

**HISTORY**

# 1935 killing of local FBI agent chronicled in book

'The G-man and the Diamond King' investigates and tells story of Klein's ill-fated run-in with death

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**A**s a former FBI special agent, Bill Plunkett knows his way around a criminal investigation.

After leaving the bureau in 2011, Plunkett used his investigative skills to dig into the death of FBI Special Agent Nelson B. Klein from the Cincinnati office, who was slain in a shoot-out in College Corner, Indiana, on Aug. 16, 1935.

Klein was one of only 36 federal officers killed as a result of adversarial action, according to the FBI website. Sunday marks the 80th anniversary of Klein's death.

Plunkett's research led to a book, "The G-man and the Diamond King: A True FBI Crime Story of the 1930s," which tells of Klein's ill-fated run-in with George W. Barrett, a suspect in a car-theft ring.

Plunkett, who lives Downtown, became aware of Klein's story in 2008 when Special Agent Timothy Tracy from the Covington office discovered that the Klein family tombstone in Southgate's Evergreen Cemetery had been toppled.

Tracy led efforts funded by the Cincinnati chapter of the Society of Former Special Agents of the FBI (SFSAFBI) to repair the headstone with a new inscription for Nelson Klein and a bronze FBI badge.

"I thought, 'Boy, I'd really like to know Klein's history,'" Plunkett said. "What really happened in College Corner?"

"I took it like I would an investigation," the author said, but "I never realized how difficult it would be."

Eighty-year-old files were long gone so Plunkett pieced together hundreds of articles, and finally found George Barrett's FBI file in the National Archives.

He was convinced the story of Klein's sacrifice needed to be told.

## Gangsters versus G-men just like in the movies

The story seems straight out of a gangster movie.

Klein was born April 3, 1898, in New York City. After serving in the New York Guard during World War I, he worked as a hotel detective before joining the Bureau of Investigation (BOI), the precursor to the FBI, in 1926.

In 1932, Klein transferred to the

Cincinnati offices, which were located in the U.S. Post Office and Customs building at Government Square on Fifth Street.

Klein lived in Southgate with his wife, Catharine, and their three children.

When Klein joined the bureau, agents received little training, and there were so few federal laws that it wasn't until 1934 that federal agents were allowed to carry firearms and make arrests.

In the 1930s, federal agents were known as G-men, slang for government men. The agency officially became the Federal Bureau of Investigation in July 1935.

Under Director J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI was famed for well-publicized manhunts of public enemies such as John Dillinger and Charles "Pretty Boy" Floyd, both killed by agents.

George W. Barrett was the exact opposite of Klein. A career hoodlum, moonshiner, car thief and murderer, Barrett was known to carry a handful of diamonds in his pocket, earning him the nickname "the Diamond King."

Born in Clay County in Eastern Kentucky amid Hatfield and McCoy-type feuding, Barrett was no stranger to guns and violence. As Barrett reportedly said when he was arrested after killing Klein, "Us Kentuckians carry guns and we carry 'em to shoot."

Plunkett recounts that in 1930 in Clover Bottom, Kentucky, Barrett shot his 73-year-old mother, Nancy Barrett, three times – in the stomach, chest, and mouth – and attacked his sister.

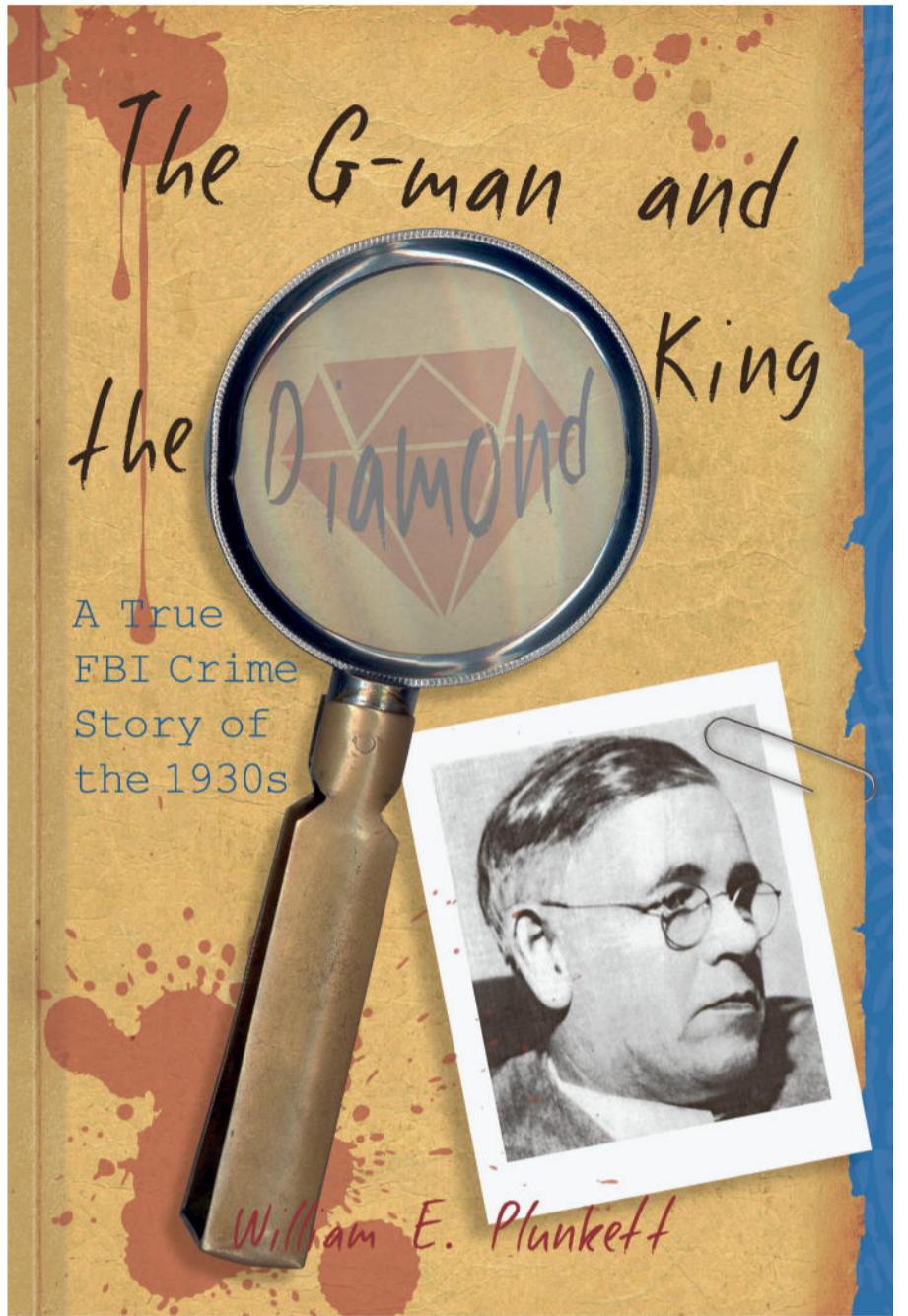
Barrett was tried twice for the murder of his mother, but both trials ended in hung juries thanks to the work of Frank H. Baker, the Commonwealth Attorney prosecuting the case, who was also Barrett's cousin.

In 1932, Barrett was acting as Baker's bodyguard when they were ambushed in Manchester, Kentucky, as part of a feud. Baker was killed, but Barrett was uninjured.

Barrett's main racket was stolen cars. He would buy a popular automobile, then steal a lookalike car and alter the motor number to be the same as the car he purchased. Then he would sell the stolen car with what appeared to be legitimate papers, often across state lines, which made



PROVIDED  
The restored grave marker for FBI Special Agent Nelson Klein in Evergreen Cemetery in Southgate.



PROVIDED PHOTOS

Book cover for "The G-man and the Diamond King" by William E. Plunkett.



FBI Special Agent Nelson B. Klein was assigned to the Cincinnati office when he was killed attempting to apprehend a suspect on Aug. 16, 1935.

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**Klein**

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it a federal matter.

On Aug. 16, 1935, Agent Klein and his partner, Donald McGovern, tracked Barrett to Hamilton, Ohio, and then to College Corner, a little burg straddling the Ohio and Indiana border six miles northwest of Miami University.

According to Plunkett's research, Klein and McGovern spotted Barrett and called for backup from the Butler County sheriff. But, fearing that Barrett would flee, the agents confronted him.

Klein jumped out of the car, identified himself as a federal agent, and hotfooted it after Barrett down an alley. He didn't see that Barrett hid a .45 Colt revolver under a towel.

McGovern heard a barrage of gunfire and found Klein lying on the ground and Barrett hiding behind a tree. McGovern shot Barrett in the knee, incapacitating him.

Barrett reportedly told a witness, "I beat him to the trigger! I shot him!"

Klein had been hit six times and died at the scene, but not before he had succeeding in shooting Barrett in the other knee.

Klein's body was transported to Christ Hospital in Mount Auburn. Barrett was taken under guard to Fort Hamilton Hospital in Hamilton.

With both knees shattered by bullets, Barrett stood trial in a wheelchair. That December, a jury in Indianapolis found Barrett guilty of mur-



FILE/THE INDIANAPOLIS STAR  
George W. Barrett was still recovering from gunshot wounds to both knees when he was on trial for the murder of Agent Nelson Klein. Barrett became the first person executed for killing a federal agent.

der after deliberating for just 50 minutes.

Barrett became the first person to be sentenced under a 1934 law making it a federal crime to murder a federal officer, punishable by death by hanging. He was executed in Marion County, Indiana, on March 24, 1936, seven months after he murdered Klein.

"Justice was a lot swifter then," Plunkett said.

Today, Agent Klein is honored – the Indianapolis FBI office is on Nelson B. Klein Parkway – though not necessarily remembered. Plunkett's book will ensure that more will hear Klein's story.

Proceeds from the book will go to the Former Special Agents of the FBI Foundation.



ENQUIRER FILE  
Gen. John T. Thompson of Newport displays his invention, the Tommy gun, which he intended for military use, but it became the favorite weapon of gangsters in the 1930s.

**Tommy gun symbolized gangster era**

The Thompson submachine gun, or Tommy gun, was the preferred weapon of gangsters during the Prohibition era.

Invented by Newport native Gen. John Taliaferro Thompson, who was born in the Thompson House, in Newport in 1860, the rapid-fire gun was intended as a military weapon for World War I, but by the time it was ready in 1918, the war was over.

The guns were used by police and military, but American gangsters would often steal them from police armories.

The Tommy gun has been further popularized in Hollywood gangster movies. Thompson regretted the gun's use in criminal activities, writing, "It has worried me that the gun has been stolen by evil men, and used for purposes outside our (company) otto, 'On the side of law and order.' "



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