

Ballistic Testing Helped Solve Rockingham County Case

Editor's Note: *The new "Clerk's Corner" series is produced by the Rockingham County Clerk of Court's Office. It will include local stories taken from preserved, historic court records that will cover a broad span of crime and legal topics. Think of it as local, historic true crime from the source. The column will be written by a rotation of authors. "Clerk's Corner" will run the first and third Friday of every month.*



Clerk's Corner

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Did you know that one of the first cases to involve ballistic forensic testing by the FBI occurred in Rockingham County?

On the morning of Dec. 9, 1935, a neighbor of John H. Loker walked over to the Loker farm to help the 66-year-old man shuck corn but was shocked to find Loker's "shot-riddled" body lying on the small pathway leading to his home. Upon investigation, police were quickly able to conclude that Loker's reputation for keep-

ing large sums of cash had led to a robbery of his home and that Loker had likely returned from tending his fields at the wrong time. It was later determined that over \$2,300 was missing from Loker's residence.

Despite knowing the primary motive and circumstances surrounding Loker's murder, Rockingham County police had a

difficult time narrowing down their pool of suspects in the first few weeks of their investigation. To assist with the process, police sent the fingerprints of eleven suspects to the Federal Bureau of Investigation for testing. At the FBI's Criminological Laboratory in Washington, D.C., (established only three years earlier in 1932), analysts

compared the fingerprints of the eleven suspects to the ones found on a broken window at Loker's home. Having found Loker's own shotgun a few feet away from his body at the initial crime scene, police also asked the analysts to attempt a ballistics test to determine whether or not the shotgun had been used in the murder. On January 14, 1936, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover sent a letter to the Rockingham County chief of police, confirming that Loker's shotgun had been the weapon used to kill him.

Before they could even receive the results of these tests, however, Rockingham County police caught a break in the case when local resident Carl Turner confessed to being part of the plot to rob Loker. Turner had entered the police's initial pool of suspects when he began spending large sums of money around Harrisonburg in the days following Loker's murder.

Upon being questioned, Turner told investigators that he knew the individual who had killed Loker, but he eventually confessed in early January to being part of the crime when he felt guilty about giving the name of an innocent person. In addition to admitting that he had been the one to kill Loker, Turner revealed that Loker's nephew, Lester Loker, had come up with the plot to rob his uncle and assisted Turner with breaking into his home. Turner also named four women, Nellie Williams, Christine Williams, May Williams and Virginia Williams, as accomplices in the crime, noting that they knew about the plot and even helped the men hide the stolen money in the woods surrounding John Loker's farm.

Ultimately, Carl Turner, Lester Loker and Nellie Williams were all charged and convicted for the robbery-turned-slaying of John H. Loker. During the

trials of Carl Turner and Lester Loker, FBI analysts traveled from Washington, D.C., to Harrisonburg to testify that the physical evidence from the broken window and Loker's shotgun matched Turner's confessions. Both Turner and Loker served life sentences at the Virginia State Penitentiary, while Nellie Williams was sentenced to serve six years at the same prison.

The \$2,300 that Carl Turner and Lester Loker killed John Loker over has never been recovered. According to newspapers from the time, Lester Loker may have burned the money after hearing about Carl Turner's confession, or most of it may still be buried in the woods near Elkton and could be waiting to be discovered by future generations of Rockingham County residents.

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