

The Mattoon Mad Gasser – Looking Back At A Textbook Case Of Mass Hysteria

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By Debbie Carlson

Aline Kearney was uneasy when she went to bed late on Sept. 1, 1944, in the small east-central Illinois town of Mattoon. Kearney's sister, Martha, helped her count money from a check that Kearney cashed earlier – but Kearney had left open the windows and curtains on her one-storey house, providing a view of their activity for anyone on the street.

She had reasons for concern: her husband was working a late shift, and the newspaper said Mattoon police were looking for a Nazi who had escaped from the prisoner-of-war camp near Peoria. Prowler sightings were common, too.

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Kearney retired around 11 p.m., taking her 3-year-old daughter with her. Not long after, the scent of flowers from the garden wafted into her bedroom, but she soon realized the scent wasn't flowers. Paralysis struck her legs. She screamed for help from Martha, who was staying overnight.

Martha ran next door to the Robinsons', who summoned the police. Mr. Robinson and police searched the Kearney house and yard, but found nothing amiss.

Bert Kearney returned from his taxi-driving shift at 12:30 a.m., and thought he saw a tall man in dark clothes and a tight-fitting cap at the bedroom window. He gave chase, but the man eluded capture. Police were called again but did not apprehend the man. Mrs. Kearney's paralysis subsided within 30 minutes, but her daughter was ill until morning.

So began the tale of the Mattoon Mad Gasser, considered one of the first scientifically documented mass hysteria cases in U.S. history. It was sensationalized by the local press, picked up by national media, and spread across the country to a public on edge in war time.

The public preoccupation with the story lasted for a little less than two weeks until after Labor Day 1944, and it might have been forgotten were it not for Donald Johnson, a curious psychology student from the University of Illinois who visited the uneasy town in the weeks after the incident. In 1945, he published a study of the case in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, and his research is cited in many textbooks as a classic study of mass hysteria.

Beyond the assertions of psychological abnormality, the case also has been mentioned by paranormal activity buffs as an example of supernatural phenomena. And then there are the more mundane explanations: One author of a now out-of-print book posits the Mad Gasser attacks were perpetrated by a disgruntled resident seeking revenge on his narrow-minded small town.

It's also a case of the media building up, then pulling down, a story. The mass hysteria, it would seem, could not have occurred had Mrs. Kearney not told her story to the local newspaper, the *Mattoon Daily Journal-Gazette*, the region's largest publication, which went on to stoke the fires of fear and neighborly distrust. And yet it was the same media that within weeks convinced readers that there was nothing to the story.

By September 1944, World War II was winding down, leaving the suspicion that the enemy would use a hail-Mary secret weapon. On Aug. 30, the neighboring *Charleston Daily Courier* carried a United Press story which asserted that Germany could be preparing to use poison gas or developing a mystery weapon to win the war. Mattoon was then – and still is – a typical rural Midwestern small town of less than 20,000 residents, and like many small towns, Mattoon sent young men to the front.

News about the war was everywhere, and people would have been worried about poison-gas weapons, explains Robert Bartholomew, who teaches history at Botany Downs Secondary College in South Auckland, New Zealand. Bartholomew has written extensively about mass hysteria, including articles about the Mad Gasser published in scholarly journals.

Mustard gas was first used in World War I, and between WWI and WWII attempts at international bans on chemical weapons failed. "Remember, their sons came home (from WWI) with injuries and burns from chemical warfare. That heightened their fear. It was based in reality," Bartholomew says.

The war's influence on everyday life was profound, and invasion fears weren't uncommon despite the heartland's

MRS. KEARNEY AND DAUGHTER FIRST VICTIMS

Both Recover; Rob- ber Fails to Get Into Home

A prowler who used some kind of anesthetic or gas to knock out his intended victims was on the loose in Mattoon Friday night.

Mrs. Bert Kearney and her three-year-old daughter, Dorothy Ellen, were victims of the anesthetic Friday night as they slept in bed at their home, 1408 Marshall avenue. Both had recovered today, although Mrs. Kearney said that her mouth and throat remained parched and her lips burned from effects of whatever was used by the prowler who was unsuccessful in getting into the house.

Here's What Happened.

Mrs. Kearney told the following story:

"It was shortly after 11 o'clock Friday night when I went to bed, taking with me, my daughter, Dorothy. My sister, Mrs. Edgar Reedy was in the living room of the home, and my daughter Carol, 2, and Mrs. Reedy's son, Roger, 2, were in another part of the house.

"I first noticed a sickening, sweet odor in the bedroom, but at the time thought that it might be from flowers outside the window. However, the odor grew stronger and I began to feel a paralysis of my legs and lower body.

"I grew frightened and screamed for Martha (Mrs. Reedy). She came into the bedroom, to which the door had been closed, and asked me what was the matter. I told her of the sensation I had, but I was unable then to move from bed.

obvious geographical protection from a conventional attack and the lack of actual chemical weapon use in World War II. (Poison gas was produced during World War II and war plans were drawn up for its use, but it was not deployed by either side.) Examples of irrational fear during a time when the war was all but won can be seen in the *Journal-Gazette* advertisements. On Aug. 20, the paper ran a full back page ad promoting “invasion bonds,” another type of war bond. The ad pictures the Grim Reaper, his skeleton hands wrapped around a broadsword, stating: “Suppose every man, woman and child in this town should be KILLED!” and “Buy your invasion bonds today!”

In this context, according to Bartholomew, there were underlying reasons for people to be nervous, and Mrs. Kearney was already on her guard because of the reports of the escaped German prisoner.

In his analysis, Johnson said no one would consider the *Journal-Gazette* a “sensational” paper, so readers would likely take Mrs. Kearney’s story seriously. His conclusion: the front-page story was the immediate cause for what became mass hysteria. All told, Johnson counted nearly 30 police reports of people sickened by the Mad Gasser’s fumes, with all of the victims’ cases reported in the media at one time.

After the initial account, the paper published that the “anesthetist” attacked four more Mattoon residents, with one claiming to be gassed on Aug. 31.

The tale grew from there. Letters to the editor complained of lax police protection, with the gasser attacks only exacerbating an already tense situation. The tale of a phantom gasser then drew the attention of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, the *Chicago Daily News*, and the *Chicago Herald-American*, which sent reporters to Mattoon. National media, including *Newsweek* and *Time*, carried the story.

During the case, the only solid piece of evidence was a cloth found at one victim’s home, but it yielded no results.

At the hysteria’s zenith, however, the *Journal-Gazette* mysteriously and suddenly changed its tone. The headline in the Sept. 11 edition read: “Many Prowler Reports; Few Real.” It was the first time the paper took a more critical view toward the phenomenon that it had helped to create.

In the same edition, two women claiming to be victims were examined at a hospital, including one who said she was gassed while at the movies. After hearing about the two women’s cases, Mattoon Commissioner Thomas Wright declared the entire incident a case of “mass hysteria.”

In the Sept. 11 edition of the Charleston newspaper, a United Press story quoted Wright using the term “mass hysteria” for the first time. “There is more than one mad man in Mattoon, there’s 15,000 of them. What we’ve got here is mass hysteria.”

MRS. C. CORDES BURNED; ILL TWO HOURS

Overcome After Pick- ing Up Cloth Found on Front Porch

Mattoon’s “anesthetic prowler,” at first believed to have fled the city after his acts of last week, was on the loose again Tuesday night, adding another victim to his list.

The latest person to suffer from the “fumes” or “anesthetic” was Mrs. Carl Cordes, 921 North Twenty-first street, but the circumstances under which she became a victim differed from five previously reported cases.

Mrs. Cordes as a result of her experience with the “drug” or “anesthetic” was violently ill for more than two hours. Her throat and mouth were so badly burned by the fumes she inhaled that blood came from cracks in her parched and swollen lips and her seared throat and the roof of her mouth.

On Sept. 12, the *Journal-Gazette* reported that police had four suspects, two amateur chemists and two others derided as “crackpots,” but no one in custody. The last report in the *Journal-Gazette* was Sept. 14, when the paper channeled a famous gas-filled World War I account with the headline, “All Quiet On Mattoon’s ‘Gas Front.’” Police reported that complaints were down sharply.

Bartholomew says the nearly two weeks of media coverage from the *Journal-Gazette* show how the story was stoked, then extinguished by the media.

“The media first reported about it uncritically. The way it was reported – it looked like it could be real and it became real. Then it was treated more skeptically. All these investigators were on the case, even the FBI, but nothing was found,” he says.

The idea of a prowler pumping gas into someone’s home with no other motive than to incapacitate the occupant may seem far-fetched. Yet, as Bartholomew explains, heightened awareness to environmental factors can trigger mass hysteria.

An internet search of the “Mad Gasser of Mattoon” brings up several paranormal magazine articles and blogs, with some trying to link the Mattoon case to an earlier episode of another mad gasser in rural Virginia about 10 years prior.

Bartholomew rejected those theories. None of the media coverage at the time ever suggested that the gasser of Virginia might be in Mattoon. It’s likely no one involved in the Mattoon case even knew about the Virginia case. “There’s absolutely no link that it was an actual person,” he said.

At least one amateur researcher thinks the Mad Gasser existed. Local native Scott Maruna, a high school chemistry teacher and author of “The Mad Gasser of Mattoon,” claims Farley Llewellyn, town outcast and son of a grocery store owner, was responsible. Maruna wrote in a 2003 book that Llewellyn wanted revenge on Mattoon residents who had ostracized him for being homosexual.

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“Most of the town was convinced that Farley was ‘losing his mind,’” Maruna wrote in the book, adding that the Mattoon “gossip mill” was insinuating that the man’s sexual preference was the cause of his “diminishing sanity.”

Armed with a newspaper description of one of the suspects and interviews with town residents who were still alive, Maruna came to the conclusion that Llewellyn was considered the most likely suspect. Llewellyn was tall and thin – matching the description of the man thought to be seen outside the Kearney household. He had graduated from the University of Illinois with a chemistry degree, and he had a home lab.

Yet Johnson’s research said chemists were “extremely skeptical” that a “mad genius” could produce a gas that would be stable enough to make someone sick, but fleeting enough to not leave any traces. Bartholomew concurs.

“Anyone who carefully examines all of the evidence and still thinks there was a real gasser is living in fantasy land. The evidence for mass hysteria is overwhelming. It is a textbook case. The Mad Gasser outbreak was a media creation from start to finish, and has nothing whatsoever to do with the paranormal.”

Bartholomew calls the Mad Gasser case “fascinating” and said that anyone believing that the phenomenon could not happen again should think again.

ALL QUIET ON MATTOON'S “GAS FRONT”

Police Get Only One Call; Find Neither Prowler Nor Gas

With nightly calls for police assistance and investigation reaching an all-time high a week ago when the city was gripped by the case of the “mad anesthetist,” Mattoon officials were amazed Wednesday night when only one call—far below the normal number—was received.

The lone call was a report of a prowler in the 3000 block of Richmond avenue. Police, guided by two-way broadcasting equipment loaned by the state, investigated and reported finding no prowler or evidence of a “new gas attack.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if it were to happen again – I’d be surprised if it did not happen again,” he says. “We have a lot more environmental concerns now.”

Debbie Carlson is a Chicago-based journalist whose work has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, Barron’s, The Guardian, Chicago Tribune and other media outlets. Her first journalism job was at the Mattoon Journal-Gazette.

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