

Michigan Every Day

By Patrick Sullivan and Carole Eberly

Sept. 6, 1901
Detroit native assassinates McKinley

President William McKinley, on a visit to the Pan American Exhibition in Buffalo, New York, held a reception for the public at the Temple of Music at 4 p.m. As a stream of folks pressed into the hall, a line formed to greet the president, a normal-looking, average-sized man in a black suit approached. He appeared to have a bandage or a handkerchief wrapped around one of his hands. As he neared McKinley, he raised his hand and fired two shots into the president, shooting through the cloth that concealed the revolver.

Two government officials and a bystander jumped on the assassin, wrestling the revolver from him and subduing the man. Panic followed shocked silence in the crowded hall. McKinley did not die immediately. He appeared stunned after being shot and then walked to a chair to sit, removing his hat and resting his head in his hands.

One of the bullets struck him in the chest, and was easily removed by surgeons. The other bullet hit McKinley in the stomach and posed more serious trouble for the president. McKinley died eight days later. That day investigators had a signed confession from Leon F. Czolgosz, a Michigan native who most recently lived in Cleveland. Czolgosz, an anarchist, believed that killing the president would put an end to the American government.

Sources vary on Czolgosz's early life. Some newspaper accounts say he was born in Alpena; others Detroit. It is also said he lived for awhile in the Upper Peninsula lumber town of Seney, a place of notorious violence and debauchery. Some accounts said he was run out of town over his promotion of socialism or anarchy. Other accounts have it that Czolgosz only became interested in radical politics shortly before the assassination.

In his confession, Czolgosz described a pathetic life that led him on a path to becoming an anarchist and assassin: "Yes, I know I was bitter," he wrote in his confession. "I never had much luck at anything, and this preyed upon me. It made me morose and envious, but what started the craze to kill was a lecture I heard some little time ago by (socialist) Emma Goldman. She was in Cleveland and I and other anarchists went to hear her. She set me on fire."