

# MOUNTAIN HOME

Pennsylvania's *Country* Takes



## MURDER OF THE CENTURY

Pittsburgh millionaire Harry Thaw killed famed New York architect Stanford White in 1906 over Evelyn Nesbit, "the most beautiful girl in the world." Did Pennsylvania Governor William Stone of Wellsboro harbor the killer in his Pine Creek cabin?

By Carrie Hagen

NOVEMBER 2015

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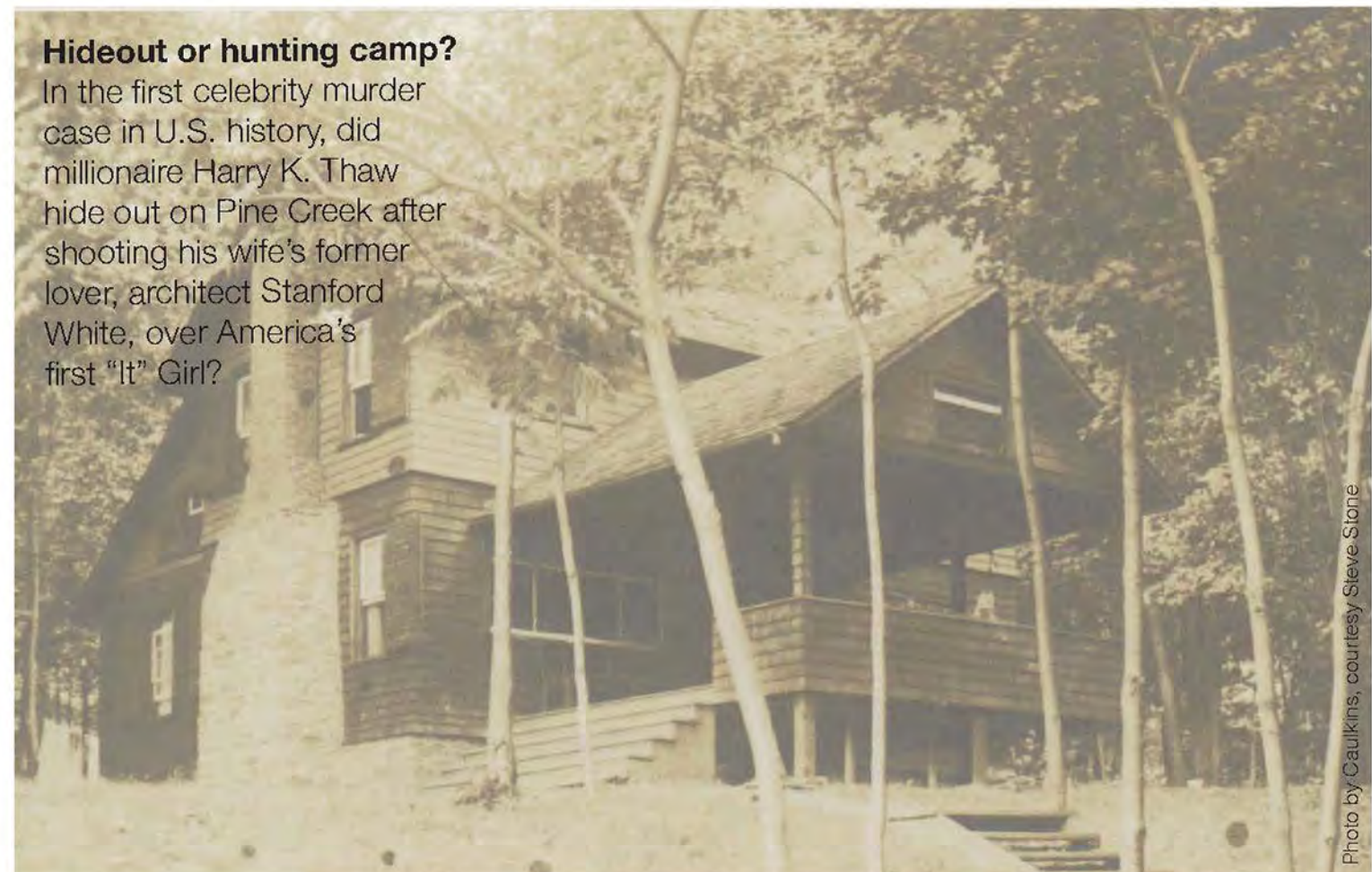


Photo by Caulkins, courtesy Steve Stone

**Hideout or hunting camp?**  
In the first celebrity murder case in U.S. history, did millionaire Harry K. Thaw hide out on Pine Creek after shooting his wife's former lover, architect Stanford White, over America's first "It" Girl?



## HARRY THAW KILLS STANFORD WHITE ON ROOF GARDEN!



The Millionaire



The Chorus Girl



The Architect

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# Murder of the Century

Did Wellsboro's Homegrown Governor Harbor a Killer on the Run?

By Carrie Hagen

Locals in and around Wellsboro, Pennsylvania (pop. 3,328) know a thing or two about former Pennsylvania Governor William A. Stone, who rose from Tioga County district attorney to governor from 1899 to 1903, when he built the state capitol that stands to this day. They know he was born and raised in the area, that historical markers note his history and whereabouts, and that a grandfather clock once belonging to him resides in the Green Free Library on Main Street.

"And that's it," says Wellsboro native Pat Davis, a musician, retired Wellsboro music teacher, and *Mountain Home* columnist, referring to her knowledge of Stone.

So it came as something of a surprise to *Mountain Home* when, last spring, Wellsboro lawyer Tom Walrath shared a story connecting Stone to deranged Pittsburgh millionaire Harry Kendall Thaw, one of the most famous murderers in American history. According to the story, Pennsylvania's former governor harbored the villain in his Pine Creek cabin after Thaw killed renowned architect Stanford White on the roof garden theater of Madison Square Garden in 1906.

The Pennsylvania Grand Canyon would certainly be an attractive refuge for a killer, especially one connected to a politician who owned land in the Pine Creek gorge, a forty-seven-mile run occupying 160,000 acres of the Tioga State Forest. But why would Thaw risk a trip to north-central Pennsylvania when he could easily hide in Manhattan? And why would the former governor conceal a murderer on his property?

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The site of the mystery: Governor Stone's great grandson, Steve Stone, at the family cabin on Pine Creek.

Suzan Plohar

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On June 25, 1906, during the finale of a musical show on the rooftop theater, Harry Kendall Thaw approached White, pulled a pistol from his pocket, said, "You've ruined my wife," and shot him in the face. The thirty-five-year-old Thaw was a Pittsburgh millionaire, heir to a coal and railroad fortune, and White the noted designer of numerous New York properties, including this first version of Madison Square Garden.

The high society murder allowed newspaperman William Randolph Hearst to make it the story of the

year. Although seventeen years older than Thaw, White was a former lover of the younger man's wife. Evelyn Nesbit had married Harry Kendall Thaw in 1905 against White's wishes: his interest in her welfare was purely physical. A powerful man with a fondness for young women, White had raped Nesbit soon after she gained attention as a young teenage model and chorus girl. The two later had a sexual relationship. Thaw claimed he killed White because the man had attacked his wife's virtue when she was only fourteen, but investigators later

testified that Thaw had been obsessed with White long before he knew of Evelyn's past.

Harry Kendall Thaw himself had a deviant sexual appetite. In New York and throughout Europe, he would rent hotel rooms, lure potential young lovers with expensive gifts, and then imprison, beat, and rape them. Much more often than not, he successfully bribed his victims and hotel employees to stay quiet. With the death of his strict father in 1893, the twenty-two-year-old Thaw convinced his overindulgent mother to increase



his allowance, an act that financed more escapades. Finding a home in New York, Thaw sought acceptance from Manhattan's best social circles; when his erratic behavior distanced him from socialites, he blamed the most popular man among them for blocking his passage. Stanford White, many say, never knew the full extent of Thaw's paranoid fixation on him, his wealth, and his success. Perhaps White had realized, when he warned Evelyn Nesbit about Thaw, that the man had first seen her in his company.

After a quick arrest, Thaw admitted his guilt and spent that night at a police station in the Tenderloin district. By the following evening he occupied Cell #220 at the Tombs Prison in Lower Manhattan as a felon on Murderer's Row. So regardless of any connection to the former Pennsylvania governor, Henry Kendall Thaw wouldn't have had time before his arrest and incarceration to flee to a cabin over 240 miles away.

What basis had there been, then, for the local story connecting Thaw and Wellsboro's Stone? Tom Walrath was sure that his old friend Al Cole would recall hearing the tale, and that perhaps he might know something of its origin.

"I wish I could help you, but I don't know anything about it," Cole said on a voicemail message. He offered a number for Steve Stone, the great grandson of the former governor and the owner of the Pine Creek cabin at the center of the Thaw question.

Stone returned a call immediately. He found the story "fascinating" but had also "never heard of it before." Stone, a Pittsburgh businessman, and his four sisters had vacationed at the cabin as children before he began investing in its upkeep as an adult. Called "The Guv" by his friends, Steve Stone is knowledgeable not only about the area's social and geographical landscape but also his family history, having combed through documents dating back to the nineteenth century. Eager to help, Stone offered to look back at them for a connection between his and the Thaw family, both native to Pittsburgh. He also suggested that he contact Leroy Crossley, Jr., an eighty-nine-year-old former camp neighbor now living in Youngstown, Ohio, whose father had owned Cole's Pine Creek property. Although Crossley had sold the property to Al Cole's family in the 1970s, his father had owned it before him. Perhaps Crossley would remember hearing a story about the governor's hosting an infamous guest. This lead also turned into a dead end.

William A. Stone would no longer have been in office when Thaw killed Stanford White. He left in 1903 after serving one term, and by 1906 had settled into a law practice with his son back in Pittsburgh. Did Stone, then, represent Thaw when the "Trial of the Century"

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Gibson Girl: artists' model Evelyn Nesbit was idealized—and immortalized—by graphic artist Charles Dana Gibson.

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began in January of 1907?

Harry Kendall Thaw's family wealth bought him a top-notch legal team. As a high-profile lawyer practicing in their hometown, Stone could have consulted with Mary Copley Thaw about her son's situation. *The New York Times* historical archive, however, contains no mention of William A. Stone in the dozens of articles that review the trials of Harry Kendall Thaw in 1907 and 1908.

At the "Trial of the Century," Stanford White's celebrity and the egregious nature of his murder rallied the muckraking press, and it fixated on Thaw's plea: not guilty by reason of temporary insanity. Immediately after Thaw's arrest, his defense team had informed the district attorney's

office that it would argue "emotional insanity"; incredulous, the district attorney sent three "alienists" to The Tombs to judge Thaw's frame of mind. These psychologists found him to be of sound mind and body. Their assessment, combined with the Thaw family's distaste for the word "insane," changed the defense's petition to include the word "temporary." Thaw's trial was the first in American history to argue the plea of "temporary insanity" (a phrase re-labeled by critics as "dementia Americana"). Scholars say it was the largest of its kind to rely on the testimony of expensive alienists, and, because of the press frenzy, the first in which a judge sequestered a jury for the duration of the trial.



The jury could not reach a verdict. The case went to a second trial that ended almost a year after the first began. This jury declared Harry Kendall Thaw not guilty by reason of temporary insanity. Immediately, the judge sentenced him to the State Asylum for the Criminally Insane at Matteawan in Fishkill, New York, for an unspecified amount of time. It would be up to the doctors to decide when Thaw would be sane enough to rejoin society.

Thaw had not anticipated this sentencing. He thought he would walk. "I am confident that my stay at Matteawan will be for a short period of time only," said Thaw, who also stated that his lawyers would be filing a writ of habeas corpus to argue the justice of the punishment. They did—and although the Thaw family bribed judges, prosecutors, the hospital superintendent, doctors, and reporters, Thaw's lawyers failed three times to secure his release.

Harry Kendall Thaw had numerous legal needs while in the State Asylum at Matteawan. He wanted the state of New York to deport him to Pennsylvania, where he assumed his family could arrange his immediate release; he wanted his legal team to continue filing writs of habeas corpus; he wanted to keep his wife Evelyn's financial desires at bay; he needed to protect himself from bribery charges and lawsuits; he wanted to expand his business interests into real estate and logging; he wanted to protect his future inheritance from any type of seizure.

Here, it appears, he began a legal relationship with William A. Stone.

By 1909, Thaw and his family had retained Stone as his bankruptcy lawyer. Four years later, Stone had taken a more prominent role on his legal team. Thaw wanted the ex-governor to use his reputation to engage the State Department and Pennsylvania's current governor in his case, and so he put Stone in charge of

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his deportation efforts. On August 17, 1913, Thaw himself took a more active role by fleeing the asylum. Five years after entering Matteawan, Harry Kendall Thaw walked out the front door and into an escape car that guards had clearly ignored, facilitating his escape.

After forty-eight hours on the run, he surfaced in Canada, and so began another chapter in the American government versus Harry Kendall Thaw.

Tom Walrath clarified the story as he knew it: "I heard that [Thaw] hid out in Governor Stone's cabin while he was awaiting trial" for White's murder. He expressed surprise that his friends could not recount the Pine Creek cabin tale. "I can't believe it," he said, seemingly puzzled about where to direct further inquiries. Asked to recall who had relayed the story to him, he offered another name—"Pat Davis." Davis, Walrath said, had been learning the music to *Ragtime*, a story that recalled Stanford White's murder, when he heard the story from her.

"He did not," laughed Davis. Yes, she knew the music to *Ragtime*, but she had never heard about the connection between Harry Kendall Thaw and William A. Stone. If anyone might know, she said, it would be Scott Gitchell of the Tioga County Historical Society.

Gitchell's own great-great grandfather was a childhood friend of William A. Stone's and a fellow member of Company A in the 187th Regiment of the Pennsylvania Infantry during the Civil War. The historian was unaware of any connection between Stone and Thaw. "I've never heard that particular story," he said.

According to his autobiography *The Tale of a Plain Man*, William A. Stone intended to get a job as a sales clerk when he returned from the war and graduated from the Mansfield State Normal School in 1868, but his height worked against him. He was so tall that his head would bang against the items that hung from ceiling hooks. Unable to secure employment, he spoke with a local acquaintance from Mansfield who encouraged him to study law at night and teach school at Wellsboro Academy during the day.

Stone preferred the law over teaching, and by 1870, he had tried cases before the bar admitted him. Four years later, he became district attorney of Tioga County. Stone resigned to practice law in Pittsburgh, where he became a congressman in 1891. He gave a well-received stump speech for William McKinley's presidential run in 1896, and one year later, fueled the acclaim into a gubernatorial campaign. After four years as governor, Stone joined his son in a Pittsburgh law practice. Summers he spent vacationing at his cabin.

"I have spent most of my time there from June to October for fifteen years," Stone wrote in 1918. "There are speckled trout in 4-Mile Run and black bass in Pine Creek.



Different choices: too tall to be a sales clerk, William A. Stone instead studied law, which eventually led to Congress and the state governorship.



Suzan Ritchar

I take great pleasure in studying their habits and catch my share of them. I am an optimist and do not waste time in thinking about my mistakes or those of my friends."

Was Harry Kendall Thaw one of these friends? If so, could the former governor overlook the "mistakes" of a murderer that one sheriff called "a dipsomaniac, degenerate, murderer, coward, egoist, over-indulgent, spendthrift, good-for-nothing, evil-minded, night-crawler, spoiled youngster"? Thaw said that once he

escaped from Matteawan, he had first intended to go to Pennsylvania.

But where in Pennsylvania? Perhaps Pittsburgh, near his family home? And if so, would he have gone directly there, or would he have stopped overnight at a hidden cabin along a creek bank near Wellsboro? The summer home where one of his lawyers spent most of "June through October"?

Steve Stone is one of the few who has a permit to drive along Pine Creek on a former bed of the New

York Railroad, an old forestry road where hikers and bikers play on a late summer morning. He drives slower than necessary, aware that outdoors enthusiasts don't always approve of clearing a path for his SUV. As he heads to his cabin from the Darling Run Access Area, he points out a bald eagle's nest, and the swinging bridge that he and his family would walk across when they came in from Pittsburgh. A canoe banked at the bottom of rickety steps takes Stone and guests across the creek to his seven-acre property, what is left

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Motive for murder: With Evelyn Nesbit as the model, Stanford White commissioned Augustus Saint-Gaudens to sculpt a statue of Diana to top the Madison Square Garden building he designed (on the right tower at right). White was murdered at the roof garden theater atop the building; (above) a half-size gilt version at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. The original statue is in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



commons.wikimedia.c

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from the 2,000 acres that William A. Stone once held.

"When my great grandfather had the current place, a number of heavy hitters had homes here," said Stone, alluding to a bank president and the secretary of the state's treasury among others. The area, in the midst of coal region, was a logger's gold mine once, home to mills long gone by the time

Hurricane Agnes swept many camps away in 1972. Agnes also damaged the railroad, and in so doing, limited further construction.

One hundred and one years before this flood, Steve Stone's great grandfather celebrated the opening of the railroad in Wellsboro, an occasion marked by the consumption of champagne for the first time at a

public dinner. About thirty years later, the railroad would bring the materials and workers necessary to construct his fishing cabin on Pine Creek at a stream called Four Mile Run, and, soon after that, it would bring visiting family and friends, ushering in even Theodore Roosevelt on his presidential railcar. Could it also have ferried in a fugitive murderer?

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History upon history: Theodore Roosevelt, who visited Stone's cabin on Pine Creek, in a White House chair designed by Stanford White.

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Harry Kendall Thaw could have escaped by train to Wellsboro, over 150 miles from Fishkill. He would have had to transfer lines in Corning, New York, but Stone's cabin would have given him an obscure cover to assess his options once back in Pennsylvania. If it were then decided that he needed to flee the country, he could have gotten back on the train and switched lines again to Quebec, where he was arrested on August 19. This trajectory would have required quite a bit of travel in forty-eight hours.

Thaw's reemergence in Quebec captured front-page headlines once again. New York demanded his return, but William A. Stone told *The New York Times* on August 26 that, due to a treaty between the United States and Canada, Thaw had the right to appear before a Canadian court even as a U.S. citizen. The Thaw camp wanted him neither deported to New York nor to Vermont—where he had crossed the Canadian border—because of the

reciprocity between those two states.

Three weeks after Thaw fled Matteawan, Canadian immigration sent him to Vermont. He made it to New Hampshire before authorities arrested him. In Concord, a crowd of 2,000 curious fans greeted his arrival.

"One might think that a hero was in the limelight," said a local police officer.

Thaw remained on a very loose "house arrest" in New Hampshire while he awaited trial at district, and then federal court. Legal wrangling kept Thaw in New Hampshire until December of 1914, when the United States Supreme Court demanded that New Hampshire extradite the "prisoner" to New York.

In January, he returned to his old cell—#220—at The Tombs. Over the next seven months, his lawyers filed, argued, and appealed motions until they secured his release. On July 16, 1915, Harry Kendall Thaw again

walked out of jail, but this time as a free man.

Eight months later, on March 15, 1916, *The Wellsboro Agitator* reported an update on a piece of gossip. "A report circulated of late indicating that Harry K. Thaw had leased ex-Gov. Stone's cottage at Four Mile Run for the summer, is without the slightest foundation, Mr. Stone writing to a friend here that the matter had never even been considered by any of the parties concerned."

On June 28th, the same social column published a list of comings and goings about town. One item reads, "Harry K. Thaw, of Pittsburgh, is a guest of Ex-Gov. Stone, at Four Mile Run."

Thaw's presence did cause the town to whisper once, but the truth behind the story is neither scandalous nor conspiratorial. Ten years after murdering Stanford White, three years after escaping from an asylum, and one

year after getting his freedom, Harry Kendall Thaw spent time at William A. Stone's cabin. So the governor did shelter the madman at his Pine Creek cabin, just a little bit out of scandalous sequence.

When a story gets passed down from generation to generation, said historian Scott Gitchell, it can become a "conglomeration of facts" that "gets embroidered" into rumor and falsehood, urban legend and Southern yarn. Still, we need to preserve these colorful tales through storytelling; by connecting us to our history, they stimulate our interest in fact-finding, bringing us closer to the truths behind our assumptions.

*Inspired and haunted by true stories, first-time Mountain Home contributing writer Carrie Hagen is the author of 'We Is Got Him: The Kidnapping That Changed America.' She lives in Philadelphia.*

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