Bloomington Evening
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SKY SLAYER CAPTURED HERE

Three Missouri Counties Seeking Custody of Aviator

FIRST DEGREE MURDER, THEFT AND KIDNAPING

Are Charges Which He May Face In Missouri

Plane Which Pletch Landed Here

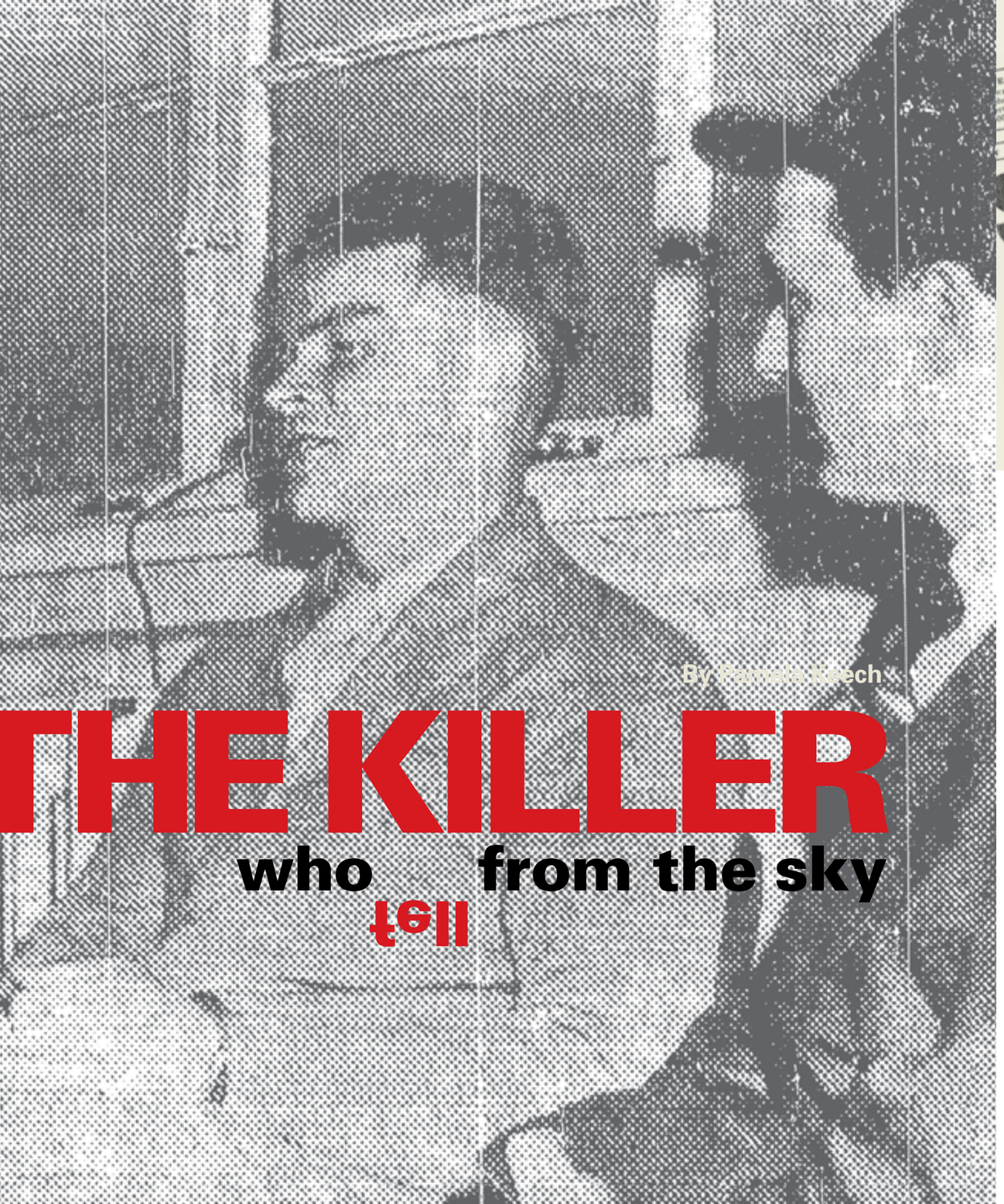
SWITCHBOARD OPERATOR, 54, PROVIDES TIP

Clear Creek Woman Heroine Of Dramatic Arrest

Is Killed

CITY AND STATE POLICE SEIZE MURDERER ON TIP FROM ALERT CLEAR CREEK PHONE OPERATOR

Police Radio Reports Keep Officers On Trail Of Flying Lochinvar—Confesses First Air Murder



By Pamela Keech

THE KILLER who fell from the sky

A True-life B-town Crime Story

Just before Halloween, exactly 70 years ago, a murderer landed a small plane in a cow pasture four miles south of the downtown Square and put Bloomington on the front page of major newspapers across the country.

It was Saturday, October 28, 1939, an autumn day in Bloomington. The weather was clear and cool, with a chance of hard frost. Pork loin was 15 cents a pound at the A&P, and *The Roaring '20s* with James Cagney was playing at the Indiana Theatre. Kids were looking forward to Halloween on Tuesday and the big parade downtown with prizes for the best costumes.

Down the road in the small community of Clear Creek, 6-year-old Bobby Joe Logsdon and his 7-year-old brother Jimmy were doing chores on their family's small farm at the corner of South Rogers Street and That Road. It was just starting to get dark when Bobby Joe heard one of his favorite sounds—an airplane engine—but he had never heard one so loud. He looked up and saw a yellow plane fly just over the treetops.

Bob Logsdon, now 76, who has lived in Clear Creek his entire life and is co-owner of Stella's Place Furniture there, says, "My brother and I were crazy about aviation. I never saw or heard an airplane fly that low before and it was real exciting." But something even more exciting was about to happen. "I heard the pilot cut his engine and then he landed in the field right behind our house! Jimmy and I wanted to go over there and just touch the pilot, but our father wouldn't let us go."

The plane, a two-seater Taylor Cub monoplane, touched down in a cow pasture on the property of Meredith Dillman, whose family also had been watching the plane circle. When it landed, son Morris and daughter Lois jumped in the car and sped to the scene where they joined a growing crowd of men and boys.

The pilot was a young man in his late 20s, good-looking, with wavy hair swept back in a pompadour. He was wearing dirty blue overalls. According to the *Bloomington Evening World*, he appeared calm and told the Dillmans that he was flying from Chicago to Bedford to attend a steak dinner but decided to land because of

darkness. Conflicting reports in the same newspaper said that he claimed he was headed to Bedford to see a girlfriend, and that he was a student pilot from a nearby airport.

Logsdon remembers getting close enough to see the pilot get out of the plane. "He had blood on his front. He said it was from a nosebleed he got from the altitude. Then he said he was hungry and asked if there was anyplace to get something to eat."

A group of older boys led the pilot down Rogers Street to the Williams and Wampler General Store, a hub for gasoline and groceries for most of the early 20th century. The building is now Stella's Place; Logsdon has owned it for more than 30 years. "There used to be a hot bar in the back with a few stools where you could get coffee or a sandwich," he says. The pilot sat down and ordered two hamburgers and a cup of coffee.

In 1939, Clear Creek's telephones were still on the party-line system, which required an operator on duty at all times. The telephone switchboard was in the home of operator Bertha Maner, 54, a widow with a son who had been crippled by polio. Logsdon's older sister, Evelyn Miller, now 88, once worked there as an operator and knew Maner. "Bertha had the most beautiful outlook on life," she says, "and a head of beautiful white hair. She used laundry bluing to color it."

On that October afternoon, Maner had been listening to a football game on the radio and heard a news bulletin that a man suspected of murder in Missouri and flying a stolen yellow airplane had been spotted over Frankfort, Indiana. He was heading south.

Other Clear Creek residents saw the plane circling and called Maner. "People commenced calling in when the plane kept flying so low," she told reporters. When she heard the plane had landed on the Dillman farm she immediately connected the landing with the news bulletin and notified Bloomington police. About her quick thinking Maner told the press, "I have a vivid imagination and a nose for news."

Logsdon remembers getting close enough to see the pilot get out of the plane. 'He had blood on his front.'

Indiana state and local police had been notified of the fugitive pilot that morning, and at 5:10 that afternoon Bloomington police were informed that the plane had been spotted over Brown County State Park. When they received the call from Maner, they asked that she contact the Dillman farm for the license number of the plane, which was verified as that of the stolen aircraft.

The police then called the Williams and Wampler store. As Logsdon tells it, "The phone rang and Bill Wampler answered it. The deputy instructed Bill to say only 'yes' or 'no' in response to his questions. He asked if the pilot was there, then if Bill could stall him, but not to do anything foolish because the man was dangerous. Bill was frying the hamburgers for the pilot. He was a nervous, jittery kind of guy, but he just scooted the burgers over to the cool part of the grill so they wouldn't cook so fast."

In minutes the store was surrounded by state and local police. Newspapers reported that although the pilot carried a .32 caliber revolver, he offered no resistance and remained calm as he was led away in handcuffs.

For the next few days, the story was front-page news in local and national newspapers, including the *Bloomington Evening World*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, *Ft. Lauderdale Evening Independent*, *Hartford Courant*, and *The Kansas City Star*. An undocumented source said that the reporter who covered the story for the Kansas City papers was a young Walter Cronkite.

Airplanes and women

The pilot, Earnest P. "Larry" Pletch, 29, grew up in Frankfort, Indiana, the son of a prosperous farmer and Republican county councilman. A high-school dropout, he was known locally as "a genius with machinery," thought of himself as an inventor, and preferred repairing cars and tractors to working on the family farm. He had two other loves—airplanes and women.

Pletch was obsessed with flying. "I always have been crazy about flying. I would rather fly than eat," he told deputies at the Monroe County Jail after his arrest. As a teenager he had begged his father to buy him an airplane but was told that he would have to finish high school first. Instead, he quit school and got married. By the time he landed in Dillman's pasture, he was on his third wife and had a 4-year-old daughter.

Pletch never took flying lessons and had never piloted an airplane until the summer of 1938 when he stole a plane near Frankfort. "It was the first time I had ever been at the controls. The boys said it couldn't be done," he bragged to police. "I took off in that plane at three o'clock in the morning and flew it to Danville, Illinois, and landed it in a seven-acre field."

Then he flew to Vernon, Illinois, where he earned money by flying passengers. "The second week that I had been flying I gave exhibitions, did stunt flying, and put on a one-man show. A few days later I gave lessons to passengers."

It was in Vernon that Pletch first combined his passions for flying and women. He met a 17-year-old girl named Goldie Gerkin, who asked for a plane ride. The ride turned into a five-day air-borne romance, and ended when he left her under a shade tree after she refused to marry him. Pletch was later arrested. The press nicknamed him the "Flying Romeo" for the escapade.

Pletch was out on bond and still awaiting trial for the Goldie episode when he committed the crime that would bring him to Bloomington. The events leading to his arrest here began earlier that fall.

In September 1939, Pletch married his third wife, Francis Bales of Palmyra, Missouri, whom he had met while working an airplane-ride concession with carnival shows. After only a few days she left him (some sources said he had robbed her) and he returned to Indiana. In late October, Pletch borrowed a car and drove to Missouri to look for her.

In Brookfield, Missouri, he met Carl Bivens, 39, a flight instructor who was offering lessons in a yellow monoplane that belonged to a friend. Pletch asked Bivens to give him advanced flying instruction.

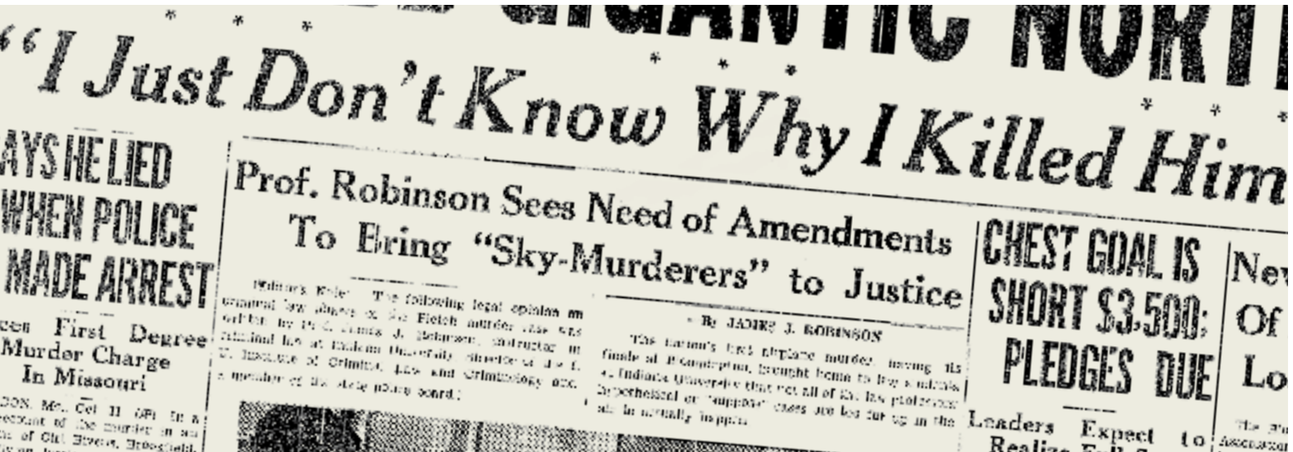
On Friday, October 27, Pletch had two lessons, then about 4 o'clock Bivens took him up for a third. The plane was a tandem with dual controls. Bivens was sitting in the front seat, the customary spot for the instructor. The two had been in the air for about 40 minutes and were cruising at 5,000 feet, "zipping along," as Pletch described it, when he shot Bivens.

"Carl was telling me I had a natural ability and I should follow that line," Pletch later confessed to prosecutors in Missouri. "I had a revolver in my pocket and without saying a word to him, I took it out of my overalls and I fired a bullet into the back of his head. He never knew what struck him.

"The ship began to pitch and then to dive. It went crazy and I remembered reading about a dying man 'stiffening' at the controls, and then I fired another shot into the back of his head." Pletch struggled with the

Bobby today: Eyewitness Bob Logsdon and his sister Evelyn Logsdon Miller inside the old Willams and Wampler General Store in Clear Creek, now Stella's Place Furniture.

Bobby back then: The Logsdon family, circa 1939, on the very spot where Bobby Joe and Jimmy first spotted the stolen airplane. Left to right: Jimmy Logsdon, cousin Lillian Warner, unidentified woman, sister Helen Logsdon, Bobby Joe Logsdon.


"I Just Don't Know Why I Killed Him

AYS HE LIED WHEN POLICE MADE ARREST

First Degree Murder Charge In Missouri

Prof. Robinson Sees Need of Amendments To Bring "Sky-Murderers" to Justice

By JAMES J. ROBINSON

CHEST GOAL IS SHORT $3,500; PLEDGES DUE

Leaders Expect to Realize Full

Photo of Earnest P. Pletch in the *Bloomington Evening World*, taken the day he turned from the "Flying Romeo" into a "sky murderer."

controls, and was able to pull the plane out of the dive at 1,500 feet. He landed as soon as he could, hid the body in a thicket of trees near Cherry Box, Missouri, then took off again, heading toward Indiana and his family home in Frankfort. He spent that Friday night sleeping in a farmer's barn.

Pletch initially said that he flew over his parents' home to "wave at them," but later admitted that "I flew to Frankfort with the intention of smashing the plane into the side of my father's barn but lost my nerve." He then flew across Indiana until darkness prompted him to land behind Bobby Joe Logsdon's house.

After his arrest, Pletch was held at the Monroe County Jail where he denied shooting Bivens, although the .32 caliber revolver he carried was the same type of gun as the murder weapon. He then concocted a story that he and Bivens had agreed to steal the plane and fly to Mexico in order to test Pletch's invention of "extremely high-efficiency aviation fuel." He claimed he shot Bivens in self-defense during a mid-air fight after Bivens tried to back out of the plan. That story was later discounted by Missouri police.

From Bloomington, Pletch was quickly transported to Indianapolis, where his parents were allowed to see him. "Try to make your peace with God," his mother told him. "That's the only thing left." The next day Indiana state police turned him over to officers of the Missouri state patrol. He was taken to the county jail in Macon, Missouri, to stand trial for first-degree murder and theft.

'I just don't know why I killed him but I did.'

The crime was unprecedented. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* called it "One of the most spectacular crimes of the 20th century—and what is believed to be the first airplane kidnap murder on record." Because it happened somewhere over three Missouri counties, and involved interstate transport of a stolen airplane, it raised questions in legal circles about where, by whom, and even whether Pletch could be prosecuted.

Professor James J. Robinson, then director of the Indiana University Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology, published an opinion on the front page of the *Bloomington Evening World* in which he discussed the legal ramifications of prosecuting what he called "sky murderers."

"Suppose a murder is committed in an airplane out of sight of land…making it impossible to prove the county over which the offense occurred. Could the murderer be prosecuted and, if so, where?" He called for amendments to state and national constitutions if murderers using "the Pletch method" were to be "brought effectively within the range of criminal law."

The following Wednesday, November 1, Pletch surprised authorities during a preliminary hearing by pleading guilty to first-degree murder. He was immediately sentenced to life in prison, after promising never to apply for pardon or parole at the request of his victim's widow. His parents were relieved that he would not receive the death penalty. "Guy [Pletch's father] had hoped maybe he could save Earnest's life. We're thankful to learn about it. It is a great burden off my mind," his mother told the press.

Only five days after he killed Bivens, the "Flying Romeo" began his sentence at the Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City. During his lifetime he had at least one more brush with fame. In 1948 he was granted a U.S. patent for an invention, "Traction increasing device for dual wheel vehicles." The patent document consists of precise drawings and detailed descriptive text. It is signed Earnest P. Pletch, Inventor.

Pletch died in June 2001 and is buried in Camdenton, Missouri. He has no marker, but an adjoining grave is marked "Avis Pletch, Wife of Earnest Pletch, 1904-1973." She would have been yet another one of his spouses.

As for motive, on October 31, 1939, the *Bloomington Evening World* ran a front-page banner headline that quoted Pletch telling prosecuting attorneys, "I Just Don't Know Why I Killed Him But I Did."

Besides countless newspaper accounts, Pletch's crime is the subject of short pieces in two books by Fred D. Cavinder, *The Indiana Book of Records, Firsts, and Fascinating Facts* and *More Amazing Tales from Indiana*. According to Bob Logsdon and his sister Evelyn, it also appeared in "at least one sleazy detective magazine," the name of which has been long forgotten. ✲