

The 1955 Airplane Bombing

A case summary by Andrew J. Field, author of
“Mainliner Denver: The Bombing of Flight 629.”

Curiously, the biggest murder case in the history of Weld County did not occur in Weld County; it happened in the sky several thousand feet above. Nor was the criminal case prosecuted in Weld County; it was tried in Denver District Court. However, the people and places of Weld County played an important role in the case.

On November 1, 1955, a United Air Lines plane flying over southwestern Weld County exploded, killing forty-four passengers and crew. Bodies rained from the sky into the sugar beet fields below, and hundreds of residents, police officers, and emergency workers responded to the scene to provide aid. Unfortunately, there were no survivors to assist, and Weld County Coroner Ross Adamson soon set up a temporary morgue in the Greeley Armory. As ambulances brought the dead to the armory, United Air Lines established an emergency response center in Greeley’s Camfield Hotel to notify the victims’ families.

At first, it was unclear whether the explosion might have been caused by some type of mechanical malfunction. However, FBI agents quickly

determined that the plane had been sabotaged by dynamite connected to a timer that had been concealed in the luggage of a passenger: Daisy King, the owner of a Denver restaurant. It was a remarkable revelation because this was the first confirmed case of sabotage committed against a commercial airplane and, at the time, the worst case of mass murder in the history of the United States.

The FBI agents focused their investigation on Daisy King's son, John Gilbert Graham. Initially, Graham seemed like an unlikely suspect because he was married and had two young children. But when the agents dug deeper they learned that Graham and his mother had a complicated relationship. As a child, Graham had been deeply wounded by his mother's abandonment; as an adult, he was deeply resentful of her domineering use of money to control his life. In addition, the agents discovered that Graham had purchased life insurance policies which named him as the beneficiary in the event of his mother's death.

Graham confessed during an interview with the FBI agents, but the federal prosecutor was surprised to learn there was no federal murder statute with the death penalty that applied to airplane sabotage (an omission which Congress soon cured). Consequently, Graham was charged in Denver district Court with a single count of deliberate murder (of his mother). The

trial was to become the most sensational in Colorado history, and the national media's interest in the case was so intense that it led to Colorado becoming the first state to allow television coverage of criminal trials.

In the months leading up to the trial, Graham recanted his confession, attempted suicide, invoked and then abandoned the insanity defense, and granted several interviews to reporters in which he adamantly asserted his innocence. Because the press coverage was so extensive, when the trial began it took the judge and lawyers several days to select a jury. The trial itself was equally complicated, with numerous witnesses called to tell the jury about the tragedy and the overwhelming evidence establishing Graham's guilt. As was widely expected, the jury found Graham guilty and sentenced him to death.

After the trial, Graham resisted his attorneys' efforts to appeal. On January 11, 1957 – barely more than a year after the bombing had occurred – Graham was put to death in the gas chamber at the state penitentiary in Canon City.