

Cold case

A labor leader murdered while waiting to meet with the governor may get his tribute 100 years later **BY JAMES V. HARRIGAN**

A CENTURY AGO, it was a little easier to gain access to the Commonwealth's chief executive than it is today. Most appointments were scheduled in advance, but sometimes people just showed up in the lobby of the governor's office, hoping he would see them.

That's how it was on December 5, 1907, when three men sat beneath the portrait of Abraham Lincoln—where the portrait of William Weld now hangs—waiting to meet with Gov. Curtis Guild.

The three were representatives of organized labor: Dennis Driscoll, 39, of Roxbury, former president of the local horseshoer's union; Arthur Huddell, 39, of Chelsea, a steam engineer and longtime labor activist; and Edward Cohen, 49, of Lynn, the most powerful labor leader in Massachusetts. As president of the state chapter of the American Federation of Labor, Cohen was friendly with political leaders on both sides of the aisle. Born in England, the father of six sons and two daughters, he was a cigar-maker, a trade he shared with Samuel Gompers, the national president of the AF of L (as it was typically referred to).

Cohen and the others wanted to talk to the governor about a serious and sensitive matter. They were seeking a pardon for A.M. Kennedy, a union man imprisoned for murder in Essex County, a crime the labor leaders believed he committed while insane. Little did they know they would soon be victims of a similar crime, during one of the strangest and most tragic events to take place in the Massachusetts State House—an event that may finally be rescued from obscurity 100 years later, thanks to a modern-day labor man.

ACCORDING TO NEWS accounts, John Steele, 38, left his mother's house in Everett that morning and headed into Boston “on an intention of visiting some newspaper offices.” Although he had no background in journalism, Steele told his mother he hoped to “secure a position as a reporter.” With his thick mustache and prematurely gray hair, his mother thought of him as “a very intellectual looking man...a great reader and very studious...a walking

encyclopedia.”

But Steele was also a deeply troubled man. He had been committed thrice to state insane asylums following his release from the Army. Just three weeks earlier he had signed himself out of Danvers State Hospital, where he'd been confined voluntarily, in order to spend Thanksgiving with his family.

Upon arriving in Boston, Steele decided he needed a gun. At a sporting goods store, he bought a revolver and cartridges. After a quick lesson in the pistol's operation from a clerk, he headed to Boston Common to test the weapon, but seeing signs prohibiting the use of firearms, he then set out for South Boston. On the causeway to Castle Island, Steele grabbed a small piece of wood from a trash pile.

With the fort at his back, he aimed toward the harbor and fired a few rounds. Then he held the piece of wood close to the barrel and fired again. Though the wood was blown from his hand, Steele came to believe that the bullet bounced off, and that the gun was defective. Heading back to the store where he bought it, Steele stopped off at a gun shop owned by Ivor Johnson.

“They cheated me on this revolver,” he told Johnson. “It's a bum gun and I mean to get my money back.” Johnson inspected the revolver and handed it back, saying it appeared to be fully operational. But Steele continued on to the sporting goods store and demanded his money back. When the clerk refused, Steele declared he would go to the State House and see what the governor had to say about it.

Along the way, he remembered what he'd said to his mother and doubled back to “Newspaper Row” on Washington Street. He entered the offices of the *Boston Daily Globe* and asked for military editor Harry Hartley. Upon learning that Hartley was absent, Steele questioned three other reporters about what caliber revolver the police and Army used and whether various bullets could penetrate a piece of wood. But he departed the *Globe* “appearing to be anything but satisfied with the interview,” leading the reporters to speak of “the peculiarities of the man's inquiries and of his wild appearance.”

On Beacon Hill, Gov. Curtis Guild was occupied

with a delegation from Rhode Island, but he knew that Teddy Cohen and two other labor leaders were waiting to see him. They wouldn't disclose their business, but Guild was unconcerned. Having battled monopolies, supported legislation on behalf of women and children workers, and sought better ventilation of factories and workshops, the Republican was proud of his labor record.

As the three labor chieftains chatted among themselves, Steele walked into the governor's lobby, wearing a black derby. At the back of the outer office were Charles Groves, the governor's secretary, and stenographer C.A. Southworth, to whom Groves was dictating a letter.

Huddell looked up at Steele, then turned back toward Cohen and Driscoll. As the labor leaders continued their conversation in a lower tone, the man in the derby came to

believe they were talking about him. Without a word of warning, Steele reached into his pocket, pulled out the revolver, took aim, and fired.

The bullet buried itself harmlessly in the wall, but the report startled everyone. Groves stopped dictating; he and Southworth hopped over the rope separating the waiting

Without a word of warning, he pulled out the revolver.

area from the rest of the office. Before they could make another move, however, the man in the derby fired a second time, striking Cohen in the temple.

In Huddell's first-person narration of the event, which he gave to the *Globe*, as the union boss "sank to the floor," Huddell lunged at the gunman "and had him by the

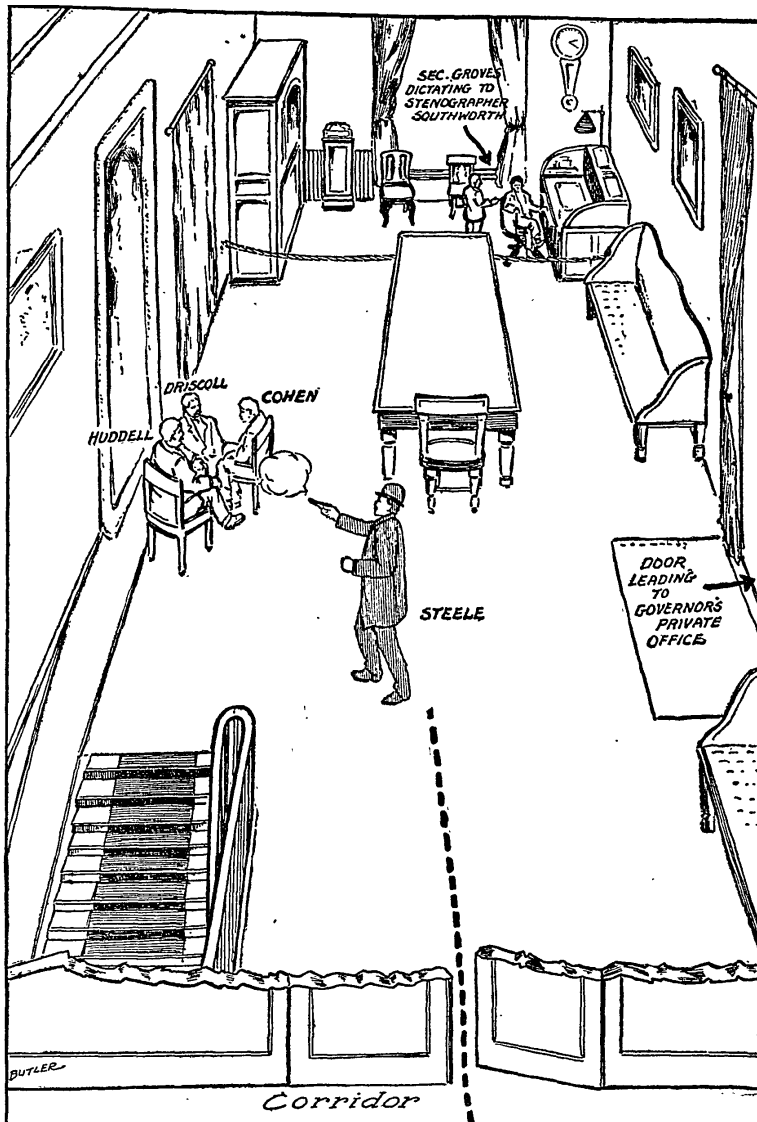
wrist... trying to wrench the revolver from his grasp." But Steele got off another shot, striking Driscoll in the head; he fell to the floor next to Cohen.

By this time, Huddell continued, Groves, State Police Chief Jophanus Whitney (who had been in the corridor just outside the lobby) and Gov. Guild himself—the governor rushed out of his private office in response to the first shot—"all [had] a hand on him," and Huddell "tore the revolver from the man before he could fire another shot and in an instant he was floored."

While being led away, the shooter yelled about his missing hat and "a stick of wood" that would show "they fired the first shot," the *Globe* reported. Only after Steele was confined to a cell in the State House basement did the chief realize that he had served with the man in the Spanish-American War. Whitney recalled that, while on guard duty at training camp one night, Steele became delusional and threatened to kill another soldier. The incident led to Steele's court martial, and commitment to an asylum in Washington, DC.

Meanwhile, upstairs, Guild grabbed cushions and towels from his private office and kept the victims comfortable, then hopped into ambulance that took Cohen and Driscoll to Massachusetts General

The *Boston Daily Globe* illustrated the attack by "maniac" Steele, who "unquestionably" meant to kill the governor.



Hospital, inspiring rumors that the governor had been shot, too. Guild stayed at the hospital late into the night, but released a statement saying he was unhurt and likening the day's events to "a Malay running amuck."

Cohen died the next morning, while Driscoll spent more than a year recovering from his wounds. Steele was held on \$100,000 bail, the highest ever set in Boston Municipal Court. The *Globe* reported that Steele at arraignment "had many appearances of a rational man," was well groomed, and "looked around interestedly at the different parts of the courtroom," but the newspapers never failed to refer to him as a "maniac" and were full of stories chronicling his long history of mental illness.

Though indicted for murder by a grand jury, Steele was never tried for the crime. He was deemed criminally insane and committed to Bridgewater State Hospital for the rest of his life.

THE STORY OF Edward Cohen's murder in the governor's lobby was all but forgotten until a few years ago, when Robert Haynes, current president of the Massachusetts AFL-CIO, found a resolution honoring the victims in the records of long-ago state labor conventions. He was

moved to file legislation to honor Cohen with a plaque in the governor's office.

"It's a bit of labor history," says Haynes. "And it's time we honored somebody who died in the line of duty."

The bill was signed by Acting Gov. Jane Swift on January 1, 2003, her final day in office. But no formal signing ceremony was held, and not even Haynes was aware that the tribute to the fallen labor chief had become law. In fact, two years ago, Haynes asked Rep. Steven Walsh of Lynn, where Cohen lived, to refile the bill. Only after a public hearing did they discover it had already been passed.

"I think we lost sight" of the bill, Haynes says with a laugh. But why, four years later, has no plaque been installed?

"I don't think it's political," says Walsh. "Sometimes these [things] move slower than they should."

According to Susan Moir, of the Labor Resources Center at the University of Massachusetts–Boston, the interested parties, which include organized labor, Cohen's relatives, and the Massachusetts Arts Commission, "are just getting rolling on the plaque now." But they are planning on an installation in December, to coincide with the 100th anniversary.

For his part, Haynes thinks the commemoration shouldn't be limited to a plaque inside the governor's office. "It would make a great movie," he says. **CW**



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