

The Kidnap Racket: E.J. Connelley and the Weyerhaeuser Kidnapping

by Brian Hunt

WEYNAP

The *New York Times* called it “the greatest manhunt in the history of the Northwest.” On May 24, 1935, nine-year-old George Weyerhaeuser was kidnapped in Tacoma, WA. Eight days later, he returned safely to his family. The kidnapers remained at large with a \$200,000 ransom. FBI Special Agent in Charge (SAC) Earl “E.J.” Connelley and his cadre of Special Agents (SAs) stationed in Tacoma had been working tirelessly since the boy was abducted.

Now it was time for action.

WEYNAP — as the Weyerhaeuser case was abbreviated in Bureau files — was one of the great 1930s kidnapping investigations. In a decade that began with the Lindbergh case and ended with the equally tragic Levine and Cash cases, Weyerhaeuser stands out as one of the great successes of Hoover’s “G-Men.” Leading the case was the enigmatic E.J. Connelley.

Connelley made a name for himself as an ace investigator in the kidnap racket. The WWI veteran earned J. Edgar Hoover’s trust through a succession of cases and assignments after he’d joined the Bureau in 1920. Unlike many gangster-era Agents who met Hoover’s “clean cut” look, Connelley wore a pencil mustache. Hoover didn’t care for facial hair, but Connelley kept his trademark throughout his career.

The ramifications of the Weyerhaeuser kidnapping were huge. The wealthy family controlled the timber business in the Pacific Northwest. An incredible ransom had been requested. Sensing a need for zero mistakes from the onset of the case, Hoover sent Connelley to Tacoma on a “special” to take charge of the Weyerhaeuser field investigation.

Egoist, Egoist

Connelley walked into a hornet’s nest. Three competing news organizations — the *United Press*, the *Associated Press*, and William Randolph Hearst’s International News Service — were already on the scene and reporters crowded outside the house. An elderly family member, who had not been told of George’s abduction for fear of causing her medical problems,

was instead told the people outside were strikers upset about the family timber business.

Tacoma police initially responded to the missing person call. It wasn’t until a ransom note was delivered later on the 24th that anyone suspected a kidnapping. The note had 21 specific instructions for the family, saying, “Remember to follow the rules all of them. A slip on your part will be just to [sic] bad for someone else.” It was signed, Egoist Egoist.

Before the FBI was called in, police officers let reporters into the Weyerhaeuser home to read the ransom note; officers and family members passed the note around amongst themselves, spoiling the fingerprint evidence. In terms of an uncontrolled setting, it seemed to be the worst possible start to a case.

Connelley immediately set up a temporary shop in the Rust Building (the closest FBI office was in Portland; the Seattle field office had closed in 1932). This was not his first kidnap case — he played an incidental role in Lindbergh,

and more prominently in the 1934 Alice Speed Stoll kidnapping in Louisville. Phone lines at the Weyerhaeuser house were tapped; mail was intercepted and opened before it reached the family. Connelley followed Bureau policy and let the family contact the kidnapers and put together the ransom.

Agents painstakingly wrote

down each serial number of the \$200,000 ransom. The kidnapper’s ransom note was sent to the lab in Washington for handwriting, document and fingerprint analysis.

Leads flooded Bureau offices across the country. People implicated neighbors, old friends, former crime partners, even relatives. There seemed to be a public need to participate in these cases, rooted in the psychology of the Great Depression. Citizens wrote to the Bureau with all sorts of suggestions. (Since details of the ransom note had been published, people felt obliged to try and provide their “expert” analysis of it). In the mass hysteria initiated by the news of the kidnapping, every nine-year-old boy seen across the country now resembled George Weyerhaeuser.

Connelley sifted through all of it. The Bureau compiled a list of over 200 suspects. There had been labor problems with the Weyerhaeuser timber company, so disgruntled employees were considered suspects. All Public Enemies at-large were

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also under suspicion – including Alvin Karpis, Harry Campbell, Volney Davis, and Thomas Robinson, Jr. Connelley thought the perpetrator was a novice, not a skilled criminal. “[T]he note was probably written by someone who has been reading of the other kidnappings and Detective Magazines,” he wrote, “which might indicate it was the work of a boy or some illiterate person.”



Connelley portrait in the early 40s from the family collection

The press was antagonistic. Those with ties to the Los Angeles office pestered SAC Joe Dunn for information. They played local law enforcement against the Federal Agents in Tacoma, even when there was tacit cooperation. A famous reporter telegraphed Hoover: “Suggest you send Harold Nathan at once to rectify glaring mistakes in diplomacy by certain fish blooded individual who has succeeded admirably in arousing antagonism of absolutely everybody of importance on the Pacific Coast.” It isn’t clear whether the writer was referring to Connelley or Portland SAC Cal Spears. But eventually Hoover sent Dunn to Tacoma with the sole job of managing the press. “We will not investigate this case through the newspapers,” Hoover said. This freed Connelley to focus on the case.

A Break in the Case

After communicating with the kidnapers through newspaper ads, Philip Weyerhaeuser (George’s father) drove up to Seattle to make the ransom drop. He followed a series of notes left in tin cans near white flags beside a deserted road. The first drop failed when Weyerhaeuser couldn’t locate the final note of instructions. He sat in his car for two hours, waiting for a sign. Then, frustrated at the lost chance to get his son back, he decided to leave.

He re-established contact with the kidnapers the next day and was directed to another remote area outside Seattle. Weyerhaeuser left the \$200,000 inside his car, as instructed, with the engine on and started walking away down the dirt road. A man jumped out from the underbrush, slid in the car behind the wheel, and gunned the engine. Weyerhaeuser saw the red taillights fade away into darkness and hoped he’d done the right thing.

The next morning, Connelley went to the scene of the drop. The kidnapers had been careless and left plenty of evidence, including a piece of paper with addresses and handwritten notes. He collected them all and sent them back to the lab in Washington for analysis. But before any of the leads or evidence played out, they got a break.

In the pre-dawn hours of June 1, the kidnapers released George in the woods near Issaquah. The boy walked for hours until he found an occupied farmhouse.

“I’m George Weyerhaeuser,” he said.

The family instantly recognized him from the news. They fed him, gave him dry clothes, and then the farmer drove

George back into town. They stopped at a gas station and the man tried to call the Weyerhaeuser house. Despite having two Agents monitoring incoming phone calls (a point of contention that would infuriate Connelley given the events to come), no one answered. So the farmer called the police instead.

A *Seattle Times* reporter happened to be in the police station when the call came in. He overheard the news and in the cutthroat interest of “scooping” the other newspapers, he decided to hire a taxi and intercept the farmer bringing George home. In a terrible breach of ethics, the reporter impersonated a police officer and agreed to take George back to his parents. While driving back to Tacoma, the reporter got his precious scoop from the traumatized nine-year old.

Connelley raged about what had happened. Over the following days he interviewed the young boy at the Weyerhaeuser house and learned many details that would eventually lead to the kidnapers’ arrest and successful prosecution.

Salt Lake

The Salt Lake City office was undermanned. Connelley had his Agents spread out over parts of the Northwest looking for the dugout holes and the house where George had been kept. So when ransom bills started appearing in Utah, SAC Louis Wine relied on the local police for help. At a dime store, two officers were called to the cashier’s desk when another ransom bill was presented. They immediately took the woman who presented the money, Margaret Waley, into custody and brought her to the FBI office. Connelley left Tacoma and arrived in Salt Lake. Waley denied any knowledge of the kidnapping at first, then later admitted her husband Harmon had been part of it along with another man, William Dainard (alias Mahan). Agents staked out the woman’s home and arrested her husband when he returned. Under interrogation — one of Connelley’s specialties — both Waleys eventually confessed and gave full statements that implicated themselves and Dainard, who was still on the loose.



Connelley in field in June 1935 from the family collection. Connelley and an unnamed Agent search a field where George Weyerhaeuser was believed to have been kept in a dugout pit

Connelley and a group of Agents trudged up the hills of Immigrant Pass. Harmon Waley told Agents he'd buried almost \$100,000 of the ransom money in the foothills outside the city. Digging several feet into the desert ground, Agents found the cache wrapped in an oilskin sack. The following day, Dainard was almost arrested in Butte, MT. He abandoned over \$15,000 of the ransom money in his car when he fled.

Both Waleys were convicted. Harmon ended up in Alcatraz and his wife served a 20-year sentence in a Michigan detention farm. Dainard was apprehended the next year and was also sent to Alcatraz for a 60-year sentence.

Philip Weyerhaeuser wrote a personal letter of thanks to Hoover on June 5th, commending the FBI. "Mr. Spears and Connelley have been extremely helpful throughout and all members of your organization did their utmost to further the recovery of the child."

During the Waley trial, reporters described how after George testified, he stepped off the witness stand and went back to sit on Connelley's lap. Like many Agents of any era, Connelley spent long hours and days away from his own wife and son (his son Jack was 14 at the time of WEYNAP). An AP photo captured an opportune moment where Connelley looked down, paternally, on George. There was something personal at stake for Connelley in this case. He was rarely at home for long periods of time while his own son grew up. WEYNAP was a chance to help one father reunite with his son, even while Connelley was separated from his own.

The Legendary E.J.

I first came across E.J. Connelley in 2012 while researching my non-fiction book, *G-Men, Gangsters, and Gators*, about the FBI manhunt of Ma and Fred Barker in central Florida. In early 1935 (four months before WEYNAP) Connelley located the Barkers in a lake house near Ocala, FL and led a four-hour gun battle that killed Ma and Fred Barker. For all this prominence, I thought, surely there would be a wealth of biographical information on him, just as there existed about FBI celebrity Melvin Purvis.

I was wrong. Connelley was a ghost. He left a small trace in the historical record. Newspapers of the time couldn't even spell his name right. He was called Earl, Edward, Edmund, Connolly, Conley, even Donnelley.

Whatever history remembered him as, though, the Agents of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s all knew all about him. When field offices heard "Connelley is coming," Agents braced for the worst. As part of the FBI Oral History Project, former Special Agent James Healy talked about his experience with Connelley on a case in Detroit in the early 1950s. The interview — sponsored by the Society of Former Special Agents of the FBI — is one of the few extant interviews of an Agent who worked for Connelley.

"He was a legendary member of the old FBI gang-era Agents," Healy said. "He was a little man by stature, but he had a very big voice. And it could be a very angry voice at times. We, the secretary and I, sat in on the conferences and

really got an ear full, too. He chewed out the Agents very dramatically and sometimes maybe profanely. But he got a lot of results too."

Healy recounted an investigation into an attempted assassination of Victor Reuther, brother of the president of the United Auto Workers. "Mr. Connelley was a workaholic. He came to work everyday, including Saturdays and Sundays. He couldn't understand why all the other Agents on the Special weren't there with him, but he would come after church."

Healy concluded: "Mr. Connelley... was another example of the dedicated people that the Bureau had. He was a married man from Cincinnati. He had a family back there, but he was on the road almost all the time. His health suffered from it."

Connelley was also a brutal critic of men, threatening to ruin careers with his acerbic comments about their appearance, speech, or on-the-job performance. Connelley called SA Charles Winstead "one of the slowest-thinking Agents in the Chicago office and not of any particular value, except for his marksmanship." This is particularly puzzling since Winstead was one of the most reliable Agents from that era, one of the "Cowboys" that Hoover brought in from the southwest to bolster the Bureau. (Winstead is credited with firing the shot that killed John Dillinger outside the Biograph Theater.) But Winstead failed to impress Connelley out in the field, where actions, not reputation, defined a man.

Connelley's worth inside the Bureau was high. In fact, before the chaos of the 1930s erupted, an inspection of Connelley's Chicago office concluded with this pronouncement: "As you will note," the Inspector wrote to Hoover, "we have placed Mr. Connelley in the Superior class of Special Agents in Charge and we are agreed that *he is the best Special Agent in Charge in the Bureau's service today.*" [Author's emphasis].

When Connelley reported for duty as SAC of the New York office in the early 1930s, he went about it like a President in his first week in office. He sent out an office



Connelley outside airplane, from the family collection, taken in May 1936 following the arrest of Alvin Karpis in New Orleans. Connelley is in the white suit. Other individuals are unidentified. Karpis was still onboard the plane

memorandum to all employees covering timeliness of reports, rules for reporting to work on time, registering in and out of the office, tracing mail, marking copies of reports, time frames for following up on open cases, spending less than 10% of time on reviewing files and dictating reports, and rules for the overall appearance of the office.

This was not well received. The 10% time allotment became known as "Connelley's rule." One morning, Connelley stood in the door to his office, looking out at the desks of the Special Agents. One Agent read a newspaper after the clock passed 9 a.m. Connelley walked over to his desk and asked him why he hadn't gone into the file room to get his basket and start the day's work. Embarrassed, the Agent stashed the newspaper and went to work.

Someone in the office bypassed Connelley and complained directly to Headquarters. An Inspector noted, "it appears that Mr. Connelley is lacking in certain qualities of diplomacy in attracting the loyalty of a large number of the employees assigned to him, which, no doubt, is attributable to his rather cold attitude toward some of the personnel... He is rather a strict disciplinarian, which, in many instances of course is necessary, but applies general rules to all Agents when frequently a correction of the individual faults of Agents would be more tactful and cause less resentment."

After Hoover received this feedback about Connelley's management style, he fired off a series of memos criticizing Connelley. Some men would have accepted the Director's wrath and gone on their way. Connelley was different. He fired right back: "Knowing that you desire strict accountability as to any and all personnel in their work, results, and time spent, which is as it should be, I would appreciate it if you will advise me if there is anything in the above which you believe should be varied to better suit conditions or your desires in the matter."

Connelley learned how to better manage an office over the course of his career (though his forte was running a special out in the field). His kidnapping cases took him across the country, including Chicago, Miami, New York, Seattle and Minneapolis. He developed a loyal and dedicated group of men on his "federal flying squads." The Director even joined Connelley in the snow-laden fields of Wisconsin during the Ross case of 1938. Only two cases (Mattson and Levine) remain unsolved to this day. Generally, Connelley got his man.

He and Agent Clarence Hurt pulled Alvin Karpis from a car off Canal Street in New Orleans (the famous arrest that Hoover took credit for). He sent at least five men to Alcatraz in the 1930s. Connelley also played a major role in the espionage cases of the 1940s. Shortly before his retirement, he helped investigate the "crime of the century," which for the 1950s was the Boston Brinks robbery.

Reporter Don Whitehead published *The FBI Story* in 1956. Like most "Hooverized" official publications, it sanitized case histories by removing Agents' names and giving all credit to the Bureau. Though an active investigator in many of the cases that were recounted, Connelley was only mentioned twice. A passage from the chapter, "The Anonymous Nine," indirectly summarized Connelley's career:

"...Hoover has around him a group of top-flight executives who climbed from the ranks of the FBI's Special Agents. They came up the hard way, by merit and not as somebody's political pets. Hoover trusted them to make decisions. In turn, these men have repaid the trust with loyalty and fierce pride in the FBI. They accept without question the FBI policy of anonymity. Their names are not widely known beyond the doors of the FBI's Headquarters. And yet they hold in their hands much of the responsibility for the nation's safety.



Connelley's retirement dinner given by the NYC office at Toots Shors. Connelley is left of the microphone



Plaque that hung in the Cincinnati office (and subsequently lost when the office later moved)

...These men did not reach their positions by being yes-men. They arrived by being willing to accept hard work, make decisions and take on responsibilities while submerging their own personalities in the FBI.”

The men who went into battle with Connelley on raids in the 1930s swore allegiance to him, even after they retired or left the Bureau. When Connelley’s health failed in the years after his retirement, the boys wrote him letters of encouragement. “Whenever Johnny Madala, Danny Sullivan and I get together,” Charlie Weeks wrote Connelley, “we spend most of the time recalling the greatest Boss we ever had in the Bureau, so your ears ought to burn.”

Weeks also wrote one of the last letters Connelley read before he died on July 20, 1957. It bore an unintended foreshadowing: “I will never forget how you were always

ready to go charging day or night and you deserve a good rest from all that excitement and hard work.”

Upcoming Book – GMAN

In 2013, Connelley’s granddaughters contacted retired SA Larry Wack. Larry hosts the par excellence website on all things Bureau-related of the gangster era. He had also been a great help to me in researching my first book and put me in touch with the granddaughters. For nearly 60 years, the family kept a trunk full of letters, photos, newspapers, and more. Though memories of him are scarce, like many family members of Agents from this era, they have a fierce pride in what their grandfather accomplished with his life’s work. They were ready to have his story told. I traveled up to Ohio to see the information they had preserved. Even Connelley’s well-worn leather holster was in their collection. For a historical researcher like me, it was the equivalent of finding a treasure chest filled with gold.

I hope to publish Connelley’s biography in 2015. WEYNAP is one of the many high profile cases that will be featured. The stereotypical G-Man in popular culture is now cliché: the long trench coat, snap-brim fedora, and polished shoes. More often, though, people remember the gangsters of the era like Dillinger, rather than the men who brought them to justice. I hope that by publishing Connelley’s story (and all the Agents who worked alongside him) I can tilt the scales back in the favor of the good guys.

If you know anything about E.J. Connelley or the cases he worked, I’d like to hear from you.

Brian Hunt grew up in Minnesota. He learned of the Depression-era gangsters as part of local history in the Minneapolis and St. Paul areas. After graduating summa cum laude from the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN, he entered a career in the insurance industry and later moved to Florida. He previously self-published an account of the FBI raid on the Barkers, “G-Men, Gangsters, and Gators.” In his free time he writes a history column for Home magazine. He is currently writing the biography of FBI legend E.J. Connelley.

The 9/11 Oral History Project – “Our Gift to the Nation”

Members of the History Committee met in New York to discuss the 9/11 history project. They will be collecting oral histories of FBI Agents who worked on the response to 9/11, as next year will mark the 15th anniversary of the event.



Jim Tobin, Bruce Ash, Tom Moriarty, Joe Valiquette, Ray Batvinis and Jim Nicholas