Episode 809, Story 3: Special Agent Five

Gwen Wright: Our last case investigates a faded radio script and the early career of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. It's 1932: organized gangs run wild in U.S. cities, and bank robbers have free range of the Midwest. Across the country, citizens sit in fear and fascination, as tales of these criminal exploits stream into their living rooms through the wonder of radio. It's a peculiar marriage of crime and pop culture, turning felons and feds into folk heroes, and pushing radio's popularity to new heights. But was one of these radio programs intended to do more than just entertain? Now, J.D. and Karen Riggs of Stafford, Virginia, have found a document that may be a little known episode from the early days of radio and federal crime fighting.

J.D. Riggs: We didn't know if it was a true crime story or Hollywood make-believe.

Gwen: Hi, I'm Gwendolyn Wright.

J.D.: Hello, I'm J.D., how you doing?

Gwen: Pretty well, thanks very much.

J.D.: Come on in.

Gwen: So, what do the two of you have to show me?

J.D.: We have this script that I found when I was working at an auction house.

Gwen: The special effects directions make him think it was meant for broadcast.

J.D.: It looked very old, like an old radio script.

Gwen: "Special Agent Five" tells the story of a violent bank robbery in Lamar, Colorado.

J.D.: "Special Agent Five through courtesy of J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the United States Bureau of Investigation".

Gwen: Is there any kind of date on here?

Karen: There is a date on the back.

Gwen: November 22, 1932. So, anything else that you noticed, reading this through?

Karen: Yeah, there's this stamp here with the name G.F. Zimmer.

Gwen: Well what exactly would the two of you like me to find out?

J.D.: The Lamar Bank Robbery, did it really happen?

Karen: I thought it was really interesting that J. Edgar Hoover's name is on this. I don't know what he would have to do with a radio show.

Gwen: I'll take it with me if that's okay and I'll take very good care of it, okay? J. Edgar Hoover, who is permitting someone to relate an authentic story. Hoover is the towering and controversial figure who would serve as FBI director for 48 years. I wonder why he appears to have been involved with this radio script in 1932. It reads like a pulp detective story. There's a bank robbery. "Put up your hands everybody!" Several guys in a gang come in and kill the president and his son. -- Shot! -- But in escaping one of them is shot in the face. They kidnap a doctor and make him fix the wound. And then kill him -- Plug him Charlie! -- and throw his car over a cliff. Then later the police find the car and there's a tell-tale fingerprint on the window. So they send the fingerprint to the Bureau of Investigation and in just a few days one of the agents is able to match that fingerprint. The script claims that the agent had memorized the single print, and was able to make the identification of the robber, Jake Mayer, very quickly. Hoover wires the police and tells them who they're after -- Crime does not pay. I want to find out if this is a true story: but first, was the script ever broadcast? I sent a copy ahead to Elizabeth McLeod, a radio historian. She asked me to meet her at the Seth B. Winner Sound Studios on Long Island, New York. What was Special Agent Five? Was this an actual radio program?

Elizabeth McLeod: Yes it was. It was a segment of the Lucky Strike Hour which was a very popular variety series in the early 1930's on the NBC network.

RECORDING: Ladies and gentlemen, the Lucky Strike Hour, presented for your pleasure by the manufacturers of Lucky Strike cigarettes.

Elizabeth: It was heard on 60 stations from coast to coast which gave it an outstanding reach. You had maybe 150 million people in the United States then probably half of them had radios or had accessed to radios.

Gwen: Do you have any notion of how many might have listened to this program?

Elizabeth: Well I can give you a pretty good estimate. This volume that I'm extracting from my bag is a radio directory, which contains a lot of information about the industry. And I can turn to a page here with the ten leading evening programs since March of 1933.

Gwen: Aha!

Elizabeth: Twenty-five percent of the audience was listening at that time. So you had, oh, I would guess maybe 25 or 30 million people. Radio was the coming thing. It was the first opportunity that people had to really share a common experience. It was the form of entertainment during the depression. You could go into any office and say, "Did you hear what was on the radio last night?" And everyone would say, "Oh that was a great program, I heard that."

Gwen: Elizabeth explains how the cigarette maker understood the appeal of crime stories, so in 1932, the company launched "Special Agent Five," airing thirteen episodes in all. Was this particular episode aired?

Elizabeth: Yes it was. And as a matter of fact I can show you a copy of the script of the actual Lucky Strike Dance Hour from November 22, 1932.

Gwen: I notice a name on her script. G. F. Zimmer is also listed as the story's creator.

Elizabeth: The author of this script, George F. Zimmer was a freelance pulp writer.

Gwen: Ah, ha.

Elizabeth: He had written for pulp magazines in the ‘20s.

Gwen: Do you have any idea how the public responded?

Elizabeth: The public loved them. The critics of the day were not too fond of blood and thunder type programs. They felt that radio should be a bit more refined. The audience however voted with its ears.

Gwen: In 1932, radio shows were broadcast live, and recordings seldom made. But Elizabeth owns an extremely rare piece of vinyl, a later episode of Special Agent Five.

Elizabeth: This is from December 6th of 1932.

RECORDING: beep beep beep beep….

Elizabeth: Well that sound effect that you heard, that morse code, actually said, “LS, LS, LS,” for Lucky Strike, Lucky Strike, Lucky Strike.

RECORDING: “Clear the wires, clear the wires, Special Agent Five, through courtesy of J. Edgar Hoover, Director United States Bureau of Investigation, Department of Justice, you are permitted to relate authentic story, “The Shipwreckers.”

Gwen: Now who was Special Agent Five? Elizabeth explains that “Special Agent Five” was the anonymous law-and-order G-Man who would introduce every case. So the agents are just numbers?

Elizabeth: Exactly.

Gwen: But Hoover himself comes in as a name?

Elizabeth: Exactly. Hoover is the man.

Gwen: Do you think that Hoover himself vetted these scripts? Did he approve what was being said?

Elizabeth: I don't have any access to that particular information. I bet if you visited the FBI today their archives might just yield some answers.

Gwen: Thanks a lot Elizabeth.

Elizabeth: Thank you very much and let me give you a CD of the program so that you may listen to the entire thing at your leisure.

Gwen: I've sent FBI historian John Fox a copy of the script. He wants to meet me at the FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C. Access to FBI files is restricted, but John's unearthed information on the script's author: George F. Zimmer.

John Fox: He was not a part of the Bureau, but he came to us looking for information. This document shows that back in 1932 we provided him with what we call "interesting case write-ups". Which were summaries of some of the big cases that the FBI did.

Gwen: Now who in the Bureau would have given that approval?

John: It says, "Contact originally was made with him apparently by Special Agent Burris. Tremendous quantity of material was furnished to him during 1932. During this year in the early part of 1933 he put on radio programs. Primarily about the Bureau over the Lucky Strike Program."

Gwen: Although John doesn't know anything about Special Agent Burris, he notes that the document is addressed to Louis Nichols, who was Hoover's head of Bureau Publicity. That's fascinating, because it clearly is the stories that we're looking at. Do you think Hoover himself was involved?

John: Oh, Hoover certainly would have approved it, yes.

Gwen: To learn more about the case the script was based upon, John suggests I visit the FBI's identification facility in West Virginia. Dan Roberts is assistant director of the agency's Criminal Justice Information Services Division. You must be Dan.

Dan Roberts: Gwen, Dan Roberts. Pleasure to meet you.

Gwen: Dan shows me mug shots of 30's-era criminals. He explains that during the depression, there was a perception that crime had spun out of control, and that gangsters had seized the upper hand.

Dan: Most of them were involved in either auto theft, bank robbery or kidnappings, something like that.

Gwen: Dan says the Lamar bank robbery dramatized in the script was a "true crime." It was carried out not by the script's Jake Mayer gang, but by the notorious Jake Fleagle gang. Oh, you've got a number of files.

Dan: Yes these are some of the organized crime figures and right on top here is Jake Fleagle's file.

Gwen: Dan explains how Fleagle's gang robbed banks in the Midwest of a million dollars over 10 years. By the end of their spree, the bounty for the gang's capture had reached $44,000.

Dan: This is the original set of prints that we had on file for him. These were actually taken in 1916, so these predated the bank robbery in Lamar, Colorado by about 12 years.

Gwen: Dan says the Fleagle gang's most notorious crime was the Lamar bank robbery, and its murder of four men.

Gwen: Well one of the parts of this script that seems implausible to me is that they transferred the print to the Bureau headquarters and one of the agents memorized it and in just a short time made the match. Does that seem even possible to you?

Dan: No. The image comparison that they used actually wasn't until a little over a year later, 13 months later.

Gwen: Dan explains that, although the script had taken dramatic liberties, the Lamar bank robbery was the first time a fingerprint found at a crime scene had solved a Bureau of Investigation case. The case was clearly an FBI success story. But I'm curious why Hoover himself is so closely associated with it — the script even has the Director wiring the suspect's identity to the police. Richard Gid Powers is the author of "G-men: Hoover's FBI in American Popular Culture." Hi Richard, Gwen Wright.

Richard Gid Powers: Hello, Gwen, nice to see you.

Gwen: I'd sent Richard a copy of the script in advance. Now my image of J. Edgar Hoover is this secretive, man who hated to have anything about himself or the Bureau become public. How do we look at this secretive person and this publicity? Richard says Hoover himself had been the driving force in adopting and promoting scientific crime fighting techniques, such as fingerprinting.

Richard: It was something also that created a tremendous image of the FBI as really being that perfect combination of brains and brawn. This was very good for recruiting new agents. It was very good for having the public cooperate when agents came and asked for information. And finally it meant that FBI agents were totally believable when they testified in court.

Gwen: But — as always with J. Edgar Hoover — he says there's more here than meets the eye. Richard explains that from Hoover's earliest days at the FBI, both he and the agency got mixed reviews from Congress and the public.

Richard: When Hoover took over in 1924 he took over a Bureau that had been enmeshed in scandals.

Gwen: The Labor Department had declared the notorious Palmer Raids of 1919 and '20 — which had led to the deportation of alleged communists and aliens — illegal, giving Hoover a public black eye.

Richard: Hoover actually was the person who organized and carried out the Palmer Raids.

Gwen: Hoover had also been assistant director during the Teapot Dome Scandal of 1924, in which federal agents dug up dirt on a senator to protect the Secretary of the Interior from criminal investigation.

Richard: At the very beginning he's almost destroyed by the uncomplimentary stories of what he had done.

Gwen: Richard says that the problem of Hoover's public perception was compounded by an additional challenge just at the time "Special Agent Five" was written.

Richard: It really has perhaps more to do with Hoover's peculiar situation in 1932.

Gwen: What Richard tells me next gives me a special insight on why Hoover may have signed off on this script. There are no recordings of your episode, so far as we know. But we do have another episode of "Special Agent Five" that aired just several weeks later. I tell the Riggs that their script is based on a true crime story about the first time a fingerprint had been used by the Bureau to crack a case.

RECORDING: "Special Agent Five, through courtesy of J. Edgar Hoover Director United States Bureau of Investigation Department of Justice…"

Karen: Wow.

Gwen: The G. F. Zimmer on your script was the story creator. But this series was part of a much larger and carefully conceived plan.

Richard: It's a period of time when Hoover's job is on the line.

Gwen: Richard Powers had explained that when this script aired, Franklin Delano Roosevelt had just been elected President, ushering in a democratic administration.

Richard: There's very likely going to be a clean sweep as far as the Justice Department is concerned. And so this script may well have been an effort on Hoover's part to save his job. And evidence for that is, that unlike other popular entertainment, Hoover's name is mentioned prominently at the beginning, at the end. And that's really unusual.

J.D.: That's pretty interesting. To be able to bring something like this to light is just amazing.

Karen: It almost got thrown away.

Gwen: Hoover survived Roosevelt's arrival in office and would go on to be Director of the FBI under eight presidents. For 50 years Hoover was known as the most powerful man in America. What does this script mean to you now? What will you do with it?

J.D.: Uh, take better care of it.

Karen: It's been very interesting and thank you very much for checking on it for us.

Gwen: The fingerprints of canny public relations strategy were left on Hoover's entire subsequent career. He and his publicity director, Louis Nichols, worked behind the scenes with radio programs like "Gang Busters" and shows like "The F.B.I." to burnish the image of the hardworking G-Man as honorable, upstanding, and by-the-book. But this manufactured image masked a much more complicated truth…For decades, Hoover would also skirt — and sometimes subvert — the law while secretly amassing files on tens of thousands of Americans he considered threatening to the country, or to his personal power. In 1975, a committee headed by Senator Frank Church began investigating abuses by intelligence agencies. It characterized the FBI's monitoring and disruption of domestic political organizations — which included non-violent civil rights groups and anti war protestors — as a "sophisticated vigilante operation." Hoover had remained as director of the FBI until his death in May of 1972.