

The Final Call

A History of the Murder of Three Police Officers

November 29, 1930

Macomb, Illinois

By

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PREFACE

On November 29, 1930 at 11:30p.m., Willard Edwin Vrell, a car thief and burglar from Canton, Illinois, shot and killed Macomb Police Officers J. Edward “Opie” Whittlesey, Albert Links, and Ernest E. “Cotton” Bowman and wounded Officer Luther Jackson. Bowman, although mortally wounded, was able to kill Vrell. In less than three minutes, one of the most tragic chapters in Macomb’s history was written.

This account is as accurate as possible. The reader must remember that over half a century has passed since that tragic night – memories have faded, documents have been lost or destroyed, and some details may not be quite correct. Thus, while what is portrayed in this history is believed to be what actually took place, not every particular can be verified.

While the writing of any tragedy will inherently recall painful memories of family members, that is not the intent of this history. Rather, this account is meant to establish permanently what took place on that Saturday night over half a century ago.

Dedicated to the Memory of:

J. Edward Whittlesey

Albert Links

Ernest E. Bowman

“He fell at his post of duty.”*

*Epitaph on Bowman’s gravestone

I. THE PEOPLE

“Opie”

J. Edward Whittlesey was born in 1870, the youngest of five children. He married Mary Cushman in 1893, and in 1903, they moved to Macomb. They were living at 618 South Johnson Street at the time of his death.

Whittlesey had long been a popular figure around town. In addition to his police duties, he worked in the Alley Inn, a local restaurant, and also occasionally drove a cab. He was an excellent bowler, an avid hunter, and he devoted his spare time in the summer months to baseball, both playing and umpiring. Whittlesey was also well known as a storyteller, which earned him the nickname of “Opie,” a cartoon character of the time also known for telling tall tales. In his later years, “Opie,” although a tall man, became mildly hunch-backed. This condition, along with the fact that he was not known as a sharp dresser, made “Opie” an easily recognized figure about town.

Whittlesey was a veteran of the Police Department, but it is unknown exactly how long he had been a policeman. At the time of his tragic death, Whittlesey left one married daughter and a thirteen-year-old granddaughter, Margaret Huston Ruth. Mrs. Ruth, who lives in Macomb today, served as Macomb City Clerk for several years.

“Al”

Albert Links was born in 1872 in LaHarpe, Illinois, and lived most of his life in the Stronghurst area where he was a farmer. Links married Nellie Mudd in 1908 and they had two sons, John (who was to play an important part in the shooting) and Errett. Links moved his family to Macomb in 1923, first living on South Johnson at Grant (near St. Francis Hospital), before eventually moving to 132 West Adams. Late in the summer of 1930, the Macomb City Council decided to add another police officer to the city’s force and hired Links for the job. Links doubtless had little, if any, formal training for his new position and was still “learning the ropes” when the shooting took place.

According to Marie Mudd Ruth (no relation to Margaret Huston Ruth, Whittlesey’s granddaughter), Links’ sister-in-law, Links was quite the prankster who loved to play practical jokes. He was a very easy-going man and loved being outdoors. He was fond of picnics, and took his family on outings quite often. At the time of this writing, Marie Mudd Ruth is 93 years old and lives in Galesburg.

After Links was killed, Mrs. Links put her sons through Western Illinois State Normal School, as Western Illinois University was then known. During this time, John worked as a car mechanic to help support the family. After Errett’s graduation in 1934, Mrs. Links moved the family to Moline, Illinois. In January 1941, Mrs. Links was stricken with cancer and returned to

Macomb for treatment. She died on January 22nd, just a few days after entering St. Francis Hospital.

John continued to work as a mechanic and also drove a truck. He lived the rest of his life in Moline, dying in 1979. According to his daughter, Joan Links Donnelly, and step-daughters Kay Souza and Jean Crawford, John could not bring himself to talk very much about Links' death, as he always felt partially responsible for what happened to his father. Errett moved to California where he worked for Allis Chalmers Company until his death in 1967.

“Cotton”

Ernest E. “Cotton” Bowman was a family man. He and his wife, Effie Teel, were rearing four children with a fifth child expected in January 1931. Upon the birth of Ernest Eugene Bowman, the *Canton Daily Ledger* newspaper noted: “He’ll know that his daddy was strong-hearted in the face of death, and that he was of the stuff of which only heroes are made, and that his act rid society of a verminous killer.”

Bowman was born in 1892 in Industry, Illinois, living there until 1927 when he and his family moved to Macomb. They resided at 303 South White, now listed as 1121 East Jefferson. While living in Industry, Bowman was active in community affairs, and played the trumpet in the Industry town band. Bowman was an avid outdoorsman and hunter, with hunting trips taking him as far as Texas. “Cotton” was also a stern but fair father. When one of the Bowman children misbehaved, privileges were withheld and the offending children “grounded.” Bowman was a well-known interior decorator and painter by trade, but after moving to Macomb, he became quite interested in police work. Around September 1930, “Cotton” was selected to be the Merchant Policeman. This position, although carrying a city policeman’s commission, was paid entirely by Macomb merchants. “Cotton” was responsible for going around to the local merchants and getting them to agree to donate money to his salary, with one to two dollars a month per merchant the going rate. In exchange, “Cotton” was to check the merchant’s store each night, safeguarding it against break-in. Bowman, although known as a gentle man and loving father and husband was quite fearless in police work.

“Luther”

Luther Jackson, the sole survivor of the tragic shooting, had been on the Police Department a little over a year. Jackson, 50 years old in 1930, was no stranger to being shot at. Just three weeks before the shooting, Jackson was patrolling the City Square on foot. Looking down the walkway behind the Montgomery Ward store (now the Macomb Dining Company restaurant), Jackson saw several subjects removing items from the rear of the store. Not seeing anyone else in the alley, Jackson started down the alley to talk to them. A man whom Jackson had not seen stepped out from his “look-out” position.

As it was a warm night, Jackson had pushed his cap up on the back of his head, which probably saved his life. The “look-out,” armed with a pistol, took aim at the badge on Jackson’s cap and fired, striking the badge. Had Jackson been wearing the cap normally, he probably would have been killed. As it happened, the bullet, although not touching Jackson, stunned him causing him to fall down. The burglars ran up to Jackson, and, believing him to be dead (Jackson later recalled hearing one say, “Well, I guess this old son-of-a-bitch is dead.”), began kicking Jackson in the body, cursing him all the while. Jackson, fearing they would shoot him again if they saw he was alive, played dead, lying on his .45 calibre revolver in a shoulder holster so the burglars would not see it and take it. Finally, fearing that the gunshot may have been heard, the burglars ran down the alley to Randolph Street. As soon as the burglars got some distance away, Jackson rolled onto his stomach, retrieved his weapon, and fired at the fleeing man. No doubt this action startled them, as a presumably “dead” man was now shooting at them.

The night of the murders was Jackson’s last night as a Macomb police officer. He was wounded within a half hour of the end of his last shift with the Macomb Police Department. Jackson had previously resigned in order to take the position of night watchman at Western Illinois State Normal School. After recovering from his wounds, Jackson finally took over at Western, where he was again the target of burglars’ guns on three or four different occasions during his career there. Luther Jackson died in August of 1952.

“Eddie”

Willard Edwin Vrell was born on October 7, 1902, in Liverpool, Illinois, the eighth and last child of Willard A. and Ellen Whitehead Vrell. While growing up, “Eddie” became a constant worry to his parents by getting in trouble with the local police. By the time Eddie had completed the seventh grade, he decided he had had enough of school and did not return.

Although Eddie had been picked up by the police on numerous occasions, he was first arrested when he was fourteen years old. The charge was criminal damage to property and the result was a fine. Eddie and his family were living in Canton during this time and because of his numerous scrapes with the police, Eddie’s parents decided to move back to Liverpool in order to get Eddie away from his friends and the countless opportunities a “big city” afforded for getting in trouble.

The strategy did not work. On January 11, 1919, Eddie, having recently turned sixteen, broke into the Leonard and Raker warehouse in Liverpool and stole 11 knives, 8,000 cigarettes, 20 pairs of skates, 1,000 shotgun shells, and \$53.00 cash – a total of \$219.00 worth of property. Eddie attributed his apprehension to getting some string stuck on his foot as he left the building. Pieces of it broke off as he headed home, leaving a trail for the police to follow. During a search of Eddie’s hiding place, numerous other stolen items were found. Taken before Judge G.W. Thompson, Eddie pled guilty to the burglary and was sentenced to a one to twenty year term in the Pontiac State Reformatory.

During Eddie's entrance interview in Pontiac, he admitted he had "done wrong" and that he just wanted to get out as soon as possible so he could open a garage and boat repair shop in Liverpool and so be useful to society. Eddie was admitted to Pontiac on February 5, 1919, and was paroled to his lawyer in Canton on June 1, 1922. The lawyer put Eddie to work on his farm. On June 28, Eddie stole a farm truck and picked up a friend of his, Bernard Hardin, and a local prostitute, Mrs. Noe. They all became intoxicated. The next morning the truck was found in Canton and Eddie was found passed out in Farmington, 30 miles away. When questioned about the incident, Eddie denied that he knew anything about the truck or that Mrs. Noe was a prostitute. He stated that he had an argument with his friends and that they attacked him in Farmington. It was determined to give Eddie a second chance; Eddie repaid that kindness by stealing the lawyer's car on July 15. No action had yet been taken concerning this incident when, on July 19, Eddie stole another car. Eddie again denied knowing anything about the lawyer's car and said he had permission to take the other car and just hadn't gotten around to returning it. Eddie was judged in violation of his parole and was returned to Pontiac on July 25, 1922. He was paroled again on June 8, 1923, and sent to a construction company in Bloomington.

Having learned the carpentry trade while at Pontiac, Eddie, dismayed at being assigned to a cement contractor, promptly stole a company truck. He was found in Canton at a girlfriend's house by Canton Police Chief David O'Brien (who would be shot to death in 1926 by a Peoria man in Canton) and Deputy L.F. Weller. Eddie started to run from the officers but stopped when a warning shot was fired. Eddie was returned to Pontiac on June 23, 1923 (having been out only 15 days). He was not paroled again until November 8, 1927, after his mother had written to the parole board on two separate occasions begging that her son be released.

On January 18, 1928, Eddie stole a Canton man's car and drove it to DeWitt, Iowa. Eddie left the car in Iowa and went to Chicago to see a friend with whom he had been in prison. Having returned to Canton, Eddie went to see the car's owner, W.A. Clark, told him he knew where Clark's car was and for \$25.00 he would return it. Clark paid the money, but then reported the incident to police. Eddie was caught with the car in Ottawa, Illinois, and was sent back to Pontiac March 17, 1928. Eddie again denied having taken the car and stated he thought he was being sent back because he left the state without permission. Eddie was finally discharged on June 21, 1930, when his sentence expired.

After his release from prison, Eddie began almost at once to commit more crimes. Among those that can be positively linked to him included the burglary of the golf course driving range clubhouse in Canton in August 1930, where he stole the Spanish-made .32 calibre semiautomatic pistol, later used to murder three policemen and wound a fourth. Before this shooting, however, Eddie used the weapon to commit other crimes. A.F. Clause identified Eddie as the man who, with a partner, held Clause up at gunpoint just east of Carthage, demanding a ride to Macomb. During the ride Eddie constantly cursed Clause, jabbing him with the pistol while ordering him to drive faster. Approximately one mile west of Macomb, Eddie ordered Clause to stop. Eddie

and his partner got out, but made no attempt to rob Clause. Clause identified Eddie's body at the mortuary after the shooting as one of the two men who had held him up.

Around the first of November, 1930, Eddie had become a regular customer at a lunch room at 323 East Elm in Canton and made the acquaintance of Mrs. Nellie Munson, a waitress there. Munson was apparently separated from her husband, James, who had deserted her and their twenty-month old daughter several weeks earlier. Munson and Eddie quickly became intimate and within a week, they posed as man and wife and rented a room at 403 North First Avenue in Canton. According to Munson, Eddie never confided in her, leaving their room in the evening and not returning until morning. On some occasions, she added, Eddie would stay out two or three nights before returning.

On the night of November 16, 1930, Eddie planned to go to Roseville to break into a gasoline station there. For whatever reason, he decided to take Munson with him. In talking to officials after the shooting, Munson related the following story, published in the *Canton Daily Ledger*: "Vrell took me into a Ford car and started driving. He did not say what he intended to do or where he was going. He drove to Roseville, where we arrived about 1:30 o'clock in the morning. He left me in the car which was parked by the depot. After an hour and a half he came back and drove the automobile up to the garage and oil station, and attempted to load the cash register in the car. Before he got the cash register in the car we were frightened away. After driving around a while we went back and again he became frightened and drove away without it, heading for Bushnell. The car went into a ditch and was wrecked and we started walking. Olaf Anderson invited us to ride with him. I got in the front seat and Vrell was in the back. I was sleepy and was dozing when I heard Vrell ask Anderson if he wanted to live. Anderson said he did and promised to do what Vrell wanted. The car was stopped on a side road and Vrell tied Anderson's hands and feet. I don't know what towns we passed through but I remember coming through Lewistown and St. David into Canton. At the corner of First Avenue and Locust Street, Vrell let me out of the car and drove away, saying he would see me later. I went to our room and after a few hours he joined me. He showed me a roll of bills, about \$200.00 I think, which he said he took from Anderson."

Olaf Anderson, of Jamestown, North Dakota, was on his way to St. Louis when he picked up Eddie and Munson shortly after daybreak north of Good Hope. Eddie then robbed Anderson, who was a pilot, and tied him hand and foot. After dropping Munson off in Canton, Eddie drove Anderson to Topeka, Illinois (near Havana) and dumped him in a field. Anderson lay in the field eight hours before being rescued. Eddie drove back to Canton, abandoning the car in a city park after removing Anderson's luggage and flying instruments. These items were recovered in the later search of the room shared by Eddie and Munson. Eddie bought Munson some new clothes and shoes with part of the \$200.00.

II. THE NIGHT – Saturday, November 29th

On the afternoon of November 29, 1930, according to Munson, Vrell announced he was taking a bus to Mattoon. Munson insisted that she had not misunderstood Vrell say “Macomb.”

Apparently Vrell did not want Munson to know where he was going, changed his mind later, or could not get a bus to Mattoon at that time. For whatever reason, Vrell boarded the bus from Peoria, with only one other passenger, a young school teacher from Colchester who had been visiting in Peoria and was returning home. As she recalls: “I remember the young man as he sat across the aisle from me. He was wearing a suit, white sweater, and a black rubber raincoat. He never said a word during the ride, and got off at Macomb while I stayed on and rode to Colchester.” On Sunday morning, when news of the shooting reached Colchester, she and some friends went to view Vrell’s body at the undertaker’s. This is when she identified him as the man on the bus, wearing the same clothes. This pretty young school teacher later became Luther Jackson’s daughter-in-law, marrying Bluford Jackson in 1935. She resides with her husband in Macomb.

After getting off the bus in Macomb, Vrell checked a pry bar he was carrying wrapped in green paper at the Macomb Transportation Company office. It is unknown exactly what Vrell did for the next 45 minutes, but shortly before 6:00p.m. he went to the Chamber of Commerce office and asked the secretary, Miss Minnich, about the employment situation in Macomb. He left shortly and returned to the transportation office to pick up his pry bar. The only time accounted for after that was when Vrell went to the Courthouse Square, where he met Bessie Keppler window shopping at Stocker Jewelers. Striking up a casual conversation with the stranger, Keppler recalls: “He told me his name was Eddie and asked if there was anything in the window that I would like to have. When I said ‘lots of things’ he insisted on knowing a particular thing. I told him I’d like to have a good wrist watch, as the one I had had broken. He had me point one out, and then asked me where I lived, because he said ‘I’ll get it tonight and bring it to you.’ Not knowing him, I didn’t want to tell him I lived in Macomb and said he couldn’t bring it because I lived out of town. He insisted on knowing where I lived, and when I wouldn’t tell him, he finally left.” Keppler learned of the shooting through the *Macomb Daily Journal’s* special Sunday edition. After reading about the shooting in the paper, Keppler went to look at the body and discovered that it was the young man she had talked to on the Square. Bessie Keppler still lives in Macomb.

At approximately 9:45p.m., Vrell entered the S&N Battery Station, a garage at 119 W. Carroll Street, which now houses the WKAI/WLRB radio station. At the time there was a driveway through the middle of the building, with offices on either side. Howard Newland, owner of the garage, recalled for the *Journal*: “I should judge it was about 15 minutes to 10:00, because my partner said he was going to the barbershop at 9:30 and he had gone. I was by myself when the bandit came in and said he was going to wait for a fellow to meet him at 12:30. I told him he would have to wait out in the rain as I would close up before then. I noticed when he talked he

acted like his throat was soar, and I remarked that he acted like I felt. He said he had taking aspirin all day. He acted queer. He had only been there about 25 or 30 minutes when the back door slammed. It startled him. I went out to put a generator on a car. I told John Links he did not look good to me and told him tell his father to come down and look him over as I knew he was looking for a man.”

When Albert Links’ son, John, approximately nineteen years old, called the police, “Opie” Whittlesey, Links and “Cotton” Bowman responded. Arriving at the garage at approximately 11:20 p.m., they approached Vrell and questioned him. Apparently not getting satisfactory answers, Whittlesey patted Vrell down, discovering and removing the pry bar. The foot-long bar, straight on one end and curved around the other, was widely used as a burglar’s tool to pry open doors and locks.

Mr. Newland continues: “The first thing I knew Whittlesey, Bowman and Links’ father came in. I told Opie this fellow did not look good, so Whittlesey said, ‘We will look him over.’ I turned my back and could not tell whether they took a gun or a broomstick out of his coat, I just saw the shadow of something they took from him. They took him to the police station. I think his name was Harding. He told me he was a contractor in Peoria. I asked him questions at random, thinking he would say something so I could find out what he wanted. He said he was going to wait for this fellow until 12:30 at the Pontiac and Oakland garage. The old garage sign is still over the building. Whittlesey ran his hands up and down the bandit’s sides to his shoes, searching him thoroughly, but he probably could have concealed a gun in his sleeve or over his shoulder.”

The bar having been taken from him, Vrell was told he would be transported to the police station. At this point Vrell made no attempt to escape and got into the police car obediently. Whittlesey got in the driver’s seat, Links got in the front with Whittlesey, and Bowman and Vrell sat in the back seat, with Bowman behind the driver. Whittlesey drove the car, a 1930 Ford sedan, the short distance to the police station on the southwest corner of the Square, which is now Pagliai’s Pizza restaurant. By the time the southbound car stopped in front of the station, Vrell had decided on his course of action.

As Whittlesey and Links simultaneously started to step from the car, Vrell suddenly reached into his right raincoat pocket and gripped the nine-shot semiautomatic pistol that Whittlesey had overlooked during the patdown, most likely because of the rubber material from which the raincoat was made. Bowman noticed Vrell’s movement instantly and thus had a second’s warning. As he later told Lennis Bliven, “He made a pass for his gun, and I grabbed for mine, but he beat me to it.”

Vrell opened fire from his pocket, sending three bullets into Bowman’s right side. One bullet entered just below mid-chest and exited through his right chest; a second entered just above his waist, while a third struck him just below the waist. One of the bullets, possibly the one that

struck Bowman above the waist, also went through his right elbow. All printed reports of Bowman's wounds described him as having sustained five, but only three holes were discovered in Vrell's pocket. Considering the number of bullets striking the other officers, the author is led to believe that the wound in Bowman's right chest was an exit wound and the wound in his elbow was caused by the same bullet going in just above his waist. These last two wounds had been thought to be the result of a fourth and fifth round's striking Bowman.

The three bullets striking Bowman knocked him back against the rear window, after which he collapsed on the floorboards, mortally wounded. The next two bullets were directed at

Whittlesey, standing in the street and probably bending over to see what was happening in the car. One bullet struck Whittlesey in the right cheek just under his eye, almost certainly killing him instantly; the other entered his right shoulder. Whittlesey fell into the street beside the car. Vrell then turned his gun on Links, who was attempting to draw his own gun, and shot him in the right groin and in the fleshy area under his right arm. Links fell into the gutter between the car and the sidewalk and began yelling for help. Vrell, in the meantime, had gotten out of the car and run around it in order to get in the front seat.

About this time, Luther Jackson, who had been inside the police station, looked out the front door just in time to see the shooting start. Jackson, well over six feet tall and weighing 280 pounds, "filled the doorway" someone later remarked. Coming outside, Jackson raised his own sweater with his left hand in order to reach his gun, a .45 calibre Smith and Wesson revolver in a shoulder holster. Vrell spotted Jackson and fired his last two bullets at him, striking Jackson in the right wrist and grazing his massive abdomen. (Jackson later delighted in pulling up his shirt and showing anyone who would look the scar where he had been grazed.) Jackson succeeded in getting his gun out and emptied it at Vrell as Vrell, who by now had gotten in the driver's seat of the police car, was driving away.

Jackson did not hit Vrell, but the reader must remember that Jackson, shooting a veritable cannon, was wounded through his gun hand and doubtless had great difficulty in obtaining any accuracy. Jackson evidently did succeed in shooting out the right side windows of the police car as it pulled away from the curb. While Jackson's details of who was shot in what order differ from what is believed to have actually happened, the reader must again remember that Jackson had suffered a very painful wound and was under tremendous stress from seeing his fellow officers shot.

Jackson told the *Journal*: "I had just answered a phone call in the middle room of the police station and was talking to some man. Just as I hung up the receiver, I turned around and went to the front door and saw there were shots being fired in the police car. I went out close to the front of the car. As I stepped from the station toward the car, I saw Whittlesey. I saw a man in the front seat of the car shoot. Whittlesey and he fell backwards on the opposite side from me. I made an effort to get my gun and raised my left hand to my sweater. As I reached under my

sweater for my gun, a shot was fired by the man who shot Whittlesey and shot me through the hand. Immediately another shot was fired and it grazed my chest before I had drawn my gun. Al Links fell at the back of the car in the gutter. As he fell, there was a continuous shooting in the car and Cotton Bowman fell against the back glass in the car next to the station. I saw Cotton's rubber coat through the door. I shot five times at the man in the front seat. Bowman and Links were calling for help, my men were down and the man under the wheel started the car. I felt sure Bowman was dead. I asked the folks to help me get the men inside and demanded of two or three of them to help and they took the men inside. I saw they were gasping for breath and I ran to the telephone and called Clara Braun and told her to get all the doctors to the police station as quick as she could."

Jackson, having emptied his gun at the fleeing police car, rushed back inside the station and called Miss Clara Braun, the telephone operator, and instructed her to call the doctors of the community for medical help. Braun was apparently very efficient at her job, as Drs. J.D. Davis, Holmes, Howell, Carnahan, Adams, and Hermetet all responded to her calls almost immediately. After calling Braun, Jackson went back out into the street in time to see the police car crash into a front yard three blocks away.

Jackson's account continues: "My hand was bleeding profusely, and I was scared and am not ashamed to tell it as it was a precarious time. I asked the folks to help me get water to the men. When the boys saw my hand bleeding, they took me to the back room. It was giving me great pain. They corded my arm and Dr. Carnahan came and I do not know what other doctor, but they seemed to come quick. Dr. Carnahan examined Whittlesey and directed Links to be prepared for the ambulance. Then he came to me and I told him I was not hurt seriously, but he said I might be hurt more seriously than I thought. He wanted me to go to the hospital, but I said, 'Let me go to S. McArthur Street, there has been a call for me there.' They took me to the hospital. Dr. Adams and Dr. Hermetet dressed my hand. When I got back, things were well under charge at the station. They had called Police Chief Ted Ford, nobody had even thought of it before. I told him two of our men were killed and the third badly wounded. Links was severely shot through the abdomen."

Homer Hixon, a Monmouth, Illinois, truck driver, had just stepped out of the Alligator Pool Room, located above what is now the Gin Mill tavern, in time to witness the shooting. Hixon recalled: "I came out of the Alligator Pool Hall about 11:10 or 11:20. My attention was attracted by shots fired near a car in front of the police station. I could not say how many shots. I saw Links standing by the right hand side of the back glass of the car, trying to get his gun. I saw Whittlesey fall; then another shot and Links fell, hollering for help. I ran to Links and dropped down. When I got within four or five feet of the car I asked what was the matter. The bandit was getting into the Ford sedan from the opposite side, with a gun in his right hand, holding the steering wheel. Then I saw somebody in the back seat. About this time Jackson was standing on the steps with a gun in his hand. Jackson went back to the telephone. When he came back the second time, the car was gone." Hixon's statement supports the belief that Bowman was shot

first. Hixon stated he heard some shots, with Whittlesey and Links standing outside the car before he saw Whittlesey, then Links, fall to the ground. Only after Vrell had gotten in the driver's seat of the police car did Hixon first see Jackson. Also, by his own admission, Jackson stated he heard shots fired inside the car before he saw Whittlesey and Links shot and then was shot himself.

What happened inside the police car as it traveled south on Lafayette Street has been the subject of much speculation over the years. All accounts agree that Bowman, lying mortally wounded on the rear floor boards, was able to rouse himself, draw his .45 caliber Smith & Wesson revolver, and open fire on Vrell. At this point, one version has it that Vrell fired at Bowman until he was killed by Bowman's fire. This, however, would not have been possible. Vrell's gun was already empty, having discharged its nine rounds while at the police station.

Another hypothesis holds that Vrell somehow managed to get one of the officer's guns. While possible, there was never any mention of any other firearms found in the car besides Bowman's and Vrell's. Further evidence that Vrell did not shoot back was the nature of the wounds inflicted on him by Bowman's deadly fire. Firing at point-blank range, Bowman put four rounds in row across Vrell's back. As Vrell slumped over to the right, Bowman followed him down, with the bullets passing through Vrell's body and out through the front windshield of the car, the pattern of holes arcing to the right. Bowman then fired a fifth time, this bullet striking Vrell in the back of the neck and coming out just under Vrell's nose. Vrell, badly mutilated from being shot at such close range, would not have been able to fire back.

The police car, now driverless, went out of control, jumped the curbstone, and struck the steps at the L.D. Wilhelm home, 329 South Lafayette. As Wilhelm, a retired farmer, described it: "I was at home and had not gone to sleep. I had heard a couple shots but paid no attention to them, thinking it was backfire from a car. In a few minutes I heard a racket. I went to the door, turned on the light, and heard a man groaning, calling for help. He said, 'Take me to the hospital. I am going to die.' The car was standing with the front to the south and west and the back to the step of my walk. The front door on the left hand side was opened and there was a man sitting with his hands on the wheel, his head on his chest and I saw he was dead. Bowman said, 'He killed three policemen and then he got in the car and started off. I got in with him, 'Bowman said, 'I killed him and he killed me. I'm going to die.' About that time Roy Stocker came across and Thompson and Cole and some young fellow took Bowman to the hospital."

From the time the police car stopped in front of the police station to when it crashed, only three minutes had elapsed.

There had been a dance going on in the Zahren building (now Kline's department store), just south of the police station. Archie Cole, a Deputy Sheriff, and Lennis Bliven, father of the incumbent McDonough County Sheriff, John Bliven, were on police duty there. Cole remembered: "I was taking tickets at the Zahren roof garden when I heard two policemen had

been shot. I left at once and went to the police station, where I saw Ed Whittlesey lying on the floor. A young fellow told me two men were dead in the car on South Lafayette Street. He took me in his car. I found the police car had run over the curb. I got out and approached the police car. A young man told me, 'Be careful, he may not be dead.' I saw a man slumped over the wheel. I grabbed his arms, not knowing whether he was alive. I found he was dead. In the back seat was Bowman with his head bowed over against the front seat. I asked him if he was hurt. He said, 'I got him.' I dragged the bandit's body out of the car and put him on the porch at the Wilhelm place with the aid of the neighbors. I looked for a gun on him and found none. I got some people to take Bowman to the hospital. The bandit wore some pants, an overcoat and a sweater. His pockets contained a handful of cartridges and a common bill-fold with a \$1.00 bill in it and two soiled handkerchiefs. There were no marks on his clothes except a cleaner's marking number in ink. I found that the bandit had one shot in the back of his neck and four shots as nearly as I can remember in his back that come out in front."

Lennis Bliven's account paralleled Cole's: "I was on police duty at the Zahren roof garden. It was around 11:30 when someone came in and said two men were shot at the City building. I ran down. Whittlesey was lying there. Jackson said, 'Somebody get water for them.' I got a cup of water and as I started back I saw Links lying on the north side of the building, and I asked him how bad he was shot. He said, 'I'm not shot bad, I'm just shot in the hip.' I washed Whittlesey's face as it was dirty. I put a good deal of water in his face and he roused. I called 'Opie,' but he never answered. I got a second cup of water before I noticed he was shot under the eye and I could not tell whether the bullet went in or came out. About that time three telephone calls came in. I only recognized one man's voice, that was Sam Thompson. He said a man was killed in the 300 block on S. Lafayette Street and wanted help right away. Cliff Leighty rattled the back door and I let him in. He looked at Whittlesey and said he was dead. Cliff Leighty and I got in my car and we went down to 329 S. Lafayette Street. The man who did the shooting was lying on the porch and was dead. They said Bowman was taken to the hospital. Cliff did some telephoning, calling the undertakers. We got out to the hospital in time to help undress Cotton Bowman and Bowman kept saying, 'It's too late, boys,' several times. I saw four holes in his body, one in his chest on the right side, one through the right elbow, one lower down just below the ribs on the side and the other on the right side two or three inches lower. Bowman said, 'I hated to kill him, but he shot me.'"

Sam Thompson and Roy Stocker, both of whom lived in the same block where the police car had crashed gave their accounts to the *Journal*. Thompson recalled: "I just stepped out on the porch at my house two doors away from the Wilhelm home, across the street west. I saw a car coming, the speed of which attracted my attention. I saw a light flash, but I do not know whether the light reflected from an arc light or from the car; I heard a report of a gun or a backfire from the car. About this time I saw the car careen across the street towards the Thrasher house, then turned and went over the curb, hitting the step at the Wilhelm home, where it came to a stop. I ran down there and opened the door on the south side when the bandit fell into my arms. Bowman said,

‘He has killed three policemen, he has killed me, and I killed him, but I hated to do it.’ Bowman was lying on the back seat or between then seats. He raised his head, and I saw his face, and he said, ‘I am going to die,’ and I said, ‘Maybe not.’ Archie Cole, Leroy Stocker and myself put the bandit’s body on the porch of the Wilhelm home. Then we tried to get someone to take Bowman to the hospital. Finally Jerry Curtis took him and I think Stocker got into the car and held Bowman. Bowman was bleeding profusely about the head, his face a mass of blood.”

Stocker remembered: “I have the gun, a .45 calibre to turn over to whoever wants it, but I did not see any other gun in the car at the time. There were five exploded shells in it and one loaded shell. Bowman said, ‘He shot me five times but I got him.’ He said, ‘Rush me to the hospital quick.’ He was short of breath and loosened his belt, and kept repeating, ‘It’s too late boys, it is too late.’ Jerry Curtis drove the car out to the hospital and I held Bowman from the right side of the car. We took him to St. Francis Hospital.”

Bowman, mortally wounded, was taken from the car and laid on Wilhelm’s porch. He repeated several times, “It’s too late boys, it’s too late.” Bowman also revealed the kind, caring, and compassionate man he was by his regret in having to kill Vrell, saying: “I hated to kill him, but he shot me.” Bowman was then taken to St. Francis Hospital, on the southwest corner of Johnson and Grant Streets. While there, he was operated on by Dr. Holmes, who discovered that Bowman had been shot through the liver. Bowman remained in critical condition, too weak from the loss of blood to give an account of what took place.

III. THE AFTERMATH

Vrell’s corpse was taken from the police car and also placed on Wilhelm’s porch. Martin Mortuary, located on the northwest corner of Lafayette and Carroll Streets (now the Cakes, Etc. bakery) was called and they picked up the body. They could not find any identification on Vrell, as it was later discovered that he was in fact wearing the kidnapped Anderson’s clothes. As Vrell’s body was being prepared, McDonough County Sheriff Paul Eackle, serving his last day as Sheriff, went to view it. Having been close friends with Whittlesey, Eackle was suddenly overcome with rage. He began pounding on the dead body with his fists, yelling, “You son-of-a-bitch, you goddamn son-of-a-bitch!” He had to be pulled away and removed from the building.

Earlier in the week, Macomb Mayor John Graves had gone to Harrisburg, Kentucky, 78 miles south of Louisville, for the funeral of an aunt. Graves, grandfather of current McDonough County Sheriff John Bliven, was not located until 1:00 a.m. Sunday. According to Sheriff Bliven, city officials had called his mother, who in turn had to call two or three relatives’ houses to locate her father. After being told about what happened, Mayor Graves and two brothers left for Macomb at 3:00 a.m. and arrived at 9:00 p.m. Sunday evening, having driven the entire distance nonstop.

Because no one knew who Vrell was, Martin’s placed him in an open coffin and propped it up in their front window, facing Lafayette Street, so that passersby could view the body. The hope was

that someone would recognize him and supply his name. Numerous people who viewed the body stated they had seen him around town before, but did not know him. Vrell was at first believed to be Oliver Harding of Peoria. While city officials were trying to confirm this, Canton Police Chief E.R. Johnson, with Gus Coleman and Emil Sepich, also of Canton, came to Macomb on Sunday to view the body. Sepich, operator of the lunch room where Vrell had eaten regularly, identified Vrell as a regular customer, usually in the company of a girl. Sepich recalled: "When we heard of the shooting in Macomb Sunday morning, why, Chief Johnson, Gus Coleman and I went over to see the body, mostly for something to do. When we got to Macomb and saw it, I recognized him right away. I didn't know his name, but on Friday the 28th, I had started to build a partition in my store, and he came in and saw what I was doing and offered to build it for me, so I let him. I knew he was seeing a girl in Canton, so we went back and found

her." This was when Nellie Munson was found, and Vrell was finally identified. Emil Sepich is retired in Canton.

The tragedy had by then taken on greater proportions. On Sunday morning, November 30 at approximately 8:45 a.m., "Cotton" Bowman died of his wounds. He was 38 years old.

With positive identification of Vrell Sunday night, it was hoped that numerous burglaries would be cleared up. The shooting drew wide attention, with officials from Washington, Iowa, coming to view Vrell's body. They had had their Sheriff and Police Chief both killed by a car thief and hoped to identify Vrell as the murderer.

Vrell's father, contacted by McDonough County Coroner Herb Bobbitt on Sunday night, was undecided about whether to claim his son's body; he stated he would talk to his wife about it. On Monday, the elder Vrell and a Canton undertaker arrived in Macomb just before 11:00 a.m., claimed Vrell's body, and took it back to Canton. It was at the Vrell home in Canton where the Iowa men viewed the body. After an argument with Vrell's father, a witness to the Iowa shooting was finally allowed to view Vrell's body, but determined it was not Vrell who had been involved.

On Monday, December 1st, it was reported that Links, while still in critical condition, was showing some improvement. Links' sister-in-law, Marie Ruth, said that Links was joking about getting shot, saying Vrell didn't turn out to be a very good playmate. Upon X-raying him, it was discovered that the bullet which struck him in the groin had traveled up into his body, making his wounds much more serious than first believed. On Monday night, Links suddenly took a turn for the worse, and at 9:30 p.m., Albert Links died. He was 58.

On Tuesday, December 2nd, at 2:00 p.m., Macomb witnessed one of the largest funerals in the town's history. Services for Whittlesey and Bowman were conducted together at the First Presbyterian Church (on the corner of Dudley and Carroll Streets), chosen because it was the largest church in town. Cars lined all the streets in the area as over 1500 people attended. All

Macomb businesses closed for the funeral, and Galesburg sent eight uniformed officers to patrol the city streets while the funeral was taking place.

During the service, conducted by Rev. Walter Applegren and Rev. Ralph B. Fouts, Applegren said of Bowman: “He had the hand of a policeman, but the heart of a father and husband. A man riddled with bullets – still conscious of his responsibility – still determined to perform his duty against the destroyer of human life. And then, after it was all over, he said, ‘I hated to do it.’” Pall bearers for Bowman, who is buried in Industry, Illinois, were Sheriff Paul Eackle, J.W. Minnich, Deputy Sheriff Archie Cole, Policeman Earl Foster, Police Chief Ted Ford, and Policeman Luther Jackson. Pall bearers for Whittlesey, who is buried in Oakwood Cemetery, were Sterling Simpson, Edgar Conger, Deputy Sheriff Clifford Leighty, Ed Knowles, Lennis Blevin, and Leon Adcock.

On Wednesday afternoon, December 3rd, services for Links were conducted at the First Christian Church, of which Links had long been a member. Well over 700 people attended the service, with Links being buried in Oakwood Cemetery, just across the drive from Whittlesey.

Simple funeral rites on Thursday, December 4th, brought to a close the brief life and violent career of Eddie Vrell. The Rev. William Kilbourne conducted the services for the immediate family members at the home of Vrell’s parents, 142 West Hickory in Canton. Pall bearers for Vrell, who was buried in Liverpool next to two brothers and a sister, were Martin and Ralph DuBois, Lawrence Whitehead, Wayne Watson, Stanley Gibbons and Emory Crouch. The service was held at 10:00 a.m., several hours before the announced time to discourage curiosity seekers.

The forces driving Vrell to his desperate act will never be understood. He came from a respected family, none of whom had had any trouble with the law. His parents apparently worked very hard trying to keep their youngest son out of trouble, but he was determined to be a nonconformist. Written records were practically non-existent in the early twentieth century, so it will never be known just exactly what kind of trouble he caused before being arrested and sent to prison in January 1919. Even having been paroled three times, Vrell demonstrated time and again a tremendous disdain for law and order with the killing of three police officers his last lawless act.

IV. EPILOGUE

Thus ended one of the most tragic chapters in Macomb’s history. On Monday, December 1st, the Macomb City Council appointed three new policemen, Jesse Brown, Clarence Paulsgrove, and Lawrence Brown, with Paulsgrove and then Lawrence Brown later serving as Chief. A question of whether policemen were city officials or city employees arose because of insurance considerations. Officials were not covered while employees were. While that issue was being decided, the entire police force resigned, a new ordinance designating the police as city employees was passed, and the force was rehired as employees. On December 6th, exactly one week after the shooting, the City Council, in an attempt to standardize the Department, bought five .38 calibre revolvers, five holsters and bullet holders, five uniforms, but only four sets of

handcuffs, evidently feeling the Chief did not need any. In addition, a steel vest, a forerunner of the bulletproof vest, was taken on consideration, with the thinking that if it worked, all night shift officers would be provided with one. The purchase of "riot" guns, along with a machine gun, was also discussed at great length. The Council also voted to pay the salaries of the slain officers until the insurance matter was settled.

Of the seven weapons used or carried by the officers and murderer that night, only four have been located. Vrell's Spanish made .32 calibre semiautomatic pistol has always been in the custody of the Macomb Police Department. Berthol Bowman, oldest son of "Cotton" Bowman, locates his father's Army-issue (the underside of the barrel is stamped "United States Property") Model 1917 Smith & Wesson .45 calibre revolver and donated it for permanent display at the Macomb Police Department. Bluford Jackson, Luther Jackson's son, also donated his father's gun, an exact same Army model .45 revolver as Bowman's. Mrs. Margaret Ruth, granddaughter of "Opie" Whittlesey, donated one of the two guns carried by "Opie," a .22 calibre H&R "22

Special" revolver. Whittlesey's second gun, a .38 revolver, cannot be located at this writing. The whereabouts of the two guns carried by Links, a .22 and a .38, is unknown. Mrs. Marie Mudd Ruth, Links' sister-in-law, does not know what happened to them, and Links' granddaughters have never seen them. Also, as of this writing, nothing is known about the disposition of the police car. The *Canton Daily Ledger's* Saturday, December 6, 1930 edition noted that on Friday, December 5th, a representative of the glass company that made the car's windshield came to Canton with the windshield, to show the bullet holes in it. He then took it to Peoria. Nothing else is known about the car or windshield.

Nellie Munson, unable to supply any information about other crimes committed by Vrell, was taken to the Warren County Jail in Monmouth to be charged with the Roseville burglary and the Anderson kidnapping. While at Monmouth, Canton Motorcycle Officer George Greenwell, with Merle White, talked to Munson and learned that some money found in Munson's and Vrell's room in Canton had in fact been part of the money stolen from a Bushnell gas station. Munson was held in Monmouth until Monday, December 8th, when it was finally determined that although she was with Vrell during the burglary and kidnapping, Munson did not play an active part in either crime. Upon her release, Munson slipped from the public's view and at this writing nothing is known about what has become of her.

Life finally did return to normal in Macomb in the days following that tragic Saturday night. The Whittlesey family remained in Macomb, as did the Bowman and Jackson families. The Links family eventually moved away. The Vrell family, understandably stunned by Eddie's actions, refused to talk about him again, not even among themselves. Family members contacted by the author knew very little or nothing at all about their relative. Vrell's parents died in the mid-1930's, and the last immediate family members, a brother and sister, died within a few days of each other in 1975.

With the passing of time, new policies and procedures were developed for the Police Department. With these modern practices in use, it is hoped that the tragedy of November 29, 1930, will never be repeated.