



# A deadly shot

Photographs courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives

## A century later, few Tennesseans know about the Carmack shooting

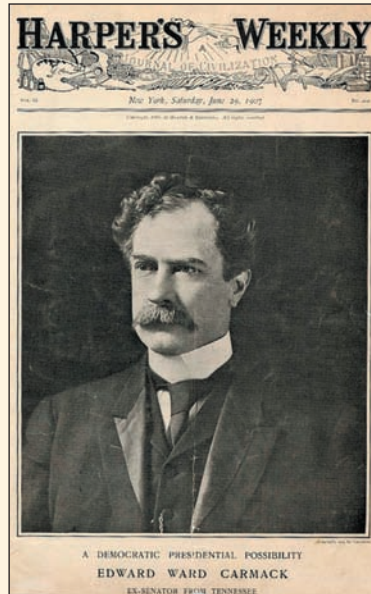
Ask anyone in Tennessee the name of the man whose statue stands between the State Capitol and Legislative Plaza in Nashville, and I suspect fewer than 1 percent can tell you. After all, it's not a president (such as Andrew Jackson), a Native American hero (such as Sequoyah) or even a cultural superstar (such as Elvis Presley).

It's Edward Ward Carmack. And there may be no better example of how disassociated Tennessee is from its past than the story of Carmack, a former U.S. senator and congressman who was editor of the Nashville Tennessean when he was killed in Nashville on Nov. 8, 1908.

The Carmack story takes us back to a time when Nashville was nothing like it is today. In 1908, Nashville's most favored nickname was Rock City, a name derived from the solid limestone beneath the city. Its largest private-sector employers were things like cotton mills, sawmills, fertilizer plants and iron foundries. Its main methods of transportation within its boundaries were streetcar, horse and buggy and walking. It had only about 85,000 people but boasted three daily newspapers (the Banner, the American and the Tennessean).

People have a tendency to get sentimental about the old days, but they forget how the place looked — and even smelled — up close. Air pollution back then was horrible. The sewage system still had a lot to be desired. And you had to be careful when you crossed the street or you might step in some horse poop.

Then there were the bars. The historian James Summerville estimates that there were around 170 bars in the few blocks surrounding the Public Square, and as best I can tell, he was right.



**Prominent politician and Tennessean editor Edward Ward Carmack is featured in a 1907 issue of Harper's Weekly as a Democratic presidential possibility.**

For the most part, people didn't sip beer in these bars. They quaffed straight whiskey until they headed for the door, stumbled out into the street and made fools out of themselves in public.

It's important to understand this because the biggest issue of the day in 1908 was prohibition. A lot of people wanted the sale of alcohol completely banned, believing it would eradicate poverty, help families and make the world a better place to live.

Duncan Cooper was a distinguished, proud man with a handlebar moustache that reminds you of someone from an Agatha Christie novel. During the Civil War, Cooper had led his own detachment of Confederate cavalry until he was captured and spent time in a prisoner-of-war camp up North.

After the war, he mined silver, owned and operated newspapers and managed business interests in Central America. By 1908, he was a close adviser to Tennessee Gov. Malcolm Patterson.

Carmack, 15 years Cooper's junior, was a native of Columbia and got his start as a newspaper man (Cooper gave him his first job as an editorial writer for the American) before shifting to politics, serving in the U.S. House and Senate. Politically, he was against big business, opposed to American imperialism and vocally against the mixing of the races.

In 1906, Carmack's career hit a stumbling point when he lost his senatorial re-election campaign. Two years later he lost the gubernatorial race to Patterson. By the fall of 1908, he was back in journalism, playing the role of bitter critic of his former opponent. And it wasn't just Patterson he was attacking; it was his old friend Cooper — an old man with a deep Southern sense of honor.

In one editorial, published on Oct. 21, 1908, Carmack compared Cooper to two men who were believed to be disreputable in Nashville. A few days later, Carmack again attacked Cooper on the editorial pages.

Cooper sent a message to Carmack, saying he wouldn't take it anymore. "You have no right in this manner to annoy, insult or injure me than you would have to do so to my face," he wrote in a letter to Carmack. "I notify you that the use of my name in your paper must cease." The Tennessean editor ignored the warning and even wrote another editorial about Cooper.

### Tennessee History for Kids

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The gauntlet had been thrown down. During the next few days, both Carmack and Cooper borrowed pistols from friends. Friends on both sides — among them Patterson, James C. Bradford and Edward Craig — tried to get the two men to calm down. Nothing worked.

On Monday, Nov. 8, Cooper's son, Robin, was doing his best to keep tabs on his father, and the two men were in young Cooper's law office in downtown Nashville. That afternoon, Patterson called (phones had been around for about 10 years at this time) and said he wanted to see young Cooper. At that time, the governor's mansion was across Seventh Avenue from where the Tennessee Tower is today, on the site now occupied by the War Memorial Building in downtown Nashville.

Taking his father with him, Cooper headed through downtown Nashville, stopping along the way in Nashville's Arcade (a retail thoroughfare that is still there today). They stopped and chatted with several people as they went. In fact, a man named John Sharp joined them in the Arcade and walked with them.

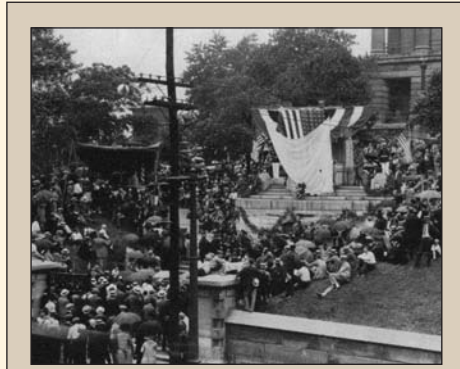
Robin Cooper walked closely with his aged father, keeping an eye out to make sure they didn't run into Carmack. But, as they headed up the hill on Union Street, fate played a trick. At the time, the Hermitage Hotel was under construction, and large construction projects in 1908 were conversation pieces. When they got next to the Hermitage site, the young Cooper stopped to chat with someone, and Duncan Cooper kept walking. When the older Cooper got to the corner of Seventh and Union, he saw Carmack, walking south to north on Seventh. Cooper crossed the street and walked toward him.

What took place next — including who said what, how the various individuals approached each other and who fired first — was the subject of a long murder trial. What we do know is that five shots were fired — two by Carmack and three by Robin Cooper, who came running up a few seconds behind his father. When it was over, Robin Cooper was injured, shot twice, while Carmack was dead.

Duncan Cooper was taken to jail that night, Robin Cooper to the hospital and Sharp went home. During the next few days, all three of them would be charged with Carmack's murder. And since the dead man was the editor of the Tennessean, there was no doubt in the mind of those who wrote for that publication about the guilt of the accused. Not only did Duncan Cooper, Robin Cooper and Sharp all conspire to kill Carmack, the Tennessean argued, but Patterson was probably in on it as well.

Never mind the idea that the meeting had been a spontaneous one. Never mind that Sharp had only joined the group a few minutes earlier, and then on a whim. Never mind the idea that Carmack had likely fired first. This was trial by newspaper, and the newspaper's editor was the victim and martyr.

On Jan. 20, 1909, the case against Duncan Cooper, Robin Cooper and Sharp began. In the days before radio, television and



**At left is the statue that memorializes Edward Ward Carmack, who was shot and killed in 1908 near the State Capitol. Above, a large crowd gathers south of the Capitol for its 1925 unveiling.**

the Internet, criminal cases were all the rage — and never in Nashville history had one garnered as much attention as this one. Attorneys called witness after witness. It is some indication of the times, the skill of the attorneys and the attention span of the audience to note that one of the closing speeches lasted nine and a half hours.

In hindsight, the most important witness was Mrs. Charles Eastman, a respectable middle-aged woman who happened to be walking down Seventh Avenue at the exact moment of the shooting. According to her testimony, Carmack greeted Eastman before he saw Duncan Cooper coming in his direction. When the older Cooper called out to Carmack, the Tennessean editor jumped behind Eastman, leading Cooper to cry out, "Damned cowardly to get behind a woman with a pistol in your hand!" Eastman then moved aside, and Carmack got between two utility poles located side by side on the street and took aim at Duncan Cooper, right about the time the younger Cooper jumped in front of his father.

In spite of these rather obvious events, however, both Duncan and Robin Cooper were found guilty of murder in the second degree and sentenced to 20 years in prison. Sharp was found not guilty of all charges.

A few months after this verdict, the Tennessee Supreme Court upheld the elder Cooper's conviction but dismissed the younger Cooper's. But then, only minutes after this decision was announced, Patterson pardoned Duncan Cooper.

The story doesn't end there. In 1919, Robin Cooper was murdered, his body found in Richland Creek in west Nashville. The crime was never solved, and for years many people in Nashville believed that Carmack's friends, or even family, reaped their revenge.

So what came out of Carmack's death and the hype that followed it? For one thing, statewide prohibition. Before the trial even took place, the state Legislature voted to ban the sale, manufacture and consumption of intoxicants. Tennessee would remain dry for a generation — although, somehow, in the 1920s and early 1930s, people found a way to drink anyway, thanks to local bootleggers.

Carmack's murder may have also been the best thing to happen to his newspaper. In 1908, the Tennessean was a struggling rag best known for its opposition to alcohol and the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. But the Carmack story put Nashville's newest daily on the map. In the following years, the American ceased publication, leaving the Tennessean as one of Nashville's two newspapers (along with the Banner, which folded in 1998).

Carmack remained a martyr and hero in Columbia for decades. Today there is still a road named for him, Carmack Boulevard, but I strongly suspect that the people of Maury County have as scant a memory of the man as people do in Nashville. ☹