

James Powers

(1861 – 14 Dec 1930)

The Evening Star, December 15, 1930, p. 1

Yeggman Killed By Police Bullet

Comrade Dying Following Gun Battle as Robbery Is Thwarted

One 69-year-old yeggman is dead and another gravely injured today after a spectacular battle with police, who surprised the pair attempting to break into the rear door of a grocery near Fourteenth and U streets last midnight.

Both men have served numerous prison terms since 1920 following their arrest in various parts of Canada and the United States on charges ranging from vagrancy to safe-blowing.

James Powers 69 years old, was killed outright, a bullet through his chest under the heart. His companion, Walter Moran, 59 years old, was shot down near the grocery door with a slug in his neck and another in his lungs. He is believed dying at Freedmen's Hospital today.

Moran insists he knows Powers only as "Harris," although a comparison of thumbprints and photographs of the pair, made by the Identification Bureau of the Department of Justice, revealed they had similar careers of crime and probably knew each other well.

In 1923, Moran was arrested in Washington State as George David and sentenced to five years in Walla Walla Prison on a safe blowing charge, police records show. He also had been arrested in Omaha, Nebr.; Vancouver, Canada, and Atlantic City, on charges of being a vagrant, pickpocket and bad check artist.

In 1925, Powers was sentenced to four years in the Federal Penitentiary at Atlanta for stealing Government property. Under various aliases, he did time in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and West Virginia State prisons on charges of robbery, grand and petty larceny – about 13 years in all.

Yeggmen Open Fire

A colored man, who explained he had done both professional and amateur sleuthing – Timothy McDonald – saw the two slip into a dark alley behind a chain grocery at 1935-1937 Fourteenth street. When they began to pry at the rear door of the grocery McDonald notified No. 8 precinct.

While Pvts. I.L. Murphy and S.F. Malone were speeding to the scene in a police roadster, McDonald saw Pvt. T.C. Lewis alight from a street car on his way to No. 8 precinct to report for duty.

McDonald told Lewis of the burglary attempt and Lewis hurried into the alley. He pushed open a gate in a fence about 10 yards behind the rear door of the grocery and saw two men at work there, one holding a flashlight while the other pried at the door with a pick.

Lewis got out his gun and, still holding the gate open, shouted "All right, there, stick 'em up!" As he did so, Lewis said, the man with the flashlight ran toward him, shooting twice at close range.

Lewis said the second explosion was almost in his face. He knocked the man's arm upward, he said, just as the gun went off. As the man with the flashlight ran through the gate, his companion, charging in his wake, aimed a blow at Lewis with the pick. Lewis said he ducked and opened fire, shooting five times at the man with the pick who dropped in the yard.

Then Lewis swung and aimed at the fleeing man. A crowd, however, had been in the alley and Lewis was forced to withhold fire.

Just as the fugitive ran out of the alley, Murphy and Malone drove up. They called to the man to halt and followed him in their automobile for half a block east on U street, when he disregarded them and kept running down the sidewalk.

In front of 1324 U street Murphy leaped from the automobile and again commanded the man to halt. The latter was only about 20 feet away. He swung, Murphy said, and leveled a revolver, shouting, "Like hell I will!"

Then Murphy fired. The bullet hit the man near the heart. He was taken to Freedmen's Hospital in the police car and pronounced dead on arrival there by Dr. W.N. Muldron. The other yeggman also was taken to the hospital.

Inspector William S. Shelby, chief of detectives, ordered Lewis and Murphy held for a coroner's inquest Wednesday. Both, however, were commended by their superiors.

Guns were found on both men, police said. A gun with two exploded shells in the cylinder lay on the sidewalk near the spot where Harris was killed.

Police say they found a bottle of nitroglycerin, a fuse and percussion caps in the dead man's pockets. A set of burglar's tools was located near the door where the two men had been at work.

The caps were similar to those used in the post office robbery at Annapolis several weeks ago and a safe cracking at Alexandria, the police determined today.

Moran is not expected to live. He said he met Powers at Eighth street and Pennsylvania avenue only an hour before they went to the store together.

Fingerprints Are Unidentified

"We picked the store because it was dark and there was a safe which we believed had plenty of money in it," Moran is quoted as having said. Moran denied any connection with previous robberies.

McDonald said he was visiting in an apartment overlooking the alley when the two men entered. He telephoned the precinct when he saw them set to work with a pick.

Lewis threw McDonald his key and told him to put in another call to the precinct through the police box, while he went into the alley. This McDonald did.

Moran asked for a priest last night and last rites were administered by Rev. Francis J. Hurney, pastor of the Immaculate Conception Church. A police guard was set up at the hospital and will be maintained while Moran remains there.

The Evening Star, December 16, 1930, p. B1

Coroner To Sift Slaying of Yeggs In Street Battle Second Robber Dies Without Coherent Statement – Record Being Traced Operations In District Under Investigation Pair Caught in Act of Breaking Into Store by Police – Inquest Is to Begin Tomorrow

Following the death in Freedmen's Hospital last midnight of Walter Moran, 59-year-old yeggman, whose companion was killed outright by police bullets late Sunday, a coroner's jury will open an inquiry tomorrow morning into the circumstances of the shooting which occurred at Fourteenth and U streets when the pair was surprised attempting to break into a grocery.

Moran, hit in the neck and chest, died before police could get a coherent statement from him. Both he and the other man, James Powers, 69 years old, had been convicted in various parts of the country during the past 30 years on offenses ranging from vagrancy to safe blowing.

The two No. 8 police precinct privates who did the shooting, T.C. Lewis and I.L. Murphy, are being detained at their precinct pending the inquest.

Other Crimes Sought

Moran denied having ever seen Powers before up to a few hours prior to the time they set about to blow the safe in a grocery at 1935-1937 Fourteenth street. Police believe, however, that the pair had been operating together in the District for some time past, a supposition which the injured man denied.

After the inquest, their bodies will be held at the morgue for a reasonable length of time to allow possible relatives to claim them. If not identified they will be consigned to Potter's Field.

Timothy McDonald, colored, noticed the men trying to force the rear door of the grocery with a pick. He called the police station and then saw Lewis alighting from a street car nearby.

Gun Battle Is Fatal

McDonald told Lewis what was going on and the officer hurried to the rear of the grocery. He swung open a gate near the door and ordered the men to surrender.

Powers shot twice at Lewis, but missed in his haste to escape. Moran rushed the officer and swung on him with the pick, a moment before Lewis shot him twice.

Meanwhile, Murphy had driven up to the mouth of the alley in a police car. He saw Powers run out brandishing a revolver, and followed him in the automobile. Dashing along the sidewalk, Powers refused to halt and Murphy, stepping from the machine, shot him dead.

A bottle of nitroglycerin was found on Powers. Both men had loaded guns and a complete set of cracksman tools lay near the grocery door.

The Evening Star, December 17, 1930, p. B1

Police Commended For Yegg Battle

Pvts. Lewis and Murphy Are Congratulated as Coroner's Jury Gives Verdict

The policemen who shot one yeggman to death and fatally wounded his companion after the pair was surprised attempting to break into a grocery at Fourteenth and U streets Sunday night were absolved of blame in the encounter by a coroner's jury this afternoon, which commended the officers for their "courage and efficiency."

It required only five minutes for the jury to make its decision and members then shook the hands of the policemen, Pvts. Talmadge C. Lewis and Ivy L. Murphy of the eighth precinct. The verdict read: "We find the officers shot in self defense and in line of duty and we commend them for their courage and efficiency."

Long Records Traced

The officers had been detained at their precinct under technical arrest pending the coroner's inquest.

The yeggmen, both of whom had long criminal records, were identified as Walter Moran, about 50 years old, and James Powers, some 10 years older.

Bodies Rest in Morgue

The bodies of the two yeggmen will be held at the District morgue for a reasonable length of time, in case some one should wish to claim them, and then will be consigned to the Potter's Field.

When asked by Lieut. Edward J. Kelly of the homicide squad if he had any relatives he wished to notify, Moran is quoted as having said just before his death that it would not be necessary to notify any one but an undertaker. No one has advanced a claim for the body.

The Evening Star, December 19, 1930, p. B1

Yegg Who Embraced Religion At Death Gets Christian Burial

Catholic Charities Society Claims Body of Desperado Who Called Priest to Administer Last Rites

Because he embraced the church on his death bed, one of two yeggmen who died from police guns Sunday night will be saved from a pauper's grave.

Walter Moran, with slugs in his neck and chest, called for a Catholic priest in the early morning hours of Monday.

Father Francis J. Hurney, pastor of the Immaculate Conception Church, responded. What passed between the two men in the Emergency Hospital ward that morning, Father Hurney never can say.

Moran did, however, return to the church. To Capt. Edward J. Kelly of the homicide squad, he said: "Notify my friends or relatives? No, notify the undertaker." Moran died a few hours later without giving police any information.

Both he and his companion, James Powers, had long criminal records. Moran fell fatally wounded and Powers died on the spot when No. 8 precinct officers surprised them attempting to break into a grocery near Fourteenth and U streets.

The District Catholic Charities claimed the body at the Morgue last night. It was removed to the funeral parlors of W. Warren Taltavull at 3619 Fourteenth street for burial in Mount Olivet Cemetery at some undetermined hour tomorrow.

As for Powers, his body remains at the Morgue. If no one calls for it, it will go to the Potter's Field in a week or so.

The Evening Star, December 20, 1930, p. B1

Police To Provide Funeral For Safe-Cracker Killed Here Officers Rescue Body of Slain Gunman From Grave in Potter's Field

James Powers, veteran safe cracker and gunman, whose criminal career was ended by a policeman's bullet Sunday night, is going to be given a "decent, Christian burial" by officers of the law he held so long in contempt.

Learning that Catholic authorities had arranged for services over Powers' comrade in crime, Walter Moran, also killed by police, headquarters detectives and police today raised a fund to insure comparable rites for Powers.

Inspector William S. Shelby, chief of the Detective Bureau, took charge of the funds, which came to him in the form of dimes, quarters, half dollars and dollars, contributed by members of the force.

Powers' body is at the Morgue and would have been consigned to the potters field without ceremony had not the police taken a hand in the situation. Funeral arrangements will be completed next week.

The body of Moran was removed from the Morgue Thursday by the Catholic Charities and placed in an undertaking establishment, preparatory to interment in Mount Olivet Cemetery today. Moran called for a priest Monday morning, and Father Francis J. Hurney of Immaculate Conception Church administered last rites of the church.

Power was killed instantly and Moran shot fatally late Sunday night as they were about to break into a store near Fourteenth and U streets. The shooting began when police of the eighth precinct arrived in response to a citizen's alarm.

Veteran police reporters said the case was unparalleled in the history of the force.

The Evening Star, December 23, 1930, p. B1

Gunman's Funeral Takes Place Today James Powers, Recently Slain by Police, Is Given Christian Burial

A veteran gunman and safe cracker whose career was ended by a bullet from a gun fired by the police he held so long in contempt will be laid to rest today in Congressional Cemetery, while those he had flaunted stand by with lowered heads.

James Powers now rests in a casket bought by those same police, and at 2 o'clock today that casket will be carried from Lee's undertaking establishment, 332 Pennsylvania avenue, by those who hunted him.

Powers was killed in an alley a week ago when police surprised him and his partner in crime in the act of breaking into a local store. Powers died instantly – his pal, Walter Moran, who fell also with a policeman's bullet in his body, died a day later.

The police, whose bullets brought to an end two careers of crime which stretched from the East Coast to the West and from the South to Canada, a week ago learned that Moran would be given a Christian burial by Catholics.

Powers' body was doomed to dismal Potters' field – but the police felt sorrow for him – and today in full uniform they will watch his bullet-ridden body lowered into its final resting place in a casket purchased with money from their own pockets.