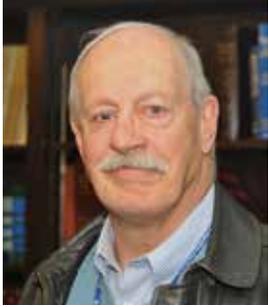


3:10 To Marquette: The Manhunt and Capture of Vincent Loonsfoot in the North Woods of Michigan

by Greg Stejskal (1975-2006)

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Greg Stejskal

In the summer of 1988, Vincent Loonsfoot, an American Indian, drove to the Hannahville Potawatomi Reservation near Escanaba, MI. There, he ambushed and shot to death four members of his wife's family and kidnapped his estranged wife, Peggy. Loonsfoot then set off into the woods — beginning a highly publicized manhunt through the

almost impenetrable forest of Michigan's Upper Peninsula (U.P.)

If you look at a map of Michigan (see page 16), it is made up of two peninsulas, the upper and the lower. The Upper Peninsula extends east from Wisconsin and is bounded on the north by Lake Superior. The Lower Peninsula, the bigger of the two, looks like a mitten. So Michiganders tend to point to their hand when giving directions. (There is a part of the lower peninsula that is referred to as "the thumb.")

The Lower Peninsula is bounded by Lake Michigan to the west and Lake Huron to the east. Where these two lakes meet at the top of the Lower Peninsula, it is the shortest distance between the two peninsulas, the Straits of Mackinac. For years, the only way to get from one peninsula to the other was by boat or plane. In 1957, the Mackinac Bridge was finished, allowing for car and truck traffic between the two.

Although the two peninsulas are now connected, they remain dramatically different. In some ways the U.P. remains the pristine wilderness immortalized in Longfellow's epic poem, "Hiawatha." "By the shores of Gitche Gumee..."

Longfellow was describing the Lake Superior coast of the U.P.

It was first settled by white men to harvest the lumber from the immense forests and to mine the copper.

But the deep subterranean mines became unprofitable and the abundant free-for-all lumbering became limited and regulated by the Forest Service.

The U.P. is sparsely populated with no major cities — big swathes are

National Forests. Some of the Indians remain, but are mostly living on or near the reservations.

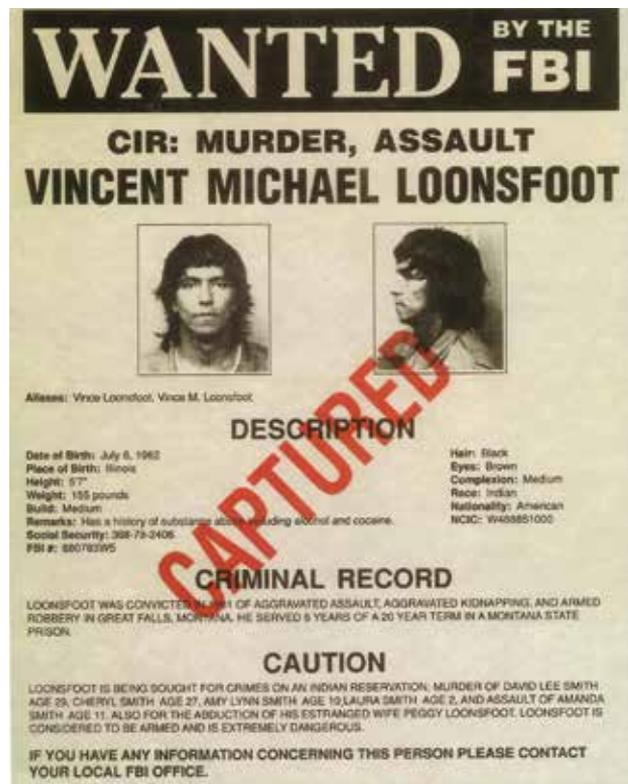
Vincent Loonsfoot and his wife, Peggy, were living near Baraga on the Keweenaw Bay Reservation. An Ojibwa Indian Tribal Court awarded Peggy sole custody of the Loonsfoot's two-year-old daughter, based on a finding that Loonsfoot had repeatedly physically abused Peggy. Without telling him, Peggy took their daughter and moved to Escanaba on the south/Lake Michigan side of the U.P.

Loonsfoot followed her, but not being certain where she was staying, he staked out her brother, David Smith's, home on the Hannahville Reservation near Escanaba. While waiting for Smith and his family to return, Loonsfoot used cocaine and drank beer. It's not clear if Loonsfoot had a plan, but when the Smith family came home, he ambushed them. Loonsfoot shot and killed David, his wife and two of their daughters. He wounded a third daughter, Amanda, age 11.

Driving the Smith's car, Loonsfoot then forced Amanda to take him to the home where Peggy (Amanda's aunt) was staying. There, Loonsfoot kidnapped Peggy, leaving Amanda. (Amanda would recover from her wounds.) Loonsfoot drove



FBI/Swat patch



Fbi Wanted Poster of Loonsfoot

to a ski area outside of Escanaba where the car stalled. Then Loonsfoot set off into the woods with Peggy, who was barefoot and three months pregnant. He had no provisions, and only the clothes they were wearing. He did have a .30 caliber lever-action rifle and some knives.

Because the murders had occurred on an Indian Reservation, the crimes fell under federal jurisdiction. The Marquette FBI Office was notified. (Marquette is the largest city in the U.P. and is on Lake Superior.) When the Marquette FBI Agents were able to assess the situation, they called the main Michigan FBI Office in Detroit. It was decided that the FBI SWAT team would be dispatched to the U.P. to conduct the search for Loonsfoot and Peggy.

In the meantime, state and county law enforcement were attempting to cordon off the area around Escanaba to keep Loonsfoot from escaping the area.

The FBI SWAT team was flown to the U.P. in an Air Force National Guard C-130. I was a SWAT team leader, but was in the midst of a trial in which I was the Case Agent and couldn't deploy until it was concluded.

The SWAT team was on the ground and searching within 48 hours of the murders/abduction. The trail was cold and the woods extremely thick. Tracking dogs were used and were able to pick up a scent. It did appear that Loonsfoot was using railroad right-of-ways, but would periodically go into the woods. Trains leaving the area were searched. Aircraft were also used in the search, but they had not made any sightings.

Loonsfoot seemed to have been moving in a westerly direction from Escanaba. Making the search more difficult, it was the height of the blackfly season and the woods were full of voracious ticks. The SWAT guys did make a game of picking ticks off each other at the end of the day — seeing who had collected the most.

There were several possible sightings of Loonsfoot and Peggy by local residents and reports of eggs being pilfered from local farms. The response to these sightings hadn't resulted in any confirmation of Loonsfoot's past or present locations.

The search had been ongoing for about a week when my trial ended. The following day, I headed for the U.P. It was over 400 miles from my home in Ann Arbor to Escanaba — not as the crow flies, but I had to drive and cross the Mackinac Bridge.

When I arrived in Escanaba, I saw some of the SWAT team guys near the County Fairgrounds. I stopped, and they filled me in on the status of the search. They had just finished checking the area based on a possible sighting, but hadn't found anything. They directed me to the command post (CP).

At the CP, I met with Jerry Craig, the over-all SWAT team leader. Jerry gave me a tour of the area. He showed me where the murders occurred and where Loonsfoot had left the car and entered the woods over a week before.

I also learned that the full search would be terminated the following day. I would be left in charge and would have three SWAT volunteers: Steve Hancock, Bill Randall and Chuck Smith, who would remain. We would act as a roving patrol to respond to sightings or other indications that our quarry may be at a location. There was some doubt that Loonsfoot and/or Peggy were still in the area or were still alive.

One non-SWAT Agent at the CP suggested I be alert for congregations of crows or buzzards as it might be evidence of human carrion. A logical tip until you consider how many dead animals there are in the north woods.

The next day, I had a sinking feeling as I watched the C-130 rise from Escanaba airport. I was now in charge of a three-man team searching for an armed and very dangerous Indian and his hostage somewhere in the vast woods of the U.P. I went back to the CP. All the media and their satellite antenna trucks were gone. I reviewed the maps, checking the locations of the sightings, etc.

I went to dinner with my team and explained to them that our mission would be starting in the morning. After dinner, we all went back to our hotel knowing we would start early the next day.

I had no idea how early.

At about 3 am, I was awakened by a call from an FBI Supervisor. He had received a call from the Delta County Sheriff's Office. Loonsfoot with Peggy had just walked into the Sheriff's Office (SO) in Escanaba. Loonsfoot had indicated he wanted to surrender. I called one of the other SWAT guys, Bill Randall, and we drove to the SO. The other two SWAT Agents would follow as quickly as they could.

There was only one person at the SO, the dispatcher. He was in a room separated from the reception area by protective glass. The dispatcher did not want to leave his enclosure for fear Loonsfoot's intent was less than honorable.

16B / THE DETROIT NEWS / Saturday, Dec. 10, 1988

U.P. man convicted of murdering 4 in his wife's family



Associated Press

MARQUETTE -- A federal judge convicted Vincent Loonsfoot of first-degree murder Friday in the slayings of four members of his wife's family on an Upper Peninsula Indian reservation.

U.S. District Judge Robert Holmes Bell made the ruling shortly after lawyers presented closing arguments in the five-day trial, a court spokeswoman said. Loonsfoot earlier this week had waived his right to a jury trial.

Bell found Loonsfoot, 27, of Baraga county, guilty of four counts of first-degree

murder, as well as one count each of kidnapping, use of a firearm during commission of a felony and of committing a crime of violence while possessing a firearm. He faces life imprisonment on each murder count at a sentencing hearing scheduled Feb. 27.

LOONSFOT LISTENED quietly to the verdict. Defense attorney Thomas Casselman declined comment on the ruling.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Thomas Martin called the verdict just. He said testimony from Loonsfoot's estranged

wife Peggy and Amanda Smith, 11, who witnessed the slayings of her parents, were the keys to the federal case.

Casselmann argued that Loonsfoot's history of drug abuse, as well as his use of cocaine and beer the day of the slayings, prevented him from being able to plan the deaths of his brother-in-law David Smith, 29; Smith's wife Sherri, 27; and two of their children, Amy, 10, and Laura, 2.

THE FOUR were found dead June 14 at their home on Hannahville Indian Reservation in Delta County. Amanda

Smith, who was injured in the incident, testified Loonsfoot forced her to take him to the home of his estranged wife, who was David Smith's sister.

Peggy Loonsfoot testified earlier this week that her husband forced her to flee with him into the woods, where they slept on the ground and drank from streams. Loonsfoot surrendered June 24 after evading an extensive manhunt in the central Upper Peninsula woods.

Loonsfoot said in a taped statement he made shortly after his arrest that he didn't know what he was doing at the

time of the shootings. Loonsfoot also had said he did not know he had killed two of his nieces.

He told federal agents he went to the Smith home in search of his estranged wife and panicked when David Smith made a sudden movement.

"I thought he was going for a gun or something," Loonsfoot said in the taped statement.

Prosecutors said Smith was holding his 2-year-old daughter in his arms when both were shot at close range.

Bill and I approached the SO carefully. Through the window we were able to see Loonsfoot and Peggy sitting placidly on a bench in the reception area. We entered guns drawn and ordered Loonsfoot to the floor. He offered no resistance. We handcuffed and searched him. Loonsfoot was shirtless, and we noted with some satisfaction he was dirty and badly bug-bitten.

We talked to Peggy and as unobtrusively as possible searched her just to make sure she hadn't succumbed to the Stockholm Syndrome, i.e., when a captive becomes sympathetic with their capturer. Peggy looked very tired, but seemed to be in relatively good shape and relieved that her ordeal was over. We had the dispatcher call for medical assistance for her.

Later that morning, the Agents from Marquette arrived to interview Loonsfoot. They would be handling the federal prosecution. I sat in on the interview. Loonsfoot was my responsibility until we turned him over to the U.S. Marshal.

Loonsfoot matter-of-factly confessed to ambushing and shooting the Smith family and kidnapping Peggy. It was as though he was discussing yesterday's baseball game. He showed no emotion and seemed to have no regret.

He talked about his first day and night in the woods. He and Peggy had walked to a highway rest-stop west of Escanaba. There Loonsfoot waited all night for a car to arrive. If one did, he had intended to kill the driver and any occupants and take the car.

He waited all night for a car, but none stopped. Only an 18-wheeler stopped, and Loonsfoot didn't know how to drive a big truck. That truck driver will never know how lucky he was.

Loonsfoot never made it further than the rest-stop. He and Peggy had doubled back and spent the rest of their time on the run near town. He would retrieve scraps of food from garbage. One night when it was raining they slept in a dumpster. Loonsfoot was not a skilled woodsman just an urban Indian.

During the interview, Loonsfoot looked at me and said, "I saw you a couple of days ago by the County Fairgrounds. You were standing by a white car and talking to some guys with rifles, wearing vests and helmets. You weren't wearing a vest or helmet. I had you in my sights, and I was going to shoot you. But I knew if I did the guys with the rifles would have got me."

Like that unknown truck driver, the angel of death had apparently passed me over too.

I asked him where his rifle was. He said it was in a field behind the grocery store not too far from the fairgrounds.

Bill Randall and I drove to the field and within minutes

found the lever-action rifle. It still had a round in the chamber. That bullet had special significance for me.

When we got back to the SO with the rifle, the media had returned as had the hierarchy from the FBI Office in Detroit. There was also a crowd of local citizens, many of them Indians.

It would be my responsibility to arrange for Loonsfoot's transfer to Marquette, where there was a Federal District Court and a U.S. Marshal who would take custody of Loonsfoot for prosecution. Marquette is about 65 miles north of Escanaba.

My concern was for Loonsfoot's safety. Those Indians in the crowd outside didn't want to rescue him. They wanted revenge — he had killed most of an Indian family from their community.

I was feeling like Van Heflin's character in the movie, *3:10 to Yuma*, having to transport a notorious bad guy played by Glen Ford knowing his gang was waiting to spring him. (The later version of the movie had Christian Bale and Russell

Crowe playing the respective parts.)

My plan would be to use three vehicles. The two Agents from Marquette would be in the lead car as they were familiar with the route. I would put Loonsfoot in the second car with the other three SWAT Agents. They would have automatic weapons. I would be in the tail car with my Remington 870, literally riding shotgun.

I planned to load the cars in a big garage attached to the SO and then just drive out, en-route to Marquette. But I was overruled, as the media wanted a "perp walk" outside. We would just have to put a Kevlar vest on Loonsfoot, walk him to the car and hope there were no Jack Rubys (potential assassins) in the crowd.

The whole transport operation went smoothly, although I kept thinking about contingencies like a big tree lying in the road, portending an ambush.

After turning Loonsfoot over to the U.S. Marshal, we returned to Escanaba. The sense of relief in the town was palpable. There was no longer an armed killer possibly lurking in the woods.

We went out to eat and stayed to celebrate. We didn't buy our own drinks all night. It seemed like every guy in town wanted to shake our hands and every girl wanted to give us a hug. I felt guilty about accepting this adulation having arrived late to the manhunt, but felt it was my duty to take one for the team.

Epilogue:

In December 1988, Loonsfoot was tried before a U.S. District Court Judge in Marquette. The Judge found him guilty

of four counts of 1st degree murder, as well as kidnapping. In February 1989, Loonsfoot was sentenced to life in prison with no chance of parole. (Major crimes committed on federal property, in this case an Indian reservation, are tried in federal court, under federal law. Michigan has never had a death penalty, but because Loonsfoot was prosecuted under federal law, he could have been sentenced to death.)

Peggy Deleon (formerly Loonsfoot) is remarried and still lives in the Escanaba area. She gave birth to a son with whom she was pregnant at the time she was abducted. He is now 29 years old.

DEDICATION: This story is dedicated to all the FBI Agents who have volunteered to become members of the FBI SWAT program. They must undergo testing, qualify and participate in extensive periodic training. They are subject to being “called out” without notice and spend time away from home. These assignments by nature are dangerous and can cause hardships for the Agents and their families — all of this for no extra pay. SWAT Agents exemplify the FBI motto: Fidelity, Bravery, Integrity.

MICHIGAN

