

North Mayo Heritage Centre Mayo Heritage Newsletter

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YouTube



The Wilkes Barre Good Friday Bombings

Image: North Main Street, Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania



Why is Good Friday called “Good” Friday?
“Good” in this context refers to a “a day or season” observed as holy by the Church
(*source: Oxford English Dictionary*)

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Wilkes Barre's Tragic Good Friday

Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania lies just a few miles southwest of Scranton, Ballina's twin town. The whole valley in which the two cities are situated has deep historical ties to north Co. Mayo.

From about 1860 onwards, thousands upon thousands of emigrants from north Mayo made their homes in this part of Pennsylvania. What attracted the emigrants in the first place was, of course, work, in the coal mines around the valley. It was harsh, dangerous work, and tragic accidents were common. So too was tension over labour rights. Early miners lived in mine owned houses and shopped in mine owned shops. But as the 19th century gave way to the 20th, organised labour, often violently and even murderously resisted, came to establish itself. Tensions around union politics were never far away however. And such tension led to the horrendous, tragic events of Good Friday, April 10th 1936.

We know now, at a remove of 88 years, what happened in sequence. No such luxury was afforded to the residents of Wilkes-Barre on the peaceful Friday morning in question. The mailmen innocently delivered six cigar boxes to addresses in the valley. Each box was marked 'sample' and had a hand written address. One postman read the address on such a box, and approaching the house, spotted a little boy playing in the garden. He handed the child the box. The child was delighted; he thought it was a box of candy. But, miraculously, he then noticed it was a cigar box, and lost interest.

He left the box on the kitchen table. His father arrived home and sitting down to open the package offered his son-in-law to join him in having a cigar. Then he opened the box. The resultant explosion was so severe that it instantly killed the man. His son-in-law, somehow, escaped with serious injuries, but he survived.

Two of the six boxes exploded, killing a total of three people, one of whom was a four year old boy. Some of the scenes were so gruesome, the police banned the press from photographing them. The other four boxes were intercepted and soaked in water to defuse them.

Right: A picture published in the *Evening News* on April 10, 1936, shows the scene outside the home of Thomas Maloney at 694 E. Northampton St., Wilkes-Barre Township.

The boxes were all addressed to men involved in union affairs in the district. There was a dispute at the time whereby one union had called a strike, but had then claimed that other miners had crossed the picket line and taken work from the striking miners. One of the deceased, named Gallagher, was believed to have been a case of mistaken identity, but police discounted this.

Panic, understandably, ensued in the region. The police tried to keep things calm, but they faced the same problem which always arises in cases like this; they were under severe pressure to find those responsible. The explosive material itself was of a brand used in only a handful of mines in the area, and was eventually traced to one colliery. Fingerprints were found on one of the unexploded devices. The hunger with which the local press reported the arrests and subsequent trial hold an air of desperation.

After arresting several suspects who were of no value to the investigation, the police raided a home in Hanover, a part of Wilkes-Barre. Unbeknownst to the woman of the house, her husband, 52 year German native Michael Fugmann, was already in custody. The police ransacked the cellar of the house and took away several pieces of evidence having dug up the floor of the cellar.

Fugmann was tried for the Good Friday Bombings, a trial that set many precedents. There were extra jurors sworn in. Handwriting experts were summoned to compare Fugmann's handwriting with those on the unexploded packages.

In evidence, police said they had found wax paper, empty boxes and nails in his cellar all of which exactly matched those used in the bombs.

Fugmann had been in America for only 12 years, having emigrated in 1924. His wife claimed that he could speak and read English, but he could not write it. His parish priest stated he knew him well and that he was not capable of such evil. When Fugmann was arrested, the press reported that he was a former German Army Artillery sergeant who had fought in World War I for 'four years'. By the end of the trial, he was a 'deserter'. Fugmann was found guilty, and despite his counsel appealing, he was executed in July 1938, protesting his innocence to the very last. Police even received a hand scribbled note stating that they had got the wrong man.

For the victim's families, and those who survived, life would be forever changed, and they bore the scars, mentally and literally, of Good Friday 1936 for the rest of their lives.

