

# Gasser" Adds Six Vic Set for Siegfried Battle

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## VIET FORCES SWEEP INTO BULGARIA

Near Junction With  
Yugoslav Troops of  
Marshal Tito

BY NATALIA RENE  
(I. N. S. Staff Correspondent)

Moscow—The rapidly expanding  
Soviet drive which has enveloped  
practically the whole of Romania  
swept into Bulgaria today on a 135-  
mile front, hammered westward at  
the gates of Yugoslavia and push-  
ed northward beyond the liberated

Allied Leaders  
to Study Future  
of Italy

BY KINGSBURY SMITH  
(I. N. S. Staff Correspondent)  
Washington — It was learned  
authoritatively today that the fu-  
ture of Italy will be discussed at  
the forthcoming meeting between  
President Roosevelt and British  
Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

This conference between the two  
Allied leaders, which is expected  
to be held shortly in Canada, will  
deal with European political prob-  
lems in addition to drafting plans  
for the final defeat of Japan next  
year.

Churchill, who recently visited  
Rome, is understood to favor a  
more lenient policy toward the Ital-  
ians now. The British have been  
pursuing a cautious policy in Italy

## ISOLATIONISM IS DEAD, SAYS GOV. DEWEY

G. O. P. Presidential  
Nominee Travels  
to Michigan

BY LEO W. O'BRIEN  
(I. N. S. Staff Correspondent)  
Aboard Dewey Campaign Train,  
Enroute to Michigan—Gov. Thomas  
E. Dewey traveled toward his native  
state of Michigan today for con-  
ferences and a week-end with his  
mother, after telling the people that  
American isolationism is dead and  
that peace plans must be lifted en-  
tirely out of politics.

## 125 RETAILERS HEAR SPEECH ON AVIATION

Douglas Represent-  
ative Speaks at  
Fall Meeting

Geoffrey F. Morgan of Chicago,  
member of the speakers' bureau of  
the Douglas Aircraft Company,  
thrilled 125 persons at the fall din-  
ner meeting of the Retail Division  
of the Mattoon Association of Com-  
merce in the Masonic Temple Fri-  
day night with an address on fu-  
ture aviation.

Mr. Morgan, introduced by H. J.  
Ewinz, chairman of the retail group

Mattoon Daily Journal-Gazette, 1945

## THE MATTOON MAD GASSER — LOOKING BACK AT A TEXTBOOK CASE OF MASS HYSTERIA

Debbie Carlson

June 4, 2015 // BeltMag.com

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.

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 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.”

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.

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.

"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."

