

*Edward Barnholt  
and William Wittick:  
Lancaster County's  
Fearless Constables*

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**L**aw enforcement in Pennsylvania prior to the establishment of the Pennsylvania State Police in 1905<sup>1</sup> was left to the county sheriffs, constables, and police departments of those municipalities that had seen fit to provide such protection. Each county had an elected sheriff; in Pennsylvania the sheriff was primarily the executive officer of the court, charged with carrying out the orders of the court, serving papers, and keeping the peace within the county. The sheriff (shire reeve) is an ancient office that was known in early England. Originally the sheriff was the king's representative in the shire or county; he was in charge of protecting the royal interests. Later, when noblemen began challenging the authority of kings, the sheriffs frequently sided with the nobility. To have a royal officer whose loyalty to the monarch was unquestioned, the office of coroner (literally, king's man) was created, and that official was authorized to serve in place of the sheriff if the latter was removed from office. To this day, Pennsylvania coroners have that ancient authority although it is used rarely if at all. Unlike the sheriffs of southern and western states, the Pennsylvania sheriff does little actual police

work, and his authority is limited.

Within the county each municipality has the authority to elect constables whose responsibilities inside the cities, boroughs and townships are similar to those of a sheriff. The constable also is an ancient office. As late as the fifteenth century English constables (not to be confused with the modern British police officer) had nearly unlimited powers granted by the king. Very early the constable was in charge of the kingdom's defense and provost duties (military law enforcement). The modern Pennsylvania constable is an elected official who generally performs various responsibilities for and under the direction of district justices, magistrates, aldermen, and justices of the peace.<sup>2</sup>

Only a few municipalities such as Lancaster city, Columbia borough, and several other communities had their own police departments before World War II. Up to this time the constable usually was the principal law enforcement officer in most areas of Lancaster County. Most municipalities in Lancaster County now have police departments, and the Pennsylvania State Police have expanded their coverage to cover those few municipalities that do not have or contract for their own police protection.

Because constables are close to their jurisdictions, they know the citizens of their bailiwicks, who is having problems, who is likely to commit crimes, and who is behaving erratically. Moreover, an understanding constable may (and often does) solve problems without the necessity of making arrests. In the days when the constable was just about the only law enforcement official the average citizen ever saw, his influence was great. He was paid by fees which meant he had to have a regular trade or vocation in order to earn a regular income. Not all constables possessed the temperament, courage and integrity to carry out their responsibilities properly. But there were a few constables that were outstanding lawmen. They were peculiarly equipped with unusual resourcefulness, intelligence, and persistence to be first-rate detectives; and then having located their criminal suspects, apprehended them and put them behind bars, often at great risk to their own lives.

Several of the most remarkable Lancaster County constables were Edward Barnholt and William Wittick. Both lawmen were outstanding detectives, and were recognized far beyond the boundaries of Lancaster County.

Edward Barnholt was born in March 1846 in Philadelphia. When he was eighteen years old he enlisted in Company H, 213th Regiment of the Pennsylvania Volunteers, serving from 21 February 1865 until the unit was mustered out on 18 November 1865. This was



*Edward Barnholt in his prime as a city policeman on the left, and as a city constable and detective on the right. Pictures from the 1927 Sunday News.*

one of the famous Civil War regiments recruited and outfitted largely through the Union League of Philadelphia. Its colonel was John A. Gorgas, a descendant of the Gorgas family of Ephrata. Just before the assassination of President Lincoln the regiment was assigned to guard the northern defenses of Washington, D.C. Following the assassination and the attempts on the lives of Secretary of State Seward and Vice President Johnson, George Atzerodt, alleged conspirator who was supposed to kill the Vice President, was thought to be heading for Rockville, Maryland. Private Barnholt and two other Union Army soldiers were detached and sent by direction of the provost marshal to hunt for Atzerodt. They apprehended him hiding in his cousin's house. Atzerodt was hanged for his part in the conspiracy.

After being discharged from the Union Army, Barnholt settled in Lancaster and became a horse dealer. In those days the stealing of horses was more common than motor car theft is today. A perceptive horse dealer soon learned the habits and tricks of horse thieves. Barnhold earned quite a bit of extra cash from bounty hunting and finding stolen horses. In those days there were numerous "horse and livestock detective associations" which offered rewards for the appre-

hension of thieves and the return of stolen property. Armed with the necessary skills and possessed of a keen mind, Barnholt moved to the Sixth Ward of Lancaster, and in 1884 was elected constable on the Republican ticket. He served in that position until 1898 at which time he became a private detective or "private investigator" as that occupation is known today. While serving as constable Barnholt also managed to be a city police officer under Republican mayors. (Police were appointed on a patronage basis prior to civil service.)

Edward Barnholt became the proprietor of the Mountville Hotel about 1908 and pursued the occupation of innkeeper when he wasn't hunting down fugitives from justice. Oldtimers will recall the livery stable (actually a horse sales and boarding stable) on Lemon Street opposite the Mountville Hotel where Barnholt kept his hand in the art of horse dealing. During his long career as a lawman Barnholt found time to marry Mary B. Winters and become the father of eight children: William; Cyrus; John S.; Adam; J. Hay; Emma, who was the wife of H. Clay Miller, prominent electrical contractor and Lancaster councilman; Helen, wife of Frederick Jeckel of New Jersey; and Mabel, wife of Grant Witmer, Mountville. William and Cyrus were partners in the stock brokerage firm of Barnholt, Welchans & Co. John worked in the same firm. Adam was a telegrapher. J. Hay Brown Barnholt, named for the prominent Lancaster attorney and Pennsylvania Supreme Court chief justice, moved to Carney's Point, N.J.<sup>3</sup>

Barnholt and William Wittick of Columbia frequently went criminal hunting as a team. An example of this cooperation was reported in a York newspaper during the 1890's.

Detective Edward Barnholt of Lancaster and Constable William Wittick of Columbia were in the city (York) the latter part of last week. They came up North George Street to the Pennsylvania House, where one crossed to the west side of George Street, keeping slightly in advance of his companion on the opposite side of the street, and they walked south to the square. Here one turned to the east and the other to the west and continuing thus circled the square until they met on Tyler's corner. Here they passed each other without any recognition and continued their walk until they were again opposite each other at Spahr's and Lebach's corners.

They then retraced their steps as far as the Pennsylvania House where they met and entered the hotel. Later in the day a secret conclave was held with some of our citizens on what topic we know not, but the officers left the city without prisoners we know. There evidently is something brewing in this neighborhood.<sup>4</sup>

With similar stratagems Barnholt and Wittick went about their business of collaring criminals. Neither man basked in the limelight; they thought of their tasks as necessary work in bringing the lawless element to justice rather than puffing up their own egos. Only after

the criminals were behind bars did the detective work gradually come to public attention. Often the pair accomplished their objectives without the slightest publicity—which was fine with them. The team of Barnholt and Wittick were well known, however, to the criminal world. According to Lawrence Jacobs, writing in the *Lancaster Sunday News* in 1927, "With Wittick he (Barnholt) formed a team known to every Lancastrian of the latter part of the last century. The two called each other in on practically every investigation which the one was called on to make and together they dug into every important crime within the border of Lancaster County for more than a score of years."<sup>5</sup>

Barnholt's introduction to local criminal investigation began soon after he was elected constable. A convention in Lancaster brought to the city a large number of delegates. On the last day of the convention the offices of Henry K. Keller, grain broker, were robbed. In a short time Barnholt had taken four men into custody at the Pennsylvania Railroad depot. Before the constable had captured the quartet, they had tossed their loot along the railroad tracks, and Barnholt managed to gather up the stolen money which was deposited in the safe of a local bank. During the following night the bank's safe was broken into and the money stolen the second time within 24 hours. It turned out that the quartet was wanted in other cities for similar thefts.

Although Barnholt had captured countless horse thieves, they one that he never forgot was "Old Jim" Henry who not only stole horses but burned barns. Henry was sentenced in 1871 to 20 years imprisonment for stealing a horse from Thomas A. Clark of Drumore Township, and then setting his barn alight. After 14 years behind bars Henry was released, and he induced local newspaper reporters to start a campaign for funds so the parolee could "turn a new leaf and start life anew." Money poured in from generous souls, and "Old Jim" promptly disappeared in 1884. In April, 1885, a horse valued at \$300 was stolen in Howard County, Maryland, and the owner's barn burned. A newly-hired employee, Charlie Weise, was suspected. Barnholt read of the crime in a police journal, and following his detective's intuition, he concluded the *modus operandi* had the signs of an "Old Jim" job. Shortly after that, Barnholt spied a person in downtown Lancaster that resembled "Old Jim" Henry—except that the fellow's hair was black, and "Old Jim" had gray hair. Barnholt accosted him and asked his name. "Weise" said the fellow. Barnholt placed him under arrest and took him down to Maryland where the thief was tried and found guilty. He died in a Maryland penitentiary.

His first year as a constable kept Barnholt plenty busy running down horse thieves. In 1884 Henry Bossman took two horses in Cumberland, Maryland. Barnholt arrested him, but Bossman refused to give his name or be photographed. He finally kicked over and broke the camera in Rote's Photographic Gallery. Barnholt managed to subdue him and identify him. Another horse thief Barnholt captured was the notorious Cornelius Koons.

Winfield Scott Hayes was a "con man" who used blackmail and false impersonation in addition to horse stealing. He was wanted over the eastern seaboard from Boston to Baltimore, but when he took George Redsecker's horse in Columbia he met his defeat in the person of Constable Barnholt.

William "Tom" Colwell, a black barber of Christiana, rented a building from Mrs. Benn where he practiced his trade for several years. Then he changed quarters, and soon left town. At this turn of events the Benn building was destroyed by fire, and arson was suspected. Barnholt promptly started searching for Colwell. A short time later John Sharpless of Delaware County was murdered while providing some harness for a black man who claimed his harness had broken and that he could not proceed without a replacement. Sharpless' widow testified that the murderer was a black man. Colwell was located in Burlington, New Jersey, by Barnholt. While being arrested Colwell asked Barnholt if he was a suspect in the Sharpless murder. Barnholt then undertook an extensive and exhaustive investigation which connected Colwell to the murder, but the Delaware County court jury failed to convict Colwell. Another man eventually was hanged for the crime, much to Barnholt's chagrin and sense of justice. Colwell was convicted in Lancaster County for the Benn arson.

Levi Anderson alias Henry Young, a horse thief and cigar swindler, was convicted through the efforts of Barnholt.

Barnholt and William Wittick were feared in the rugged hills and woodlands of eastern Lancaster County known as the Welsh Mountain. Named originally for the numerous Welsh ironworkers that settled at the head of the Pequea Creek early in the eighteenth century, the area became populated by a number of black families as well as white persons. The community did not deserve the unfortunate reputation it acquired, for many of its inhabitants, both black and white, were peaceful law-abiding citizens. The wild and overgrown environment made the area a wonderful refuge for scoundrels searching for a hiding place, and so to the Welsh mountain fled many criminals followed by Barnholt and Wittick. The Buzzards—a family of white petty outlaws—probably were the most notorious,

if not the most amusing, denizens of the Welsh Mountain. One of the Buzzard boys had a massive compulsion to be an evangelistic preacher. He would hold fire-and-brimstone services, and while his flock was in a state of religious ecstasy, Buzzard would sneak out and raid the local henhouses, returning in time to bring his congregation down to earthly reality, the full significance of which they understood when they arrived home. That particular member of the infamous family served as self-appointed chaplain in the Eastern State Penitentiary during his long stays in that Institution. When scheduled for release in his eighties, he pleaded to be allowed to remain until death in the only home he had known so long. He died a free man in the prison.

Not all of Barnholt and Wittick fugitives were as benevolent as Amos Bills, murderer of George Boots in a Welsh Mountain fight, who was arrested by the two constables while walking his girl. It would be unfair to claim Barnholt and Wittick were the only prominent lawmen in the Welsh Mountain. There was plenty of business to go around. Other constables that made many arrests in that area were Harry Hess, Samuel Bowman, Arthur Ayers, Herbert Steigerwalt, and George A. "Buzzy" Lollar. The latter two, who usually traveled together in a sturdy black carriage—a sort of rural "black mariah"—were especially fearsome to law-breakers.

Edward Barnholt died from the effects of a stroke 9 August 1921 and is buried in Greenwood Cemetery, Lancaster.

William Wittick was physically the opposite of Barnholt. Wittick was short and rather portly. Barnholt was tall and athletic. Both men were fearless and strong. Wittick frequently made use of disguises which enabled him to learn what was going on among the hoodlum element. His favorite disguise was that of a "knight of the road," a tramp, complete with cane and sack containing "all his possessions." Because Columbia was a busy railroad town, it was a gathering place for bums, tramps, vagrants, the under-privileged, and all sorts of abandoned men who found ways to ride the rails without paying the fares.

Born in Columbia 31 December 1852, Wittick was a mere lad of eleven when the Columbia bridge was set afire to prevent the Confederate troops from invading Lancaster County from Wrightsville. At about the same time Barnholt moved to Lancaster, Wittick had been elected constable in Columbia, a position in which he was to serve the rest of his life. The Witticks came from Germany and were members of Holy Trinity parish. William Wittick married Alice Anstein, and they had four children: Minnie (1881), Charles (1883), William J. (1884), and John (1886).

Wittick was described by the police reporter for a Philadelphia newspaper:

He was a hardworking, hardhitting, fearless, sturdy, little man of not more than five feet six inches but a terror to criminals. He never used a club in his life. When he wants to subdue an unruly prisoner, he just naturally gets a glister in his brown eyes, sails in with his two brawny fists and generally has to use only one of them. As "Bill" Wittick, he is known to police the country over. He is a member in high standing in the International Association of Police Chiefs, and in his own kind has made some memorable captures in his territory.<sup>6</sup>

A case which won him the praise of police over the East began in 1904 in Burlington, New Jersey. Mrs. Charles Biddle was assaulted in her home in Burlington by three masked black men. News of the assault and robbery was telegraphed to police throughout the Mid-Atlantic region resulted in a widespread manhunt. Mrs. Biddle had recognized one of the trio as Aaron Timbers, a former employee of her husband. Timbers was known to associate often with Jonas Simms and William Austin. While investigating the murder of the toll-gate keeper at Bird-in-Hand, Wittick saw a copy of a Philadelphia newspaper that mentioned the Biddle assault. As soon as he saw the names Timbers and Simms, Wittick later recalled, he wondered if they were the sons of Sam Timber and Sam Simms of Columbia. Doing some quick mental genealogy, Wittick concluded one of the Simm's twin boys was the object of their hunt. From Bird-in-hand Wittick telegraphed Columbia police officer, John Myers, "Watch Ringgold's house for Timbers and Sims on Jersey crime." Myers and Squire George Lutz set up a watch on the house all day but no one appeared. By evening Wittick had arrived to take over the surveillance. Inasmuch as Ringgold was a well cleaner, much of his work was done late in the night. Ascertaining where he would be working—a well on Mill Street between Second and Third streets—Wittick and Myers pounced on Aaron Timbers at midnight, and then took Simms into custody at the Ringgold house. Later Austin was arrested in Philadelphia. Wittick received congratulatory telegrams and messages from police officers over the East and was a hero in the newspaper headlines for a week. A Philadelphia newspaper praised Wittick by saying "Strange and interesting it is to note that a man who does most of his work with a pipe in his mouth and blue jean overalls covering his portly limbs, planned and executed the pursuit and capture. He did it because he has a head on his shoulders and a remarkable memory in that head." Another press article described Wittick's capture of Timbers and Simms "as fine a police job as this state has ever seen both for the calm promptitude and the certainty with which it was carried through." Later he was feted by the town of Burlington and was a guest in the Biddle home.





*Three pictures of Police Chief William Wittick, of Columbia, who won fame as a detective, and whose name struck terror in the heart of many a criminal in this section. In the center is a conventional studio portrait, and at the right he is shown in a rather belligerent pose, revolver in hand. At the left he is shown dressed as a tramp, in which disguise he did some notable detective work. Pictures from 1927 Sunday News.*

Although many of Wittick's captures were made in Columbia, he traveled thousands of miles in pursuit of his quarry. One of his favorite haunts was the gate leading from the train shed into the Broad Street Station of the Pennsylvania Railroad in Philadelphia. Here Wittick would stand by the hour, sometimes a half day, waiting for "his man" to arrive on the train. Wittick was instrumental in solving the attempted murder of Mrs. Frank Thomson, wife of the president of the Pennsylvania Railroad. A criminal named Purnell and his three associates, "Doc" Sawyer, William Dickson, and Tom Johnson, broke into the Thomson mansion where they threatened to shoot Mrs. Thomson. Wittick clobbered Purnell with one blow and locked him up when he showed up in Columbia. Then he arrested the associates. Purnell was sentenced to forty years in prison, and thus was ended one of the largest burglary rings in Philadelphia history.

Wittick's staunchest friends thought he had gone too far when he arrested A. G. Glasgow, an extraordinarily pious Bible salesman from Millersville. When he wasn't selling Bibles, he was conducting Sunday School classes. But Wittick nabbed Glasgow breaking the 8th Com-

mandment; he was a record-breaking horse thief, having taken at least fifty horses from their owners. The horse thief confessed, and was sentenced to prison. Wittick's knowledge of human nature was vindicated again!

The constitutional niceties of search warrants and prohibition of planting evidence to force confessions were ignored often by the enterprising constables as they pursued the criminal element. Stephen Burrels of Columbia discovered that Detective Wittick had his own notions of what was constitutional. Burrels, who was suspected of horse stealing and highway robbery, had held up Cyrus Conklin, a prominent Columbian. He took Conklin's pocket watch among other valuables, breaking the chain in so doing. Wittick tracked Burrels one long winter night through the snow, following the hoof marks of a horse Burrels had stolen. He caught up with Burrels at Brenneman's Tavern in Manor Township. Wittick carried with him the piece of chain left in the victim's pocket, and when he searched Burrels he dropped the chain into Burrel's pocket. As he continued the search, Wittick lifted the recently-planted chain from Burrel's pocket. The amazed Burrels confessed to the crime.

Wittick worked on the murder of Mrs. Calvin Dellinger by her husband. A Pinkerton detective, James Nevins, who also was on the case, said that in his 30 years of detective work he had never found a detective who worked as hard as Wittick. In addition to his work as a constable and private detective, Wittick served 25 years on the Columbia police force, and was the borough's first police chief. Most of his income came from bounty money. Wittick died in 1909 and was a member of Holy Trinity Parish; he was buried in the Roman Catholic Cemetery in Columbia.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The Pennsylvania State Police was the first statewide police force in the United States. Inability of local sheriffs, constables and police officers to control lawlessness in the coal fields and during Pennsylvania's many labor strikes at the turn of the century prodded the state legislature into approving the Pennsylvania State Police Act which was signed into law by Governor Pennypacker 2 May 1905. The Governor offered the job of designing, creating, recruiting, and supervising such a force to Captain John C. Groome, commander of the famous First Troop, Philadelphia City Cavalry. The blue-blooded gentleman warrior was absolutely impartial, beholden to no politician, and held unswervingly to the steadfast purpose of forming what he called "the finest thing in the world." When the State Police were ready for action on 1 March 1906, the force consisted of four troupes, A, B, C, and D, each with a captain, a lieutenant, five sergeants, and approximately fifty corporals and troopers. They were outfitted in dark gray whipcord military tunics and riding breeches, black helmets similar to British constables' headgear, black leather belts and holsters, and black boots and puttees. Since the policemen were mounted, they wore nickel spurs on their boots.

Lancaster County was served by Troop C, located originally at Reading, and later in Schuylkill County. The State Police Department was reorganized in 1919 at which time it had five troops; the following year Supt. Groome retired at the age of 58 after fifteen years service. In 1937 the legislature reorganize the force as the Penna. Motor Police, but in 1943 renamed it with its original title, Penna. State Police. Four districts were established, with Troop C which covered Lancaster County stationed at Reading. The next year the districts were changed to squadrons, with Troop B of the Fourth Squadron stationed at Lancaster. By 1965 the Lancaster barracks had become Troop J.

<sup>2</sup>Although the modern Pennsylvania constable as a rule does not track down desperate criminals, hunt car thieves, and investigate crimes, he has an important task to perform, and the efficiency of the judiciary depends upon the constable's ability and integrity. As a peace officer he often is called upon for crowd and traffic control, keeping polling places orderly, and assisting the police. Constables assist the sheriff in transporting prisoners and guarding defendants in criminal cases. Today's constable is far better educated for the job than was the constable of years ago.

<sup>3</sup>Jacob Hay Brown, a native of York, Pennsylvania, was born 11 September 1849, the son of the Reverend James Allen and Mary E. Brown. The father was pastor of Zion Lutheran Church of York. After being graduated from Gettysburg College, Brown read law and established an office in Lancaster in 1871. His talent came to the attention of William Uhler Hensel, Esq., and for many years they were partners in the firm of Hensel and Brown. Hensel was appointed attorney general in Governor Pattison's cabinet, and in 1899 Brown was elected associate justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. He was appointed chief justice of that court in 1914, retiring in 1919 upon reaching the mandatory age limit. He was a Republican. Brown died in 1930. His given name was derived from his maternal grandfather, Jacob Hay, Jr. W. Hensel Brown, for many years a distinguished Lancaster Attorney and judge. is a son of J. Hay Brown.

<sup>4</sup>*Lancaster Sunday News*, 25 September 1927.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid*.