

## MURDER AT THE DEPOT

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>



*Newspaper photo of the victim, Ralph Brewster*

On April 3, 1922, Ralph W. Brewster began his first day of work as a ticket agent at the Winchester center depot. After eight years working railroad jobs, he reportedly said he wanted the transfer in order to be near the big city and to get a pay raise. He was 27 and had a wife and three children still living in their home in Pittsfield, N.H., while he made sure this was to be a permanent position.

People in Winchester did not know him well, if at all, since he was boarding with a friend in Woburn. By the end of the month, everyone knew about him. On April 20, he was shot to death in the depot ticket office.

Brewster had gone on duty at 2:30 p.m. At 7:30 p.m., he had supper with towerman John Loranger, who reported that Brewster had been in a cheerful mood. He was seen alive about 9:35 p.m. when another towerman picked up his pay envelope. At 9:50 p.m., a resident called the station and talked with a man, presumably (but not positively) Brewster.

At about a minute before 10, Thomas Flaherty entered the station, just after a 49-car freight train from the north finished passing through. As he walked down the long platform, a man passed him, running as fast as he could, heading in the direction of Woburn. While entering and exiting, Flaherty glanced into the ticket office and saw no one, but he assumed Brewster was in the freight office.

A Quincy man named Barstow arrived at the station at about 10:10 and took a seat in the empty waiting room. Soon a few others began arriving for the 10:30 train to Boston. One of them, Frank Rowe of Vine Street, went to the ticket window at 10:20, peered through the iron grating, and saw Brewster lying on the floor. Turning to Barstow, he called out that something was the matter with the station agent. The door being locked, Rowe ran to police headquarters. Barstow called them by telephone.



*Scene of the crime, the center train depot, built 1872*



*Off. Hogan in 1930*

On arrival at the depot, police could just see Brewster's feet and legs through the window. Unable to break down the door, locked from inside, they tore off one of the iron gratings over the ticket window, and Officer John Hogan climbed into the office and unlocked the door. Brewster was lying face down.

Though it was first assumed Brewster fell and died from a hemorrhage, Dr. Daniel Dennett discovered bullet wounds. One bullet entered the side of his chest and passed just over his heart, through his right lung and lodged under the skin of his back. Another was lodged in the roof of his mouth at the base of his brain.



*Dr. Daniel Dennett*

The police found two other bullets. One tore through the sash of the ticket window facing the women's waiting room, struck a window casing in the rear of the station, and fell to the tile floor. The other was embedded in the wall. Police believed the gunman fired the four shots from a 32-caliber pistol in rapid succession. Because Brewster's clothing was burned where the bullets entered his body, police theorized that someone tricked him into opening the door. Since no one reported hearing the shots, they supposed the murderer probably fired while the long freight train roared by.

## **WHY?**

An early theory was that it was a robbery gone wrong. However, there was about \$400 in the office, and Brewster's watch, ring, and stickpin were not taken. But since the killer could have taken fright or stepped back, accidentally letting the door close and lock him out, police and the district attorney continued to entertain the possibility.

Another theory was that Brewster had a personal enemy. Inquiries in Pittsfield, however, led to a picture of the victim as an honest and honorable man, hard-working and thrifty, a devoted husband and member of several fraternal orders. No one knew of any trouble or anyone seeking to harm him.



*A view of the depot looking south (the opposite direction from Woburn) down the tracks*

Authorities did learn that there was a skeleton in his wife's family closet (Mrs. Brewster's "older sister" having revealed herself to be her mother) and that he did not get along with his mother-



MRS SYLVIA BREWSTER.  
Widow of Ticket Agent Murdered at Winchester.

### Widow Knows of No Enemies

in-law. Although the press made much of this, the authorities apparently did not see this as an avenue to identifying the killer.

His widow, grief-stricken, thought it was a case of mistaken identity. Police investigated John Loranger, who was the ticket agent before Brewster and resembled him, but could find no motive for Loranger to have been the intended victim. They also looked into the question of someone else wanting the Winchester post but concluded there was no disappointed or jealous rival for the job.

### WHO DONE IT?

The idea that the killer was an enemy was strengthened by stories that surfaced over the next couple of days.

First, not only Flaherty but also Philip LeDuc independently told police they saw a man running up the tracks in the direction of Woburn just before 10. Flaherty described him as in his early 20s, of medium height, with a swarthy complexion. Both said he wore a long overcoat and a slouch hat.

A neighbor of the friends with whom Brewster was lodging in Woburn (named Sargent) reported seeing a suspicious man, on the night of the murder, lurking on the back veranda of the Sargent house earlier that evening. Her description tallied with that of the man running along the tracks. This suggested to police that someone was looking specifically for Brewster.

On April 23, four men came forward and described a stranger seen at the Main Street bowling alley on the night of the murder. They said he arrived a few minutes after 6:30, just after the arrival of a train from Manchester, N.H., bowled three strings with one of the men, left, returned about 9, and left again about 9:30, not to return. The pinboy said the stranger, who appeared to be nervous, asked him about trains to Boston and examined a railroad timetable.

*Boston Globe headlines with photos of District Attorney Everett P. Saltonstall, who arrived at the scene at 12:20 a.m., and medical examiner Dr. George McGrath*

It so happened that Officer Hogan had found a hat south of the station beside the tracks after the murder. It fitted the description of the mystery man's hat. The men at the bowling alley were unanimous that the man they saw wore a hat exactly like the one police had. One remembered specifically that the crease was extremely sharp and deep.

Authorities then went to New Hampshire to try to find out whose hat it was. Having identified the hat shop from the label, they went there and got a list of customers. They even located some who still had their hats. Though the theory that the killer, like the victim, was a New Hampshire man was promising, they never did identify the owner of the lost hat.

Then a new development pointed to a specific suspect.



*Sgt. Thomas McCauley with the hat he took to N.H. in an effort to identify the killer*



*Main Street in the 1920s. The depot was down the walk on the right side. The bowling alley was in the block in the rear center of the photograph.*

## **TINDALL & LAWHORN**

In May, police in Cambridge arrested a man for robbery. His name was Port H. Tindall, though the name he gave was Charles Tindall, one of several aliases he used. It seems Tindall thought he would make a little money by buying a Victrola on the installment plan and reselling it without having made his payments.

While being interrogated for that crime, he hinted that he knew something about Winchester and a killing. The story he eventually spilled (or spun) was that a man he knew from the Marines done it. Tindall, a native of Illinois, had joined the Marines in 1920 at age 18 and was cashiered in 1921 with a bad character.

The man he accused was Pvt. John Dewey Lawhorn, a native of Kentucky who had been a marine since enlisting at age 18 in 1916. His record was not perfect, but he served through World War I and re-enlisted in 1920. Reportedly, he was generally highly regarded at the Charlestown Navy Yard.

Tindall alleged that Lawhorn was a buddy who once tried to induce him to join him in robbing the Winchester depot, saying Lawhorn had been seeing a telephone operator in Winchester, became familiar with the station, and saw how easily they could rob the ticket office.

About a month after the murder, Tindall said, Lawhorn confessed to him that he was the murderer. Furnished with information (later refuted) that Lawhorn had a window of opportunity on the night of the murder, police got a warrant for his arrest. They had to go to Quantico to deliver it, since Lawhorn had been sent there to represent the Charlestown Navy Yard in the Marine Corps Rifle and Pistol Competition to decide the marine team in the international competition.

When Lawhorn was returned to Charlestown, the commanding officer at the Navy Yard allowed District Attorney Endicott P. Saltonstall to examine him. Lawhorn protested his innocence. Some fellow Marines spoke up for him, reportedly saying he detested Tindall and was not the type to commit the crime. The Navy Yard produced records that showed Lawhorn was on guard duty at the main gate from noon to 3 p.m. and from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. on April 20. He had an alibi.



*Pvt. John Lawhorn, U.S.M.C.*

Police confirmed that a telephone operator had indeed been friendly with Lawhorn, but when she was questioned, the young woman, fresh from eloping with another Marine, had nothing to offer relative to the crime. There was never any report that the local witnesses were asked to confront Lawhorn, but his description did not match that of the running man.

In July, the Middlesex Grand Jury determined there was not enough evidence to support a bill of indictment. Lawhorn was free. He returned to duty, went AWOL on Aug. 24, and was discharged in September for desertion. What happened next is unknown, but in the 1930s he settled in Cincinnati where he died in 1986.

Tindall, who had been kept in jail throughout Lawhorn's ordeal, was also freed, the judge deciding he had been punished enough. The next year he was found guilty of passing worthless checks and sentenced to the Concord Reformatory. The rest of his story is another mystery.

So, who killed Ralph Brewster? The question was apparently abandoned after Lawhorn was let go. Was it the running man? And who was he—a desperado attempting to rob the station or a personal enemy?

The Board of Selectmen offered \$500 as a reward for the arrest and conviction of the murderer. It went unclaimed. The case remains unsolved.



*Sgt. McCauley and Chief McIntosh, two of the investigators who never found out who done it*

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2019 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Dec. 9, 2015. This revision supersedes all previous articles.