

HORRIFIC CRIME IN SOUTH BEAVER TOWNSHIP

“Lizzie Borden took an axe....” Most of us are familiar with that little ditty and the story behind it. Not as many are aware that South Beaver Township once had its own Lizzie Borden, only his name was Paul Cook.

During the early morning hours of Wednesday, May 24, 1939, Paul Cook murdered his mother and father with an axe as they lay sleeping. He then blasted his sister with a shotgun before killing her, too, with the axe.

My late cousin, Peggy Jean Townsend, who was about twelve at the time, later wrote the following account of the crime.

“I was reading the American Girl magazine when Chuck (my father) came in. “Paul Cook killed his mother, father and sister,’ he said.

“There was stunned silence for a while and then we started to ask questions. “Chuck explained all he knew about it. Groetzingers had found the three dead. Paul was still free and the police were looking for him. It had happened during the past night. Paul had killed them with an axe and a gun.

“We attended the funeral and burial service in Highland Cemetery across from New Salem Presbyterian Church. My father and uncle Sam Moore were pallbearers. The scope of the crime was made far more real to me when I saw the three caskets side by side.”

Forrest Cook and his wife, Cora, along with 24 year-old daughter Eleanor and 17-year-old son Paul, lived on what is now Allen Road. Forrest, nick-named “Frosty,” worked at Manufacturers Light and Heat and was tax collector for the township. Eleanor had graduated from a business college and worked as a bookkeeper, while Mrs. Cook was a housewife. Paul was what would be termed today, a troubled youth, but in those unenlightened days was just a bad kid. He liked to drink, had been expelled from high school, and had stolen money and forged checks. The family had a 1939 Buick, but Forrest had forbidden Paul from driving it, or even getting his driver’s license, because he was so reckless.

On the morning of Wednesday, the 24th of May, 1939, Paul Cook drove his dad’s Buick into Blackhawk gas station which used to be on the corner of Rt. 251 and old Rt.51 in Chippewa and bought gas for the car. He told Walter

Gratz, the proprietor, that his folks had all gone to the New York World's Fair with friends from Ohio. Gratz knew the Cook family and was suspicious enough to call the police, and one of Walter's relatives drove to the Cook house to check on things. He didn't go inside, but an axe was found all covered with blood and hair, and the way the dogs were acting he could tell something was amiss.

The police soon arrived and the mutilated and bloody bodies of Forrest, Cora and Eleanor Cook were found on their beds. The search for young Paul was begun immediately as everyone was sure he was the guilty party.

The police stopped at the Buick dealer in Beaver Falls where they were told that Paul had just been there and had a radio installed in the car with the cost charged to Mr. Cook. About noon, the police found the Buick sitting in front of Beaver Falls High School with Paul inside talking to a buddy. The boy was arrested and taken to the B.F. Police Station and then to the Beaver County Jail where he was questioned. At first Paul denied any knowledge of the killings but became confused and his answers to questions uncertain and evasive. Finally, he told the questioning officer, "Yes, I did it because I was sore at 'em."

During the afternoon Paul was taken to his home and shown the bodies, which were still lying as found. The police captain who was with Paul wrote later, "I expected him to show some sign of remorse, to break out into sobs, perhaps to collapse. He did none of these. We took him over to the bed where his parents still lay. Cross wise on each of their faces was a gaping, bloody gash that went deep into the bone. It was a moment that nearly got me and I have been through a lot. But it never fazed Paul. For a split second there was a sort of stifled gasp as the horror of the scene burst upon [him]. But only one gasp, if it could be called that. In his eyes was a hint of moisture, but no crying. Callously he looked down at the dead bodies of his father and mother and turning to me, spoke: 'I did it!'"

Peg then wrote: "Paul had been declared to be insane at the time of the murder and had spent the years between 1939 and 1963 at Farview Hospital for the mentally insane. He was discharged when it was believed that he had been cured and then his murder trial was held. The jury found him not guilty by reason of insanity." The judge, district attorney and defense attorney all concurred in the verdict.

Peg goes on: “Paul, in his testimony, said he had loved his family until he was about 13. Then when in ninth grade he began to feel unwanted. He said he did not know he had killed his family and did not learn of it until 1945 when another patient at Farview told him about it.”

After his release from custody in 1963, “Paul worked at or owned a service station, I think, in New Brighton. At age 76 he was living in retirement along Park Road in Chippewa Township.”

I was only five when the crime occurred and, since my father, Sam Moore, was a pallbearer, I was probably at the funeral, although I have no recollection of it. I do remember that occasionally my sister and I would ride our bikes past the Cook house and we always hurried—it was spooky to us.

Sam Moore