

Yesteryears

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Car accident led to Floyd's demise

By Lois Firestone

STORIES ABOUT PRETTY Boy Floyd's final days melded into Columbiana County folklore — Sprucevale Road farm wife Ellen Conkle, for instance, enjoyed a brief celebrity and is still remembered because she prepared the desperado's last "fit for a king" meal of spareribs, homebaked bread and rice pudding. And for years afterward, people talked about the expert marksmanship of East Liverpool policeman Chester Smith who winged Floyd in the arm in a vain attempt to "save him" for trial.

But what was he doing in the area in the first place? And why did Floyd foolishly emerge from his self-imposed exile after 14 months of successfully eluding J. Edgar Hoover and the Federal Bureau of Investigation?

Charles "Choc" Floyd's death warrant was signed and irrevocably sealed on the evening of Monday, Oct. 22, 1934, 16 months before his death on the Conkle farm. The instrument was the Kansas City Massacre, the wanton murders of a federal agent and four other men shortly after 7 a.m. on June 17, 1933 as they emerged from Kansas City's Union Station. Head G-Man J. Edgar Hoover saw the chance to blame the murders on Floyd and put him away once and for all — whether he was caught dead or alive didn't concern them. Nor did it matter that "eyewitnesses" were unreliable and no actual evidence pointed to his guilt.

From then until his death, Floyd vehemently denied having anything to do with the slaughter. Shortly after it happened, he sent Kansas City police a penciled message on the back of a business postcard — Dated June 20, 1933 and mailed from Springfield, Missouri, it read "Dear Sirs: I, Charles Floyd, want it

made known that I did not participate in the massacre of officers at Kansas City. Charles Floyd."

Their destination was Buffalo. On Sept. 21 the quartet rented an apartment in a nondescript section of the city, living on cash the two men had accumulated from previous bank robberies. Floyd and Juanita adopted the names Mr. and Mrs. George Sanders and Richetti and Rose were Mr. and Mrs. Ed Brennan.

They lived quietly and kept to themselves — there were no raucous parties or get-togethers with visiting friends. If neighbors questioned anything, it was why the two men never went out to a job. Living on the "lam" was worse than doing hard time in prison, he wrote to his family. Floyd had always like to cook and spent hours over a stove, stirring up spaghetti sauce or baking his favorite dessert, apple pie. For most of his waking hours, Richetti drank whiskey — prohibition had been repealed in December 1933. The others played pitch and double solitaire to pass the dragging hours, or they listened to the radio and read detective magazines — Floyd picked up a copy of the Buffalo Courier-Express every day to keep up with Hoover's raids and manhunts.

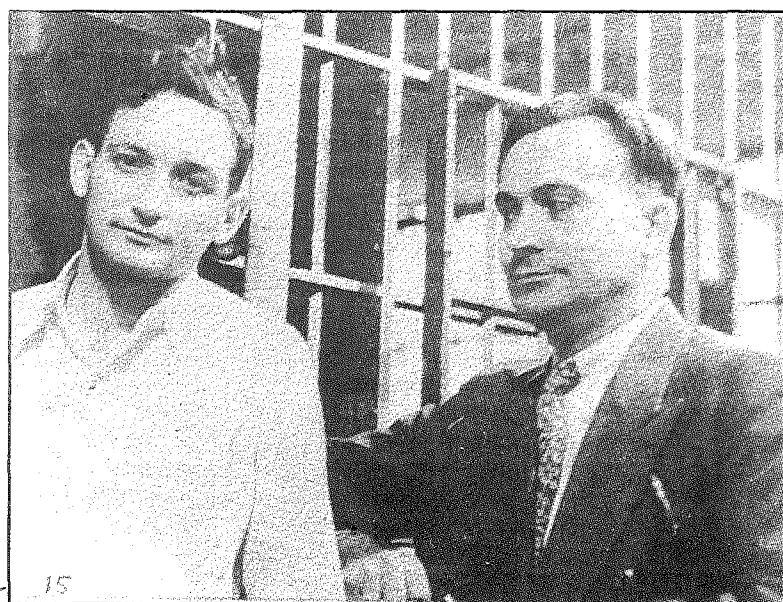
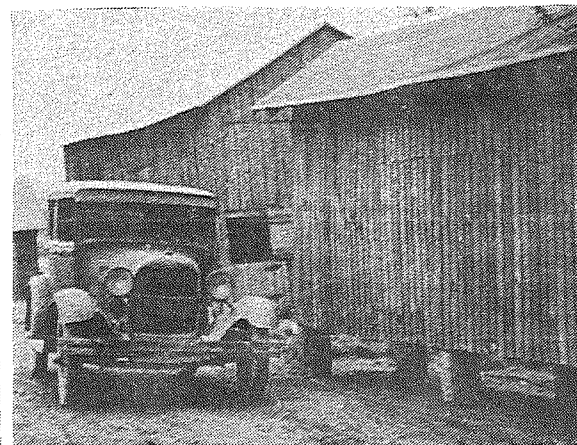
Twelve long months passed, but Floyd's name continued to crop up almost every day with rumors about where he was hiding out or what he was doing: He was seen everywhere, on both coasts on the same day. He joined the Chinese army, he was negotiating with a Hollywood film company for his life story, he was dead from old gunshot wounds, he was dying from blood poisoning, he was living in Mexico, Virginia, and Arkansas, he'd had his hair dyed red and grown

a beard. John Dillinger was shot down in front of Chicago's Biograph Theater on July 22, 1934, and it was after that that Hoover announced that he was now naming Floyd as the country's Public Enemy Number One. Floyd became more and more cautious as summer merged into fall, and then on Oct. 19, Floyd decided to leave Buffalo and return home to the familiar hills of Oklahoma. The major reason for that was the headline he'd read eight days earlier in the Buffalo-Courier Express which read: "U.S. Men Solve Massacre of 5 in Kansas City...Pretty Boy Floyd, two others named by federal agents in railway station tragedy." Government witness James LaCapra had placed Floyd at the scene of the crime. the news set off a

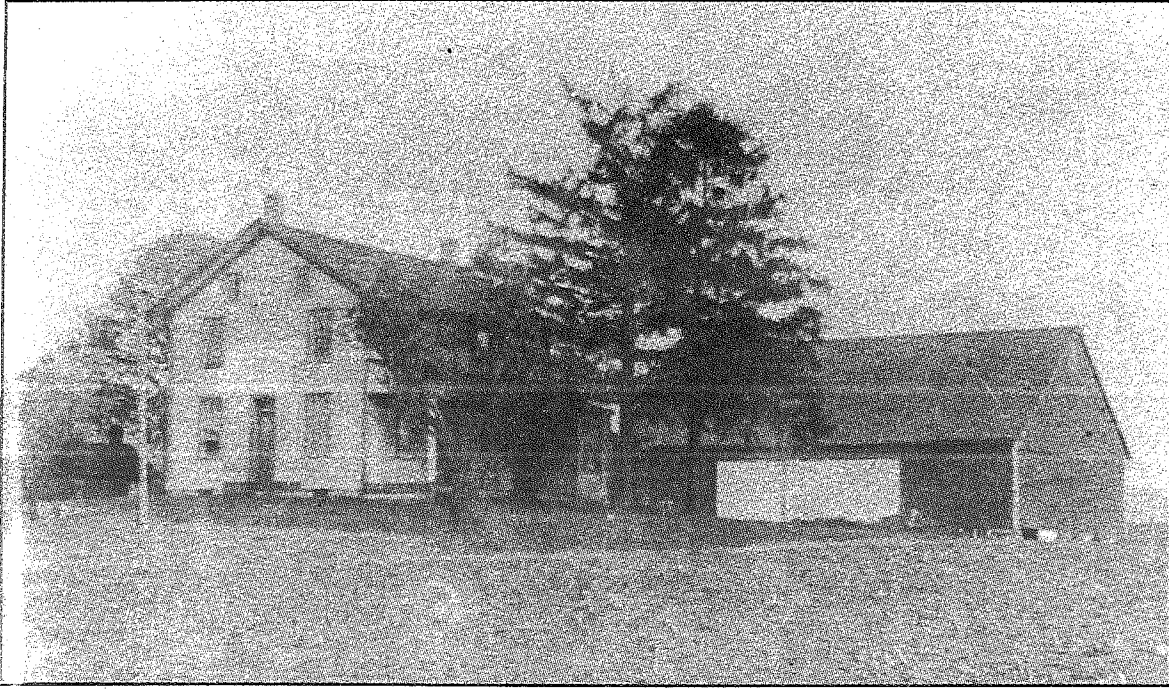
See Floyd, page 4



East Liverpool Police Chief McDermott, above photo, left, and Sgt. Herman Roth stand guard over the body of Pretty Boy Floyd at the Sturgis Funeral Home in East Liverpool shortly after the shooting. At top right is the corn crib and Stewart Dyke's Model A Ford in which Floyd was sitting, waiting for Dyke to finish husking corn before being taken to Clarkson. At right are Dyke and his wife. Local and federal authorities arrived before Floyd could make his getaway, but the Dykes insisted Floyd was an extremely polite man.



Wellsville Police chief John Fultz, right, with Adam Richetti, Pretty Boy's pal who was taken to the Wellsville jail after being captured. Fultz contacted J. Edgar Hoover who in turn contacted Melvin Purvis at the Chicago bureau of the FBI, thus setting in motion the move to corner Pretty Boy at the Sprucevale farm.



Widow Ellen Conkle's farm along Sprucevale Road in a photo taken in the 1930s. She was cleaning a smokehouse when Floyd appeared at her door asking for a meal. After washing up, he ate his meal on the porch.



Wellsville Police Chief John Fultz deputized men from town to guard Adam Richetti, Floyd's pal whom they were holding in the Wellsville jail. Fultz feared Floyd would try to rescue his friend. Fultz called them to duty again after Floyd's death of threats in a letter to get "the one who got Floyd." Four men cruising the area were seen near the Fultz home. Some said they saw a machine gun inside, but nothing ever came of the scare.

Floyd

Continued from page 1

flood of conjecture about Floyd's whereabouts, and stories of heavily-armed posses on the hunt for Floyd and Richetti.

His money dwindling, Floyd gave Rose Baird \$600 to buy a Ford two-door sedan, and about 3 a.m. on Oct. 19 they locked the door of the apartment and headed south. Hell's Half Acre was a small settlement along the Ohio River on the border of Ohio and Pennsylvania, operated by a local character, State Line Jenny, and for years bootleggers and bank robbers had found refuge there.

Floyd's plan was to stay there for a night or two and then go on to Dillonvale, a small town downriver between Steubenville and Wheeling, to visit Adam's sister and her husband, Minnie and Henry Sustic.

On Saturday, Oct. 20, the bank in Titusville, not far from Dillonvale, was robbed and two men made off with \$400 in cash. Likely the culprits were Floyd and Richetti, but they weren't caught, although some people conjectured that it could have been the two men since it was well known that Richetti's relatives lived nearby.

Early on the foggy morning

of Saturday, Oct. 20 the Ford sedan carrying Floyd, Adam and the two Baird sisters was heading north, speeding along Route 7 — the Wellsville-East Liverpool Road — near a shut down brickyard close to an area called the Silver Switch.

Floyd was at the wheel and could barely see the rain-slick road ahead. Suddenly he lost control and the car skidded into a telephone pole, damaging the auto. After a struggle they got the car back on the road, but both men knew they'd have to risk going to a garage for repairs. Floyd told Beulah and Rose to take the car on into Wellsville to find a mechanic. After the car was fixed they were to come back for the two men. Before the sisters drove off, they retrieved their firearms and a few blankets from the backseat, climbed a hillside and sat down to wait.

The rest of the story has been repeated many times. The suspicions of Joseph Fryman and his son-in-law David O'Hanlon who lived at the top of the hill and their call to Wellsville Police Chief John Fultz. Richetti's capture when Fultz confronted the two men and Floyd's frantic escape up Route 45 onto Route 30 toward Lisbon. Finally, tired, dirty and hungry, Floyd was cornered on the Conkle farm. His nemesis, Melvin H. Purvis who had stalked him for months, was there to witness the final moments of America's Public Enemy Number One.



Floyd's death mask.

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