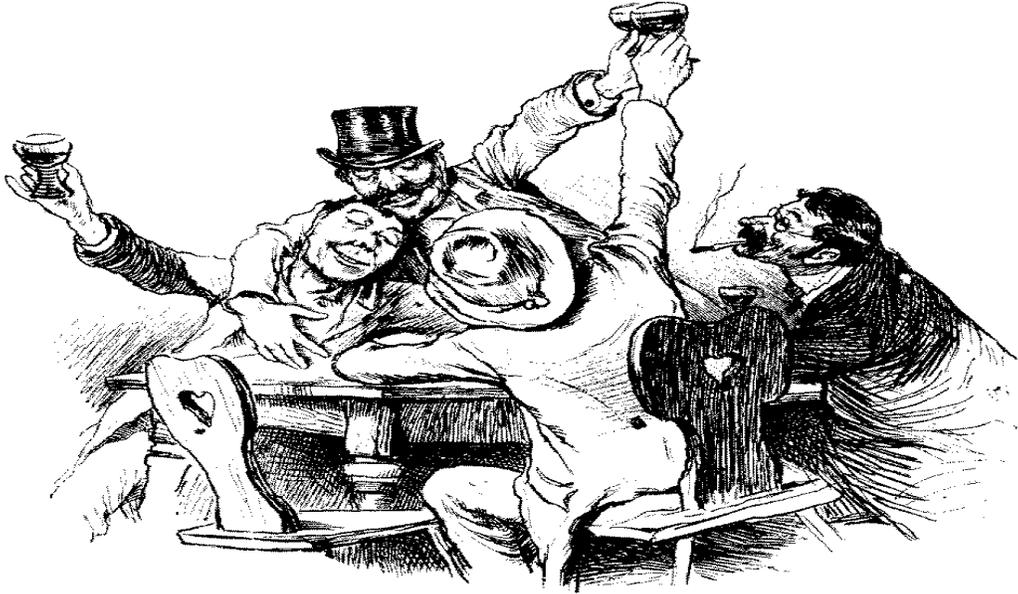


The Unsolved Shooting of a Woodbury Van Sise

by Tom Montalbano



The Van Sise family established homesteads in Syosset and Woodbury before the American Revolution and soon scattered itself throughout the area. On a parcel along Woodbury Road through which Froehlich Farms Boulevard now passes, Nathaniel B. Van Sise and his wife raised their five sons and three daughters. Nathan had turned 61 in April of 1890. His middle son, Frederick, was barely 22.

The Woodbury Van Sises were known to be passionate about politics, frequently arguing their political ideologies in a dimly lit, unlicensed gin mill located in the basement of Charles Gunther Keil's hotel in Manetto Hill, the area now known as "Plainview/Old Bethpage." Gunther Keil, a politically connected farmer and hotel keeper, turned 76 in 1890. Having survived a brutal stabbing in Jamaica, Queens eighteen years earlier, Keil had become a hardened man who stashed a double-barrel shotgun behind the kitchen door of his establishment and pulled it out whenever patrons became unruly.

Like Keil's business itself, the surrounding neighborhood had, for some time, attracted a rough crowd. In 1889, an elderly man got into a scuffle with workers from an adjacent brickyard and was beaten to death here. From this point forward, women and children were sternly warned to avoid this area, commonly known as *Keil's Grove*.

Boys' Night Out

Although the Woodbury Temperance Society kept a tight watch on alcohol consumption in 1890, many farmers made a regular habit of sneaking off to find a drink wherever one could be had. One prime opportunity was on the occasion of a political election, which often required that the men of the house spend the better part of a day traveling by horse and wagon to and from the nearest polling station.

The 1890 Town of Oyster Bay elections drew great interest from local farmers, whose fortunes were beginning to turn in the newly industrialized America. Eager to elect town officials whom they believed would restore their futures, all eligible men saddled up the night before "Town Meeting Day" and prepared to cast their ballots bright and early. In the hotly contested 1890 race for Town Supervisor, Gunther Keil threw his support behind Republican/Independent candidate, George W. Downing, while Nathan Van Sise and his sons backed the Democratic candidate, Scudder V. Whitney.

At 11:00am on April 2, 1890, Nathan and Fred Van Vise, along with their 36-year-old farmhand, Charles Mott Duryea, left Woodbury by horse-drawn carriage and made their way to the Farmingdale polling station, stopping at two hotels along the way for shots of whiskey, gin, and beer. After casting their votes for Whitney (as well as for Duryea's brother, William, who was running for re-election as Overseer of the Poor), the three men proceeded to another watering hole, where they ran into their friend, Gunther Keil.

Keil himself had been to the polls earlier in the day and had left discouraged by the impending loss of his candidate. As the four men consumed several rounds together, the Van Sises and Duryea continually ribbed Keil over the probable victory of Scudder Whitney. Exasperated, Keil eventually got up and left. The Van Sise clan followed shortly afterward, staggering through the streets of Plainview toward the next saloon.

After no fewer than four additional drinking stops, the Van Sises and Duryea found themselves at yet another tavern, where they once again ran into Gunther Keil. While hammering down three rounds of drinks, the Van Sises and Duryea witnessed a scuffle between Keil and their good friend, William Spoonheimer, in which Keil knocked Spoonheimer to the ground and stormed out. Assisting Spoonheimer to his feet, Duryea asked why he hadn't "knocked the old man's head off."

When the tavern owner informed the men that she would not serve them any more liquor, the two Van Sises and Charles Duryea exited the saloon and were about to head home when Nathan Van Sise insisted that they stop by Gunther Keil's first. Charles Duryea later quoted Van Sise as having said, "Let's go to Keil's and have a good time." Whether or not he was implying that the men should settle the score for Spoonheimer remains unanswered.

Once at Keil's, the Van Sises and Duryea wasted no time restoring the flow of liquor that had begun almost nine hours earlier. Gunther Keil's wife, Anna, served the men several rounds of beer and whiskey before retiring to the upstairs bedroom at approximately 11:00pm, leaving her inebriated husband alone with the three rowdy Woodbury farmers. Meanwhile, Mrs. Keil's daughter-in-law, Frances, waited in an adjacent bedroom for her husband, Charles, Jr., to return from his job at the polling station.

Downstairs, the drinking continued and the political discussion became more and more heated. At least twice during the next hour, Anna went downstairs to try to get the disorderly guests to leave. Despite her efforts, the verbal taunting became darker and even more aggressive, the Van Sises and Duryea at one point threatening to trash Keil's unlicensed bar if he did not serve them another bottle of whiskey.

It's All Fun Until Someone Gets Hurt!

Exactly what happened next may never be known. Gunther Keil claimed that, at around 12:30am, after continually refusing to serve the already drunk and disorderly threesome any more liquor, he was suddenly struck by the fist of Charles Duryea, a brawny man almost forty years his junior. In self-defense, Keil then grabbed a chair and swung it at Duryea, prompting both the younger and the elder Van Sise to join in the brawl. Keil stated that Frederick Van Sise then came at him with a wooden stick, taking wild blows and eventually cracking his skull with a strike to the head, sending him to the floor.



Both Nathan Van Sise and Charles Duryea claimed that it was *Keil* who instigated the clash when, at around midnight, Keil jumped up unexpectedly, hurled some insults at them, and threatened to shoot them if they didn't leave. On their way out, they maintained, Keil grabbed a chair and hit Duryea over the head. Defending himself, Duryea knocked Keil down with a single blow and all three men continued to make their way to the door.

However the confrontation began, it was Gunther Keil who ended it. Recovering from Duryea's blow, Keil scrambled to his feet, limped to the pantry, and grabbed his shotgun. He returned to the saloon and pointed the gun at Fred Van Sise, who ducked behind the kitchen stove for shelter. According to Duryea,

Keil followed Fred to the stove, placed the muzzle of the gun against his chest, and fired a single shot. As young Fred's heart exploded, the Keil family dog sprang up the stairs, howling.

MURDER ON LONG ISLAND

FREDERICK VAN SISE KILLED IN A DRUNKEN ROW

Stunned, Nathan Van Sise arose from his chair and pounced on Keil, who was still grasping the gun. A fierce struggle ensued between the two elderly men as blood and soot from a cracked stove pipe splattered the

saloon. Eventually, Keil struck a blow to Nathan Van Sise's head with the butt of his rifle, knocking him to the ground before shattering his leg with a second thrust so forceful that it fractured the stock of the gun.

Keil then found himself in a confrontation with Duryea, whom he lunged at with the broken gun. The melee spilled into Keil's backyard, where Duryea grabbed a picket from a wooden fence and turned the makeshift weapon on Keil. With merciless blows to the old man's head, Duryea ultimately battered Keil so badly that a physician later described his skull as "beaten to a jelly" and his face "unrecognizable." As Anna and Frances Keil ran downstairs to see what had happened, Charles Duryea disappeared into the darkness. Describing the bloody crime scene later on, the coroner stated that it "looked like a slaughterhouse, from floor to ceiling."

The Aftermath & The Coroner's Inquest

In the days that followed, police arrested - and then released - Gunther Keil, Nathan Van Sise, and Charles Duryea at different times, as neither investigators nor the coroner could establish the truth about the shooting.

Coroner J.S. Cooley of Glen Cove determined that Gunther Keil's wounds suggested that he had likely been attacked with blunt objects and, perhaps, a knife before firing the shot that killed Fred Van Sise, supporting Keil's claim that he had acted in self defense. Charles Duryea and Nathan Van Sise both maintained that, aside from a single punch thrown by Duryea after Keil hit him with a chair, neither had any type of physical confrontation with Keil until after he fired the shot that killed Fred Van Sise.

Keil's daughter-in-law, Frances, who had initially advised investigators that she had been upstairs the entire evening and had not witnessed any of the events leading up to the shooting, surprised many people at the coroner's inquest one week after the killing by appearing as an eyewitness. Contrary to her original statement, Frances Keil told the inquest jury that, unable to sleep with the quarrel raging in the saloon, she got out of bed at some point, went to the backyard, and peered into a window, where she saw Fred Van Sise raise a chair to strike her father-in-law. She added that, when Gunther Keil ordered him to put down the chair, Van Sise removed his overcoat and challenged Keil to a fist fight. Eventually, according to Frances, Charles Duryea diffused the situation, and she went back upstairs to bed, only to be awakened a short time later by the shotgun blast.

If Frances Keil's suspicious testimony weren't enough to infuriate Van Sise sympathizers, there was also the matter of the court's hastily assembled jury, which consisted of eight men, all of German background, like Keil, and some of whom were known to be his customers or acquaintances. Perhaps most questionable was the presence of Joseph Steinert, Jr., the son of the Justice of the Peace who had shown partiality to Keil from the very beginning. In the end, to the

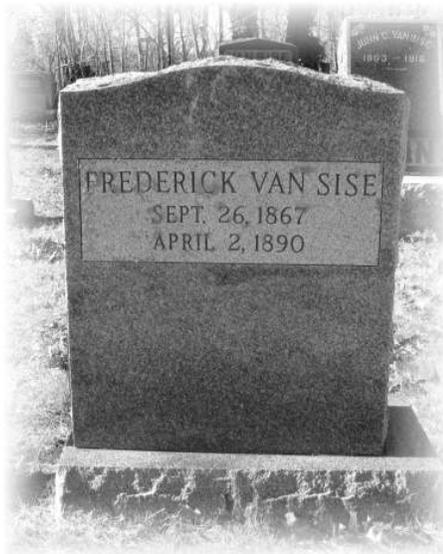
outrage of the Woodbury constituency that wanted to see Gunther Keil brought to justice, the jury determined that dents in the bloody fence picket collected at the scene were congruent with marks on Keil's shotgun. These, according to the jury's ultimate ruling, were likely caused by Charles Duryea's swinging the picket and inadvertently striking the trigger of the gun while Keil was holding it, accidentally causing the gun to discharge into Fred Van Sise's chest!

DID NOT MEAN IT

Strange Verdict in the Van Sise Shooting Case.

Although Coroner Cooley ultimately convinced a judge to try Gunther Keil on charges of Second Degree Manslaughter, the trial was postponed several times due to Keil's poor health and the death of his only (albeit *self-proclaimed*) eyewitness, Frances, who had apparently suffered an emotional and physical breakdown after the incident, and who died nine months later.

The Truth Taken To The Grave



In the end, the case was never brought to court. Nathan Van Sise died of cancer in October of 1893. Although his immediate family (particularly his son, John, who had witnessed the aftermath of his brother's murder) was never the same again, the Van Sise families of Woodbury and Syosset maintained their prominence in the community into the 21st century, when *Van Sise Farms* of Woodbury, the last memento of the family's presence here, finally changed its name.

Charles Gunther Keil passed away in July of 1894. All that is mentioned of the shooting in his obituary is that the case against him never went to trial, "it being generally accepted that the old man acted in self-defense."

Anna Keil, Gunther's wife, continued to live on the farm with Charles, Jr. and his second wife, who ultimately, turned the inn into a respectable business.

Charles Duryea passed away in 1924 and is buried in the Bethpage Cemetery, just a short distance from Nathaniel and Frederick Van Sise.

A perplexing twist to this story is the fact that, in social columns appearing in local newspapers during the following years, all three families involved - the Van Sises, the Keils, and the Duryeas – seem to have continued socializing with one another, even attending the weddings of each other's children. One can only wonder if, perhaps, the fatal shooting of Fred Van Sise was, simply, an accident among drunken friends, who decided it would be best for their families and themselves to let this gruesome memory fade into the ages.

**Post-Script: In the Town of Oyster Bay Election of 1890, Scudder Whitney, the Van Sise's candidate and friend, defeated George Downing by almost 400 votes. William Duryea, Charles' brother, also won re-election as Town of Oyster Bay Overseer of the Poor.*

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