Grim century-old echo

2 cops slain in Jan. 1922, parolee killer cites fear of police brutality

Sgt. Francis J. Buckley, one of two cops killed by Luther Boddy (r.) less than 100 feet from a Harlem police station, with his wife and children. Case drew extensive press coverage. Boddy was sent to electric chair.

BY MARA BOVSUNNEW YORK DAILY NEWS

Two detectives were shot dead in the line of duty in front of a police station. Their killer, despite a long history of crime, had been granted parole two months earlier.

It may seem like something out of today's headlines. But it happened 100 years ago, on the night of Jan. 5, 1922, less than 100 feet from the police station on W. 135th St. in Harlem.

Sgts. William A. Miller and Francis J. Buckley were bringing Luther Boddy in for questioning. Just 20, Boddy already had a four-year record of arrests, convictions, imprisonment and parole.

On the street, his fierce reputation was well established. A deep scar that ran along his right cheek and ended under his chin enhanced his image as a desperado. He got the scar in prison when another inmate whacked him with a shovel.

In the brief time since Boddy's parole, he was implicated in the gunshot wounding of another police officer and a robbery attempt during which a building janitor was slain and a rent collector wounded.

Miller and Buckley were sent out to nab Boddy as he reported to a parole officer at a school on W. 135th St.

Somehow, Boddy managed to conceal a .38 pistol as he was searched.

About 100 feet from the police station, Boddy pulled out the gun and started shooting wildly. Miller, 46, got a fatal bullet to his head. Buckley, 35, shot in the abdomen, lingered in the hospital for less than a day, long enough for him to give the details of the shooting. Blood donations from six fellow officers could not save him.

They left behind two widows and 11 children. Miller and his wife had eight kids. Buckley and his wife had three.

The Brooklyn Daily Eagle visited Marguerite Theresa Miller the day after her husband's death. "He did not know what fear was," she told a reporter between fits of weeping. "It would not have happened if the fellow who did the shooting had not been let out on parole."

This was a common sentiment. The Daily News noted that the murders "marked the climax of a criminal career extending over four years, a career that would not have been possible except for extreme leniency shown by half a dozen judges in city courts." At the time, the city was in the grips of a crime wave.

Although the shooting happened steps from a police station, Boddy evaded capture and slipped away into the night.

Thousands of officers fanned out to the fugitive's usual haunts in Harlem and New Jersey, where his mother lived.

Boddy's brother John, a World War I veteran, came to the W. 135th St. station, told police that Luther was a disgrace to his family, and joined in the hunt.

Two days later, a cab driver gave police the tip they needed. The cabbie, Adam Adubato, said he picked up a fare — a woman wearing a fur coat, a long black wig, a skirt and a green hat with a veil — in Newark.

He quickly realized this was no lady.

In the car, the passenger drew a revolver and announced in a distinctly masculine voice, "I'm Boddy, the man who bumped off those two cops in New York. ... If you cross me, I'll knock you off."

He demanded a ride to Philadelphia, but just before dawn, the car ran out of gas near Glenlake, Pa., about 25 miles from their destination.

Boddy ordered Adubato to flag down another car and said he'd take care of the rest. The terrified cabbie, whose police officer brother had been gunned down a few years earlier, got a driver to stop.

Instead of following Boddy's orders, Adubato leaped onto the running board and screamed, "For God's sake, keep on going. I have a murderer in my car, and he's going to stick you up!"

The driver roared off.

With the cabbie's information, police were able to track Boddy to Philadelphia.

They found him in a roominghouse,

sleeping with the murder weapon under his pillow.

He confessed to police. "I guess my temper suddenly flared up. ... I don't know how many shots I fired. And then I ran away," he said. At his trial, Boddy's lawyers attempted an audacious strategy. They blamed his victims.

"BODDY SWEARS HORROR OF POLICE TORTURES CAUSED HIM TO KILL," was The News' headline on Jan. 27, 1922.

He told the court of incidents where he was picked up for no reason and beaten for hours by groups of cops. When Miller and Buckley grabbed him, he said, fear of more violence drove him temporarily insane.

He remembered reaching for the hidden gun, but could recall nothing else until he found himself bolting down Seventh Ave. with a smoking revolver in his hand.

The jury took two hours to find him guilty of murder in the first degree, a verdict that meant death in the electric chair. Boddy, The News noted, "smiled a moment after the foreman gave the jury's decision." He smiled again when he heard the sentence.

"Goodbye, Doc," he said to the physician attending him at his Aug. 31 execution.

No one tried to deny that Boddy was a dangerous criminal with a bleak future. But his defense — that police brutality had driven him to murder — struck a chord. More than 30,000 Harlem residents filed past his coffin in the undertaker shop on W. 136st St.

At the time, the "third degree," which relied on beatings, was routinely used to wring out a confession. Boddy's case is cited as one of the sparks of a movement to bring an end to the practice.

JUSTICE STORY has been the Daily News' exclusive take on true crime tales of murder, mystery and mayhem for more than 100 years.