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| |  | | --- | | As interesting, even intriguing, as the story of Theodore Roosevelt’s life is, some events that took place at his home in Oyster Bay can get lost in sensational hyperbole – and result in unintentional inaccuracies in some of the narrative details heard on tours (TR himself was occasionally accused of using exaggeration to enliven a tale). A case in point is the story of **Henry Weilbrenner’s** visit to Sagamore Hill on the evening of September 1, 1903.  Nava Berger, former Park Guide and author of *Theodore Roosevelt’s Assassination Incident of 1903* (1), recalls hearing the story of Weilbrenner’s late-night visit to Sagamore Hill – a visit that was purportedly prompted by his belief that **Alice Roosevelt** had agreed to marry him, and that in a desperate attempt to get to his sequestered bride-to-be, Weilbrenner pointed a pistol at Roosevelt as TR stood on the porch silhouetted against the light from the library. | |

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| |  | | --- | | Berger was apparently intrigued by this particular story and began a research project into its details. But after scouring 118 newspaper articles of the period and numerous books on TR in an attempt to get at the truth of this story, she could not find definitive confirmation of some of the details related to her. Her research into this “assassination incident” ultimately uncovered a less sensational story than the original, but it revealed much more about the history of early 20th-century newspaper coverage and its fascination with celebrity and scandal.    Not unlike tabloid “news” coverage today, newspapers early on found that scandal sells, and the more those scandals were connected to sex, violence, and prominent individuals, the hotter the sales. Roosevelt courted the newspapers, and having installed the first White House Press Room, he encouraged coverage of his activities by “friendly” reporters. Because Roosevelt met with members of the press daily, and because he was widely covered, readers avidly followed news about him and his family, especially news about “Princess Alice”. Berger breaks down the reporting of Weilbrenner’s “visit” to Sagamore Hill, and his fixation on Alice Roosevelt, into three categories of coverage: “the least sensational,” the “semi-sensational,” and the just plain “sensational”.  *The New York Times,* one of those in the “least sensational” categories, simply reported that on September 1st, a local man, Henry Weilbrenner, tried three separate times to meet with Roosevelt, starting at 10 pm, his last attempt occurring at 11 pm. Saying he had a “personal engagement” with TR and wanted to see him, he was turned away at first by a “secret service operative” and finally taken into custody and put in the stables on the property. The fact that a “revolver was found in the buggy” was reported without elaboration.  A slightly more dramatic account of this event could be found in one of the “semi-sensational” newspapers, the *Montgomery Advertiser,* which echoed closely the *Times* account but added, without attribution, that Weilbrenner “struggled and was not arrested easily.” It described a scuffle between the officer and Weilbrenner loud enough to rouse Roosevelt who appeared in the doorway of Sagamore Hill. The would-be suitor of Alice Roosevelt was also described as having been seen practicing using his revolver, implying a possible plan to assassinate the current President (a sensationalized, though dubious, detail perhaps intended to stoke fears of yet another presidential assassination, most recently that of President William McKinley).  The “sensational” *American Citizen* takes the story a step further, providing an “illustration” of the “crazed” would-be assassin standing in his buggy pointing his revolver directly at Roosevelt, who had stepped onto the porch in harm’s way. The reporter describes Roosevelt’s close brush with death with dramatic flourishes, typical of tabloid reporting. He writes that “within a fraction of a second a bullet would have sped on its way had not the maniac’s revolver been knocked from his hands by a secret service agent.” The writer continues to “stretche[s] the truth” again by alleging that Weilbrenner had not acted alone but had two accomplices who had not been apprehended. The act of a single man thus expanded to become a new “conspiracy” of many.  Three days later on September 4, 1903, *New York Tribune* published a corrective to previous coverage of this incident. The article asserted that no assassination had been intended and that the revolver Weilbrenner carried was not for “offensive, but for defensive purposes.” Nevertheless, Henry Weilbrenner was arrested and deemed insane because he “did not know right from wrong.” He was committed to Kings Park State Hospital, just a few miles east of Sagamore Hill, where he lived until his death on November 6, 1951. He is presumed to have been buried in one of the cemetery areas on the hospital grounds.  Alice Roosevelt never met Henry Weilbrenner. She married Representative Nicholas Longworth, and that marriage, along with her own adventures, provided enough drama to assure tabloid journalists steady copy and strong newspaper sales to fans of sensational news. Yet, even today, readers hungry for celebrity news, and journalists eager to make a name for themselves, would be wise to compare and scrutinize a variety of news reports before claiming to know the absolute truth of an event. Nava Berger’s article on Henry Weilbrenner’s attempted audience with TR illustrates that the facts of some stories are hard to uncover without some serious journalistic detective work. Those of us who narrate events from Roosevelt's life, as well as those peddlers and consumers of tabloid "news", are reminded that the lure of celebrity scandal is not just a phenomenon unique to “modern culture”.  \_ \_ \_ \_ | |