

The Disappearance and Almost Certain Murder of Victor Deissler, Feb. 2, 1941, 10 pm - 11:30 pm

Below I include: (1) an Introduction (2) a Timetable of known facts, (3) Theories of the disappearance, (4) "Talk around town", (5) Sources, and (6) Youngstown and the Mafia.

1. Introduction

I was about 7 or 8 when my mother first explained that our grandfather (her father), Victor Gerard Deissler, had "disappeared" in 1941. No one knew what had happened and no one had heard from him again. She used the phrase a "business deal gone bad", and said that his car had been found in a parking lot in Youngstown.

She didn't like talking about it. I don't remember her ever mentioning the possibility of murder. I filled this vacuum with the supposition that he had either "skipped town" or committed suicide.

I knew that my mother's brother Eddie had died tragically, as a child, of lockjaw (in the 1930's).

My mom said that her father had had to have all of his teeth pulled out because of gum disease and that it was a terribly painful, butcherous procedure.

Maybe the Depression had taken an undue toll on his business.

I remember thinking that, despite all of the preceding, that in order to "skip town" or commit suicide there had to have been problems in the relationship with my grandmother (and with his kids). Perhaps he had left a note of some kind, but my grandmother had never revealed it.

In the late 1990's I got to thinking that possibly my mom didn't know the whole story. Maybe her father's death *had* been recorded and she simply didn't know about it. I contacted the Mercer County Dept. of Records to see what they had. They said that no actual death had been recorded in Mercer County for Victor Deissler, but that in 1950 he had been declared legally dead.

At some point I discussed this with my cousin Mary (Deissler Marx). She said that her father had suggested his father had been murdered. I remember thinking that this was probably "happy-think": though murder is terrible, it lacks the blemish of moral/spiritual weakness which splitting town or committing suicide have.

That's where things stood until my Dec. 24, 2008, Google Search on "victor deissler". (Curiously, this search no longer brings up the *Gettysburg Times* article which I got on Dec. 24....)

As you can see below, I was almost certainly terribly wrong; I believe we have done our grandfather's memory a great injustice.

2. Timetable

1903 First electric refrigerator invented by Thomas Moore.

1911 First commercial refrigerator sold by General Electric Company.

1916 Self-contained refrigerator (with a compressor on the bottom of the cabinet) invented by Alfred Mellows.

1918 Mellows bought out by W.C. Durant, starting Frigidaire Company, to mass-produce refrigerators.

1926 - 1933 Victor Deissler sells Westinghouse refrigerators in Greenville; manufactures compressors for Westinghouse; forms Deissler Machine Company. This is [his business card](#).

Mar. 17, 1933 Deissler Machine Co. wins a large contract to supply Isaly Dairy Company (a large chain of family-owned dairies and restaurants with locations throughout the American Midwest) with refrigeration equipment.

1933 - 1940 Deissler Machine Co. continues to grow, supplying refrigeration equipment to both home and commercial markets. Here's a picture of the company picnic in 1938 ([http://jspecht.org/specht/2nd annual Deissler picnic.jpg](http://jspecht.org/specht/2nd%20annual%20Deissler%20picnic.jpg)). (Left-clicking on the photo enlarges it.

- first row, third from right: Dorothy Deissler Specht;
- fourth row, far right (with tie), Frank Deissler (Victor's father);
- fourth row, middle, Helen and Victor Deissler;
- fourth row, third from left, Robert Deissler.)

1935 Mills Novelty Co., a Chicago-based, Mafia-connected manufacturer of slot and vending machines, enters into a contract with Coca-Cola. Mills invests \$500,000 (\$7 million in 2008 dollars) in a plant to produce the entire Coke machine -- vending and refrigeration combined.

1940 Victor Deissler buys a new (1941-model) automobile to replace his 1937 Cadillac Fleetwood. (Gary Koch's analysis is that this car was *also* a Cadillac Fleetwood.) In any case, the cost of the car would have been \$1,000-2,000 (\$14,000-28,000 in 2008 dollars).

1940 Deissler Machine Co. starts manufacturing compressors for Coca-Cola vending machines. (See trade show photo below.)

Oct. 12, 1940 Ground broken for new Deissler Machine Co. plant in Osgood, PA (2 miles northeast of Greenville).

Jan. 18, 1941 (From the Greenville Record-Argus:) "Victor Deissler, Frank Deissler, and Kenneth Unger have returned from Chicago where they have attended the third annual All-Industry Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Exhibition, which is a national affair. The Deissler Machine Co., of Greenville, had an exhibit at the show." {Photo of trade show exhibit: <http://jspecht.org/specht/Deissler%20trade%20show.jpg> .

- the (Westinghouse) Coca-Cola machine on the far right contains a Deissler compressor, visible in the open bottom of the machine
- the photo was taken by "Kaufmann & Fabry" (logo on lower-left of photo); Kaufmann & Fabry was a Chicago photographic studio
- Chicago was the location of Mills Novelty Co., a competitor, described above }

Jan. 26-Feb. 2, 1941 Victor Deissler travels by automobile to Elmira, "Cornell" (Ithaca), and Buffalo, New York, on business. Returns with \$600 (\$8,400 in 2008 dollars) collected from clients in these cities.

**** (Sunday) Feb. 2, 1941 ****

8:30 p.m.: Goes to office to place the \$600 in the office safe. (Per wife Helen: wearing green pin-striped suit.) Reads his mail, writes several letters, leaves notes for secretary.

10:00 p.m.: Calls wife, saying he'll be home shortly. Mrs. Deissler retires for the night.

11:30 p.m.: Man wearing a tan or light brown overcoat and a brown hat is seen parking a car (later identified as Victor Deissler's) in the parking lot at 728 Mahoning Ave. in Youngstown and then walking up Mahoning Ave.

**** (Monday) Feb. 3, 1941 ****

6:30 a.m. Mrs. Deissler awakens to find husband not home; calls her father-in-law, Frank Deissler, who goes to the plant and finds office ransacked, blood on desk, door, and a packing crate; safe open; the \$600 is gone. "Deissler's overcoat was hanging in the office."

a.m.: Footprints discovered in the snow outside the plant: "Footprints in the snow showed that someone had peered through a window at the rear of the plant and then walked around the west side of the building toward the front entrance."

a.m.: Police examine the car. They find: green pin-striped suit (with torn sleeve), white shirt, green pajamas, traveling kit, black briefcase, and wallet -- the contents of which were strewn about the car. "Several pamphlets from the Mills Novelty Company, Chicago, were found on the floor." No money.

p.m.: Check of nearby railroad stations and hotels by police reveals no trace of man seen leaving car Sunday night.

**** (Tuesday and Wednesday) Feb. 4-7, 1941 ****

Extraneous, *not*-credible "sightings" of Victor Deissler at a Youngstown homeless shelter and hitch-hiking.

Pennsylvania State Police and FBI investigate the robbery and probable murder.

**** Feb. 21, 1941 ****

Pennsylvania State Police: "We are at a stalemate now." (After Feb. 21, 1941: No credible facts involving Victor Deissler, from the police or anyone. The case goes cold.)

**** Aug. 26, 1941 **** (From the Greenville Record-Argus:) Assets of Deissler Machine Company sold at auction "by direction of Bankruptcy Referee Marsh".

**** Oct. 11, 1941 **** Business reincorporated as "Diceler Corporation", with assets of Deissler Machine Co. (but fails to prosper, dying out after several years).

**** Feb. 8, 1950 **** Victor Deissler declared legally dead.

3. Theories/Hypotheses

"Absconding" Hypothesis

The Absconding hypothesis posits that Victor Deissler staged a robbery/abduction, drove his car to Youngstown, and skipped town with \$600 (\$8,400 in 2008 dollars) and whatever else might have been in the safe. Why would he do this? There is **zero** evidence that he wasn't getting along with his wife and family. The only reason would seem to have been severe debt/problems with the business.

My mother had given me the impression that the business was not going well. Thus, he might have wanted to just forget it. I assumed that meant that he could have skipped town and gone somewhere else. A **private** decision on his part (-- a terrible one for his family, but nevertheless, private).

I didn't realize that there were 30 people working for the company, depending on him.

1939 is considered to be the end of the Depression. By 1940, GDP was actually **above** where it had been in 1929.

The company was expanding (building a new plant in nearby Osgood). The Feb. 4, 1941, Youngstown Vindicator: "Deissler has lived in Greenville for many years and has an excellent reputation in the community. His firm, which manufactures refrigerator parts, has been prospering recently, townspeople say...."

The company had made it **through** the Depression and was expanding.

Staging a robbery/abduction would have been a **very public** act.

If his goal was to steal from the company and split town, he certainly could have stolen **much** more than just the \$600 (by withdrawing money from the bank).

Though my mother referred to a "business deal gone bad", the only other information indicating debts is the Aug. 26, 1941, article, suggesting bankruptcy. (Of course, money would have had to have been borrowed to finance the Osgood plant.) It seems that without its founder / central figure the company had a hard time continuing to prosper, but I *certainly* think that, had Victor Deissler lived, the company would *almost certainly* have continued to prosper.

In the context of the other facts (blood in the office, blood on the steering wheel, \$600 missing) the car in the parking lot two blocks from the railroad station becomes a simply astonishing piece of evidence. There are only two very stark, possible explanations: (1) Victor Deissler staged a robbery/abduction and drove the car there; or (2) Victor Deissler **was** robbed/abducted/murdered and the murderer wanted to make it **seem** that Victor had skipped town. (See below.)

In regard to #1, he would have to be a very bad, deceitful person, someone who could skip town and never contact his family again. I am absolutely certain that my grandmother, mother and uncle **never** heard from their husband/father again. Neither of the following two scenarios seems possible:

- (a) Victor goes somewhere else and never contacts his wife, any of his kids, or his father.
- (b) Victor goes somewhere else and contacts his father or other relatives, but his father never lets my mother or grandmother –with whom he is living— know anything about this contact.

Victor Deissler had never done anything deceitful or cowardly previously. Victor Deissler was the father of two *extremely* honest and conscientious children.

"**NO**" to the Absconding hypothesis.

Deissler Family Conspiracy Hypothesis

The Deissler Family Conspiracy hypothesis borders on the ludicrous. I include it only so that 100 years from now some great-great grandchild doesn't ask, "Why didn't he consider _____?".

In this theory there is a plan for Victor to disappear (in order to avoid debts?). His wife, Helen Deissler, and his father, Frank Deissler, are in on it. The children, Robert and Dorothy, are not. Victor and Helen periodically rendezvous somewhere....

Analysis:

See above in regard to the improbability of severe debt. This hypothesis would require that our grandmother be a liar / a great actress. She was neither. She was a simple, honest, straight-forward woman. Plus, this hypothesis would require Victor Deissler to be so cold-hearted that he could absent himself from his children: I am quite certain that my mother and uncle did *not* see him again after Feb. 2, 1941. A **big "NO"** to the Deissler Family Conspiracy hypothesis.

Suicide Hypothesis

The Suicide hypothesis depends on all the same conditions as the Absconding, but, instead of skipping town, he kills himself.

This hypothesis doesn't require Victor Deissler to be a complete scoundrel, just very depressed.

But it has a number of other very bad problems with this hypothesis....

The missing \$600 argues against suicide: if he were going to commit suicide, surely he wouldn't have taken \$600 with him(?) Unless taking it was part of making it *seem* like murder rather than suicide(?) Was there was a life insurance policy which didn't cover suicide which was later collected? There's the record in the Mercer County Courthouse of Victor Deissler being declared legally dead nine years after his disappearance. Was my grandmother able to collect insurance at that point? All *very* convoluted and *extremely* unlikely.

As noted in the Introduction, I thought that perhaps my grandfather could have left a never-revealed note for my grandmother. In the context of what I understood to be a private affair, this seemed possible. But this was not *at all* a private affair. (There was actually an article in the *San Antonio Express!* See "Sources", below.) If my grandfather left such a note, my grandmother, in talking to the police and newspapers, would have had to have been feigning surprise and puzzlement. This shades into the Deissler Family Conspiracy hypothesis (see above).... Not!

The idea that he left without saying *anything* to his wife and family is too cold to even consider.

Why take the car to the Youngstown parking lot? Maybe he planned to jump in the Mahoning River(?) {But the article says the driver walked *up* Mahoning Avenue (*away* from the river).} The fake robbery/abduction / the car in Youngstown makes no sense in the context of a suicide.

"NO" to Suicide.

Murder Hypothesis

The Murder hypothesis is **by far** the most consistent with the facts. It doesn't require any convoluted fake robbery/abduction. It doesn't require Victor Deissler to be abandoning the company he started -- and which depended on him -- and the family who loved him.

The only problem I see with the Murder hypothesis is the car.... Why would the murderer(s) have left the car in the parking lot two blocks from the train station?

The car was quite valuable. As noted in the Timetable (above) it was worth \$1,000-2,000. So the murderer(s) steal \$600 and then abandon a car worth \$1,000 -- why would he/they do that? Being caught with the car would have meant immediate and sure incrimination. Maybe they felt compelled to get away from it as quickly as possible. And it may be the \$600 was just a sidelight. It could be that the stakes were **much** higher -- such as the need to protect Mills Novelty Company's half-million dollar investment (see 1935 in Timetable above) from a serious competitor. (Or, if not Mills, some other Mafia-connected vending machine company. The Mafia was into vending machines big-time. See "Youngstown and the Mafia" below.)

Maybe he/they **lived** near there. He could get rid of the car and, once away from the parking lot, arouse no suspicion -- as a stranger in foreign territory might.

Maybe he lived in Greenville and wanted to leave the car in Youngstown to divert attention from Greenville -- and also to make it look like Deissler had hopped the train -- and also to make it convenient for him to get back to Greenville (on the train) himself.

Leaving the car in this parking lot near the train station may have been a fortunate coincidence. If calculated, it shows a truly diabolical level of genius. I suggest that there two main factors which caused the murder investigation to be stillborn in less than a week: (1) no body; and (2) the supposed victim's car being found two blocks from the railroad station.

We are faced with pairs of stark choices:

- 1.a. Victor Deissler went over his mail, wrote several letters, and left notes for his secretary to make it *look* like he was conducting normal business; or
 - b. Victor Deissler *actually* went about normal business: reading his mail, writing several letters, and leaving notes for his secretary with actual information he wanted to convey to her.

- 2.a. Victor Deissler went outside and left footprints in the snow outside his window so it would *look* like someone was peering into his office; or
 - b. one of the murderer(s) *was actually* peering into the office from outside the window.

- 3.a. Victor Deissler elaborately messed up the office to make it look like a struggle; or
 - b. there was an *actual* struggle.

4.a. Victor Deissler left his regular overcoat in the office and took a second overcoat with him; or
b. the murderer(s) forced Victor Deissler from the office with no overcoat.

5.a. Victor Deissler scattered the contents of his wallet and briefcase in his car to make it *look* like a robber/abductor had rifled through his things; or
b. the murderer(s) *actually* rifled through Deissler's things looking for money or other items of value.

6.a. Victor Deissler tore the sleeve of his suitcoat to make it *look* like their had been a struggle; or
b. there was an *actual* struggle in which the sleeve of Victor Deissler's suitcoat was torn.

7.a. Victor Deissler took off his suit coat, pants, and shirt, and left them hanging up in the car; or

b. the murder(s) made Victor Deissler strip before shooting him and disposing of his body (in order to make the body harder to identify).

This situation reminds me of Ptolemy's elaborate theory of epicycles and retrograde motion, explaining the revolution of the Sun and planets around the Earth, -- vs. Copernicus' simple, elegant heliocentric theory. The straight-forward explanation *is* most often the correct one....

4. Talk Around Town

I don't hold much store in rumors, but they can sometimes be of interest. Two pieces of "gossip" are these:

1. Gary spoke with Paul Tupilo(?) who owns/runs the Greenville ICE Co. where the Deissler Machine Co. used to be located. Paul suggested that there was a rumor that Victor Deissler had "gone back to Germany". This suggestion is so preposterous as to warrant no answer whatsoever.... nevertheless, I will give one: Victor Deissler was born in the US. Victor Deissler's **father** was born in the US. Victor Deissler's mother was not German. There is zero evidence that Victor Deissler had ever been to Germany. Enough said?

To me, this is a case of "blaming the victim". Something completely extraordinary, completely inexplicable happens. Faced with a choice of believing that there were clever murderers in their midst or believing that Victor Deissler had not actually been murdered, they chose the latter. That's human nature.

2. Ed Loreno, an 80-year-old member of the Greenville Historical Society, who I spoke with by phone, was a boy at the time of these events. Though no expert, he had some opinions. I presented him with the three main theories: murder, suicide, leaving town. He felt strongly that

murder was much more likely than suicide. He completely skipped over the idea of absconding -- apparently feeling it was not worthy of consideration.

5. Sources

Gary (and Rosemary) did all of the gathering of info from the Warren Tribune, Youngstown Vindicator, and Greenville Record Argus newspapers, photos of the Greenville property and interview of Greenville ICE Co. owners -- certainly the bulk of the work. Thanks Gary and Rosemary!

A particularly useful source has been www.newspaperarchive.com. This has 74 articles listed under the exact phrase "Deissler Machine". Many of them -- especially the 50 or so from the *Record-Argus* -- do not display the actual article (they get an error) -- although there are some useful excerpts which *do* appear in their index entries and which give you a good sense of what the article is about. This is where I saw the *San Antonio Express* article.

I am attaching the articles which Gary photocopied from the *Youngstown Vindicator* (which are not represented in newspaperarchive.com).

I contacted all of the following:

- * the central Greenville Police Dept.,
- * the Hempfield Twp. Police Dept.,
- * the Mercer Co. Sheriff's Dept.,
- * the Mercer Co. State's Attorney's office (because they refer to "County Detective ...")
- * the Bessemer and Lake Erie Railroad Company -- Police Dept. (They deal with railroad property only.)
- * Trooper C. Turik, with the Mercer Co. office of the Pennsylvania State Police. He has not yet responded, but it seems to me extremely unlikely that he will have any substantive info.
- * Ed Loreno, Greenville Historical Society
- * Janet Hills, archivist of the Greenville Historical Society. (She is going to speak with Dave Boffman (age 88) to see what he remembers.)

I did *not* contact the FBI. I very much doubt that they would have anything the PA State Police doesn't.

6. Youngstown and the Mafia

The Murder hypothesis presumes that one accepts that Youngstown was a murderous, Mafia-rife location in 1941. In case you doubt that....

[Note: the red highlighting below is my own, to emphasize certain important points.]

As we see in the trade show photo (above) Deissler Machine Co. was involved in the production of the refrigeration component of Coca-Cola machines -- and possibly, the sale/maintenance of the complete machines as well. This was definitely getting into Mob territory. The following article notes the connection between the Mafia and vending machines:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_T._Licavoli :

One of many in the Licavoli family to become involved in organized crime, James Licavoli first arrived in Cleveland in 1938. There he soon became good friends with [Jimmy "The Weasel" Fratianno](#) and [Tony "Dope" Delsanter](#). Among their exploits at the time, they teamed up to rob northeast Ohio gambling halls. In 1940, Licavoli was made into the Cleveland family and quickly established control over [illegal gambling](#) and [the vending machine industry in the neighboring cities of Youngstown and Warren, Ohio](#). During this period, Licavoli was a suspect in the murders of Jim "Mancene" Mancini and gambling slot czar Nate Weisenberg.

I'm not suggesting that Victor Deissler was doing anything questionable or shady in producing compressors for soda machines. But I think that, without realizing it, he could have been gotten involved in an area whose implications he didn't completely foresee.

And, of course, there's a connection between slot machines and the Mafia (and, therefore, between Mills and the Mafia):

http://books.google.com/books?id=OSqBs8QgxZIC&pg=PA223&lpg=PA223&dq=%22Mills+Novelty+Company%22+mafia&source=web&ots=I19Qbx-QLW&sig=-kpQNCyY14tcJpktKpBjeUWS19w&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=8&ct=result

Also, Deissler Machine Co. would have had to have bought steel or steel parts for their refrigeration equipment. These might have been obtained from Youngstown companies.

I had understood, from my youth, that Youngstown had a lot of Mob activity. The following articles confirm this to a very high degree:

The first three paragraphs at <http://youngstownpride.blogspot.com/2004/12/city-that-fell-in-love-with-mob.html> :

This article comes from the July 7, 2000 edition of *The New Republic*. It is an interesting insight into crime, the mob and Jim Traficant in Youngstown.

"The city that fell in love with the mob."
Crimetown USA

There was a certain tidiness to the killings in Youngstown. Usually they happened late at night when there were no witnesses or police and only the lights from the steel furnaces still burned. Sometimes neighbors would hear the short, sharp sound of gunfire and then nothing, a silence you can't describe unless you've heard it, which if you're lucky you haven't.

Everyone suspected who the killers were--they lived in the neighborhood, sometimes just down the street--but no one could ever prove anything....

Yet the most frightening method, the one that captured the city's imagination, was the most immaculate: the **disappearance of people in broad daylight**. **They were the city's ghosts. Police found their cars empty on the side of the street**, the engines still warm, or their dinner tables still piled with food. They had, in the most classic sense, been "rubbed out."....

So, when Lenny Strollo ordered the hit that summer night in 1996, there was no reason to believe it would go down any differently....

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_L._Warner

Jack Warner (born 1892), who spent much of his youth in Youngstown, observed in his autobiography that his experiences there molded his sensibilities. Warner wrote: "[J. Edgar Hoover](#) told me that Youngstown in those days was one of the toughest cities in America, and a gathering place for [Sicilian thugs](#) active in the [Mafia](#). There was a murder or two almost every Saturday night in our neighborhood,..."

The following is excerpted from http://www.americanmafia.com/Feature_Articles_3.html :

In 1963, the Saturday Evening Post published a cover story on Youngstown, Ohio detailing the 75 car bombings and 11 murders that had plagued the tough steel belt town in recent years. Mafia figures such as Charlie "The Crab" Carabbia and "Little Joey" Naples were portrayed as men who brazenly broke the law with impunity. A sarcastic resident was also mentioned who wrote a letter back home to Youngstown, addressing the envelope; 'Murdertown, Ohio.' The post office delivered the letter to Youngstown.

Hoping to shame the citizens of Youngstown into taking action against local corruption, the Editors of the Post wrote: "The time now has come for action on the part of the whole citizenry. Until each honest man is aroused, the cesspool will remain. And Youngstown will remain a shame to the nation."

<http://glasscityjungle.com/wordpress/?p=3012>

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Youngstown became identified in the public mind with Mafia-related murders (committed chiefly via car bombings). Consequently, the metropolis gained the nickname "Bomb City," and the phrase "Youngstown tune-up" became a slang term for car-bomb assassination.

<http://www.libraryvisit.org/localnotablepart1.htm>

Youngstown Mayor Charles P. Henderson appointed FBI officer Edward J. Allen as Youngstown police chief in 1948. Within 6 years, he had cleared the city of ties to organized crime by cleaning up the Youngstown Police Department; cracking down on gambling and prostitution; severing ties between local politicians and gangsters; and closing the Jungle Inn in [Hubbard](#), "one of the biggest gambling dens in the Midwest". In November 1950, he was featured in the *Reader's Digest* article "They Busted the Rackets in Youngstown."

It may well be that the inadvertant involvement of her father's business with the Mafia was what my mom -- perhaps without even knowing any actual details -- sensed when she spoke of a "business deal gone bad".