

## Information for Episode #26

### Cleveland's Sly - Fanner Murders

By Allan May

---

Organized crime in Cleveland, during the latter years of Prohibition, was dominated by the Italian Mayfield Road Mob. The gang, whose name was a by-product of the local police and media, had been carrying on criminal activity prior to the Volsted Act going into effect.

During the late teens and early 1920s, Cleveland experienced a multitude of payroll robberies. The robberies were becoming a regular feature on the front pages of the three daily newspapers. It was a period before the business community had the safe guards of bank wire transfers and commercial armored car use. At the time many business payrolls were handled by company officials who went to the bank on a weekly, bi-monthly, or monthly schedule to pick up cash to pay employees. If companies didn't hire or provide armed escorts or if they didn't alter their transfer procedures by taking different routes to and from the bank, or scheduling different pick-up times, they could easily become targets for payroll bandits. One of the more sensational robberies took place on the morning of December 31, 1920. The robbery would result in the double slaying of Wilfred C. Sly and George K. Fanner of the W. W. Sly Manufacturing Company.

This cold-blooded double homicide involved members of the Mayfield Road Mob. Many members of the gang came from the Little Italy section located on Cleveland's East Side, where Murray Hill and Mayfield Road are the two main arteries through the neighborhood. Gang members who played a part in this murderous crime were Angelo Amato, Dominic Benigno, and Dominic Lonardo. Also believed to be involved, but not identified at the murder scene, were Charles Coletti and John Angersola. Dominic Lonardo was the youngest of the four Lonardo brothers. His oldest brother Joe would become Cleveland's first bootleg baron and the first leader of the Cleveland underworld. Coletti became Joe Lonardo's bodyguard and one of the top guns of the Mayfield Road Mob.

The actual planning of the robbery began when Louis Komer met Frank Motto in a poolroom at Superior and East 9th Street in late December. Komer, nicknamed "The Toledo Kid," was rumored to have once worked at the W. W. Sly plant. Motto had recently been convicted on five counts of auto theft and was to begin his prison term in late January. He told Komer if he could get his hands on \$1,500 he might be able to mount a successful appeal attempt. Komer then discussed the W. W. Sly payroll with Motto. The two were soon joined in the plot by Motto's friends from the Mayfield Road Mob along with a teenage acquaintance of Benigno's, Ignatius "Sam" Purpera, a six-foot plus teenager who already had a lengthy arrest record as a vicious young hood. Around 11:00 a.m. on this New Year's Eve morning, Sly and Fanner were returning to the foundry after picking up their \$4,200 cash payroll. A few blocks from the plant, Sly turned onto West 47th Street and headed over the bridge followed by Frank Motto and Sam Purpera in a stolen Stearns automobile. With Motto driving, the Stearns quickly passed Sly's automobile and cut sharply in front of him forcing his automobile to slam into the wooden siding of the bridge. Sly exited his car and walked toward Motto and Purpera,

drawing a gun as he went. "What do you mean by smashing me like this? I believe you did it on purpose. It was absolutely your fault," Sly angrily scolded the two.

"Why I did nothing of the kind you old bastard!" Purpera snapped back.

Another automobile, a Jordan containing the other four gunmen, arrived from the opposite direction. The four men exited the vehicle and moved in. Purpera had apparently convinced Sly that it was an accident because the businessman had put away his gun and pulled out a pencil and a piece of paper and began getting names from some of the twenty bystanders who had witnessed the accident. Fanner by now had exited the car, his attention was quickly drawn to one of the four men from the Jordan who had reached in and pulled out the satchel containing the payroll. When Fanner tried to retrieve the satchel all six robbers pulled guns and began blasting. Purpera fired a shot hitting Sly in the abdomen. After Sly fell to the ground, Purpera stood over him and fired twice more into his head, the shots almost obliterating his face. Fanner took a bullet under his right eye. He screamed out, "Oh my God," and died.

Five of the killers ran to the Jordan and took off leaving Purpera to escape on his own through back yards. Within a few days, police arrested Benigno, Lonardo and Amato. The three were released after failure by witnesses to identify them. There were rumors that several hoodlums were knocking on doors in the West 47th Street neighborhood advising residents against discussing the Sly-Fanner murders.

Police soon got a break when Sam Purpera was arrested in Los Angeles on March 11, 1921. Purpera's escape route had taken him to Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, El Paso, Juarez, Mexico, San Francisco and finally Los Angeles. County Prosecutor Edward Stanton traveled to the West Coast to bring Purpera back to Cleveland on a train dubbed the "Buckeye Murder Special." When he arrived back in Cleveland on March 25, Purpera made a full confession offering up the names of the other five conspirators.

Purpera, still a teenager, counted on his young age to keep him from getting the death penalty. He asked a reporter, "They don't give anybody under twenty-one the chair, do they?" In another statement Purpera blamed his life of crime on his frequenting poolrooms.

Frank Motto had reported to the Mansfield Reformatory to begin his sentence on the auto theft conviction in late January. After Purpera confessed, Motto was brought back to Cleveland and charged in the double murder. Nine days after Motto's indictment, Louis Komer was arrested in Detroit. Komer waived extradition and was brought back to Cleveland and confessed his role. Motto was now facing a one-two punch when his trial began on May 2, 1921. With Purpera and Komer testifying against him, Motto was found guilty on May 14 and sentenced to die on August 29. Judge Florence Allen, in sentencing Motto to die in the electric chair, became the first female judge in Cuyahoga County history to mete out that punishment.

The following week Purpera's trial began. He was defended by William J. Corrigan (who later defended a young doctor named Sam Sheppard in the 1950s). The young Purpera used the defense that he had not done any of the shooting and had simply walked away from the scene, not escaping in the Jordan with the others. However, several eyewitnesses testified to his participation in the shooting. Despite Corrigan's final argument for mercy, Purpera was found guilty and sentenced to die with Frank Motto on August 29th.

Shortly after the Purpera trial ended, Dominic Benigno and Charles Coletti were captured in Mexico. Although Coletti had not been mentioned by either Purpera or Komer, police still believed he was involved. Why else would he be hiding out with Benigno? The story of the

two's capture began after Cleveland Police Detective Charles Cavolo received information that Benigno mailed a letter to friends in the Cleveland area from Guadalajara, Mexico. Unable to finance a trip to Mexico to look for him through the department, funds were obtained through the Cleveland Automobile Club and Cavolo and future police chief, George Matowitz, left for Mexico City.

After conferring with the American consul, the two were preparing to leave for Guadalajara when they ran into Benigno and Coletti on the street. Cavolo and Matowitz seized the two, barely escaping with their lives after Benigno provoked a crowd of onlookers by screaming in Spanish, which neither officer understood. With some help from the local police, they subdued the pair and got them to a jail. While the extradition process dragged on, the officers passed the time by playing checkers with their captives.

Six weeks had passed and the checker games continued. Scheduled to take the prisoners on board a Spanish liner that would first take them to Spain, and more extradition headaches, Cavolo and Matowitz were able to sneak the pair onto an American ship headed for Cuba and New York City. On July 14, 1921, Benigno and Coletti were safely locked in a Brooklyn, New York jail cell. Shortly after they arrived Coletti was released because no eyewitness could tie him into the killings on the bridge. With Coletti's future involvement in organized crime, Cavolo and Matowitz would one day wish they had left him in Mexico.

John Angersola, another prominent member of the Mayfield Road Mob, was suspected by the prosecutor's office of having "some inside knowledge" of the murders and robbery. When Angersola was arrested on a concealed weapons charge in mid-March, Judge Florence Allen held him on a \$50,000 bond. She later handed down a sentence of one to three years to the gangster.

A stay of execution was denied Frank Motto and on August 29 he died in the electric chair. A sad side note to this was that Mary Sly, the mother of Wilfred Sly, died just hours before the execution, her death no doubt hastened by her son's brutal murder. Purpera's execution had been stayed so prosecutors could have him testify against Benigno.

Benigno's lawyers did an exemplary job of defending him, as no witnesses were able to place him on the bridge at the time of the shooting. But again, testimony by Purpera and Komer was devastating. The case went to the jury on September 23. The group at one point had voted eleven to one for conviction when one of the jurors suffered a stroke while climbing up the four flights of stairs at the courthouse. The judge declared a mistrial. During the second trial, the prosecution decided, unwisely as it turned out, not to have Purpera testify and Benigno almost went free. The jurors had reached a point where they voted ten to two for acquittal.

The third trial produced a sensational atmosphere as rumors abounded that Benigno's Mayfield Road Mob associates were going to initiate an armed rescue. These rumors were strengthened by an incident at the Ohio State Penitentiary where Purpera's sister attempted to smuggle a gun in to him. The Purpera family contended that Benigno's friends were going to kill Sam because of his testimony.

The additional security in the courtroom paid off when Benigno was found guilty on December 14th. Benigno's wife attacked Assistant County Prosecutor Cassidy and threatened to kill him. Friends and relatives of Benigno closed in and tried to grab Cassidy before deputies rushed over and broke up the "near riot."

In January 1922, Louis Komer received a life sentence after pleading guilty to his role in

the murders. The judge reluctantly agreed to the sentence stating that Komer's testimony might be needed for future trials. This decision upset the Italian community because Komer was the only non-Italian member of the gang; Motto had already been executed and Purpera and Benigno were both facing the chair. The passions in this case would intensify as the murder victim's families, and the public's sentiments toward them, would clash with the fears and resentment of the Italian community in Cleveland.

Purpera had won several stays as prosecutors needed him to be around to testify against Benigno if he won an appeal for a fourth trial. When the final appeal was refused there was no longer a need to keep Purpera alive. In a twist of fate, Ohio Governor Harry L. Davis had just granted Purpera a sixty-day stay in anticipation of the appeal by Benigno being won. When the appeal was denied, Davis withdrew the paperwork which had not yet been signed. Before he was executed on May 9, 1922, Purpera left a message, "Tell Mrs. Fanner, that I am sorry." Less than six weeks later, on June 14, Dominic Benigno's life also ended in the same chair that had claimed Frank Motto and Sam Purpera at the Ohio State Penitentiary in Columbus.

The excitement of the Sly - Fanner murders and the ensuing trials subsided. In 1928, Dominic Lonardo was found living under a new identity in San Francisco. Extradition was denied after previous witnesses retracted their statements about his presence on the bridge that fateful day. Lonardo was the only identified killer to go free.

The last member of the gang, Angelo Amato, had escaped to Italy shortly after the murders. Through the 1920s, there had been several reports of his arrest but they turned out to be erroneous. Finally, Amato turned himself over to the police in Palermo, Sicily in February 1934, shortly after the death of his wife. Cleveland police officers Cavolo and Matowitz accompanied by Assistant County Prosecutor Frank Celebreeze attended the trial which was held in Italy. In April 1935, Amato was found guilty and sentenced to thirty years of hard labor.