

The Hawk and the Heiress: Tales of Schemes and Scams

By Andrew Wright

The Hawk

On November 19, 1928, three prominent Clay Township residents received a menacing letter. The envelope was emblazoned with a heraldic hawk. The letter was stamped with the same image along with the words "The Hawk", which were connected by a line to an airplane. The letter threatened, "I'll bring the worst Chicago gang to blow up your home if the money is not in the mail box by the night of November 23, or if you attempt to notify the authorities or interfere with the Hawk, the owners of the home will be killed in cold blood". The letter further warned, "If this money is not placed in the rural mail box in front of your home, your residence will be bombed and your family killed."ⁱ



Bailey Hawkins
(Indy Star 4/12/29)



Louis Koss
(Courtesy of Bill Koss)



Hal L. Purdy
(Indy Star 8/7/28)

\$500 was demanded from Bailey Hawkins, president of the Citizens State Bank in Carmel, \$1000 from Louis Koss, president of the Capitol Iron Company in Indianapolis, and \$1500 from Hal L. Purdy, vice president of Marmon Automobile Company also in Indianapolis. Hamilton County Sheriff Thomas Ramsey was immediately notified, and a plan was hatched to protect the men and their properties.

On the night of November 23, a decoy package was placed in each mailbox. Though Koss scoffed at the threats, he stayed up through the

night with a sawed-off shotgun and his bulldog by his side. Outside his home two deputies and his groundkeeper hid in the bushes to await the arrival of the Hawk and his gang.

Hawkins took the threats seriously and was happy to have the sheriff, two deputies and another man guard his home. Purdy, who was in Detroit on business, put his wife and children in a hotel in Indianapolis. He hired the Pinkerton Detective Agency to guard his home and begin an investigation. The only visitors on the night of the pickup were two Indianapolis News reporters who were greeted with a warning shot from a shotgun at the Koss house.ⁱⁱ



Hawkins home (Indy Star Jan. 31 1925)

After the deadline passed with no incident, the Sheriff, postal inspectors, the Pinkertons, and even Carmel town officials intensified their investigation. The most important clue was the hawk emblem. Detectives were able to track down the Indianapolis engraving company that created the zinc etching of the hawk. The engraver gave them a name, address and description. Wendell C. Hessong, a Carmel resident, had ordered the stamp for the letterhead of a sky-writing company he

intended to establish.ⁱⁱⁱ The Hawk moniker was likely a nod to his hero, Charles Lindberg, the Lone Eagle.

Less than a year after Lindberg's transatlantic flight, Hessong enrolled in an aviation course and obtained his pilot's license the first year licenses were issued. However, the twenty-one year old could not find a job due to a spinal injury he sustained three years prior that left one arm partially paralyzed. On July 4, 1925, Hessong was joyriding down Springmill Road with nine Carmel High School classmates, unaware that six law enforcement agents had set a trap for bootleggers. Deputies opened fire on the vehicle as it approached. Hessong was struck in the hip and neck.^{iv}

Desperate to fly but unable to find employment, Hessong hatched the blackmail scheme from his brother's home in Akron, OH, where Pinkerton Detectives found him on November 28. Rue Hinshaw, a Carmel Town Board member, was present in Akron to take Hessong's confession. "I had set my mind on being a pilot, and all I needed was a plane," Hessong explained.^v "I'm sorry about the whole thing. Right after I sent out those letters I was sorry. I wanted to get the letters back, but I could not figure out how to get them.... I was going to confess the next day and the last minute I got scared." He never intended to follow through on the threats; "I wasn't going to blow up any homes. I did not even think about that part of it, but I figured if I got the money all right, if I didn't I'd go back to Akron.... I'll take my medicine and go straight when I get out."^{vi}

In his confession, Hessong implicated another Carmel resident, Jack Montgomery. Hinshaw called Sheriff Ramsey from Akron with the

name of the accomplice, who was promptly arrested.^{vii} Montgomery insisted he had played no part in the scheme. In fact he was not even aware of Hessong's plan until the night of the 23rd; however, instead of contacting the sheriff, Montgomery warned Hessong that an ambush awaited him should he attempt to retrieve the money.^{viii}

Both men were charged with blackmail and arraigned on December 19. Despite his detailed confession, Hessong was unwilling to make a plea.^{ix} Conspiracy charges were added the next day to put pressure on the defendants, but Hessong elected to plead insanity at trial rather than make the guilty plea the prosecutor sought.^x His defense argued that the wounds he received the night he was shot by deputies affected his mental state.^{xi} It took the jury less than an hour to dismiss that argument and render a guilty verdict. Hessong was sentenced to one to five years in the Indiana State Reformatory. He served time with John Dillinger, who in a few years would become America's most notorious gangster. Authorities dropped the charges against Jack Montgomery before his case went to trial.^{xii}



(Indy Star Jan. 25 1929)

Had Hessong worked on establishing his business rather than resort to a foolhardy scheme, his fortunes would have improved within seven months. The damage suit he filed following the 1925 shooting resolved on June 17, 1929. He was awarded \$1,100.^{xiii}

After serving just eight months, Hessong was paroled. He moved into his parent's house in Indianapolis. Hessong still believed he could realize his dream of flying; "I am going to be an aviator yet.... Whenever I'm through with this thing I am going to start all over again," he told his arresting officers.^{xiv} However, no record could be found that Hessong worked as a pilot. Instead he drove a truck and worked in construction. At the age of fifty-nine, he was found slumped over a boat on Geist Reservoir. He had died of a heart attack.^{xv}

The Heiress

On September 13, 1904, a letter arrived at the Michener farm south of Carmel. Talitha Michener's cousin, John Mazingo, had written to inform her that her claim on a \$150 million estate, a claim he handled entirely on her behalf over the past five years, was nearly through the legal process. She would soon be inconceivably rich.

According to Mazingo, Talitha descended from Lady Margaret Michener of Essex, a wealthy English noblewoman. Lady Margaret had owned two counties in England and resided in a palace called Marble Hall with her husband, Lord Lawrence. Lawrence was born a commoner. Their marriage angered Margaret's family and made it difficult for her heirs to claim the fortune she left behind after she and her husband passed away. Mazingo believed that Talitha was Lady Margaret's great-granddaughter and principal heir. She stood to inherit \$15 million, an unimaginable fortune that would equate to about \$400 million today.^{xvi}

Talitha immediately contacted her eight children with the news. Her daughter Ida was a

thousand miles away in Cascade, CO. Ida had left home and married a lazy and quarrelsome man at a very young age. After a few years she grew tired of supporting him as he refused to work. She divorced him and drifted from town to town until she found herself waitressing in Cascade. In the back of her mind she held onto the secret of her noble lineage and believed it would help her transcend her working life; "I have always known that someday I might be a real lady – one with a title, I mean – and have money. That day seems close at hand now, and yet I am not sure – there have been so many slips between me and the fortune that I sometimes wonder if I am ever going to get it."^{xvii}

Newspapers from Los Angeles to New York published Ida's rags-to-riches fairytale with headlines that played on the fantasies of working class readers, "Pretty Waitress Quits Work and Leaves for Home to Claim her Titled Millions,"^{xviii} "Fortune and Title for Working Girl,"^{xix} "Heiress Waitress Quits."^{xx} The process of claiming the inheritance had taken so long, as long as Ida could remember, that even though she believed the fortune was real, she struggled to accept that it was all but in hand; "Even now I am not sure that I am doing the wise thing in giving up my work at Cascade and going back East, but the letter that came the other day gives me to understand that the matter has been settled and my mother will soon come into the possession of her money."^{xxi} Any doubts the Micheners had about the legitimacy of the estate were alleviated by the many official-looking documents from American lawyers and British solicitors in their possession.

Before Ida made it out of Colorado, the story reached the desk of William T. Fletcher, a postal inspector. Fletcher presumed the Micheners

were victims of a scam and published a warning in the Indianapolis Star that no American citizen could lay claim to an English estate. He suspected fugitive George W. Thatcher of Dayton, OH, the most prolific inheritance conman, was involved.^{xxii} To perpetrate the scam, Thatcher convinced his marks that they were heirs to a grand estate. Posing as lawyers and court officials, he pocketed all the fees required to secure the claim as he strung them along.^{xxiii} His deceptions were so convincing that at least one man traveled all the way to London to complete his claim on an estate.^{xxiv}

Though Thatcher was the likely culprit, there is no record of who was behind the Michener scam or the amount he swindled from them in fictitious fees during his long con. The Micheners certainly never obtained the fortune. After arriving in Carmel, Ida moved into the family home on South Range Line Road. In 1915 she and her mother moved to Council Bluffs, IA, where Ida worked into her late 70s.^{xxv}

As for Thatcher, postal inspectors located his assistant in Wilmington, OH, and followed her to New York City, where she mailed his letters to give the impression they had come from overseas and entered the US in the port city. When she returned to Wilmington, she led investigators directly to Thatcher. He was arrested on November 30, 1904, and put on trial for defrauding people the world over out of hundreds of thousands of dollars.^{xxvi} Though Thatcher was convicted, variations of his scam populate spam folders today.

-
- ^{iv} "Youths in Machine Injured in Shooting." *Indianapolis News* 4 Jul. 1925.
- ^v "Carmel Men Seized in Blackmail Case." *Indianapolis News* 28 Nov. 1928.
- ^{vi} "Dream of Skywriting Burst in Confession." *Indianapolis News* 29 Nov. 1928.
- ^{vii} "Men Still on Guard at Homes." *Noblesville Daily Ledger* 28 Nov. 1928.
- ^{viii} "Dream of Skywriting Burst in Confession." *Indianapolis News* 29 Nov. 1928.
- ^{ix} "2 Plead Not Guilty in Blackmail Case." *Indianapolis Star* 20 Dec. 1928.
- ^x "Alleged Blackmailers Face Conspiracy Charge." *Indianapolis Star* 21 Dec. 1928.
- ^{xi} "Hessong is Placed on Trial in 'Hawk' Case." *Indianapolis News* 24 Jan. 1929.
- ^{xii} "Charges are Dropped." *Indianapolis News* 27 Feb. 1929.
- ^{xiii} "Three Get Damages." *Indianapolis News* 17 Jun. 1929.
- ^{xiv} "Dream of Skywriting Burst in Confession." *Indianapolis News* 29 Nov. 1928.
- ^{xv} "Services Wednesday for Wendell Hessong." *Indianapolis Star* 15 Aug. 1967.
- ^{xvi} "Believes She is to be an Heiress." *Indianapolis Star* 14 Sep. 1904.
- ^{xvii} "Pretty Waitress Quits Work and Leaves for Home to Claim her Titled Millions." *Weekly Gazette* (Colorado Springs, CO) 22 Sep. 1904.
- ^{xviii} Ibid.
- ^{xix} "Fortune and Title for Working Girl." *Weekly Gazette* (Colorado Springs, CO). 15 Sep. 1904.
- ^{xx} "Heiress Waitress Quits." *Topeka Daily Capital* 20 Sep. 1904.
- ^{xxi} "Pretty Waitress Quits Work and Leaves for Home to Claim her Titled Millions." *Weekly Gazette* (Colorado Springs, CO) 22 Sep. 1904.
- ^{xxii} "Warning Sent to 'Heirs' of Fortunes." *Indianapolis Star* 15 Sep. 1904.
- ^{xxiii} "Nabbed." *Cincinnati Enquirer* 30 Nov. 1904.
- ^{xxiv} "Thatcher." *Cincinnati Enquirer* 1 Dec. 1904.
- ^{xxv} *Council Bluffs Nonpareil* 27 Dec. 1950. 12.
- ^{xxvi} "Nabbed." *Cincinnati Enquirer* 30 Nov. 1904.

ⁱ "Three Carmel Men Receive Written Threats of Death." *Indianapolis News* 24 Nov. 1928.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Carmel Men Seized in Blackmail Case." *Indianapolis News* 28 Nov. 1928.