



The Stempel family/Detroit Free Press

Kidnapping for Ransom: Bad Business Model

by Greg Stejskal (1975-2006)
ticklethewire.com



Greg Stejskal

IT WAS FEBRUARY, 1980 IN DETROIT.

I was assigned to the FBI surveillance squad. It was very cold in the back of the van. We hadn't yet installed a heater that would work when the van wasn't running.

I had been driven to a spot where I could observe the ransom drop site from the small one-way window in the back of the panel van. The driver had parked the van and left. He was picked up a few blocks away by one of the other surveillance cars. If

anyone was watching, they would think the van was empty.

Kidnappings. It was one of many I would work in my career as an FBI Agent. As I would witness, time and again, it was a lousy way for criminals to make money. Particularly as technology improved, it became clear: the business model simply didn't work. And I thought it was worth recounting why.

In this 1980 case, my job was to watch the ransom package, which had been placed between the rear wall of a party store and a dumpster. The package contained \$50,000. The "party store" (that's what they call convenience stores in Detroit) was at the corner of Fenkell and Robeson on Detroit's northwest side.

I had two HTs (hand-held radios) with me in the van. One was tuned to the surveillance frequency. The other was tuned to the frequency of a transmitter in the ransom package. The transmitter broadcasts a rhythmic tone that would speed up if the package was moved, pretty primitive by today's technology.

The whole thing had started when Jacqueline Hempstead, the manager of a Detroit bank branch, learned that her son, Hessley, age 8, had been kidnapped on his way to school. She was called by the kidnappers and received instructions and a ransom demand. Mrs. Hempstead contacted her bank's security officer, who alerted the Detroit Police Department (DPD) and the FBI.

It was decided that Mrs. Hempstead would follow the kidnappers' instructions and comply with the ransom demand. A package with \$50,000 and the aforementioned transmitter was prepared.

The FBI had been positioned in a parameter around the drop site. I had been driven to a spot near the drop site before the delivery. There I could observe the delivery and provide protection to Mrs. Hempstead if necessary.

Mrs. Hempstead delivered the package without any problems. We had Agents in the vicinity of the drop, but not close enough to observe the package or spook someone wanting to make a pick-up.

After I had been watching for several hours, I heard an ominous sound — a garbage truck approaching. The truck got positioned and lifted the dumpster next to the ransom package. For a moment I thought what a novel way a ransom. But when the dumpster was replaced, it was set on the top of the package. The transmitter screeched, then seemed to moan before dying completely. The package was torn open with the stacks of bills clearly visible.

I kept my vigil, but we were concerned that a passerby might see the cash. After about an hour with no apparent effort by the kidnapers to collect the ransom, we had Mrs. Hempstead retrieve the package.

In the meantime, young Hessley, who had been left unsupervised by the kidnapers at a house on Detroit's eastside, was able to break free and call his home. Agents that were posted at the Hempstead home told him to get out of the house and go to a neighbor's house.

He went to the neighbors and then called again. He was picked up by FBI Agents and returned home. The kidnapers were identified initially from their connection to the house where Hessley was held. They were successfully prosecuted.

The kidnapping was short-circuited, but the victim was returned safe and law enforcement responded quickly and performed well.

In 1975, my first year assigned to Detroit Division (Michigan), there were four kidnappings in Michigan, three of which were classic kidnappings for ransom. The other was Jimmy Hoffa, a kidnapping/murder.

It was an exciting first year on the job for me, but this was probably an inordinate number of ransom kidnappings for anywhere, including Detroit.

Before I arrived, in much earlier times, it seemed as if criminals had had far better luck with kidnapping. In Bryan Burroughs' book, *Public Enemies, America's Greatest Crime Wave and the Birth of the FBI 1933-34*, Burroughs writes that for some of the notorious gangs of the era, kidnapping was the crime of choice. John Dillinger's gang specialized in bank robbery, but the Barker/Karpis gang preferred kidnapping.

It was the gangs' success in their respective specialty crimes that resulted in making them federal crimes, and gave birth to the FBI. (Machine Gun Kelly, a member of the Barker gang, is credited with coining the "G-man" moniker for FBI Agents when he was arrested by the FBI.) The FBI learned from those early experiences.

Kidnapping for ransom, out of necessity, requires a victim who is of wealth or has some access to wealth (part of the business model). Consequently, the victim will be or is often related, in some way, to a high-profile person who can be expected to have the wherewithal and desire to pay a ransom.

2 Confess Kidnapping, Prosecutor Tells Court



\$100,000 Bond Set For Each

BY ERV CHEVY AND RUSAN STAYTON
Free Press Staff

"I was spending like a tycoon. It was free money."

—Ernest Brown

Spending Spree Leads Police To Suspects in Stempel Case

BY RUSAN STAYTON
Free Press Staff

"I was spending like a tycoon. It was free money."

—Ernest Brown

100,000 ransom money that was paid for the kidnaping of the son of General Motors Corp. executive Robert C. Stempel, was traced to Detroit on Monday.

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Suspects in 1975 kidnapping of GM exec's son/Detroit Free Press

2 Are Arraigned After Confessing To Boy's Kidnap



Free Press Photo by JIMMY TAPPA

Merritt and Dolly Wilson, parents of one of the kidnaping suspects, talk to reporters outside the Federal Building. "He's never given me or his mother a problem," said Merritt Wilson.

2 Are Arraigned After Confessing To Boy's Kidnap

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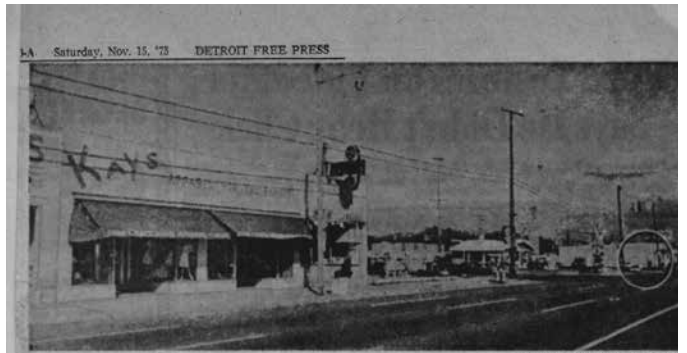
The 18-year-old drove with the kidnapers to pick up a package containing the \$100,000 ransom payment. The money was taken to the 18-year-old's home and counted, Henderson said.

Both Henderson and the juvenile, who have been re-arrested, are being further investigated in their roles in the kidnaping, were questioned by police and FBI agents. Henderson's statements led to the arrest of Wilson and Williams.

Stempel, the son of General Motors Corp. executive Robert C. Stempel, was kidnaped at airport Monday night near his home in the Fourteen Mile Township area of Bloomfield Hills. He was blindfolded and locked in the trunk of a Cadillac for about 33 hours.

The youth was released after late Wednesday night after his father, who is director of engineering for GM's

Detroit Free Press



Kay's Apparel, where some of the ransom money was spent, is a half block from the phone booth (circled) where Robert Stempel waited in vain Wednesday for a call about the ransom drop.

Kidnapping Suspect Arrested

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"Obviously it helped when the lost money started floating around."

Robertson said police had recorded the serial numbers of the ransom money but had not marked the bills for fear that the ransom money lost had not and kill the Stempel boy.

The FBI had concentrated its hunt for the kidnapers in the area around Kay's Apparel because it is about a half-block from where the elder Stempel was instructed at one point to await details of the ransom payment.

Also, the store is near the Instler Roller Rink, at Middle Belt south of Michigan, where ransom money was jacket and a cardigan sweater in layaway.

He had given his name as Richard Williams.

When he returned Thursday he paid off the balance on the layaway merchandise and his companion bought an identical leather jacket and a similar cardigan sweater with stripes.

The jackets cost about \$100 apiece and the sweaters cost \$25 each.

"They were pretty happy," said Westerholm. "They knew exactly what they wanted."

"I SAW THEM when they came in," said the woman cashier whom they paid "He (Williams' companion) gave me five \$50 bills. They had a roll of bills."

Later, FBI agents making a check of stores in the area



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The federal statute that gives the FBI jurisdiction in kidnapping cases is called the "Lindbergh law," which arose from the highly publicized kidnapping of Charles and Anne Lindbergh's son by Bruno Richard Hauptmann and the proliferation of high profile kidnappings elsewhere in the U.S. The Lindberghs were wealthy, but Charles may have been the most famous and beloved person in America at the time.

The Lindbergh baby was found dead after a ransom was paid. It was several years before the case was solved. The federal kidnapping statute relies on a presumption that any kidnapping involves interstate commerce. It is a rebuttable presumption, but allows the FBI to investigate a kidnapping without having to first establish some interstate aspect.

One such case came with the kidnapping in Michigan on November 10, 1975. A young man, Timothy Stempel, 13, was kidnapped in Bloomfield Township, an affluent suburb north of Detroit.

Timothy's father was Robert Stempel, a high-ranking executive with General Motors (later Robert Stempel would become CEO of GM). Mr. Stempel received a series of phone calls at his home from the kidnappers, and he was told they wanted \$150,000 for Timothy's return. Stempel contacted GM security, who in turn contacted the police and FBI.

Timothy had been kidnapped by two men, Darryl Wilson and Clinton Williams, who had decided that a good money-making project would be to kidnap a rich kid and hold him for ransom.

They had no specific victim in mind when they drove to the high-income neighborhood of Bloomfield Township. They passed on a few potential victims for various reasons; playing too close to a house, too young.

Then they spotted Timothy. He was skateboarding. Williams asked Timothy for directions to a person's house. Timothy said he didn't know the person and started to walk away. Williams pulled a handgun and told Timothy to get in the car. Timothy hit Williams with the skateboard, but Williams tackled him and struck him several times in the head. Williams

and Wilson blindfolded Timothy and placed him in the back-seat of the car.

They drove to Wilson's apartment on the south side of Ann Arbor and transferred Timothy to the trunk of the car, where he would remain for the next 50 some hours. Williams then called Robert Stempel and told him they had his son, and he would call back with instructions. Lastly Williams told Stempel: "Don't tell the police."

The police and the FBI committed hundreds of officers and Agents to the investigation. It was designated a "special" by FBI Headquarters — all hands on deck. But it had to be done in such a way as to not alert the kidnappers that police were involved. The paramount goal in any kidnapping investigation is the safe return of the victim.

Robert Stempel received subsequent telephone calls on November 11 and again on the next day. Ultimately, he was instructed to go to an empty lot behind a roller skating rink in Inkster, a working class suburb west of Detroit. He was to leave the money there, and he would be contacted about his son's release.

The evening of the "drop," it was pouring rain. Efforts were made to surveil the ransom package, but because of the location and the weather, it was impossible without taking the chance of alerting the kidnappers.

The package was retrieved, but whoever made the pick-up was not seen. (Night vision equipment would have been helpful, but was not yet available.)

Within a few hours, Timothy was released by the kidnappers not far from the drop site. Initially there were no suspects, but because much of the activity had occurred in Inkster and nearby, "neighborhood" investigations were conducted that included a canvass of businesses and homes to determine if anyone had seen any relevant activity. At an apparel store, within a block of the roller rink drop site, an Agent found that two men had spent several hundred dollars in cash for clothes.

The serial numbers on the cash matched the numbers recorded from some of the ransom money, and the men who bought the clothes were identified. This is similar to how Bruno Richard Hauptmann was initially identified as the kidnapper of the Lindbergh baby. He had spent some of the ransom money, a gold certificate, at a gas station. The station attendant made a note of Hauptmann's car license number. One of the reasons we now canvass neighborhoods.

The sartorial aspiring men were interviewed, and they told how they had agreed to drive two men to the roller rink on the night of November 12 to retrieve a package containing money. The men assumed it was drug money and accepted several thousand dollars for their trouble.

The men identified Darryl Wilson and said he lived in Ann Arbor, but didn't know his address or the other man's name.

The investigation determined that Wilson lived in an apartment on Ann Arbor's south side with a relative. A sur-

veillance was set up at the apartment complex, and the car used in the kidnapping was found at the complex.

Timothy Stempel, while locked in the trunk of the car, had carved his name on the inside of the trunk lid with a broken piece of a hacksaw blade he found in the trunk — pretty ingenious.

I was assigned to the surveillance. After a few hours, one of the other Agents, Stan Lapekas, suggested we take a look in a dumpster at the apartment complex for possible evidence. The dumpster was inside a wood fence enclosure in the parking lot, and we couldn't be seen from the outside.

After we had been in the enclosure for only a few minutes, a car drove in and parked right next to the enclosure gate. I peeked out and realized the driver was the subject, Darryl Wilson. As soon as he exited the car, Lapekas and I grabbed him and placed him in the back-seat of our car, with us sitting very close on either side of him.

We acted as if we already knew everything, but wanted to give him an opportunity to tell his side of the story. After giving him his rights, he almost immediately confessed and gave up his accomplice, Clinton Williams. We hadn't had Williams' name until Wilson told us. Wilson also told us where Williams lived. I got several other Agents and drove to Williams' home and arrested him.

Williams also confessed. He told us he had threatened Timothy Stempel with a handgun and hit him several times. He said they had kept Timothy in the trunk of a car for over two days. He also said he had made the phone calls to Timothy's dad from a pay phone in Inkster. (With the existing technology, we hadn't been able to trace the calls.)

The subsequent search of Wilson's apartment resulted in the recovery of \$137,000 of the ransom money.

The case and subsequent trial became a bit of a media circus. There was no interstate aspect of the kidnapping for it to be charged federally so it was prosecuted in State Court. The venue was Oakland County's Bloomfield Township, where the kidnapping occurred. The high profile Oakland County Prosecutor L. Brooks Patterson, who would later run for Governor, was the prosecutor. (He is presently the Oakland County Executive.)

Because of the media attention, the trial was moved from Oakland to Leland County, in the northwest corner of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. On the first day of trial, Patterson suspected that Wilson and Williams might be planning to enter a plea. Patterson put Timothy Stempel on the stand



Members of the International Coffee Club gather to discuss the Stempel trial's repercussions

Kidnap Trial Disrupts Leland

BY TIMOTHY J. MANLYN
From Free Press

LELAND — The men gathered for a coffee break at midmorning Tuesday, as usual, at the fire hall. Driving through a landscape of pine and aspen, and deep white snow, most came from as far as 11 miles for a cup of Jim Van Ness' coffee, a doughnut, and a good half hour of conversation.

"You can find out just about anything you want to know here," claims one of the regulars, Nicholas Leland.

And that's just about right because the coffee break, attended by about 50 men every day but Sunday, has been an institution and a town forum for nearly 42 years.

THE GROUP calls itself the International Coffee Club of America. Van Ness charges 10 cents for coffee and a doughnut in a school, but everything comes in a quarter, as Van Ness says he "don't raise prices."

What they like about the group is "the best atmosphere of male companionship," visitors are allowed

once a year — on the fourth of July they gather locally, give the men a night of judging how people feel about any subject that might come up in that town of about 200 on a two-mile stretch of land between Lake Leelanau and the shore of Lake Michigan.

A man might want to come in coffee to talk with Charley Stender about some electrical work or Bill Nedow about carpentry or they might just look each other about the weather — an ever-present topic.

But lately, much of the talk has been about "the trial."

AND FOR TINY LELAND, there's barely one line here worth talking about — the one that brought two black men from Florida to their last 20-minute court session, on charges of kidnapping the young son of a GM executive from near his family's Bloomfield Township home last November.

"We have a rather depressed feeling about the trial," says Leland, a retired attorney, "that if we here are WAFSP, and if the defense was worried about the trial being moved here, they had a good point."

The defense is worried. The two court-appointed lawyers even tried to get the trial moved a second time, away from Leland and back to a metropolitan area, with blacks and non-white voters. That attempt failed.

"That we can be just as prejudiced here as anywhere in the state," claims Bob Largent, John O'Brien, retired Michigan Bar member, and "Newwood" Woody Miller agree, "I think the people are here with going to take the trial as they best they can," said O'Brien.

WHATEVER the facts of the case, which give it local Monday in a small Leelanau County courtroom here, there is no doubt that it has caused turbulence and opposition along the Leelanau Peninsula, northwest of Traverse City.

The two men on trial, Darryl Wilson, 37, and Clinton Williams, 21, both of Ann Arbor, confessed in

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...but planned mostly before the court. Since the defendants also testified in court, the law requires a second jury for each of the defendants.

...although the wily public spots for the "wider people" are the Detroit Times, the post office, and the Leland Herald-Examiner, a general, but unconnected item in a newspaper-covered event, which caters to very wealthy residents from Leelanau and elsewhere Michigan.

"The main thing with this trial is that it is something new and exciting," says Dick Zelenka, lawyer for one of the weekly Leelanau Enterprises. "There's a small amount of excitement about bringing business up here because the only time we'd have business was when someone would bring their colored help with them. Thursday and the colored day is here when the help had left. But when they're dead off — there aren't many."

...When Oakland County's Judge John O'Brien questioned potential jurors last week about racial prejudice and prejudice against blacks, he made a fair decision, most said it wouldn't be a problem. But one man openly admitted he had racial bias.

...Leland's 16-year-old fire hall was built by donations of money and labor and the new \$120,000 fire engine was paid for in cash. "We wouldn't have bought it if we couldn't pay for it," said O'Brien. Local government doesn't interfere much in daily life.

...Alvin Gardner's "America" film series is showing on Sunday nights at the fire hall. A group of students, mostly from the county, are on it. They are on the fire hall and later to general.

...The Leelanau Methodist Church for home-cooked dinner and the 10-member Popcorn Club hold a variety of family events and dances.

...and now "The Trial" has come to Leland, providing an assortment of emotions, from indignation to anger. Some say a crime has violated the town's peace.

...But in the International Coffee Club the men here still talk with ease. Bob White, the fire hall's owner, says, "I don't know anything about the trial, but the people are here."

...There has been a kidnapping trial here in Leland County, Michigan, but after it is over the courtroom will be down and residents will go back to their normal lives of coffee here among the pine and aspen and nothing more.

and introduced the trunk lid. He then had me testify out of order to get Williams' confession on the record with all the damning admissions.

On the beginning of the second day of trial, Wilson and Williams entered guilty pleas with no plea bargain.

There were several other kidnappings for ransom in the Detroit Division during my 30+ years there, but I'm not aware of any that were successful.

All of the kidnapers were identified and prosecuted. In two instances, although a ransom was demanded and paid, the victims were murdered. In both those cases, the kidnapers never had any intention of releasing the victims alive.

The business model for kidnapping for ransom is flawed. It is a very high-risk crime.

In some parts of the world, kidnappings are done with the collusion of the police or at least their indifference, thus, lowering the risk factor. The victim has to fit a profile, and it is very difficult to successfully collect a ransom — probably more so today than in the technology-challenged period of the early years of my career.

Although the potential profit would seem to be high, the odds of actually getting and keeping it are extremely low.

In the latter years of my career, there were no kidnappings for ransom in Michigan. They also seem to be rare elsewhere in the country. I doubt that kidnapping for ransom is extinct in the U.S., but it would seem to be on the endangered list.

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