

OBSESSION LED TO DEATHS IN 1903

By Ellen Knight¹

The wretchedness and dangers that the crime of stalking can create, highlighted in January, National Stalking Awareness Month, can unfortunately be found in many towns described as pleasant, peaceful, and even sleepy, including Winchester. In fact, one of the more grim local family tragedies, occurring in 1903, can be laid at its door. Though it ended in Lowell, it began in Winchester.

Georgianna and Alexina Goddu, it was said, were bright, pleasant young ladies, both very musical. The future should have been happy for both girls. Their family was respected, their father being a machinist for the McKay Company (later United Shoe) and a brother of Winchester's famous inventor, Louis Goddu. Further, the girls, two of seven siblings, were pleasantly occupied. Georgianna taught music, while Alexina was studying operatic singing. Both sang in St. Mary's choir.

But then Joseph Lamothe came into their lives. At first, he was a welcome friend of the family. But this was all spoiled when his mad infatuation for Alexina led to his stalking her and turning the girl into a virtual prisoner in her own home on Washington Street. The situation turned uglier still when, in June 1903, the girls took a trip to visit relations in Lowell, and Lamothe followed. When he appeared one Sunday afternoon, intent of seeing Alexina, Georgianna intervened and attempted to talk him into seeing reason. About an hour later, shots were fired. While Lamothe fled, Georgina was taken to the hospital where she died two days later.

While Lamothe was on the run, Alice and her mother, fearing he would come after them, went into hiding, adding more suffering to their already considerable misery.

As the story unfolded in the newspapers, a puzzling portrait of Lamothe (who used several assumed names) appeared. He was introduced to Alexina (known to her family as Alice) by a mutual acquaintance. He was college-educated and well mannered. "Being a fine linguist and an entertaining talker, Mr. Lamothe was able to please all of us, as his manners were always beyond criticism," Alice told a *Boston Globe* reporter.

He professed an interest in music and lent her books of Italian songs. He offered to teach her Italian, and they arranged that he come out once a week to their home. According to Alice, for about a year his visits were spent entirely on lessons and music. "I thought that he had a genuine



interest in my musical future as a friend of the family, for I did not regard him as my friend any more than that of any other member of the family.”

But then interest turned to ardor. “I did not like it,” Alice said. “I tried in every way to discourage him,” but nothing would dissuade him. “Some time in January, he told me that he was determined to marry me. I said that I did not love him; did not care for him at all.... After that I determined not to have anything more to do with him.”²



A newspaper portrait of Alice Goddu, based on a photograph

Incensed at being rebuffed, Lamothe persisted. In his mind, apparently, the blame for his rejection really lay with Alice’s mother, who Alice had said would never approve of the marriage and who herself forbade him in February to visit the house. So Lamothe continued to write to Alice, begging to meet and threatening that something terrible would happen. Alice heard that he was hanging about the street and never left the house alone.

That June the sisters went to Lowell to visit relations, one of whom was newly married to Dr. Adelard Payette. Lamothe learned where they had gone and followed them, again haunting their street. They were told he was carrying a gun.

On the evening of June 28, they met him on the street. While Alexina went indoors, Georgiana barred his way and talked with Lamothe for about an hour. The conversation ended with Georgianna and Lamothe struggling for possession of the gun. When Payette exited the house to go to Georgianna’s aid, Lamothe wrenched away the pistol, shot her and then Payette, who still managed to tackle Lamothe as he attempted to get into the house.

The shots and commotion drawing a crowd, Lamothe fled. The Lowell police launched a manhunt. Immediately the story was front-page news. At midnight Lamothe mailed a letter to the *Boston Globe*, denying any guilt. “She herself caused the accident by refusing to let go of my hand in spite of my requests that she do so. I did not shoot Miss Goddu. She shot herself,” he wrote, adding “I cannot understand your statement that I shot a man. I don’t remember any such thing.”³

However, the shootings had been witnessed. Police gave no credence to Lamotte’s letter. Lowell, Boston, and state police conducted an intensive search and watched many possible avenues of flight. Based on an early theory that he was suicidal, the mill canals near the shooting were drained. Once Georgianna died, police circulated Lamothe’s picture, description, and the news that he was wanted on a charge of murder.



Georgiana Goddu, as shown in the newspapers

The police manhunt for Lamothe ended in St. Luke's Hospital in New York. A search of his lodgings revealed he had a friend who was an orderly there. All employees at the hospital were given his description and photograph. On the evening of July 3, he arrived. The doorkeeper recognized him and tried to detain him long enough for police to arrive. Lamothe said he would return and left. The next morning he did return. The police were waiting. When Detective John Becker identified himself, Lamothe put his right hand into his coat pocket. Presuming he was reaching for a weapon—which he was—Becker took hold of Lamothe.

As they struggled, Lamothe reportedly turned the gun in his own direction and fired through his pocket. The bullet went into his abdomen. Hours of surgery notwithstanding, he died the next day.

Up to the conclusion of the manhunt, the police and press both investigated Lamothe's background. A lot was written about his life and character. According to the papers, some acquaintances spoke kindly, but others said he was flighty, had peculiar ideas, and was mentally unbalanced. The orderly, hitherto ignorant of the shootings in Lowell, was quoted as saying he could not understand it, that "while he was moody at times...he was always so calm that I did not think anything would excite him to do any one any harm."⁴

Though the psychological causes of Lamothe's crimes remained unclear, his death meant that the family he harmed was able to retreat from the sensational headlines. Dr. Payette recovered. The Goddus returned to Winchester but moved north when United Shoe relocated to Beverly. Alexina resumed a musical life. In 1908 she married a musician/music teacher with whom she concertized in the Lawrence-Lowell area. She died in 1946, leaving two daughters one of whom was also a concert soprano.

The horror of 1903 did not follow them in the papers. Once Lamothe was dead, the story also died in the press. The time for awareness, however, endures.

¹ This article © 2023 by the author Ellen Knight was first published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Jan. 19, 2023. This version supersedes all previous articles.

² *The Boston Globe*, July 2, 1903

³ *The Boston Globe*, July 1, 1903.

⁴ *The Boston Globe*, July 7, 1903. Information about the crime and manhunt were also drawn from articles in the *Boston Post* and *Boston Record*.