

# Back in the Country... Bell Acres Stories

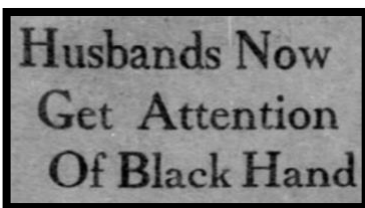
By Debby Rabold



## In the Time of the Black Hand Unsolved Murders in the Sewickley Valley

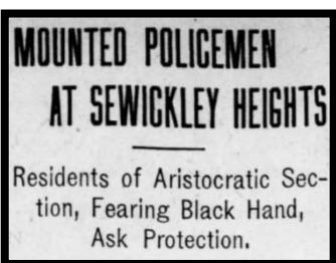
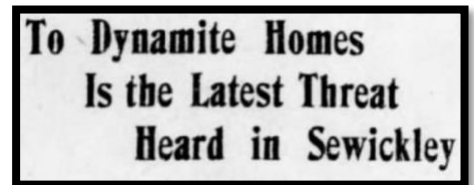
It was the late 19<sup>th</sup> century influx of Italian immigrants that brought Black Hand extortion rings to the United States and to the Pittsburgh area circa 1904. As practiced in their native land, extortionists delivered letters to their intended victims that threatened arson, kidnapping or murder unless large sums of cash were paid. Black ink drawings of hands, daggers or guns appeared on the letters to instill fear in the unfortunate recipients. While such letters were sometimes sent as jokes, most often they were deadly serious.

Initially, victims were wealthier members of the Italian community, but grew to include non-Italians. One early incident of Black Hand activity began in January 1908 when four society matrons in the Pittsburgh suburb of Sewickley Heights each received a threatening note demanding as much as \$400 in cash.



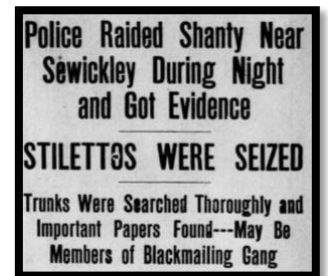
A plan to apprehend the culprit or culprits was put into place by Sewickley Borough and Pittsburgh police. A decoy letter was sent through the mail while a police officer posed as a clerk in the Sewickley Post office. An eighteen-year-old was arrested after picking up the letter while two accomplices who waited outside were arrested the following morning.

Soon after, letters threatening to dynamite their homes were received by the women's husbands unless the threesome was released from the county jail. Guards were stationed on the estates and the Italian neighborhood on the outskirts of Sewickley was placed under surveillance.



Fear spread through the area and residents were encouraged not to employ foreign born. One contractor was informed that he would not receive jobs if he employed foreign labor. An editorial in the local newspaper advised that all foreign servants be "closely watched." Rising tensions caused a number of Italian families to move away.

After receiving help in their investigation from the Italian community, police staged a middle of the night raid on a Blackburn Road residence that resulted in the discovery of a trunk containing Black Hand letters and literature. Several weapons were also found in the house. The six men present were arrested on suspicion of being part of the letter writing Black Hand gang.



Trials quickly followed. With a lack of evidence linking the six men to the letters, the judge in the case instructed the jury to return a verdict of not guilty. In the trial involving the Sewickley post office, charges were dropped against the two accomplices. Charged with mail fraud, the accused was acquitted on the grounds of mistaken identity.

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**Italian Murdered  
Near Leetsdale  
Shot - Riddled Body  
Found in Woods by  
Three Men.**

A Black Hand offshoot was the Good Killers Society. One Economy resident lived and died a "Good Killer".

It was 5AM Monday 1 November 1924 when the thirty-nine-year-old father of seven left his Big Sewickley Creek Road home near Beeler's Mill for a nearby factory job. Stopping to remove a tree limb lying across the Camp Meeting Road, he must have realized he was being ambushed and ran into the woods as he attempted to escape.

At nearly the same time, three hunters from nearby Leetsdale were heading into the woods when they came across the victim's automobile standing in the road with its engine running. They followed tracks through the trees for about a quarter mile when they found a body lying in a pool of blood. Fresh footprints led from the scene back to the road. The victim was later found to have suffered twenty-five bullet wounds.

While the shooter was never identified, detectives were able to piece together the circumstances of what had occurred. The victim had been paid by the Society to kill an individual in Detroit, which he failed to do. He then refused to either return the money or carry out the original assignment. He also chose to ignore threats that included the stoning of his house. His refusal to cooperate sealed his fate.

Within two weeks, another Sewickley area incident was reported in Pittsburgh papers. A gardener, who was employed on Heights estates, was visited at his Nevin Avenue home by an individual who threatened to murder the entire family unless \$1,000 in cash was delivered by noontime the same day.

**POLICE FOIL  
PLOT OF ALLEGED  
BLACKMAILERS**

The father of three gathered the cash then proceeded to the Sewickley police station from where an officer was dispatched to the home. The collector arrived at noon and as the money was being handed over, the officer came out of hiding to make an arrest. A revolver was drawn and a brief struggle ensued before the suspect was cuffed and led from the house. Two accomplices were spotted hiding outdoors and all three were taken to the police station. It was reported that within the Italian community, the gardener was considered wealthy and therefore targeted for extortion.

**CLUES SOUGHT  
TO NEW RACKET  
MURDER HERE**  
87th Such Victim Is  
Sewickley Heights  
Gardener.  
FIND BODY IN CEMETERY  
Sawed-Off Shotgun Used  
In Slaying, Wounds In-  
dicate to Sleuths.

Foreign born estate workers were among those targeted. One incident involving three gardeners occurred on the Blackburn Road during the summer of 1929. That morning, one of the men had a premonition something might happen that day and decided to carry a revolver. As the men were walking to their jobs near the country club, they were fired on from behind a wall. Gunfire was returned and police later found a bloodied cap in the bushes.

A forty-one-year-old father of seven, also an estate gardener, was gunned down in August 1931. The family lived on Cook Way on the hillside below the Sewickley Cemetery. Each day, the victim used a path through the cemetery to reach his job until the morning when a gravedigger found the man's bullet riddled body. With no connection to the rackets or bootlegging, police assumed the victim must have been receiving threats since a revolver and ammunition were found in his pocket.

This was Allegheny County's eighty-seventh unsolved killing in sixty-nine months. A few weeks later, a young man from Cleveland arrived in Sewickley to work as a gardener and his body was found on Fern Hollow Road. Bodies of estate workers were later found on Glen Mitchell Road in Aleppo and Hazel Lane in Edgeworth.

**Mystery Veils Deaths Of  
Workers on Large  
Estates.**

**TAKEN FOR A RIDE**  
**Gang Victim Found Dead on Sevin's  
Farm**

Included in this staggering number of killings was the partially burned body of an Ambridge resident that was found in August 1930 when automobile headlights revealed his body lying in a roadside ditch at the Devils Hollow picnic grounds on Sevin Road. A known gambler, the victim had been shot four times in the stomach according to news accounts. Some years later, another partially burned body was found chained to a walnut tree in Devils Hollow.

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A series of killings that captured headlines began in 1923 with the shooting death of the owner of a Walnut Street restaurant in Sewickley's business district. The victim was asleep in a room at the restaurant when killed. Investigators reasoned he may have refused to carry out a Black Hand order and was marked for death. A new employee was charged with the shooting, but was acquitted in a January 1925 trial.

**VICTIM'S BODY  
HURLED OVER  
HILL AFTER  
BEING SHOT**  
**Had Been Acquitted  
Of Slaying in Se-  
wickley Recently.**  
**KILLED IN AUTO,  
POLICE BELIEVE**

Two months after the trial ended, the restaurant's one time owner who was also a reputed bootlegger demanded \$100 from an employee. After being threatened and fearing for his life, the employee opened fire on the extortionist who was sitting in an automobile outside the restaurant. The killing happened to be witnessed by the same young man who had been acquitted of murder charges.

Investigators would later theorize that because there were those who held him responsible for the 1923 death of the restaurant owner along with not wanting him to testify in the upcoming trial for the recent killing, the twenty-five-year old witness became a Good Killers victim. Shot twice, his body was found in a bloody sack at the bottom of a steep hill on the Rochester Road S-bends in nearby Franklin Township [Franklin Park Borough].

Another of the restaurant's former owners who was also a reputed bootlegger met the same fate as his predecessors. After having sold the restaurant, he purchased a working farm on Magee Road close to the one-room school house. It was in September 1928 that the forty-two-year-old head of the local Sons of Italy organization drove to the farm from his home in Sewickley. After he failed to return home that day, two friends drove to the farm where they made a gruesome discovery. Bound and shot on the farmhouse's cellar floor was the farm worker. The owner's body was found sprawled at the back door with his face shredded by buckshot.

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## Self-Styled Racket Czar Shot Dead in Sewickley

While quiet country roads were often times associated with gangland killings, the streets of Sewickley were not immune from the sounds of gunfire. One area resident recalls the time when as a young child, he was walking with his mother in the business district and she pushed him into a doorway as gunshots were heard being fired and how afterwards he saw the bodies of two men lying in the street.

At the age of twenty-three, a rising racketeer and bootlegger already had the attention of police. He was known to boast that he was the "Al Capone of the Sewickley Valley" and regularly warned others not to take away his customers or undersell him.

Shortly after midnight on September 4, 1933, young Al Capone left his Dickson Road home and headed to the new Italian club on Broad Street that he was set to join that night. Outside the club, he was attacked by two assailants. Evidence showed a vicious fight occurred before his being shot three times. Hearing gunfire, a police officer arrived to find a body in the ditch at Division and Broad and a car with two occupants speeding away.

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Secret societies once played a role in Italian society, but over time, as their actions became increasingly violent, they were no longer tolerated by Italian authorities. Following a government crack-down in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, many members left the country, emigrating to North America where they continued to feud and extort cash with threats of death, kidnapping and arson. Most of their victims were fellow Italians, but not all. Extortion produced revenue for gang members until Prohibition was introduced in 1920 and bootlegging became a more profitable enterprise, although extortion was still practiced. Allegheny County's high number of gangland related killings in the 1920s and 30s were not unique. They were a local reflection of the rise of organized crime nationwide.