

Iowa Unsolved Murders: Historic Cases

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Third Time, No Charm: Murder of Benjamin "Barney" Kaplan 1925

Murder Victim

Benjamin "Barney" Kaplan
38-year-old Grocer
1885-1925
Cause of Death: Gunshot
Motive: Robbery

Murder and Date

Kaplan Grocery
301 S. Wall Street
Sioux City, Iowa
Woodbury County
Shot April 15, 1925
Died May 27, 1925

By [Nancy Bowers](#)

Written March 2013



location of Sioux City, Iowa

In 1925, Russian emigrant Benjamin "Barney" Kaplan ran a grocery store at 301 South Wall Street in the South Bottoms area west of the stockyards in Sioux City, Iowa.

Residents of the tough South Bottoms neighborhood, destroyed in the 1960s by construction of Interstate 29, were mostly working class first-generation European emigrants.

Kaplan understood hardship and generously helped out area residents when they couldn't afford food or other necessities, even though he was not wealthy himself.

Resisting Robbery

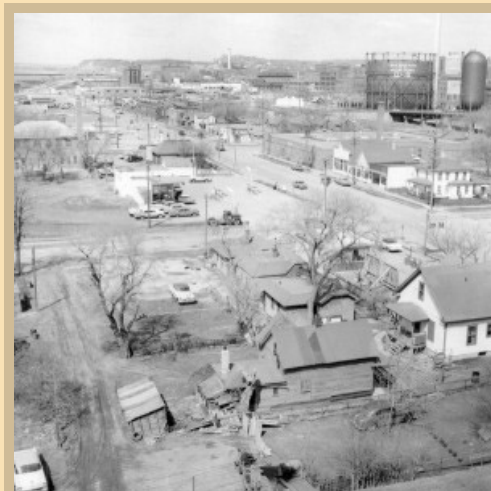
Despite his charitable ways, Barney Kaplan was no pushover. He was prepared to defend himself, his property, and his money if need be.

Since 1919, Kaplan had been the victim of two robbery attempts and both times had thwarted the would-be bandits.

The first came in his store as he was cutting meat at his butcher's block. When a robber came up behind him and ordered him to put up his hands, Kaplan turned and hurled a meat cleaver at the man, who ran from the scene without a penny.

The second time was outside his residential garage as he was returning home with the day's receipts. After he put away the car and locked up, he felt a gun muzzle in his back and heard a command to turn over his money bag.

Kaplan pulled a revolver from his belt, spun around, and fired several shots at the would-be robber, who fled the scene through a nearby alley. Again, Kaplan had protected his money.



"South Bottoms" of Sioux City, Iowa
(from Sioux City Public Museum)

Third Time, No Charm

Given Kaplan's fearless tenacity in protecting what was his, it was not surprising that during a third attempt he once again resisted.



Benjamin "Barney" Kaplan

About 8:30 p.m. on the evening of Wednesday, April 15, 1925, Barney, 38, and his 33-year-old wife Celia were alone in the grocery as closing time approached.

Two black men entered the store. One had a revolver and ordered the Kaplans to "keep still" while the other moved towards the register filled with the day's receipts.

But Barney, as usual, was not going to let anyone steal his hard-earned money. He rushed the man with the gun and pushed him towards the door.

As they struggled, the robber fired twice — one bullet went wild in the fray — but the other struck Kaplan in the abdomen.

The two men fled the store without any money and without hurting Celia Kaplan.

Authorities reported to the scene and took Barney Kaplan to St. Vincent's Hospital.

The Sioux City Police Department notified all officers scheduled to come on duty at 11:00 p.m. to report instead at 9:00 p.m. to begin rounding up suspects. Every detective on the force was put to work as well.

The officers were instructed to track down and question Negro men and bring in for further interrogation those without an alibi for the time of the shooting.

Although Celia Kaplan came to the police station in the early hours of April 16 to view suspects, she did not recognize any of them as the men involved in shooting her husband.

During the night and into the next day, Kaplan's surgeon Dr. I.E. Nervig kept



from the Sioux City Journal

reporters up to date on his patient's chances. It didn't look good, Nervig said. Kaplan was in critical condition due to hemorrhaging from internal wounds — seven of them from the single bullet fired into his lower abdomen.

Within a few days, Barney Kaplan had improved just enough to tell the police that he did not recognize the two robbers and had no idea what neighborhood they were from.

Kaplan's Decline

Despite his early rally, Barney Kaplan steadily weakened from an intestinal infection from his wounds. St. Vincent's surgeons were not able to find and remove the bullet they felt was causing it.



from the Davenport Democrat and Leader

On Wednesday, May 20 while treating Kaplan's wounds, nurses discovered a loose bullet in the wrappings which had worked its way out of his body.

That .45 caliber bullet was the only clue investigators had to the crime.

Updates from St. Vincent's became less encouraging as the infection spread throughout Barney Kaplan's body.

Kaplan, however, remained conscious and was able to converse. One of the last people to talk with him was his personal friend Sioux City Police Detective William Bohn. Kaplan reiterated to Bohn that he could provide no information on the robbers.

On May 27, 1925 — 42 days after he was shot — Barney Kaplan died.

The attempted robbery-assault then became a homicide.

However, having no clues other than the single .45 caliber bullet and lacking eye-witness identification, the Sioux City Police could not solve the murder and find justice for Kaplan. And the case went cold.

Barney Kaplan's Life

Benjamin "Barney" Kaplan was born in 1885 in Russia to David and Ann Kaplan and came to the United States in 1910. He had three brothers - Paul, Abraham, and Noah Kaplan - as well as three sisters: Tillie Kaplan, Ida Kaplan Dvorkin, and Zella Kaplan Levitan.

He married Celia Glick, also a native of Russia, and the couple had three sons: William Alexander in 1911, David in 1914, and Meyer M. in 1916.

After moving to Sioux City, Kaplan first worked in the building contracting business of Smith and Kaplan, but for nearly 10 years before his death had been the proprietor of the South Wall Street grocery where he was shot.

Kaplan's Funeral was held at 10:30 a.m. May 28, 1925 in the Kaplan home at 1604 Villa Avenue in Sioux City, and he was buried in Mt. Sinai Cemetery.

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