

MURDER ON THE DOVER BRIDGE

BY MICHAEL H.
MCDUGALD

On the afternoon of June 19, 1922, a man identified in newspaper reports as “Mr. Freeman of Dover” approached the rickety wooden planks of the Dover Bridge, near Statesboro, and found his way blocked by a Ford sedan. The Ford’s front wheels were barely on the bridge and its rear wheels remained on the dirt road.

Mr. Freeman saw two women in the car, one in the driver’s seat and the other slumped over the front seat. He also noticed a pool of blood forming on the bridge planking and observed that the woman behind the wheel had her head thrown back unnaturally and arms at her side. The second woman had apparently tried to climb from the back into the front seat but failed; she had her head on the chest and an arm around the neck of the older woman up front.

Both women were gravely wounded, perhaps dead. In shock and horror, Mr. Freeman tried to steer his vehicle around the Ford to get help, but there wasn’t room. He left his car and ran to Dover, a small town in Screven County about a half-mile away.

Troubled Beginning

By all accounts, 17-year-old Willie Mae Dixon was a pretty young lady. She was from Clito, a small town between Dover and Statesboro. Her parents, Byron and Mamie Lou Dixon, were influential in guiding her through the decisions a young woman must make, but all that changed when Elliot Padrick, the son of an itinerant Methodist preacher, entered her life.

Elliot fell in love with—and soon

Elliot Padrick, who had not seen his young bride for some time, arranged to meet her at the depot in little Clito, Georgia in June 1922. He anxiously awaited their reunion, but it was jealousy rather than affection that overflowed his heart.

Elliot Padrick was 20 years old when he met Willie Mae, but lacking judgment and self-control. He had willingly followed in his father’s footsteps, attending Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. In fact, with just a year of classes under his belt, he had already preached some six times from his father’s pulpit in a little country church in Eureka, another Bulloch County hamlet.

During a visit home, he met the charming Willie Mae Dixon. He was smitten by the young woman, but no real courtship developed. Instead, they became warm friends at first, but there was little doubt in Elliot’s mind that he would marry Willie Mae, if she would have him. When she rebuffed his advances, Elliot appealed to both sets of parents—the Dixons and the Padricks—to intervene.

COURTESY GEORGIA ARCHIVES, VANISHING GEORGIA COLLECTION



The Ogeechee River bridge near Dover, Georgia looked much like this one near Guyton, circa 1908. When a “Mr. Freeman of Dover” approached the bridge near Dover, on June 19, 1922, he found the gravely wounded Mamie Lou Dixon and Willie Mae Padrick inside a Ford sedan. The vehicle blocked his way, so Mr. Freeman sprinted to nearby Dover to summon help.

wished to marry—Willie Mae. Elliot’s mother and father concurred, and even his father’s congregation agreed that the two should wed. After all, Elliot was a student in seminary and might become the preacher one day. It was important that he have just the right wife.

Mamie Lou eventually cajoled Willie Mae into marriage. When the preacher arrived at the Dixon house to perform the ceremony, though, Willie Mae changed her mind. She wasn’t a “runaway bride,” so to speak, but an “I’m not coming out of my room to marry him” bride.

The ceremony was called off and the few wedding guests went home scratching their heads.

Mamie Lou insisted that her daughter go through with the wedding. It is uncertain why she was so insistent upon the union. Elliot later claimed that Mamie Lou had been forced into her own marriage with Byron Dixon and took twisted satisfaction in forcing Willie Mae to marry someone she didn't love. Whatever the reason, Willie Mae reluctantly capitulated and the young couple finally exchanged vows.

A Miniature Hell

The newlyweds struggled financially, but received ample help from their families. They moved to a farm that Byron Dixon rented for them. Mr. Dixon also co-signed a promissory note enabling Elliot and Willie Mae to obtain supplies and farm implements. Elliot's mother gave them chickens to raise.

Willie Mae and Elliot's life as a married couple was doomed from the beginning. "Our troubles started on the day that we were married," Elliot would later state in court. "For on that day she declared that she hated me and said that her mother had forced her to marry me...I believe that my marrying was the mistake of my life. My wife, though young as she was, realized this fact. Realizing this, she became dissatisfied with me, and this caused separation. I still loved her and believed God could make her my ideal, but all the persuasion and kindness of a husband seemed to be in vain. We parted several times but would go back together and have the same disputes. In spite of this, I still held on to God."

The rampant rumors were that they lived apart more than together. No one could put a stop to the fighting and Willie Mae's "I'm going home to Mama" tantrums. Even the governing



W.E. Padrick

The preacher's son forged a \$100 check, purchased a .32 caliber five-shot revolver, and summoned his wife to meet his train at the Clito depot.

body of the local Methodist conference learned of the Padricks' marital problems and refused to ordain Elliot as a minister.

"My wife stood the farm life with me for about thirty days," Elliot recounted. "I do not care to repeat the blasphemous outbursts, the cursing and taunting remarks that she flung at me during those thirty days. It was a miniature hell...I believe we would have been on the farm until now if her mother had left well enough alone. But there was no money coming and my father-in-law had notes piled upon him that threatened to deprive him of all his prospects. My father-in-law told me to take my belongings, which consisted of my two suitcases containing my personal effects, and some dozen chickens that my mother had given us, and get out of the community. Thus I was married by my parents-in-law and separated from my wife, my health declined, and there arose in my heart a bitter hatred for them."

Rendezvous in Clito

Even though the marriage was rocky, no one could have foreseen the events of Monday, June 19, 1922, when the preacher's son would forge a \$100 check, purchase a .32 caliber five-shot revolver, and summon his wife to meet his train at the Clito depot.

Clito was one of those country towns that thrived in the era when cotton was king. Its railroad depot was directly across from the only general store in the area. Painted a cheery yellow and white, the depot was so small and insignificant that its waiting room had only one bench. For fire protection, a barrel of stagnant rainwater stood at each corner.

The main enterprise in town was the

McDougald-Outland Company, which owned 1,185 acres of farmland, a country store, a cotton gin, and was involved in turpentine distillation. The only gasoline for miles around came from the gravity-fed pump in front of the general store. Inside, soda crackers came in barrels and cheese came in huge 'rounds' covered with cheesecloth. A chunk of cheese, some saltines, and a tin of sardines made quite a noontime meal for cotton pickers, railroad gang workers, log loaders, and plowmen.

Loved Her More than Anything

Prior to the day of the murders, Willie Mae and Elliot Padrick had been separated for some time. During the subsequent trial, Elliot complained that Willie Mae "in her perverseness" often declared that she would kill him with a butcher knife. "For this I do not believe she can be held entirely responsible," he intoned. "For before leaving home and going on the farm I was in the kitchen when I overheard my father-in-law say, as he raised an object from the refrigerator - it sounded very much like a knife - 'Here's something, Willie Mae, you can get rid of him with: a butcher knife.'"

During the many times that the couple was apart, Elliot believed, rightly or not, that his wife was seeing at least one man in Statesboro. While there was no hard evidence of her unfaithfulness, jealous husbands are seldom rational. Suspicions of infidelity tormented Elliot. "On receipt of the news that my wife had become untrue to me a feeling arose within my breast...a hideous plot arose in my mind."

Elliot methodically planned the details of his "hideous plot." He wrote Willie Mae asking her to "steal" her father's Ford and pick him up at the Clito depot. He suggested privacy, of course, since they had not seen each other for so long.



The Clito Presbyterian Church Sunday school class poses for a photo in front of the Clito depot, circa 1937 (the church met in the depot). The author, a six-year-old at the time, is the young boy standing between the two girls beneath the window. The house on the left was the Dixon house in the 1930s (and possibly at the time of the murders in 1922).

Kiss of Death

Willie Mae agreed to meet her husband, who was arriving on the train from Dover, but didn't comply with his request that she travel by herself. Instead, Mamie Lou chauffeured her daughter to Clito, where the two met the inbound train. Witnesses described the reunion as "most cordial," although it's certain Elliot was dismayed to see his mother-in-law. By then, Mamie Lou and Elliot had a strained relationship: he secretly referred to her as the "tyrant master" and "witch wife."

On that Monday afternoon, though, Elliot climbed into the Ford, kissed his wife three times and warmly shook Mrs. Dixon's hand. Then the trio started toward the Dixon home. They had traveled just a short distance before turning around and returning to Clito's general store to buy gasoline and oil for the car. Elliot explained to the clerk that he had left his suitcase in Dover, so they would need the extra gas to drive the five miles back to the depot and retrieve it. He paid the bill, appearing flush with cash, which witnesses said surprised both Willie Mae and Mamie Lou since Elliot usually didn't carry much money.

Once more, the Ford departed Clito with Mamie Lou at the wheel. The outwardly happy couple sat together in the backseat. As they left town, they passed two barns, a cotton-weighting station, and the yellow-and-white depot with its four rain barrels. Neither woman could have guessed that this would be their last view of Clito.

The old dirt road to the Dover Bridge is serene today.



Crime Scene

It was shortly afterwards that Mr. Freeman happened upon the scene of the shooting and found the two victims in Byron Dixon's Ford sedan. He promptly reported his gruesome discovery, but it was already too late for Mamie Lou and Willie Mae. Inside the blood-soaked auto, Mamie Lou was already dead from gunshot wounds and Willie Mae perished before medical help arrived. By ten o'clock that night, the bodies of both mother and daughter were taken to a Statesboro funeral home, where an inquest revealed that the fatal bullets came from a new Smith & Wesson .32 caliber revolver.

While Elliot Padrick was unsuccessful at both marriage and the ministry, he certainly wasn't hampered when it came to killing. Autopsies showed that he shot Mamie Lou cleanly through her neck, instantly severing her spinal cord. Then, for good measure, he shot her just under her right arm; that bullet tore through her body.

Willie Mae was hit three times: once through her right arm with the projectile piercing her heart; another bullet penetrated her right cheek, breaking her jawbone; the third entered her head an inch below her left ear. It is amazing



Dover, GA 1925 – Despite the floodwaters of the Ogeechee River, Dover appeared to be a prosperous railroad town in this 1925 photograph.

that she lived long enough to even attempt crawling over the seat toward her mother.

Abnormal Composure

After mortally wounding his wife and mother-in-law, Elliot knew he had to escape. He hurried the half-mile to Dover. In crossing the bridge, though, he had crossed from Bulloch County, where the crimes were committed, into Screven County. Thanks to Mr. Freeman, the Screven County sheriff was soon alerted and on the lookout for anyone who had recently come from the direction of the bridge.

When Elliot reached Dover, he approached a local citizen and asked the gentleman for a lift to Millen, some 20 miles distant. The man told Elliot that was too far away and that the roads were in bad condition. The quick-thinking murderer requested a ride instead to nearby Sylvania, and his persistence paid off. The man assented and Elliot climbed in, adding quickly that he was sick and wanted a room in a hotel.

Just two miles outside Sylvania, two police officers halted the vehicle. The June 22, 1922 edition of *The Bulloch Times* described the stop:

“The driver carrying Padrick was questioned as to where he was from and the identity of his passenger and his actions while the trip was being made from Dover. Nothing wrong was noted in the demeanor of the passenger as had first been noted by the driver, and Padrick was reported to be

perfectly calm and had talked freely on all subjects. Padrick was questioned by the officials and gave his name and took his bible from his pocket as confirmation of his declared innocence of the crime and stated that he was a preacher and believed in the word of God. The two officers then withdrew for a conference among themselves and returned to the car formerly [sic] placing Padrick under arrest telling him that it would be necessary for him to go to Dover to investigate the affair. Then a return trip was begun with Padrick in the officer’s car, but only about two miles of the distance had been traveled when the prisoner asked them not to go any further, stating that he was the man who had committed the crime, and asked that he be taken away (from the area) for safekeeping.”

Law officials returned Padrick to Sylvania and later, on account of the wide relationship of the deceased in Screven county and fear of violence from them, took him to Augusta that night for safekeeping in a strong jail.”

Designed For Living For Life

Graceful, open interiors - the beauty of post and beam construction is undeniable. So is the beauty of Lindal's exclusive lifetime structural warranty. Fortunately, you get both with a Lindal Cedar Home, which means you get everything you can imagine, including substantial peace of mind. Tell us about your ideas today.

Independently Distributed By:
 Blue Ridge Cedar Homes, Inc., 548 Whimire Drive, Dawsonville, Georgia 30534
 Tel.: 800-216-2511
 email: blueridgecedar@aol.com

Lindal
 CEDAR HOMES

Elliot chose the Dover Bridge for the site of the crime so that he could shoot Willie Mae and dispose of her body in the Ogeechee River, where it would flow downstream, never to be found.

I Do Not Know Why This Has Happened

At the time of his arrest, Elliot Padrick was carrying an unloaded, new Smith & Wesson .32 caliber five-shot revolver. All five chambers had recently been fired. Padrick was whisked away to the Richmond County Jail in Augusta, where he made a full confession. Seemingly dumbfounded by the events leading up to the murders, he stated, “Why all this has happened at the beginning of my youthful career, I do not know. I do believe that the same God who forgave David for murder forgives me and will aid me in my trial, and [I will see] the light of heaven and peaceful joy of full privilege and enjoyment.”

The next afternoon, June 20, the coroner’s inquest was held in Statesboro. Testimony from witnesses pieced together the time-line and the consensus was that Elliot chose the Dover Bridge for the site of the crime so that he could shoot Willie Mae and dispose of her body in the Ogeechee River, where it would flow downstream, never to be found. He would then make the Ford his “getaway car.” The investigators concluded that Elliot had, sometime before the murders, forged a \$100 check, cashed it, and purchased the pistol.

An unfortunate by-product of his scheme was Mamie Lou. Her death was merely happenstance because she was in the car.



Union Meeting House Cemetery – The author was unable to locate marked graves of Mamie Lou Dixon and Willie Mae Padrick, but believes both victims were most likely buried in the Union Meeting House cemetery near Clito. The Dixons attended this church at the time of the murders.

On June 21, 1922, Mamie Lou Dixon and Willie Mae Dixon Padrick were buried together at Union Methodist Church near Clito. A large crowd of family, friends, and curious citizens attended.

Life Sentence

During the ensuing trial in the Superior Court of Bulloch County, Elliot audaciously took the stand and opened his testimony with prayer, inviting the jury to pray with him. He rambled on, as any gifted but demented orator might do, preaching to everyone in the courtroom, judge and jury included. Twice during his theatrical testimony – in which he professed that he “loved his wife more than anything in the world and had rather see her dead than have her continue as she had” – his own lawyer told him peremptorily to sit down and be quiet.

The jury did not buy his harangues, and W.E. “Elliot” Padrick was convicted on the charge of murdering Mrs. Byron Dixon – Mamie Lou to those who knew her – and sentenced to life in prison on November 1, 1922. He never stood trial for Willie Mae’s murder.

Elliot Padrick remained in the Georgia State Prison in Milledgeville until his death on March 12, 1961. After 39 years of incarceration – more than double the number of years Willie Mae lived – he at last completed the sentence for his murderous rampage on the Dover Bridge.

Sources: The information contained in this article was obtained from witness statements, newspaper reports from *The Bulloch Times*, and the Georgia Office of Vital Statistics. ■

Michael H. McDougald is a retired broadcaster in Rome. He is chairman of the Foundation for Public Broadcasting in Georgia.