THE KILLING OF SEELY HOUK:

IMMIGRANTS, CONSERVATIONISTS, AND THE BLACK HAND IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

by Louis S. Warren

PART ONE

ON April 26, 1906, a Pennsylvania Railroad engineer on a passing train spotted a body in the Mahoning River in Lawrence County, Pennsylvania. He dropped a note to that effect as he passed through the next station, at Hillsville; the telegraph operator retrieved the note, and sent a line crew to investigate. The body of L. Seely Houk, the deputy game protector of Lawrence County who had been missing for over a month, was pulled from the Mahoning with at least two shotgun blasts in his head and torso. Whoever had killed Houk had not wanted his body to be found: weighed down with large stones, the body became visible

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Little Italies of America’s cities, clash with game wardens in rural Pennsylvania? Hillsville was not the only place where Italian immigrants and Pennsylvania game wardens met in violent confrontations. The game commission reported other such murders, several in 1906 alone, and the commission secretary received three Black Hand death threats in the early 1900s. But the Hillsville killings were the only ones solved, and apparently the only ones from which any evidence survives.

An examination of that evidence indicates that early game laws were hotly resented in Hillsville, as they were in other Italian immigrant communities. As attempts to re-structure human relationships with the natural environment, early conservation laws often created immense difficulties for people, including many Italian immigrants, who relied on wildlife for food. Because of the hardships imposed by the game laws, some people resorted to violence against authorities. Beyond that, the presence of game law officers in immigrant communities represented an unprecedented intrusion of state power into local life, an event which created volatile new tensions within immigrant settlements.

**PENNSYLVANIA GAME LAW AND THE DEPUTY GAME PROTECTOR OF LAWRENCE COUNTY**

Seely Houk died on the edge of Hillsville, a small limestone quarrying settlement about 10 miles west of New Castle. He was patrolling the area to arrest immigrant poachers, as part of the state’s growing game protection apparatus. Like many other states, Pennsylvania began imposing new laws to protect wildlife during the late nineteenth century. By 1900, Pennsylvania’s game laws had imposed bag limits, established seasons on hunting, and outlawed the hunting of many species, especially song birds.

But although the new state laws superseded any contravening regulations (most previous wildlife laws had been county statutes), there were no state officers to enforce the new strictures until the century was almost over, in 1895. Even then, there were only 10 state “Game Protectors.” Not until 1903 did state enforcement powers broaden substantially, with the legislature’s creation of a new class of “Deputy Game Protectors.” The game commission could appoint up to one deputy game protector per county, each bonded and possessing the powers of a regular game protector. The chief difference between the deputies and game protectors lay in their pay: rather than a salary, deputies received half the fines assessed any violators they caught, and up to $10 per conviction.

Houk was the deputy game protector of Lawrence County. His appointment in 1903 brought state authority into the hunting fields around Hillsville for the first time, a development which local hunters

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1. Only when the water level fell after the spring runoff had subsided.

2. The discovery of Houk’s body began one of the most bizarre and celebrated series of events in the history of Pennsylvania wildlife conservation. Suspicion of murder immediately fell on the residents of Hillsville, most of whom were Italian immigrant quarry workers. Pinkerton detectives hired by the game commission soon infiltrated what they called the Hillsville “Black Hand,” a secret society comprised of Italians who often indulged in criminal activity, especially extortion. One Pinkerton Agency spy lived in Hillsville for a year-and-a-half to become a high-ranking Black Hand member, a position from which he secretly sent important tips to legal authorities. After Italian poachers murdered another local man who was enforcing the game laws, and dozens of Hillsville men were arrested on suspicion of underworld activity, and the state police temporarily occupied the town, a former president of the Hillsville Black Hand went to the gallows for the murder of Seely Houk.

3. In the years since, these events have become part of game commission lore, testament to the tenacity of early conservationist stalwarts who would even face down gangsters to save wildlife and enforce the game laws. But what brought this bloody turn of events to pass? Why would a Black Hand organization, usually associated with bootlegging and extortion in the

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Seely Houk, deputy state game commissioner of Lawrence County. His murder in 1906 focused attention from outside the county on the Italian immigrant community in the New Castle area.
soon resented. After Houk’s murder, on the theory that he had been the victim of a revenge killing, detectives interviewed his associates and local aldermen, who served as judges in poaching cases, to see who might have wanted to kill Houk. They found many potential suspects, all of them Italian. Italian immigrant hunters had been the focus of Seely Houk’s anti-poaching patrols, and his characteristic aggression in performing his duties often made his arrests confrontational. Alderman Charles Haus adjudicated many of the poaching cases Houk brought to court. As the alderman told the Pinker-tons, “Houk was a man who was absolutely without fear and, although it was generally understood that his life had been threatened by many Italians, it had never interfered with his work as an officer.” Indeed, Houk preferred brinkmanship to compromise. “Houk was a man who was likely to give anyone who threatened him every opportunity to carry out their threat, provided they were quicker in drawing their gun than he was.” This would not have been easy, Haus remarked. “Houk was noted for his ability to draw his gun quickly and there were numerous instances in which Houk brought guns” confiscated from Italian poachers to the alderman’s office. Houk’s run-ins with Italian poachers were not isolated incidents. They were part of a much larger hostility between conservationists and Italian immigrants in Pennsylvania, and the United States in general. Early wildlife conservation in Pennsylvania — and throughout America — was characterized by strong nativism. Conservationist polemic decried the “wasteful” and “greedy” hunting practices of certain ethnic and social groups, among them American Indians, blacks, and immigrants — especially Italians. Italians were often excoriated because of their predilection for hunting song and “insectivorous” birds. William T. Hornaday, the president of the New York Zoological Society and one of the most famous conservationists of the era, captured conservationists’ fears of Italians in his widely read tract, Our Vanishing Wildlife.

Let every state and province in America look out sharply for the bird-killing foreigner; for sooner or later, he will surely attack your wild life. The Italians are spreading,

This drawing from a popular book suggests not only the rising conservationist sentiment of the early 20th century, but also the prejudice faced by immigrants who brought with them the tradition of hunting to feed their families.
These conservationist prejudices were part of the pervasive ethnic antagonism between English-speaking, white Americans and Italian immigrants in the early 1900s. The waning of the nineteenth century witnessed a surge in Italian immigration, especially to states in the Northeast. Soon after 1880, large numbers of immigrants from central, southern, and eastern Europe began to arrive on American shores. In the decade between 1900 and 1910, over 2.1 million Italians arrived in America, and many went to Pennsylvania.11

Italian immigrants in Pennsylvania worked as coal miners, factory workers, and laborers.12 Their arrival precipitated widespread ethnic tensions, and a pervasive sense that American society was undergoing a profound transformation.13 The social upheaval which the new immigration engendered was pronounced in Lawrence County, where Italians arrived in large numbers to take up jobs in the steel and tin factories of New Castle. In 1890, the town's population stood at 11,000, with only a few Italian families. But from 1890 to 1900, the population increased over 150 percent, to almost 29,000, with Poles, Slovaks, and Italians comprising most of the increase. Most of the Italians came from southern Italy, and they took up jobs on the railroads and in the steel mills and tin mills. West of New Castle, in Hillsville, they arrived to work the quarries, and by 1906 one observer estimated that the town's population of 1,500 included 900 Italians.14

Wage labor may have been the basis of survival for most immigrants, but in Hillsville and elsewhere subsistence hunting was a supplement to wages and an important part of Italian immigrant life. Song birds were a part of Italian culinary traditions. They were widely hunted in Italy, and sold for food in public markets.15 In Hillsville, hunting was a common way for Italian quarry workers to obtain cheap meat. Particularly in the spring and summer, when days lengthened and ground hogs were out, hunters would take to the woods after finishing work at the quarries. Often trespassing on surrounding farms, they sought out small game, including song birds, to provide meat for the table.16

This subsistence hunting clashed with many aspects of the conservationist program. Indeed, in outlawing Sunday hunting, the killing of all but a few species of designated “game birds,” and all methods of hunting other than with a gun, the conservationist program was designed in part to eliminate game meat as a year round resource. Obviously, immigrants were not the only subsistence hunters in Pennsylvania at the turn of the century. The vast and rugged mountains of northern Pennsylvania have been home to generations of subsistence hunters. But Italians lived in segregated communities; they spoke a different language, dressed differently, were easily identified, and widely mistrusted. It did not take long for the new game commission to zero in on Italian hunters. As early as 1902, the commission reported that “the unnaturalized foreigner” was responsible for the great majority of game law violations, and that Italians were especially troublesome. The 1908 report of the game commission complained that “by far the greater number of cases of violation of our game laws reported to us during the past season, killing of game out of season, hunting on Sunday, killing song and insectivorous birds, is of wrongs done by the unnaturalized foreign born resident of this State, mostly Italians.”17

Italian offenses against the game laws grew with the number of Italian immigrants in the state. And as their numbers increased in New Castle and the Hillsville settlement, their growing presence in the hunting fields began to seem not only a threat to wildlife but to the established order of rural society. The settlement was isolated in the rolling country west of New Castle, near the Ohio state line, where sugar maple and beech trees grew thick on the hills sloping down to the Mahoning River.18 The quarries which drew the Italian immigrants belonged to local families, the Johnsons and the Duffs, who like most other landowners in the area, were English-speaking farmers. Such people were perplexed and often frightened by the growing numbers of armed immi-
grants who walked their fields, trespassing while also violating game laws. Charges of stock theft, vandalism, and intimidation were soon leveled against the Italian hunters, many of whom landowners considered criminals.

The editor of the *New Castle Daily News* commented on the social tension in the farm fields around Hillsville in a column published in 1907. The piece lauded the arrests of a group of purported Black Hand men in Hillsville, alleging that farmers in the area had been so terrorized by roving bands of armed Italians that "No person in the Hillsville district, either Italian or American, will give the slightest assistance to any officer desiring the prosecution of Italian offenders." The piece detailed incidents of intimidation in the Hillsville vicinity: a farmer who let an officer use his telephone to effect the arrest of an Italian found one of his cows shot dead the following morning, with a note in poorly written English saying, "This is for assisting the police;" the arrest of an Italian for trespassing brought dozens of Italians into the area, asking local residents if they knew the whereabouts of the farmer who called the authorities. Terrified, local farmers kept their lanterns out at night and posted armed sentries.¹⁹

It is possible that the editorial is an example of the yellow journalism so popular in the period, but other evidence substantiates the depth of fear and hostility which prevailed in the Hillsville region at the time of Houk's death. Italian-Americans in Hillsville today, descendants of Italian immigrants who lived in Hillsville in 1906, recall that some local immigrants committed stock theft and rustling in the area — "lots of that" — until sometime after World War I.²⁰

The simmering hostility between immigrant poachers and local landowners boiled over in Hillsville only a few months after Houk's murder. Three Italian men, after drinking a good amount of beer one morning, decided to go hunting. Taking along two shotguns, they walked onto the lands of farmer and quarry owner William "Squire" Duff. Duff, 80 years old, found them and ordered them to leave. Shortly afterwards and still on his property, they killed two small birds. Duff returned to order them away again. One of the hunters, Dominic Sainato, discharged his weapon in the old man's face.²¹

The killing of Duff was considered immoral and unacceptable in the Italian community. Unlike the Houk murder, which was veiled in secrecy, Hillsville residents talked openly of it among themselves,
Dominic Sainato, convicted of killing Squire Duff in a conflict over hunting rights that, events would show, had much wider implications.

enabling the Pinkerton’s undercover man to advise the authorities of the assailant’s identity soon after the event. Still, the incident highlighted the tensions between English-speaking landowners and Italian immigrant hunters in the area, and the editor of the New Castle Daily News included the Duff murder in his account of hostilities between Italians and local farmers.

Houk was already dead by the time Duff was killed, but even before the Houk killing landowners in the area had sought to restrict immigrant access to their lands. Indeed, Seely Houk had been a principal ally in the effort. So close was Houk’s connection with local farmers, and so zealous his pursuit of Italian trespassers and poachers, that even local officials began to wonder if he was over-stepping the mark. In Mount Jackson Township, several miles from Hillsville, Alderman O.L. Miller complained to the game commission sometime in 1905 or early 1906 that Houk was exceeding his authority. As Miller explained the matter to investigators after Houk’s death, the deputy game protector had informed farmers in the area that they should bring persons found trespassing or hunting on their lands to New Castle “and he would do the rest.” Miller told the Pinkertons that he had doubted Houk’s authority “to deputize anyone in this manner,” and that he had sent a letter to the game commission about it. Shortly thereafter, Miller began to notice Houk’s vindictiveness toward “foreigners,” presumably Italians, who were being arrested and fined — with the collision of the game warden — even when they were obviously innocent.

Although the landowner-immigrant confrontation in the New Castle area was a product of local politics and demography, it was also part of a wider pattern of rural conflict in which the Pennsylvania game laws were to take a central place. To many farmers, hunters were armed trespassers, at best a nuisance and at worst life threatening. In 1901, the state began requiring hunters from other states to buy licenses before hunting in Pennsylvania, an action motivated by the complaints of farmers “whose land both in and out of season was run over by irresponsible hunters from adjoining states, who tore down fences, shot poultry, crippled stock, started fires and committed other depredations, then quietly disappeared into their own territory safe from pursuit.”

Just as the 1901 law was designed to limit the access of out-of-state hunters, authorities took steps to curb the growing number of Italian hunters in the countryside shortly after 1900. In 1903, the same year Seely Houk became deputy game protector of Lawrence County, the commission secured passage of a new game law, one which had ominous consequences for hunters in Hillsville and other immigrant communities. The new law required all non-residents to purchase a $10 license before hunting (state residents would not need hunting licenses until 1912). But the law contained a peculiar twist: it
Some Black Hand ("Mano nera") warnings were more formal. This folded paper hand, considered a death threat, was addressed to Joseph Berrier ("Guissep Beriere"), who was a Pennsylvania Game Commission game warden under Joseph Kalbfus ("Dettore halfes"), commission director.
WANTED FOR MURDER

JOE CALAUTE 
ITALIAN

age 22 but does not look to be over, 18; 5 feet 3 or 4 inches in height and will weigh about 135 pounds; thick black hair inclined to be curly; smooth face; dark complexion; large eyes; square jawed and has a bull dog face; does not talk very good English; when he left here he wore a soft white hat and a black suit and had on tan shoes. Was all so carrying a shot gun but may have thrown it away. Worked in limestone quarries here. Has only been in this country 1 year and 2 months.

This Italian shot and killed "Squire" Duff, a man 80 years of age because Mr. Duff ordered him to stop shooting birds on his farm.

$1000 REWARD

The County Commissioners of Lawrence County will pay $500 and Mr. Clyde Duff will pay $500 for the arrest and conviction of the murderer. There is no question as to the conviction as we have evidence to convict the above described party. If found arrest and return me.

J. LEE McFATE
County Detective for Lawrence County.

New Castle, Pa., August 14th, 1906.

A broadsheet posted in the New Castle area, 1906, requesting information about a suspect in the Squire Duff murder.

$25 fine added to the others. Complaining about Italian poachers in 1905, the secretary of the game commission estimated that "an arrest of one of these people for violating the game laws seldom results in a penalty of less than $60 or $70 with costs, sometimes very much more than this amount." 27

It was the 1903 Non-Resident License Law which became Houk's chief tool in his campaign against the Italian hunters of Hillsville. In the barebones livelihood of the limestone quarries, where a day's wages amounted to $1.65, even buying a $10 hunting license was beyond the means of most people, and fines for poaching would have been a tremendous hardship. 28 The impositions of the law represented a threat to immigrant welfare which, combined with Houk's eagerness to draw his gun, earned him the hatred of local poachers. Five or six weeks before he disappeared, Alderman Haus recalled for detectives, Houk had brought an Italian poacher to trial. He was fined $25 and costs. The man produced the money, and Houk left the room to find change.

As the Alderman recounted, while Houk was out of the office the Italian man warned "that he would kill that s— of a b— before long." Such sentiment about Houk was not unusual: in fact, Haus could not immediately recall who the Italian in question might have been, "and a search of his docket would hardly bring the particular case to light, for the reason that Houk brought a great many similar cases to him and, owing to the difficulty they had in getting the right names of the Italians, the name of John Doe was used in every case...." 29

The hatred of Houk was mirrored by local resentment of game wardens elsewhere in the state, and as the game commission expanded its presence in the countryside, anti-game law violence increased. In 1904, the year after deputy game protectors and the Non-Resident License Law came into being, five wardens were shot at and three were hit. In 1905, no wardens were shot but, while making an arrest, Game Protector Frank Rowe of Wilkes-Barre "was compelled to defend himself, which he did with his fists." The suspect died that day. 30

The next year, 1906, saw the apogee of violent confrontation over the game laws: 13 game wardens were shot at, three were injured, and three, including Houk, were killed. Hillsville farmer "Squire" Duff was also killed that year. 31

Houk's customary aggression and his zealous enforcement of the Non-Resident License Law would probably have told against him even if he had lived. In fact, some local parties had begun to take action against him through the courts at the time of his disappearance. In late 1905, Houk was arrested and tried in New Castle for assaulting an Italian in his custody, Serafino Diandra. The case sprung from Diandra's allegations, made through an
interpreter, that Houk had treated him “roughly,” and had kept him handcuffed while in the back of a buggy, from where the young man fell onto the road. Some of the witnesses against Houk must have been non-Italian residents, for all of the witnesses at the trial were. Houk was convicted, then released on bond. One month later, the judge denied Houk’s petition for a new trial. Sentencing was set for late March of 1906. When Houk did not appear at the appointed date, many speculated that the game warden had fled the county to avoid the penalty.32

The truth was he had been dead for three weeks. His long coat had been pulled over his head, and he lay face down in the Mahoning River.33

End Part I

Find the conclusion to “The Killing of Seely Houk” in the Winter issue of Pittsburgh History.

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1 Pinkerton Reports 2/5/08, 3/5/08, Pennsylvania Game Commission Library, Harrisburg, Pa. Pinkerton detectives investigating the murder sent daily reports to their superiors in Philadelphia. The hand-written reports were transcribed on a typewriter at the central office, and carbon copies were sent to the Pennsylvania Game Commission. These copies are still on file in the game commission library in Harrisburg, and photocopies of those can be found at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania in Pittsburgh. Hereafter these reports will be denoted “PR,” followed by the date of the relevant report.

2 For examples of this treatment, see William F. Schulz, Jr., Conservation Law and Administration: A Case Study of Law and Resource Use in Pennsylvania (New York, 1953), 45-48; Pennsylvania Game News (Nov. 1950), 38; Joseph Kalbfus, Dr. Kalbfus’ Book: A Sportsman’s Experiences and Impressions in East and West (Altoona, Pa., 1926), 289-90.

3 For death threats, see Kalbfus, 289. It is unlikely that the Hillsville Black Hand was responsible for all of these. Two were addressed to Game Protector Joseph Berrier, who was not active in Lawrence County.


5 Until 1895, local officials were the only game law enforcement agents. Digest of Game and Fish Laws 1903, 10. For creation of the deputy game protectors, see same, 32. The deputies were to be paid “the same compensation that constables now receive for similar service.” This was one-half the fines assessed and up to $10 per conviction. Ibid., 10, 26.

6 PR 2/4/08; see enclosed report of J.J.G. interview with Alderman Haus on 2/4; also see J.H.G. conversation with O.L. Miller on 2/20.

7 PR 2/4/08.

8 William T. Hornaday, Our Vanishing Wildlife (New York, 1913). The book included chapters on the threat to song birds posed by Italian immigrants (94-104), and by blacks and poor whites in the South. Hornaday developed and published the “Sportsman’s Platform,” otherwise known as the “Code of Ethics of the Camp-Fire Club of America,” which read in part: “An Indian has no more right to kill wild game, or to subsist upon it all the year round, than any white man in the same locality.” (384). This “Sportsman’s Code” was adopted by numerous recreational hunting organizations across America.

9 In New York, Italian poachers were active in the environs of the New York Zoological Park (now the Bronx Zoo) soon after 1900, when employees went on stopping illegal hunting of songbirds engaged them in armed combat. Remarkably, no one was killed. Ibid., 101-02.

10 Hornaday, 102.


12 Muller, 89.


15 See the list of song birds available in various markets in Italy in Hornaday, 94-101.

16 See the Pinkerton Reports for the following dates on the practice of hunting small game in the Hillsville area: 6/15/06; 6/23/06; 8/9/06; 8/10/06; 10/27/06; 10/30/06; 11/07/06. See also the statement of Silas Martin to agent J.H.G., PR 2/12/08.


18 Muller, et. al., eds., 52.

19 New Castle News, 7/15/07, 4.

20 Interview with Joe Rich, Parish Center, St. Lawrence Church, Hillsville, Pa., 4/24/91; Interview with Frank Pisccueneri, Parish Center, St. Lawrence Church, Hillsville, 4/24/91.

21 See PR 1/23/08 and 3/10/08, “F.P.D. reports.”

22 Even the one-time president of the Black Hand, a violent man, told the undercover detective that “he was sorry for the poor old man” and that “he would never do such a thing as to shoot an old man like that.” PR 8/14/06. For discussion of
the murderer’s identity even among Black Hand leaders, see PR 10/20/06 and 11/23/06. Dominic Sainato was sentenced to 20 years in prison shortly before Houk’s convicted murderer was hanged. See PR 6/19/08.

23 New Castle News, 7/15/07, 4.
24 PR 2/20/08, J.H.G. interview with O.L. Miller.
25 Report of the Game Commission of the State of Pennsylvania 1902 (Harrisburg, 1903), 4. Widespread complaints of unauthorized hunting on farms was one reason for the creation of the State Police in 1905. Much of their energy went toward enforcing the game laws. See Katherine Mayo, Justice to All: The Story of the Pennsylvania State Police (New York, 1917), 64-5, 315-7.
26 Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Digest of the Game and Fish Laws 1903, 33.
28 Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Digest of the Game and Fish Laws and Warden and Forestry Laws 1903 (Harrisburg, 1903), 32-3; for wages in Hillsville quarries, see PR 2/14/08, #42 Reports. Becoming a citizen was too difficult for most immigrants in the New Castle vicinity to even consider, requiring as it did two naturalized witnesses to attest to the petitioner’s character, and an oral exam on American government before the often hostile Naturalization Examiner Ragsdale. See New Castle Daily News, 9/12/08, 5.
29 PR 2/4/08.
31 Annual Report of the Game Commissioners of the State of Pennsylvania 1907, 15. The Commission reported that 14 wardens were fired upon in 1906, seven hit, and four killed. In fact, one of the victims was not a warden at all, but “Squire” Duff. The fact that he was included among the statistics as a “warden” illustrates the strength of common interest between game wardens and landowners. The Game Commission claimed all of the assailants were immigrants, but whether they were or not is impossible to establish. The names of the other wardens who were killed and the locations of the killings have been lost, although one Italian was killed in a shootout and one of the wounded wardens identified his assailants as Italians. The secretary of the game commission, Dr. Joseph Kalbfus, believed that all of the shootings were perpetrated by Italian immigrants. While this judgement sounds like mere ethnic prejudice, it is also true that the Non-Resident License Law was hardest on immigrants, who would have had most reason to resist. See Kalbfus, 289.
33 PR 2/5/08.