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MURDERS AT KISS-ME-QUICK:
THE UNDERSIDE OF
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

by JERRELL H. SHOFNER

THE last weekend of November 1932 was exceptionally cold and unexceptionally dull at Cedar Key until flames began shooting from the city jail about four o'clock on Monday morning. The fire was the final act of one of the most senseless and brutal murders ever committed by a Florida law enforcement official and the beginning of an international dispute which enabled Mussolini's fascist government to chastise the United States for its violation of civil rights and human decency.

Cedar Key had been a quiet community even before the Great Depression of the 1930s. Once an important railhead and the source of cedar timber, it had declined in the early twentieth century as pencil manufacturing companies cut out the native cedar and the railroad lost out to larger ocean-going vessels and motor trucks. During the depths of the depression there was little economic activity at the island town. Although generally noisy and boisterous in port towns along the Gulf coast, the Greek sponge fishermen from the Tarpon Springs fleet who put into Cedar Key when the weather was bad were welcomed by most town officials and the general population. This was especially true of Bertie Lee Skinner and Nadine Fine whose house on the outskirts of Cedar Key at the railroad station known as Kiss-Me-Quick was a dependable source of bootleg beer and whiskey. As waitresses in a Tarpon Springs restaurant several months earlier, the two had become acquainted with some of the sponge fishermen. After a disagreement with their employer and a brush with the law, they had left Tarpon Springs, eventually returning to Cedar Key. Some of their maritime acquaintances liked to visit their house there when they were in port.¹

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1. *Tarpon Springs Leader*, November 29, December 6, 1932, *Tampa Tribune*, December 2, 1932; J. C. Adkins to Henry L. Stimson, January

One Cedar Key resident who strongly disagreed with his neighbors about the fishermen was sixty-seven year old T. W. Brewer, the longtime justice of the peace, who was apparently enamored of Bertie Lee Skinner. As justice of the peace, he was the most powerful local law enforcement official in the town, a situation which was soon to become most unfortunate for the community and especially its Greek visitors. Known in the community as a "moonshiner" himself, Brewer had also become a heavy drinker in recent months, according to other town officials. He had also made it known that he did not like the Greek fishermen. He had repeatedly threatened violence toward them, and had frequently urged local youths to attack them with rocks.²

On Sunday, November 27, Judge Brewer had spent the morning and early afternoon driving back and forth through Cedar Key and the nearby countryside, drinking whiskey from pint bottles which he had obtained from local bootleggers. He was accompanied at various times by G. N. Livingston, a fourteen-year-old resident of Kiss-Me-Quick, Nadine Fine, and Thomas Booth. A relative of Fine's by marriage, Booth was apparently an unemployed drinking companion of Judge Brewer's. Booth's last encounter with the law had occurred during the previous summer when he had assaulted another man with a knife.³

About mid-afternoon, after Brewer had consumed at least two pints of liquor, he and Livingston were driving along the road when they saw several Greek sailors emerging from Bertie Lee Skinner's house. After abusive verbal threats, he drove by them and fired several shots into the ground near their feet. He and his companions then continued their carousing until well into the evening. With Nadine Fine, Livingston, and Booth in the car, he overtook three other sailors walking toward town from Kiss-Me-Quick. After a discussion between Brewer and Booth about whether the sailors should be arrested, Booth said that he would do so if Brewer would deputize him. Brewer complied, and they stopped the car near the three men. The three—Johnannon

10, 1933, Secretary of State Papers, Box 70, Series 278, Record Group 102, National Archives (hereinafter cited as SSP/RG no.)

2. Thomas Booth deposition, December 2, 1932, SSP/RG 102; interview with Quitman Hodges, Cedar Key, June 27, 1982; *Tampa Tribune*, December 1, 1932.
3. *State v. Booth*, June 1932, Circuit Court Records, Levy County Courthouse, Bronson.

Stathis, Theodorus Smarkos, and George Georgiu— were all acquainted with Booth and apparently assumed they were being offered a ride on the cold night. But, when the car stopped in Cedar Key, Judge Brewer announced that they were under arrest for being “drunk and disorderly.” Brewer, with a revolver, and Booth, with a blackjack, took the three men to the local jail, a small wooden structure with no facilities for protection against the cold. What happened at the jail did not become clear until the following morning.⁴

After taking Booth and Fine home, Brewer and Livingston continued to drive until about 4:00 A.M. when they noticed a fire in the direction of town. As they approached it became clear, according to Livingston, that the jail was burning and many of the townspeople were fighting the fire. They were also trying to open the jail door in response to the screams of one of its occupants. Although it was later revealed that the keys to the jail were in his pocket, Judge Brewer did not produce them when asked.⁵

With most of the Cedar Key residents and more than fifty sailors from the port-bound fleet present, State Attorney J. C. Adkins of Gainesville convened a coroner’s jury on Monday afternoon. After hearing several witnesses, the jury ordered the arrest of T. W. Brewer and Thomas Booth, and adjourned to meet again in Bronson on Wednesday.⁶

Astounded by the news emanating from Cedar Key, the close-knit Greek community at Tarpon Springs rallied immediately. Thirty residents, including Abe Tarapani, city commissioner, and Costas Tuluamaris, a prominent community leader, went to Cedar Key and later to Bronson to follow the inquest. Dr. Theo Tsangeiris of Tarpon Springs, joined at his request by Dr. C. A. Gavin of Otter Creek, demanded and received authority to conduct independent autopsies of the charred bodies of the three sailors. Tarpon Springs City Attorney Archie Clements joined them.⁷

The testimony of seventeen witnesses convinced the jury that

4. Thomas Booth deposition, December 2, 1932, SSP/RG 102.

5. G. N. Livingston deposition, December 2, 1932, SSP/RG 102.

6. Adkins to Stimson, January 10, 1933, SSP/RG 102.

7. *Tampa Tribune*, November 30, 1932; *Tarpon Springs Leader*, November 29, 1932.

the three men had been arrested for no reason other than that Brewer was drunk and had a grudge against them, that two of them had crushed skulls and knife wounds and were probably dead before the fire, that gasoline had been thrown on the outside of the jail from a can which had come from inside Brewer's car, and that the third man had burned to death in the fire. Indictments for first-degree murder were returned against Brewer and Booth.⁸

While the Greeks were burying their dead at Tarpon Springs, Philip Licata, the Italian consular agent at Tampa, went to Bronson as a representative of the Italian government. The reason for Italy's interest in the case subsequently became a matter of dispute, but Licata set in motion a series of events which soon involved the United States on the unsavory side of an international incident.⁹

Like most of their neighbors at Tarpon Springs, the three dead men were natives of the Dodecanese Islands. Johannon Stathis, age twenty-seven, had migrated to the United States in 1920; Theodore Smarkos, thirty-four, had arrived in 1919; and George Georgiu, forty, had left his homeland in 1914. Inhabited by Greeks, the Dodecanese Islands had been part of the Turkish Empire until they were transferred to Italy by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. The treaty was the basis of Italy's claim that they were Italian citizens, while the United States argued that only those Greeks actually residing on the islands in 1923 had come under Italian jurisdiction.¹⁰

While denying that the Italian government had jurisdiction, the United States recognized a strong moral responsibility and took an active interest in the matter. When the Italian charge d'affaires at Washington notified him of the Cedar Key murders, Secretary of State Henry Stimson asked Florida Governor David Sholtz for a report of "the circumstances surrounding the death" of the men.¹¹ Sholtz referred the matter to State Attorney Adkins who supplied the secretary of state with a full report, including

8. *Tarpon Springs Leader*, November 29, December 6, 1932; Adkins to Stimson, January 10, 1933, SSP/RG 102; Adkins to Doyle Carlton, December 10, 1932, January 10, 1933, Box 52, P68-02, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee. Hereinafter cited as FSA.
9. *Tampa Tribune*, November 30, 1932.
10. Cordell Hull to Royal Italian Ambassador, November 10, 1936, SSP/RG 102; *Tarpon Springs Leader*, November 29, 1932.
11. Stimson to Governor, January 5, 1933, SSP/RG 102.

copies of the depositions of all the witnesses. He also quickly added that the people of Levy County had cooperated in every way to bring about justice, that the two men were indicted for first-degree murder, and a trial was scheduled for the next regular term of court in April.¹²

Apparently under continuing pressure from the Italians, Stimson asked Governor Sholtz if a special term of court might be possible before April. At Sholtz's request, Judge A. V. Long agreed to hold a special term in Levy County on March 7. Brewer and Booth were found guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced to life imprisonment.¹³ The citizens of Levy County and the officials of the state of Florida had acted with dispatch to see that justice was done and had cooperated with the national government in trying to assuage the anxieties of the Italian government. Having inherited the problem from Henry Stimson when the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration took over on March 4, 1933, Secretary of State Cordell Hull must have been relieved when he was able to notify the Italian ambassador that the two murderers had received life sentences.¹⁴

Secretary Hull was not finished with the matter, however. In early September the Italian consul at New Orleans wrote Governor Sholtz in Tallahassee asking that the state "pay an indemnity to each one of the families of the three murdered persons" and that the amounts "not be inferior to the sum of ten thousand dollars." Without commenting on the state's liability in the matter or the embarrassed condition of its treasury, the governor notified the consul that he was powerless to "extend the relief sought" unless the legislature should pass a special act authorizing such an expenditure.¹⁵ Refusing to accept "the administrative exigencies and budgetary difficulties of the State of Florida" as reason for not paying the claims, the consul again asked the secretary of state to intervene.¹⁶

12. Adkins to Stimson, January 10, 1933, *ibid.*

13. Stimson to David Sholtz, February 9, 1933, Adkins to Sholtz, February 20, 1933, *ibid.*; *State v. T. W. Brewer and Thomas Booth*, March 1933, Records of Circuit Court, Levy County Courthouse; Hull to Sholtz, March 16, 1933, Box 52, P68-02, FSA.

14. Hull to Sholtz, March 31, 1933, Box 52, P68-02, FSA.

15. II Console di S. M. il Re D'Italia to Sholtz, September 11, 1933, and Cary D. Landis to J. P. Newell, September 26, 1933, *ibid.*

16. Royal Italian Embassy to Secretary of State, October 16, 1933, SSP/RG 102.

The Florida constitution prohibited borrowing, and the state was so hard-pressed for funds during the 1930s that it was hardly able to keep its schools open without assistance from the national government. Governor Sholtz was much more concerned with relieving the effects of the severe economic depression than in placating the Italian government. And, of course, under the federal system of the United States, the national government had no authority to compel payment.

The Italians were arguing that the three dead men were Italian citizens by virtue of the Lausanne treaty of 1925 and that the state of Florida was liable for their deaths because they had occurred at the hands of local officials. Unable to get the state to pay the indemnities, the State Department pointed out to the Italians that, according to legal precedent, the state was not liable. There was a lengthy list of court decisions holding that states were not responsible for acts of their officials even when they were acting in their official capacities. It was further shown that states were sovereign and could not be sued without their statutory consent. Beyond that, it was argued that the Lausanne treaty specifically limited Italian authority to those persons living on the Dodecanese Islands at the time of the treaty. All of the murdered men had immigrated before that time.¹⁷

Although they had shown at least to their own satisfaction that the state of Florida was not liable for indemnity to the deceased persons' families, officials at neither the state nor national level were pleased with the situation. The State Department felt that "there is a strong moral obligation . . . to pay indemnity to the families of these men as the record shows the murders were brutal and unprovoked." State legislative members, especially those from the area around Tarpon Springs, were also unhappy with the situation. During the 1935 biennial legislative session, the state was too hard-pressed for action, but as the depression began easing somewhat in the late 1930s, several bills were introduced authorizing payment of the indemnities. By that time, however, Governor Sholtz had been succeeded by Governor Fred P. Cone from rural northern Florida and a staunch guardian of the public purse. When the 1939 legislature finally authorized payment of \$3,500 each to Georgiu's mother and the wives of Stathis

17. State Department Memorandum, October 30, 1933, Secretary of State to Royal Italian Ambassador, November 10, 1936, *ibid.*

and Smarkos, Cone vetoed all three measures. Ten days later the legislators passed the bills over the governor's veto, and the survivors of the three men finally received about a third of the sum which the State Department had earlier agreed was "moderate considering the circumstances."¹⁸

Former Justice of the Peace T. W. Brewer apparently died in prison. Thomas Booth was paroled in August 1944.¹⁹ Their depraved deeds had embarrassed the people of Cedar Key, Levy County, and the state of Florida, and put the United States in the dubious position of having to explain its conduct to a government whose disregard of civil rights was widespread. But within legal, constitutional, and financial restraints imposed upon them, almost everyone involved did what they could to show their disapproval of the murders, to see that justice was served, and, albeit in a limited way, to indemnify the aggrieved families of the murdered men.

18. *Tampa Tribune*, May 19, 1939.

19. Inmate Records, Division of Corrections, Tallahassee.