

The Station Agent & The Mad Bomber

by Tom Montalbano



Syosset station crew, pre-1920: George Carnes, Floyd Jarvis, Albert Phesy

When you think of Syosset in 1915, you likely imagine nothing but a few farms, some newly-built summer estates, a general store, and a quiet railroad station where the ticket agent could be found snoozing at his desk almost any time of day. But in July of that year, the eyes of the country were on our sparsely populated hamlet for several days as police and federal agents re-traced the movements of a deranged anarchist who had blown up a Washington, D.C. congressional building and attempted to assassinate a prominent international banker.

The Setting

Although the first World War had been in progress for almost a year by mid 1915, America had managed to stay out of combat, opting instead to lend financial and weapons support to the Allied troops of Europe in their battle against the German army. Many of Syosset's newly-arrived millionaire summer residents were somehow involved in either the financing of the war or the production and distribution of weapons for the European front. This troubled some of Syosset's German-American population, but generally not beyond an occasional heated discussion at the local saloon.

An Ordinary Day

On June 20, 1915, Syosset's Long Island Rail Road Freight Master, George Carnes, took delivery of two cartons containing 120 pounds of dynamite from the Aetna Explosives Company of Long Island City. While such a shipment would undoubtedly raise eyebrows today, Syosset's farmers of the early 1900s commonly purchased dynamite to remove large stumps or boulders from their fields. In fact, in those days, anyone wishing to obtain dynamite could do so through the Sears-Roebuck catalog.

The packages were addressed to "Charles Hendricks," who picked them up at the Syosset train station on Jackson Avenue the same day. George Carnes later recounted that Mr. Hendricks, whom he had never met before, had badgered him relentlessly the previous week, contacting him daily to inquire as to whether the shipment had arrived. Ultimately, Carnes became irritated by the man's persistence and insisted that the inquiries cease. When the packages finally arrived, Hendricks signed for the shipment, loaded his dynamite into a small automobile, and drove away without incident.

The following day, Carnes received, for the same man, a shipment containing 100 feet of fuse and other materials typically used in the manufacture of explosive devices, as well as a small, sealed trunk with unknown contents. According to Carnes, the man arrived ten minutes after the freight house closed for the day but pleaded with him to surrender the shipment, promising that he would never bother him again. Eager to rid himself of the pesky gentleman, Carnes ultimately turned over the package and the trunk. In his haste, he did not notice that the recipient had signed his freight receipt for the first shipment as "Hendricks" and his receipt for the second as "Hendrix."

The Plot Thickens

Eleven days later, On July 2, 1915, a large explosion tore through the Senate chamber in Washington, DC just after midnight. D.C. officials had received several letters warning that a major blast was set to occur as protest against the shipment of arms to the European war front. No casualties resulted, but the enormity of the explosion prompted great concern among D.C. police officials, who immediately initiated a search for the bomber.



The very next evening, as news of the Senate bombing spread across the country, Glen Cove police thwarted an assassination attempt on JP Morgan, Jr, a prominent banker who played a key role in the USA's financial support of Allied troops. The would-be assassin had shot Morgan twice in the thigh and hip and had rigged an explosive device to detonate should authorities attempt to open fire on him. Fortunately, the plot failed and Glen Cove Police were able to detain the man, who identified himself as Frank Holt. When captured, Holt ranted that he was on a mission to end the flow of money and arms to enemies of his beloved Germany. While searching Holt's clothing and briefcase, police confiscated three sticks of dynamite and the revolver with which he had shot Morgan.

While in police custody, Holt admitted to having arranged the explosion at the Senate building. He also bragged about having rigged an undisclosed military munitions ship with fifty pounds of explosives set to ignite at a certain time. The story spilled across the front pages of the *New York Times* and other major publications from coast to coast.

The Syosset Connection

When the *Times* arrived in Syosset via LIRR the following morning, George Carnes was one of the first to get his hands on a copy. Upon reading that the gun recovered from the would-be JP Morgan assassin had been registered to a "Charles Hendricks," Carnes immediately sprang into action. He contacted the Glen Cove Police, who referred him to the Nassau County Jail in Mineola, where he immediately identified Frank Holt as the same man who had collected the shipment addressed to Charles Hendricks.

The news of Holt's arrest quickly spread through Syosset's small, tightly-knit population. For investigators, the question remained as to whether Holt was a lone madman or whether he may have had a partner, perhaps an individual named "Hendricks" who lived in the village where the shipment was received. When police and federal agents descended upon Syosset, knocking on doors and searching for "Charles Hendricks," suspicions flared, as many believed that an accomplice of Holt's might still be in possession of more than 100 pounds of dynamite, not to mention whatever was in the mysterious trunk.

A series of leads ultimately led police to Bethpage, where Holt had rented a small cottage for some time under the alias of "Mr. Patton." There, they discovered a small bomb-making laboratory, but did not uncover the arsenal of dynamite they had hoped to find. All attention still focused on Syosset, where prominent financiers hired body guards and everyday residents feared there might be a barn in the area filled with explosives that could suddenly blow and engulf the hamlet in flames. Meanwhile, Holt, while in police custody, attempted to take his life by slashing his wrist with a pen.

Ultimately, on July 7, investigators turned up at a New York City garage where they recovered the mysterious trunk that George Carnes had received at the Syosset railroad station. The trunk contained 134 sticks of

dynamite, three tin can bombs, two boxes of electric fuses, one box of blasting caps, one package of sulphur, one coil of fuse, one package of ammonia, one dry battery, one package of powdered rosin, one container of vitric acid, one package of wind matches, and six containers of mercury. These, according to Holt, were the makings of a deadly type of “infernal machine” he had developed, which could cause a horrific, delayed explosion using a combination of acids and common explosives. Upon examining the trunk’s contents, New York’s Bomb Squad Chief declared it the “greatest equipment for bomb making ever brought to New York.”

End of Story?

Although police – and the public – wanted to believe that Holt’s bombing spree was now over, there came to light the fact that the dynamite recovered in the trunk fell approximately sixty pounds short of the quantity received at the Syosset station on June 20. Therefore, investigators assumed there was still a large cache of explosives hidden somewhere.

The panic in Syosset continued, however unfounded it may have been. Overnight, rumors swelled around the hamlet that German sympathizers, perhaps collaborators of Frank Holt’s, were plotting horrific acts of sabotage against some of Syosset’s prominent residents and might even target common people who spoke out in favor of the war. The question remained: “Who was Charles Hendricks, and was he still at large?”

It became apparent that this and many other questions would go unanswered when news spread that, at almost the exact moment his explosives were discovered in Manhattan, Holt attempted suicide a second time by smashing his head against the floor of the Mineola County Jail. This time, he was successful.

The Aftermath

Although tension in and around Syosset eased somewhat on the day of Holt’s suicide, this very brief reprieve ended just one day later, when a cargo ship that had departed New York Harbor loaded with war-bound munitions suddenly exploded into flames, just as Holt had warned. Investigators later confirmed that the blast had been caused by an acid-triggered bomb similar to the one Holt had used to ignite the explosion in the Senate Chamber. This prompted the question of whether Holt – or an accomplice - may have planted even more bombs to go off over the next few days.



While investigators never positively confirmed that the delayed blast on the munitions ship was the work of Holt, they were relieved when days and weeks went by without additional incidents. Eventually, the residents of Syosset regained their relative calm after it became apparent that Mr. Holt had acted alone and was not the forerunner to a reign of terror that was about to unfold. In time, the millionaire financiers of Muttontown, Berry Hill, and Split Rock Roads released their body guards and the farmers stopped watching each other suspiciously.

Post-Script

In the days and weeks following the bomber’s suicide, overwhelming evidence, including an autopsy, confirmed that Frank Holt (alias Charles Hendricks, alias Mr. Patton) was actually Mr. Erich Muentner, a former Harvard professor of German language studies who had mysteriously fled Boston in 1906 after the suspicious poisoning death of his wife. According to associates and acquaintances, Muentner was a somewhat “disturbed” man, a self-described anarchist who often spoke against the unjust activities of the American government, behaved in a bizarre manner, and constantly mumbled about a plan to take revenge on America’s bankers, politicians, and all those he believed were waging an unjust war against the German people. Muentner had been on the Most-Wanted lists of several police agencies for nearly a decade at the time of his capture in Glen Cove.

Syosset’s George Carnes continued to serve as an agent at the Syosset railroad station, enjoying his celebrity status for some time, but surely exercising additional caution when receiving shipments containing dynamite. Police never located the remainder of Muentner’s explosives cache.