groups to execute their plan to rob a bank or attack unsuspecting business people along the highway whom they believed were carrying large sums of money. But on February 6, 1908 something went very wrong with the “yeggmen's” plan and what ensued was a vast manhunt that included most area police forces and the men of Company G, the area's Army unit stationed at the Woburn Armory.

It all began when Officers Walsh and O'Neil observed 3 suspicious looking men crossing onto the Woburn Common from the Unitarian Church on the corner of Winn Street. When the officers shouted for the men to stop, they began to run and the officers took off after them. With the officers close on their heels, the fugitives turned onto Church Avenue, and at that point the group of “yeggmen” turned as one and fired a volley of shots felling both Walsh and O'Neil, something “yeggmen” referred to as “jimmying a bull” or shooting an officer.

What the officers didn't know was that the “yeggmen” had just waylaid two businessmen in Billerica near Pinehurst Park and were now making their way back to escape on the train to Boston. When they got near the B&M tracks, they encountered outraged citizen Bert Donohue, who grabbed one of them by the coat, but once again the “yeggman” fired five shots at Donohue until he sank to the ground injured.

By then Officer Murphy had joined the chase and reached the spot where Donahue was downed. But it was at that point that the “yeggmen” split up, one heading toward Warren Avenue and Sturgis Street while the other two took off up Lexington Street toward the West Side.

Officer Murphy chose to continue his pursuit of the “yeggman” who had shot at Donahue and who had already reached the summit of Academy Hill on Warren Avenue. But before Murphy could get close enough to grab him, the desperate “yeggman” encountered Sherwood Van Tassel, a young boy of 12 out on an errand for his mother. It's not known if the boy just took him by surprise or if he tried to impede him in anyway, but what is known is that the fugitive pulled out his automatic weapon and let off a fusillade of shots, sending the boy reeling with a bullet to his leg.

At the same time, Officer Keating, having information that the other two “yeggmen” had been seen on Lexington Street, commandeered a cart driven by Edward Holland and ordered Holland to take off after them. When Officer Keating spotted the two men along the road in front of the Dobbins and Shannon farm, he ordered them to stop. Instead they turned and fired a volley of shots hitting the innocent Holland in the back and seriously injuring him.

Back in Woburn Center crowds gathered in front of the police station where Mayor Blodgett announced he had called on Company G for volunteers to assist the police in their manhunt. It was now 3:30 am when the men of Company G headed toward Winning Farm where the suspects were last seen. They spread out and combed the area all the way to Arlington Heights and Lexington Center where they were joined in the hunt by Lexington and Arlington police.

At dawn that morning it was announced that two of the “yeggmen” had been captured in Arlington, and another, not directly involved in the Woburn incident, had been taken prisoner in Chelsea. But the fugitive most wanted by police, the one who had shot 12-year old Sherwood Van Tassel, had escaped.

The good news was that all of the victims who were shot so callously by the “yeggmen” survived and the three “yeggmen” who were captured were found guilty and sent to State Prison for 25 years. Beyond that success, the case remained unsolved.

But in 1911, when Boston Police extradited three fugitives, one from Russia and two others from Austria, who had been charged with robbing a jewelry store in Boston, area police began once again to have some hope of closing the case out completely. What gave them hope was that one of the suspects was believed to be a relative of the “yeggman” who had escaped after shooting young Sherwood Van Tassel, and police hoped they could convince him to reveal where he was hiding.

By this time police had identified the shooter as Chris Zeltin and issued a \$500 reward for his capture that was still in effect. Now area police held out some hope of actually capturing and prosecuting the “yeggman” who had escaped their grasp in 1908. But so far, I've found no further information that would lead me to believe that they were able to bring Chris Zeltin to justice. I am thus left to believe he remained at large either in the US or in Russia, and his attack on an unsuspecting young boy of 12 went unpunished.

©Copyright, 2003 – Marie Coady