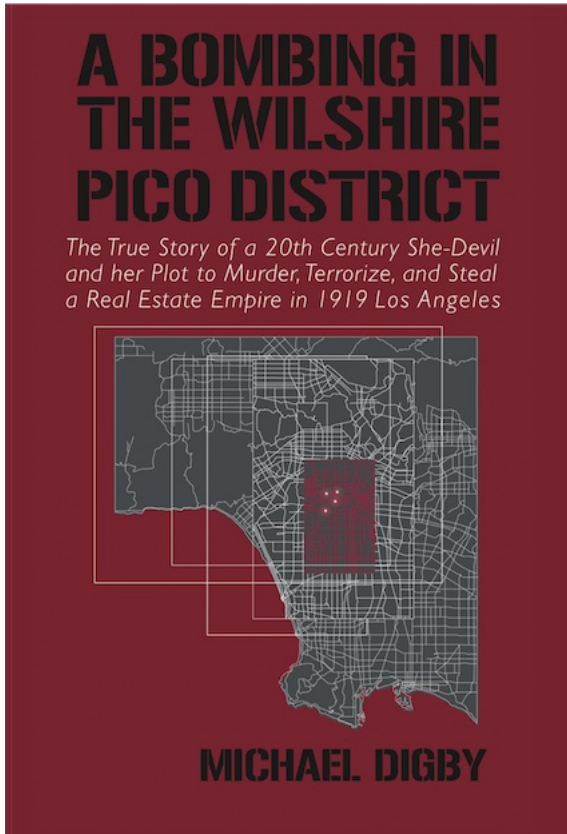


A BOMBING IN THE WILSHIRE PICO DISTRICT

*The True Story of a 20th Century She-Devil
and her Plot to Murder, Terrorize, and Steal
a Real Estate Empire in 1919 Los Angeles*



MICHAEL DIGBY



This is the story of a nascent band of amateur bombers, arsonists and thugs who attempted to murder, terrorize and steal a real estate fortune in 1919 Los Angeles.

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by Michael Digby

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Introduction

At about two in the morning, three men set off in their rented automobile with a plan to blow up a house on Wilshire Boulevard, not far from downtown Los Angeles. In the rear of the car, wedged tightly between the seats to prevent them from falling over, were two carefully wrapped bundles, each containing a bomb and coiled lengths of fuse. A rifle, perhaps two, lay across the top of the bundles.

They had driven this route before, from the 900 block of South Serrano Avenue, a distance which, given the early morning hour, would take them only about 15 minutes. They'd picked that time in the early morning so that darkness would conceal their movements and actions. They also knew that their intended victim and his family would be sound asleep.

Their preparations had been well thought out. In each of their prior attacks, they'd chosen a specific target, scouted each location more than once and decided on a plan to carry out the revenge they so desperately sought. While they were decidedly amateurs, they had already successfully sabotaged a home on one night and followed that up by setting fire to a home and a church on another. They were confident that they'd gotten away with all three attacks. Still, their list of targets remained long.

The men experimented with their plans and rehearsed. For the Wilshire Boulevard attack, they used sketches of a bomb, drawn up by the engineer in their group. They had spent the daylight hours building two "infernal machines," bombs that they expected would not only blow up the house and kill the sleeping occupants, but also burn the home to the ground and likely destroy all evidence of the crime. After all, they'd gotten away with it three times before. If things went well, they'd be at the site for no more than five minutes. They felt certain that was all the time they'd need.

The trio was as ready and prepared as they were ever going to be. Earlier in the day, they had gathered at their hideout, finished construction of the bombs, gone over their plans and decided on making a last-minute series of practice runs. It would keep them busy right up until the time of attack.

As darkness fell across Los Angeles that night, they traveled into the remote hills west of the city to practice shooting rifles and to conduct experimental burning of the fuse to determine the proper length of time-delay they would need. Finally, they packed all of the components of their “infernal machines” into one of two gunny sacks to make it easier to carry and conceal them.

If any of the three were nervous, it didn’t show. The infernal machines were meticulously built by the engineer: metal pipes filled with explosive powder, holes drilled into the pipes, fuses inserted. Then, metal containers filled with a special blend of flammable and explosive liquid chemicals were wrapped around each of the bombs. All of that was then carefully placed into a gunny sack. It was a particularly volatile type of bomb and it required a steady hand and a clear head to complete them without causing a disastrous accident.

Whether the full impact of what they were about to do ever occurred to them as they drove eastbound towards their target, will forever be unknown. They arrived in the vicinity of their target by about two o’clock in the morning.

The automobile slowed, then pulled into the alley east of South New Hampshire Avenue, right next to a home at the northeast corner of Wilshire Boulevard. They parked and the headlights were turned off. Remaining undetected and staying out of sight was essential. Having driven through that alley in the preceding days, the driver knew that there were three avenues of escape, in case something went wrong. He remained behind the wheel while the two passengers stepped out, each carrying a bundled bomb, cradling them tightly for fear of dropping them.

With the departure of the two passengers, the driver sat in silence in the shadows of two tall bushes that offered a canopy of concealment. Only the sounds of an occasional automobile passing on Wilshire disturbed that silence.

In front of the driver there was nothing but a dark alleyway. To his rear and sides, he saw nothing. But as the designated lookout, the driver had already failed. He was completely unaware that the presence of the auto and the actions of the two passengers had already attracted the attention of two night watchmen, each of whom stood on different street corners, more than 100 feet away, watching their every move. Their eyes were transfixed to what they would eventually describe as “suspicious activity.”

Moving quietly through the alley and keeping to the dark and shadowy recesses, the pair on foot whispered to each other. It’s not every day that one navigates an unfamiliar and dark alley in silence while carrying a big bomb. But neither of them, though filled with rage, had ever been particularly murderous by nature either.

As they crept forward in the alley, both men presented rather unremarkable appearances,—both purposely nondescript. Their hats were pulled low and the collars of their full-length jackets pulled up. As with anyone embarked on a mission of murder, one can presume that their hearts were pounding rapidly, that they were sweating beneath their overcoats, their breathing rapid.

They opened the unlocked gate from the north alley, entered the yard and then made their way along to the Wilshire side of the house. They knew where their target was probably sleeping, in a second floor bedroom just above the south-facing porch. Quietly, they knelt and unwrapped their bundles, placing the bombs only a few feet from each other, one under the porch and the other in a bush next to the porch. Both bombs were less than ten feet below their sleeping target. With a practiced nod, they uncoiled the time delay fuses and ignited them, knowing that it would give them five minutes to get away. A red glow of flame sizzled and spit from the bare ends of the fuses as they burned.

The duo hustled out of the yard, retraced their steps in the alley and returned to their parked auto. They barely had time to close the door and take their seats before the automobile accelerated northbound in the alley. Just as they had rehearsed, they had been on the ground for less than five minutes.

As they all sped away in the alley and turned south onto Vermont Avenue, the rush of adrenaline and euphoria got the better of them.

Two witnesses would later recall seeing three occupants of an accelerating automobile celebrating and shouting for joy.

Back under the porch at 646 South New Hampshire Avenue, there remained two burning fuses emitting a steady red-yellow glow as they inched closer and closer to the two bombs concealed in the satchels. It would not be long.

Chapter 7: The Serrano Street Bomb Cottage

While Maud was being interviewed at her home that Sunday afternoon by the two inquisitive LAPD detectives, an interesting event took place only a few miles away, and it seemed to indicate that she was not being forthcoming with detectives. As she had been in the company of detectives for most of that afternoon, she had no way of knowing that a search was underway at a bungalow located at 976½ South Serrano Street. It later became known as “the bomb cottage” by some, the “bomb factory” by others and its discovery would yield a goldmine of evidence.

Earlier in the day, the woman who owned the bungalow and lived in the front house at 976 South Serrano, a Mrs. Teitsworth, found a handwritten note on her front door. It was from her tenant in 976½ whom she knew by the name of Mr. McKee. She had grown quite suspicious of both him and his wife in the short time that they had been her tenants. There were some wild rumors circulating around the neighborhood about the couple, too.

Mister McKee had rented her three-room bungalow on July 20. In fact, Mr. McKee was apparently so anxious to move in that he offered a cash incentive to the current tenant to move out at once. He paid Mrs. Teitsworth cash to cover the ten days rent up to August 1 and she just assumed that he would continue renting even longer.

Because Mr. McKee was now three days overdue with the August rent, Mrs. Teitsworth became concerned. She kept her eye out for him. She had last seen him on the evening of Saturday, August 2. But he left so fast that she didn't have time to get his attention. As it turned out, there were many others who had seen him at that same time. McKee's movements became more fodder for the neighborhood rumor mill.

When Mrs. Teitsworth discovered the note on her door, she hoped that it contained either a rent payment for August or, at least a note from Mr. McKee explaining the delay. It was from him alright but

rather than money, He left a note announcing that he had moved out. The news was rather sudden and unexpected, rude even, causing Mrs. Teitsworth to become even more curious about what Mr. and Mrs. McKee were secretly doing.

She wasted no time in entering the bungalow and glanced around. She found that it was indeed vacant. There was no apparent damage and for that she was relieved. She noticed some items which seemed rather strange, given that they had been partially concealed behind the bathtub. She didn't know what they were but she was concerned enough to summon the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Office.

Sheriff's department detectives Walter Lips and William J. "Billy" Anderson were assigned. They were detectives assigned to the Hall of Justice. Their duties typically involved stakeouts and hunting fugitives, raiding gambling houses and lately, chasing clues related to a series of gangster murders. Interestingly, Lips had served many years as the Chief of the Los Angeles Fire Department and left that job for one with the LASO in 1909. On this day however, they were tasked with conducting an investigation on Serrano Street regarding some suspicious items found by the home owner. They listened to Mrs. Teitsworth's account of Mr. McKee. The bungalow in question was one of two which sat directly behind 976 Serrano. They joined her in entering the bungalow.

Their first impression was that of a vacant residence with scant evidence that the kitchen or living room had even been used. But Mrs. Teitsworth directed them to the bathroom and pointed out some curious items behind the bathtub. The detectives recognized that the items she found were bomb-making materials. There was low explosive powder, metal pipes of varying lengths, an oil-stained paper bag bearing the outline of heavy steel pipe, a receipt for an explosives purchase and a hat box on which was written "C. H. McGwire, 874 Trinity Hotel," as well as wrenches, a bag labeled "Hercules," hand tools and a "bomb model," essentially, a template for building a bomb. The detectives formed the opinion that the bungalow had been used exclusively as a bomb-making site and gathered the evidence. They even found two slightly damaged tables which appeared to have been where the bombs were assembled and constructed.

At one point during their search, the detectives peered out from a back window of the bungalow and saw the front of Hobart Boulevard School on the adjoining block. To make things even more interesting, just two properties south and visible from the same window was Los Angeles Gas and Electric Company Station Eight, which housed a massive electrical transformer. Not lost on either of them was the very real danger posed by someone assembling bombs next door to a school and a power station amongst a densely packed row of homes.

There was no shortage of witnesses awaiting the detectives, many having gathered in front of the home. Curiosity about what was found was absolutely killing them. All of them were questioned and nearly all of them said that they found the comings and goings of Mr. McKee quite odd. They had seen him with others, including a well-dressed woman who frequently wore a black face veil, something they all found quite strange. Some witnesses claimed that they had seen Mr. McKee carrying a rifle and what appeared to be pipes into the home. That this activity usually occurred at night only added an air of intrigue and suspense. If Mr. and Mrs. McKee believed they were being private, they grossly underestimated the level of interest they had generated among their many neighbors.

More than a few neighbors recalled that when Mr. and Mrs. McKee first moved in, Mr. McKee carried with great effort a heavy suitcase. The neighbors had even come to refer to him as “the ghost man” because he seldom came around during the day and used only candles and matches for illumination at night. Many of these neighbors also described seeing him driving a distinctive automobile, a Patterson.

In fact, three neighbors had seen Mr. and Mrs. McKee leave the bomb cottage at 5 PM on Saturday night and drive away in that very automobile. It was the last time Mrs. Teitsworth had actually seen them. The neighbors noticed that he stuffed the same heavy suitcase into the car and that his jacket and pants pockets were sagging, as if full of heavy items. At 11 PM, Mr. McKee returned alone, never actually going back into the bungalow but rather, only to Mrs. Teitsworth’s front door. He left within seconds. None of the neighbors would ever see him in person again.

Detectives Lips and Anderson were aware of the Lawler bombing. The entire city was. Even though the bombing was within LAPD's jurisdiction, every law enforcement officer in Southern California had been warned of the potential for bombings throughout the region that summer. They considered that even if their discovery was unrelated to the Lawler bombing, the find was still significant, a sure sign that bomb-building activities were afoot and that some unknown bomb builders were at large.

Late Sunday afternoon and without delay, the detectives brought their initial findings to the attention of Los Angeles County District Attorney Thomas Lee Woolwine. His attention was likely piqued when he heard mention of the C. H. McGwire label on the hat box. It was a name that had already surfaced in the Lawler bombing investigation, thanks to Maud's preliminary interview and the lead generated by the Stillwell Garage. Woolwine briefed the two sheriff's detectives about the Lawler bombing case, recognizing that the Serrano Street discovery had real potential as a lead in the case.

Enough information was learned in the previous few hours and sufficient clues were developed to warrant looking at two potential suspects in particular: Charles McGwire and Maud Kafitz. The DA asked that the detectives return to the Serrano Street neighborhood and confirm whether Mr. and Mrs. McKee were, in fact, Maud and McGwire.

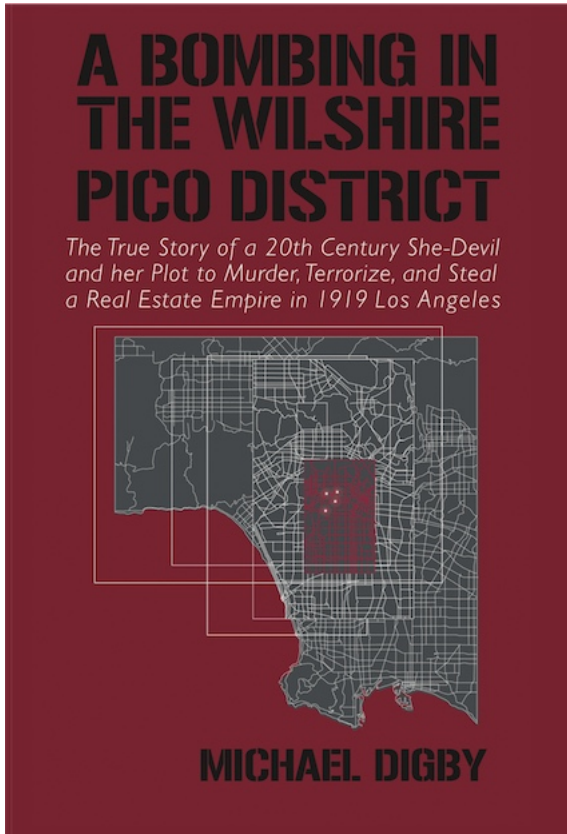
No sooner had Deputies Lips and Anderson returned to the Serrano Street neighborhood than the neighbors started to congregate once again, all anxious to retell their own personal observations of "the ghost man" and his wife and perhaps learn some facts from the two detectives. They showed photographs of Maud Kafitz and Charles McGwire to seven neighbors on Serrano Street, all of whom identified Maud as the woman seen many times visiting the home, always at night. They also concurred that the man they had come to know as Mr. McKee was actually McGwire. The detectives expanded their neighborhood canvass and visited stores in the area. Some of the shopkeepers said that the photograph shown them of Maud Kafitz was surely the woman who came into their establishments to buy food and

household essentials. And although she seemed cordial and quite attractive, she wore a black face veil, which they all found quite odd.

The discovery of the receipt for C. H. McGwire in the bungalow led the two deputies to the Trinity Hotel on Grand Avenue in downtown Los Angeles. They checked the hotel registry and noted that a Charles McGwire had, a month earlier, rented a room for an extended period, nearly a month or so. Although no bomb-making materials or other evidence was found in the room, hotel staff did mention that he had entertained several visitors during his stay, both male and female. The detectives learned also that an LAPD detective, Sergeant Bean, had been asking questions about the same man more than a month earlier.

The DA's office wasted no time in passing information along to Chief Home, a confirmation that Maud Kafitz and a man named Charles McGwire had occupied a residence used to assemble bombs. That information was briefed to all members of the Lawler bombing investigation team.

Things were about to get very uncomfortable for Maud.



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