

EDWARD LEISENRING WENTZ HIS DEATH AND ITS COVERUP

By: Lawrence J. Fleenor, Jr.
Copyright and All Rights Reserved
Big Stone Gap, Virginia
Dec. 15, 2018

The Leisenring and Wentz families of Pennsylvania were intermarried, and were related to several other Pennsylvania German families who were wealthy anthracite coal mine owners. This “hard coal” was necessary for the making of iron and steel, and these families became wealthy as a result of the Civil War. Dr. John Wentz married Mary Leisenring. He was a doctor in the Union Army during the Civil War, but afterwards forsook medicine for the coal industry.

The anthracite deposits in Pennsylvania began to play out just as the industrial age was beginning in the years after the Civil War. During that war, the industrialists in Virginia had learned that one could take bituminous coal (soft coal), turn it into coke by the same process that wood is turned into charcoal, and use that coke in the making of iron and of steel. In the 1880’s the Wentz and Leisenring families, together with related people, bought up the most valuable of the soft coal lands in the country. They bought Black Mountain, which forms the border between Kentucky and Virginia. They did so both as individuals, and under various corporate structures. John sold his and Mary’s private interests on the Kentucky side of Black Mountain to United States Steel and to International Harvester, and used the cash thus generated to develop the remaining deposits in Virginia.

Dr. John and Mary Wentz decided to set their sons up in their Virginia business ventures. This land was known at the time as the ‘Big Stone Gap coal fields’, and in today’s terminology as ‘the Appalachia coal fields’. Their eldest son, Daniel B. Wentz, and his younger brother, Edward Leisenring Wentz were shipped off to Big Stone Gap, which was just getting born. Housing being scarce, they lived in an abandoned railroad boxcar.

To look after the boys, and to teach them the business, in 1881, John and Mary sent their trusted business manager from their Pennsylvania operations, John K. Taggart, to Big Stone Gap to run their company, the Virginia Coal and Iron Company. Taggart soon bought land on top of Poplar Hill in Big Stone Gap, where the affluent, such as Col. C. B. Slemp, Rufus Ayers, and the Goodloes, had mansions. He built a mansion there in 1892 that out did all but the Ayers one.

Following the customary pattern, the starting company was divided into the land holding company, Virginia Coal and Iron Company, and the mine operating company, Stonega Coke and Coal Company. The older brother, Dan, was given the more difficult job, that of head of the mining company, and Ted was given the leadership position of the holding company. In 1896 Taggart was accidentally killed

by a dynamite explosion while he was supervising the construction of coke ovens at the company's first mine, Stonega. Dr. John and Mary bought the Taggart mansion, and their two sons moved in that same year.



THE TAGGART / WENTZ MANSION

The two Wentz brothers lived in Big Stone Gap during an era of high social activity. The nationally known author, John Fox, Jr., and his wife, the Broadway star Fritzi Scheff, lived in town. Oral traditions persist about the existence of formal balls, street dances, concerts, and of a locally noted volunteer police force named the "Big Stone Gap Home Guard", which was led by Col. Joshua Fry Bullitt, Jr. (note this name later). The "Guard" consisted of the most prominent citizens in town, with the notable exceptions of Dan and Ted Wentz (some people say that they were in the Home Guard, but their names are not in the list of members in Johnson's "History of Wise County"). Ted was a member of the baseball team.

In the general time frame of 1902-03 Ted became engaged to the St. Louis, Missouri socialite, Cornelia Forbes Brookmire, whose father James H. Brookmire, a member of the Board of Trade of St. Louis. Ted and Cornelia met through the wife of Dan, Louisa (Louise) Finley Wentz. The two women were close friends. Ted, Dan,

and Lousia all lived in the same Taggart house. There are conflicting oral traditions about whether it was Ted's idea or was an arranged marriage made by his parents. However, there are traditions that the meeting, courtship, and even the proposal all occurred in the Gap, and were all certainly under the eye of Dan. The relationship to the Forbes family is enigmatic, as most of the children of the founder of the American branch of the family, the billionaire Bertie Charles Forbes, are listed on his genealogy on-line as being "private" matters.

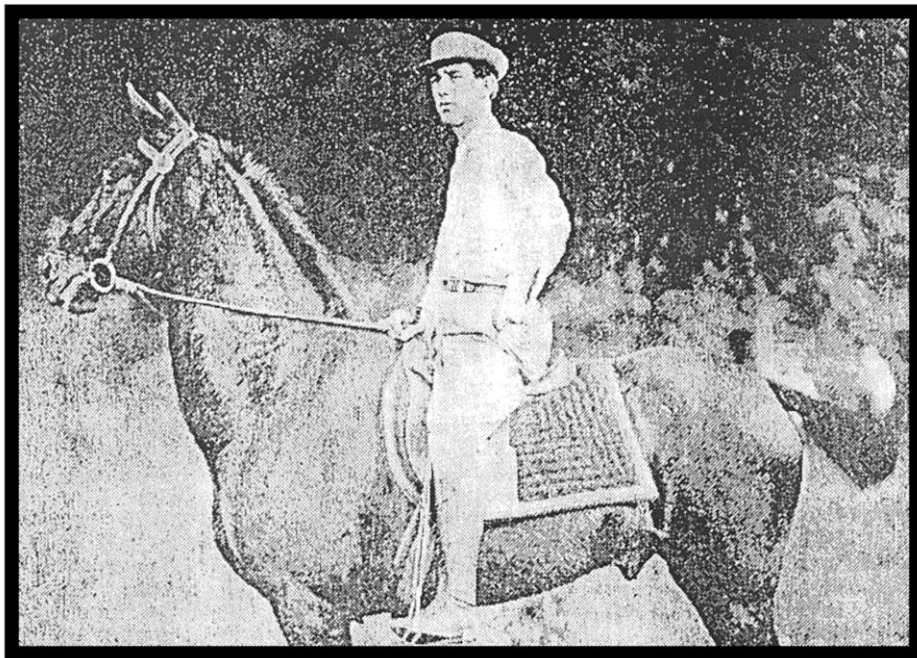


**EDWARD LEISENRING
WENTZ (TED)**

On Sept. 8, 1903 Ted executed his last will and testament. The "New York Times" related that he left his sister-in-law "Louise T. Wentz all household effects", and to his brother Dan he gave his "jewelry, horses, dogs, guns, and other personal effects". This had the result of not breaking up the household in the event of Ted's death. He left Cornelia \$500,000 (according to the New York Times; the Salt lake City Tribune and the "Evening Statesman" of Walla, Wash. obviously using the same news release said it was \$100,000).

VCI's business activities had turned very ugly. As the land owning company, it suddenly found itself in multiple litigations over land of flawed title. The suits involved not only poor mountaineers, but also some very prominent wealthy actors on the national stage. Especially in contention were tracts of land in the general areas of the current radar tower on Black Mountain, and around and about Baker's Flats, which lies at the head of Roaring Fork of the Powell River, Guest's River, and the Pound River. The corporations involved United States Steel, the Keokee Coke

and Coal Company, and the Blackwood Fuel Company. Intertwined in these land disputes was the feud involving several mountaineers who had sold their land claims to the various coal companies. There are hard core, widely held oral traditions that in order to deal with these issues VCI had an organized a “Gang of Thugs”, who among other things, were personally involved in the above mentioned feud, which was so aptly fictionalized by Fox in his Trail of the Lonesome Pine. Among other things, they are widely credited with the murders of a community of Blacks – descendants of escaped South Carolina Slaves – in Sugar Tree Gap near the radar tower. The Blacks had originally settled in Bush Hollow at Glenbrook, Kentucky, but had migrated to the saddle at the head of Bush Hollow on top of Black Mountain. There they had built an East African styled assembly of “shotgun houses” on a four cornered boundary of some indefinite location, straddling as it did not only the state line, but also the properties of United States Steel (sold to them by Dr. John Wentz), Keokee Coke and Coal Company (which VCI was to buy in 1910), and VCI. The Black squatters used the vagueness of the jurisdictional issues as a safe haven from the law, a circumstance still practiced by gamblers, bootleggers, and cock fighters well into the late twentieth century. Ted accused these people of bootlegging. It is undocumented in the written records, but well remembered by numerous oral traditions in both states, that the VCI Gang of Thugs attacked this settlement and murdered all its inhabitants. Evidently they did not go quietly, as one of the VCI Gang of Thugs, Stonega Company’s (remember that Dan Wentz ran this company) Chief of Police died July 24, 1903. Also, a man named James Daniels, was brought into the Stonega Hospital with multiple gunshot wounds, and was treated. The local gossip was that Daniels was not officially affiliated with the company, and had no right to have been treated there. This anomalous incident could not have occurred unless company management (Dan Wentz) had ordered it.



**TED WENTZ AS HE RODE
AROUND WISE COUNTY**

Discussion of The Above Photograph

A great deal can be said about the personality of Ted Wentz from this photograph.

First of all the horse is a Morgan. Morgans are a Northerner's horse, and were used by the Union cavalry during the Civil War. A Southerner in this time and place would have been riding a 'five gaited horse', more properly named 'American Saddle Bred' or 'Saddler'. His saddle is an 'English' styled, and one rode it by 'posting', that is by sitting shallowly in the saddle, and by rising rhythmically on the balls of one's feet.

A well bred Southerner would have been riding in a 'plantation' saddle, and would have been sitting deep in its padding, with his heels pointed downward so as to absorb the shock of the horse's gait. He would have been wearing a broad brimmed hat to protect himself from the sun and the weather.

That useless hat Wentz is wearing was Ivy League.

With all this nonverbal language Wentz was telling the local people that he was not one of them, and was from the superior victorious North. From the reputation he left behind one would say that he succeeded.

<>

In incidents that likely were related to the above violence, the Clark / Clarkston family was at the same approximate time involved with the VCI Gang of Thugs. The family was originally Clarkston, but due to the Civil War the prouion Kentucky branch of the family changed their name to Clark. The family has acquired several land grants from Kentucky in the general area of the Black Mountain radar tower. James Monroe Clarkston / Clark owned land that VCI wanted. He had refused to sell. One night his barn mysteriously burned. The next morning he sat on his front porch with a rifle in his lap, awaiting the inevitable reappearance of the VCI land agent and his anticipated reoffer to buy his land. That agent came, and was shot and killed by Clark, who immediately went into permanent exile in Missouri.

Another Clarkston of Clover Fork, Ky. (Glenbrook area) owned 11 of those acres on Black Mountain mentioned above. Ted Wentz wanted them, and threatened Clarkston that if he did not sell the land Wentz would run the offered price down until it was nothing, and then Wentz would drive Clarkston off the land. Clarkston sold. Clarkston's father had killed a member of the clan that constituted the VCI Gang of Thugs, and the two families were involved in the feud mentioned above, which also had Civil War entanglements. There were few secrets in the mountains, and it was widely believed that this Clarkston did dirty work for Calvin Pardee, owner of the Blackwood Fuel Company.

Wentz is described as being widely feared because of his whipping people with the whip that he carried. Oral traditions aside, it is a documented fact that he carried a hammerless (a pocket gun) 32 revolver, and that he always took his attack dog with him when he went into the mountains. The dog was trained to trot along side Wentz as he rode on horseback.

Ted played tennis with John Goodloe, who was both an across-the-street neighbor and large timber and coal land owner, on Oct. 13, 1903. On Oct. 14th he telephoned his assistant, Samuel Wax, and told him that he “was going up the river” to see Sam’s brother, Charles. Some say Charles was also a VCI employee. Charles lived at “Lipps”, an unincorporated community on Guest’s River north of Norton. Sam may have been a land agent rather than a standard employee of VCI. There were no VCI mines in that part of the area.



**TED WENTZ IN HIS BSG
BASEBALL UNIFORM**

NOTE THAT IN NONE OF THE
PICTURES USED HERE IS HE
SMILING OR HAPPY

VCI was in intense negotiations with the Blackwood Fuel Co. of Calvin Pardee, and the Virginia Iron and Coal Company’s Hagan estate over the land between the heads of Roaring Fork of Powell River and that of Guest River. Significantly, Black Creek owned by Blackwood Fuel Company sits like a wedge between Roaring Fork and Guest’s River. The original surveys were irreproducible on the map.

In order to understand this planned trip, and what was to happen next, one must understand the lay of the road of that era. It was strikingly different from the road system of today. Old US 23 from Kent Junction through Blackwood, and Norton, did not exist. The object of the road was to gain access from Big Stone Gap to Kentucky. It did so by accessing both Flat Gap at the head of the Cumberland River, and Winding Gap (currently called Pound-Jenkins Gap) and the Kentucky and Big Sandy Rivers. The old road went up current Old US 23 to Kent Junction after having passed through both present Appalachia and Kelly View. At Kent Junction it cut up the Roaring Fork of Powell River to the mouth of Cane Patch Creek, which provided a route with little noticeable grade into Black Creek, and through White

Oak Gap to the head of Powell River. From its head there is only a little hill to cross to get to Guest River not far from Lipps. One can continue through Fox Gap to Flat Gap, or to Winding Gap.

On the morning of Oct. 14, 1903 Ted locked his attack dog in the house. He left his whip at home. He took his revolver with him, having chambered only three cartridges, and having taken no spares he mounted his horse. The dog was so upset at being left at home that it gnawed the woodwork, leaving scars that can be seen today. He was last seen at Kellyview northeast of Appalachia. The next evidence of him was when his horse, with its reins broken, was found late in the evening at Kent Junction, a couple of miles on up the road, where Roaring Fork empties into the Powell River. Wentz had never arrived at Charles Wax's.

Dan Wentz was notified, and immediately assumed that his brother had been murdered. A reward for finding the body was offered, and gradually climbed to \$100,000. Dr. John Wentz immediately pulled Dan out of Virginia and returned him to Pennsylvania, where he assumed control of the family's businesses there. John went on a nationally publicized rant accusing his business competitors of murdering Ted. He did not name Calvin Pardee, but described him to the "New York Times" in such a way that there could have been little doubt whom he meant. In order to avoid slander charges, Wentz later retracted his comments. There is little room for doubt that John believed that Pardee, perhaps through Clarkston, was responsible for his son's murder. Following the custom of that era, other newspapers nationally picked up and reprinted the "Times" story, each adding their own imagined embellishments.

Men from the Stonega and Osaka mines were given double pay to search for Ted Wentz, and "hundreds" of people unaffiliated with the company searched. On May 9, 1904 David Raleigh of Pardee Coal Camp – located about six miles upstream from Cane Patch, which is about two miles upstream from Kent Junction, was looking for a lost cow, when he found the decomposed body of Ted Wentz. It was near a bridle path, and was lying behind a log where it was hard to see. (some reports state that Raleigh lived at Blackwood – this point of confusion likely comes from the fact that Pardee was owned by the Blackwood Fuel Company – the coal camp of Blackwood lies at the mouth of Black Creek, perhaps four miles from the mouth of Cane Patch) The author grew up with several people whose grandfathers participated in the search, and they all state that the body was found "between Kent Junction and Cane Patch".

A Coroner's Jury of citizens was empaneled (it would have to have been ordered by the county judge). It consisted of two coroners, Dr. Malcom Campbell of Blackwood (the coal camp Blackwood had been opened in 1903 by the Blackwood Fuel Company owned by Calvin Pardee), and John Adams, Jr. Esq. (a Stonega Company Lawyer). Thus the interests of the potential accuser and the potential accused were represented at the top of the inquest. The jury of citizens was composed of Captain Henry Taylor (a resident of Big Stone Gap, and who was an

affiliate of VCI), J. P. Wolfe (the chief surveyor for VCI), Horace E. Fox (an engineer for VCI and brother of the author John Fox, Jr.), W. S. Mathews (Commissioner of Revenue for the Western District of Wise Co. in 1907), W. A. Head (resident of Big Stone Gap), and C. A. Vance of the Town of Wise (unknown occupation), Dr. W. Kelly (not a physician, he was a pharmacist in Big Stone Gap and a partner with Col. Bullitt in the ownership of coal mines at Josephine), J. P. Edmonds (a physician in Big Stone Gap), and W. C. Moore (a physician of the Town of Wise). Col. J. F. Bullett, who was the attorney for both VCI and the Wentz family, attended as their designated representative. His daughter had married the son of John K. Taggart. The autopsy was also attended by about 500 interested people with no official capacity to the proceedings.

The environment where the body was found, and condition of the body itself, and the reasoning of the jury were carefully and professionally recorded. It was in the woods near a bridle path. There had been a forest fire which had partially burned the body and its clothing. The body lay on its back on the ground behind a log. Its head lay on the log. The body was partially skeletonized, but sufficient clothing and flesh remained to make two significant conclusions. The body was that of Edward L. Wentz. 'Dependent rubor' was present. This observation indicated that Wentz had lain down on the ground himself, and that the body had not been moved after death. This phenomenon comes about because the blood in the body drains to its lowest part after death, and then clots there, not to be altered by further repositioning of the body. This finding is still used by medical examiners of today, and was sufficient to rule out the possibility that the body had been put there by someone else after Wentz's death. The bullet hole in the skin was over the left fifth rib anteriorly, thus passing through the tip of the heart, and through the left 10th rib posteriorly, but not puncturing the skin, and then lodging in the lumbar spine. The bullet was recovered, and was a 32 caliber. Twenty five feet above the head the 32 hammerless revolver, and his glasses were found. The revolver had three bullets in it, with the center one having been fired.

The jury ruled that the sequence of events had been the following. Wentz had ridden to this spot, dismounted his horse and tied it up by its reins, and then lay himself down on the ground behind the log, thus creating for himself a private place for what he was about to do. He had been here before, as spent 32 cartridge casings were found in a ground hog hole where the animal had picked them up and had taken them home. Wentz then took his revolver, likely in both hands in order to position it properly, so as to direct the course of the bullet lengthways through the vital organs of his body including his heart, and pulled the trigger. At that point the 'startle response', the most basic reflex the body has, caused his arms to fling themselves outward, and upward, sweeping his glasses off as the gun was flung backwards above his head. In the opinion of the author, who is a physician and who has been trained in the basic issues of the medical examiner's science, this recovery and analysis of the data would stand up well in today's world. There is no room for any doubt that events unfolded as stated above.

Dr. John Wentz went on a rage. He publically said that coroner's jury had lied, and that Ted's death had been "an accident". He then reported to the "New York Times" that the coroner's report confirmed that it had been murder. This news item, as before, was picked up by the national press. Someone slipped the "Times" a copy of the coroner's report, and perhaps with the testimony of so many VCI affiliates, the "Times" finally published an accurate report.

Dr. Wentz then informed the "Times" that his son had killed himself because Dr. Wentz and the family disapproved the marriage, and that if Ted did marry Cornelia he would be disinherited. This story, too, was dutifully spread around the country.

Dr. Wentz then sent a private train to Big Stone Gap, accompanied by his two other sons. They carried Ted's remains back to Pennsylvania for burial. Ever since then, Edward L. Wentz has been written out of the family histories. He is not listed in any of the family genealogies. He is not mentioned in Prescott's History of VCI, even though Prescott lived in the Wentz house (the one built by Taggart), and was himself President of VCI, just as Wentz had been. Ted is barely referred to in the company's more modern history, In The Kingdom of Coal, where his name is omitted from the index.

Cornelia left her own story. She said that Ted had been very romantic at first, but then seemed to lose interest and to have become distracted. She did not mention any opposition to the marriage coming from the Wentz family. Someone released to the press the story that Ted had loved her so much that he planned to build her a house in Big Stone Gap where they could live happily together. One newspaper even reported that the house had already been built, and gave details of its type of construction. Even reports of the contents of the will were reported in the papers, and indicated that Ted had owned two lots in Big Stone Gap. Cornelia went on to find herself another wealthy eligible bachelor, and married Howard Frank Gillette of Chicago in 1911.

Review of the deed records in the Wise County Court House shows that Edward L. Wentz never owned any land in Big Stone Gap, or in Wise Co. Who was responsible for the misinformation having been given to the press is unknown. He and Dan did not even own the Taggart House in which they lived. It was owned by their father, Dr. John Wentz.

The only documented acknowledgement that Dr. John and Mary Wentz, and their two remaining sons, ever made of the existence of Edward was made quietly when John and Mary endowed two maternity beds in the Presbyterian Hospital of Philadelphia in the memory of Edward Leisenring Wentz. Dr. Wentz was a trustee of that hospital.

This is the end of the known facts. But what really happened? What reasonable speculations could be made about these sequences of events? First of all,

there is no room for any doubt that Wentz committed suicide. He did not do it impulsively. He dispassionately premeditated it, and meticulously planned it, and probably made a practice run on it. Cornelia's comments describe a depressed individual. So, why was he depressed? There are two possible lines of reasoned thought. The first is that he was distressed over the marked violence and murders in which he had been a central figure. He may have wanted to avoid discovery and prosecution for these crimes. He may even have felt that he deserved to be executed for these crimes, and since no one else seemed to be going to do it, he may have felt duty bound to have done it to himself. Such ideation is not uncommon in similar situations.

But how does one explain two remarkable circumstances? The first is the comments made by Cornelia that Wentz loved her so much that they either had planned to build a house, or even that it had already been built? The other circumstance is the remarkable switch in stories put out to the "Times" by Dr. John Wentz after he had accepted the fact that Ted had killed himself, which said that Wentz had killed himself because the family had opposed his marriage. After all, the story about the house and the lots mentioned in the will are clearly false. This, together with the facts that far from opposing the marriage, the engagement had come through the family. What were Cornelia and the Wentz family trying to cover up? What truth could have been more unacceptable than the cover story about the supposed family opposition to a marriage that they had actually help bring about?

Truth be told, rumors about Ted having been a homosexual have persisted for over a hundred years. It is a fact that internal emotional conflicts about sexual identity are the leading cause of suicide in young white males. Could it be that Cornelia felt compelled to release false stories about the imaginary house to show the world that Wentz really was in love with her? Could it be that Dr. John would rather have been thought of as an ogre of a father than to have the world know that his son was a homosexual? Such a thinking pattern is so common that psychiatrists call it 'reaction formation'.

Bibliography:

- 1 - Rottenberg, Dan - In the Kingdom of Coal
- 2 - Prescott, E. J. - The Story of the Virginia Coal and Iron Company
- 3 - Fleenor, Lawrence J. - A - "Iron Furnaces and Canals In Early Virginia" - BigStone GapPublishing.net - in essays listed under "other writings"
B - Black Mountain, the Mother of Today
- 4 - Ancestry.com - "Daniel B. Wentz"; "Charles Dickenson Wax"; Bertie Charles Forbes; Cornelia Forbes Brookshire; Dan B. Wentz
- 5 - "New York Times" May 12, 1904; Nov. 30, 1904; March 10, 1940
- 6 - Robertson, Rhonda - "The Post" 5-31-2006 referencing an article by James Taylor Adams

- 7 - Holyfield, Ida - "The Post" 10-3-2007; this issue also contains a reprint of the "Post" article on Ted Wentz dated Oct. 14, 1903
- 8 - Addington, Luther F. - The Story of Wise County (Virginia)
- 9 - Johnson, Charles A. - Wise County Virginia
- 10 - "Google Earth" - site of Lipps
- 11 - Moore, Ted - oral tradition to the author concerning the death of Ted Wentz
- 12 - Wright, Laura - "The Wentz Mystery" printed in "The Virginia Creeper" - date or issue number not supplied - available on-line
- 13 - "The Evening Statesman" of Walla, Washington
- 14 - FamilyTreeNow - Louisa (Louise) Finley Wentz
- 15 - Deb Clarkston - communication to the author concerning James Monroe Clarkston / Clark
- 16 - "Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commonwealth to the Governor and the General Assembly" - on-line - identifies Capt. Henry Taylor
- 17 - "Virginia Medical Semi Monthly" vol. 9 of 1904-05 identifies Dr. Edmonds & Dr. Moore
- 18 - "New York Medical Journal" vol. 85 pg. 610 - the endowment of the maternity beds