

Police Used Klan Informers To Set Trap for Terrorists

PHW
2/14/70

On June 30, 1968, police in Meridian, Miss., ambushed and killed a Klanswoman, Kathy Ainsworth, and wounded Klansman Thomas Tarrants III while the two apparently prepared to bomb the home of a Jewish businessman. It was the climax of a series of unsolved killings and bombings of Negroes and Jews in that area. This is the second of three articles on the case.

By Jack Nelson

© 1970, Los Angeles Times

A bomb that wrecked Temple Beth Israel in Jackson, Miss., late on the night of Sept. 18, 1967, sparked the first drive for reward money to be used to solve the crimes. On the night of Nov. 21, another bomb shattered the Jackson home of Rabbi Perry Nussbaum. He and his wife, both asleep at the time, narrowly escaped injury.

After each bombing, A. I. Botnick went to Jackson to discuss the situation with Jewish leaders. Botnick was New Orleans director of the Anti-Defamation League.

Scattered violence against Negroes continued, but it was not until late on the night of May 27, 1968, that another anti-Jewish act occurred—the dynamiting of a synagogue in Meridian. Botnick rushed to the city and talked to Jewish leaders and other civic figures about the necessity of raising money to help the FBI solve the bombings. For some reason the FBI did not want to use money from its own fund for paying informants.

(For many years the FBI has

used this fund to buy information about the Ku Klux Klan; the system has paid off in convictions of Klansmen in several killings, including the Philadelphia, Miss., lynching and the nightrider slayings of Vila Liuzzo in Alabama, Col. Lemuel Penn in Georgia and Vernon Dahmer in Mississippi. In the case of Mrs. Liuzzo, a white civil rights worker slain after the Selma to Montgomery march, the principal suspect was an FBI informer who was in the car with the killers when they shot her.)

Airport Talk

Kenneth Dean, a young native Southerner active in civil rights, recalls that he and his wife discussed the Mississippi bombing cases with Botnick at the New Orleans airport on June 9, 1968, and that Botnick "became very anxious and said that something almost beyond belief had happened."

Dean said Botnick told of being asked if he would "make a contact somewhere in the North, such as Chicago, to have two Klansmen (the Roberts brothers) liquidated."

Dean said Botnick told him it was believed that Raymond and Alton Wayne Roberts were the source of much of the violence in the Meridian area and that was why they should be killed.

"Botnick said he was assured that if he could arrange the Roberts brothers' liquidation, there would be no investigation," Dean said. "Botnick said he could not do this." When the Times asked Botnick about the incident, he denied it occurred. "That's the wildest thing I've ever heard," he said.

Klan Harassed

In any event, by early June, the Meridian police department had adopted a policy of harassing the Klan.

The day after the bombing of the synagogue Meridian police detected L.L. Scarbrough noted in a written report that he had learned that the state had a "squad capable of causing a lot of harassment to hate-type groups and individuals who are chief suspects in acts of violence . . ." Two days later he wrote of discussing the situation with Meridian Police Chief Roy Gunn and assuring him "that there would be no innocent persons injured in any way." (Scarbrough cooperated with the Times in developing the facts of the case.)

"Realizing the tasks we were facing, Chief Gunn gave us his approval on this," Scarbrough wrote. "After already stressing that we had a free hand, and could go to any extreme to solve this case and other like cases . . . we did not hesitate a moment in making arrangements to ask the state for help."

The same day Gunn wrote a letter to state Public Safety Commissioner Gilés W. Crisler asking for investigative assistance and reporting that since Jan. 15 the Meridian area had experienced terrorist attacks on eight Negro churches, two Negro homes, a white home and a synagogue.

Early in June a former FBI agent began negotiating with the FBI and the Meridian police on behalf of the Roberts brothers. Detective Scarbrough said the intermediary "came to us and . . . told us that for the money I think we can find out who did it and we met with him and arranged a meeting with the informants."

Scarbrough said the intermediary wanted \$10,000 for himself and \$69,000 for the informants. At that time, the Jewish community and others in Mississippi had

pledged rewards totaling \$79,000 for the arrest and conviction of the terrorists.

The intermediary first approached FBI agent Frank Watts of Meridian, according to Scarbrough, and said he would work with Scarbrough but with no one else on the police department. "And as long as it was kept very confidential—he didn't want to be involved at all," Scarbrough said. "He was just wanting to be a go-between."

Met With Go-Between

On June 10, 1968, Scarbrough noted in his file on the case:

"Met with our intermediary and told him that we were ready to do business. He asked us about the money and we told him that we had met with a man (in an interview Scarbrough identified the man as Botnick) and he assured us that the money was available. He then called Weyne (Roberts) and told him that we were ready to do business. Wayne told the intermediary that he would go out to the shop and talk with Raymond.

"Raymond told us that it would take about three days to set up another job in Meridian . . . He stated that when the next job is set up we would have to stake out three different places and said there is always two alternates besides the real thing. The reason for this being 'goddamn pimps' like me.

"He stated that we would

have to hide these stake-out men real good because we would be dealing with professionals and they are sharp as hell. Raymond asked me if I could get some of the pressure taken off him and I told him that I did not set the policy, just investigated, but common sense would tell them if they cooperated with us the pressure would let up."

'We Wanted to Know'

(In an interview, Scarbrough was asked if he could recall the conversation with the informants when the possibility of another bombing in Meridian was first discussed. He paused for several seconds, then said, "Here's the way it went. We told 'em that if anything happened in Meridian we wanted to know about it. Regardless of what if was, we wanted to know where it was gonna happen. We had to do that to stay out of entrapment."

The following day Scarbrough and FBI agents Watts and Jack Rucker met with Botnick, who, according to a Scarbrough memo, told them a group of interested citizens had arranged to fly \$25,000 in \$20 bills to Meridian.

"Met with our intermediary and advised him that other negotiations were being made and if they did not 'come around' quickly they would lose the money and any leniency that could be offered by the court for state's evidence" Scarbrough wrote in the memo. "I told him that Raymond Roberts was dead and the only thing that would save his life would be to join forces with us and turn full state's evidence."

First Meeting

On the night of June 11 Scarbrough, FBI men Watts and Rucker, the intermediary and the Roberts brothers held the first of a series of meetings in a house trailer at Scarbrough's farm in Vinelle, about 10 miles from Meridian.

During these meetings,

the FBI agents participated in all negotiations for information and in all payments to the Roberts brothers, according to Scarbrough.

Scarbrough said he and the agents took a briefcase crammed with \$25,000 in \$20 bills to the June 11 meeting and "scattered it around" so that it would look like the full \$79,000.

Scarbrough said the informants were given \$1,000 as "good faith" money, but that in the beginning they provided little information. Scarbrough got a handwritten receipt for the payment which read: "June 12, 1968, received this date from Luke Scarbrough the sum of \$1,000 for services rendered." It was signed "Bobby Komoroski," a pseudonym for Alton Wayne Roberts.

On June 12 Scarbrough filed a memo quoting the intermediary as saying he was going to try to get the informants to testify for \$150,000. However, the Roberts brothers refused. Moreover, the FBI expressed doubt that any terrorists could be convicted on paid testimony, according to Scarbrough.

The next day one of the informants met with suspected terrorist Joe Danny Hawkins, who "showed informant two houses that had been shot into and a house with a sign stating 'peace' on it where they intended to commit a number 4 (Klan code for a murder). White people and colored people live in this house."

Immunity Sought

On June 18 Scarbrough reported that the informants had met with Hawkins "to plan a 'Number 4' in Meridian in the near future. Informants stated that if we would give them full immunity they would tell us who is responsible for all the church bombings," Scarbrough reported. "Informants wanted a written commitment concerning immunity which was given to them and signed by myself." Scarbrough later said; "I'd



THOMAS TARRANTS III



KATHY AINSWORTH

Associated Press

... Klan terrorists who were caught in a police trap.

have signed anything—to have caught Tarrant s. 'Cause he wasn't worth a damn anyway. They had me signing all kinds of crap, but who in the hell can they show it to."

The receipt for the second payment read: "June 18, 1968, received this date from Luke Scarbrough the sum of \$850 for services rendered." It was signed by Al Rose, a pseudonym for Raymond Roberts.

On June 20 the informants called Scarbrough and said that they had contacted Hawkins and that the home of Jewish businessman Meyer Davidson had been selected as a bombing target for the next week. Davidson had been a leader in raising the reward.

\$20,000 Demanded

The next day Scarbrough wrote, "After a lengthy session informants stated that they want \$10,000 each this date. I promised them we would talk to the people involved and see if we could arrange it and turn the money over to the intermediary."

By now the FBI and the Meridian police were holding daily strategy sessions, making plans for evacuation of the Davidson family for a stake-out of the Davidson home and for a demolition team to be on hand to disarm the bomb.

The informant reported that Hawkins had said he planned to use 28 sticks of dynamite with a timing device and place the bomb in the carport of the Davidson Home. It would be placed at

about 11:30 p.m. and would be timed to explode at 4:30 a.m.

The FBI, working through the Office of Naval Intelligence, arranged to have a demolition team come to Meridian. The team arrived at the Naval air station there on June 23.

Two days later the informants reported the bombing was scheduled for Thursday, June 27. The FBI and police staked out the Davidson home that night, but nothing happened.

The next day Scarbrough reported: "Tarrant s and Hawkins came to Meridian and picked up informer and stated that the reason they did not pull the job was because they have been pressed for time and they had to get some money. They stated that they are going to Alabama to pull a job. (Tarrant s and Hawkins) asked the informer why he was in such a hurry for this job in Meridian and he stated that he is going to be indicted by grand jury on Monday and it will probably would pull the job before Monday and it will probably be Sunday night."

(In arranging the bombing attempt, Raymond Roberts mentioned being under pressure because of the violence in the area, according to Scarbrough, and told Hawkins he needed him to carry out the bombing to get the "heat" off himself.)

NEXT: Meridian police and FBI agents wait in the darkness for the terrorists' arrival at the Davidson home.