

West Virginia Murder, Unsolved

Brutal Murder of Redhead Near Maryland Line One of State's Most Baffling Unsolved Crimes

By James A. Hill
(Staff Writer for The Gazette)

BERKELEY SPRINGS.—Late in the afternoon of May 10, 1950, Benjamin J. Mills of nearby Hancock, Md., worked his way slowly along the West Virginia side of old U. S. 522 searching for mushrooms.

As he approached the south end of the Hancock bridge on the Maryland border about 4 p. m., he stumbled onto a gruesome find.

Lying in the sparse grass about 42 feet from the top of the west bank of the highway was the twisted body of a nude woman.

For a few fleeting seconds the 45-year-old laborer stared fearfully at the contorted face, swollen purple in death, then headed for the Hancock police station about three-tenths of a mile away.

A half hour later the state police radio at Romney sent Cpl. C. S. Burke of Berkeley Springs hurrying to the scene from where he cruised in his patrol car a few miles away.

Burke, who was to find himself in the middle of one of the most baffling crimes in West Virginia history, arrived about the same time as Morgan County Sheriff's Deputy Lawrence Michael and Coroner C. C. Dyche.

Also on hand was Maryland State Trooper R. E. Garvey, Police Chief Murphree of Hancock and the shaken mushroom hunter who made the discovery.

After the body was taken to Hunter mortuary in Berkeley Springs, police hastily scoured the area for any tell-tale evidence.

For more than two hours the area was combed for a two-mile radius, but nothing connected with the death could be found.

Meanwhile, news of the discovery spread like wildfire over the surrounding countryside. Before Drs. H. D. Powers and J. H. Armentrout of Martinsburg arrived to perform an autopsy at 11 p. m., more than 500 persons had already viewed the body.

Hundreds Gather to View Body

Several hundred others gathered outside the mortuary along with newspaper reporters from nearby communities.

As quickly as possible a detailed description of the body was released.

It was described as that of an unknown white female; 30 to 35 years of age; height five feet five inches; weight 125 to 130 pounds; auburn red hair; recent permanent; color of eyes not known; nationality not known; complexion fair, freckles on back of hands and lower arms; very small; teeth natural; "Y" shaped scar on outside of right wrist; "W" shaped scar on center of forehead; two operation scars, one a 10-inch hysterectomy and the other a four-inch appendectomy.

The scars were later to weave a strange coincidence that mystifies police and medical authorities to this day.

Four hours later at 3 a. m. on May 11, the two doctors finished the autopsy and reported their findings to Burke. Their conclusions were:

"Evidence obtained from this examination would indicate death occurred from strangulation. It would appear that the strangulation had resulted from a rope or some similar object having been drawn about the base of the neck in such a manner as to cause deep abrasions. The abrasions over the nose and forehead and the bruised areas under the scalp over the temporal muscles and above the eyes would indicate the head had been struck numerous blows with a blunt object."

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\$100 Reward Offered by Gazette For Arrest, Conviction of Killer

The Gazette is offering \$100 reward to the first person who provides police with aid and information leading to the arrest and conviction of the person or persons responsible for any of the murders described in this series.

The names of any person corresponding with this paper or police in connection with the crimes will be kept strictly confidential and will not be divulged under any circumstances.



Potters grave
The five who mourned the unknown victim

Bus Driver Remembered Redhead

At midnight Burke and Basore met the driver, H. H. Grossnickle, in Hancock, where the driver said he had discharged a passenger early on the morning of May 5 who closely resembled the murder victim.

Grossnickle said his red-haired passenger, carrying only a small overnight case, alighted from the bus with another lady who had a ticket to Hancock from Savage, Okla. The driver said he remembered the red-haired passenger had a ticket from Columbus, O., to Hancock, and recalled she asked him how to get to Needmore, Pa. The driver said he advised the woman to call a cab.

A short time later Grossnickle showed up at the veterans' hospital, where he declared the dead woman to be the same passenger he let off in Hancock. Basore also had retrieved the used tickets from the Potomac-Edison bus station in Frederick and found the red-head had bought her ticket about midnight on May 4 from the Penn Greyhound bus station in Columbus.

Pictures and fingerprints were immediately forwarded to Columbus police along with the information from the bus driver. In Columbus alone, police reported that at least seven red-heads were being sought as missing persons, tumbling the case into an almost hopeless maze.

It was about this time that harassed police were confronted with a woman who had arrived with a hearse from Baltimore to lay claim to the body.

First Real Suspect Picked Up

The woman, identified as a Mrs. Esther Bova, declared the body to be that of a Ruth Magruder, alias June Williams, born Dec. 7, 1902, on whom Mrs. Bova had carried insurance since Ruth disappeared in December of 1941. Mrs. Bova demanded the body in order to claim her insurance. Her demands, however, were not met.

On May 15 the first real suspect was apprehended in Morgantown, falling like a bombshell into the web of the tangled mystery. The man, whom we shall name Fred Jackson, a tall, good looking 160-pounder, was taken into custody by Cpl. Frank Roberts on a tip from Jackson's landlady.

The woman told police that Jackson had just returned from a trip to New Jersey, describing "a horrible sight that met his eyes on side road near Hancock on the morning of May 9," just a day before the mushroom hunter stumbled on his gruesome find.

She quoted Jackson that he became sleepy while driving during the night of May 8 and had pulled off on the side road to nap. On awakening the next day Jackson said he took a short walk and saw the nude body of a woman, all swollen and blue, lying on the side of a steep embankment. He added that he knew the woman was dead and became frightened and drove away.

Lie Detector Backs Up Story

Jackson was brought to Berkeley Springs on May 16 and placed in the Morgan County Jail. At midnight he was taken to detachment headquarters and grilled until 4 a. m. He then was taken to the scene of the discovery, where he admitted making the statement to his landlady. Jackson declared he had lied about the whole thing, that he made up the story "just to tell something exciting."

On May 17 he was taken to detachment headquarters at Elkins and given a polygraph (lie detector) test which showed no guilty reaction. Disappointed over their failure to connect Jackson with the crime, police released the suspect after his story was checked from the time he left New Jersey and arrived in Morgantown.

On May 22 the dead woman was tentatively identified for the second time as a "Martha Smith" who had married the son of a Fulton County family and was supposedly living somewhere in Ohio. The same day Sheriff Munson and Trooper Basore went to Columbus to hunt Martha and to check with the agent who had sold the red-haired woman a ticket to Hancock. The agent positively identified a picture of the murder victim as the woman who had bought the ticket.

The search for Martha carried Munson and Basore from Columbus to Mansfield and to Akron. In Akron the mystery was thrown into further confusion when Martha was discovered alive.

A day later the unknown red-head was returned to Hunter mortuary in Berkeley Springs and that afternoon buried in a potter's grave in Greenway Cemetery.

Woman Knew Little of Passenger

At about the same time the other woman who alighted from the bus in Hancock the morning of May 5 was located in Hancock and identified as a Mrs. Mellet of Savage, Okla., who had come to Maryland to see her new grandson, Mrs. Mellet remembered her fellow passenger but could shed no light on her movements.

By this time, 13 days after the twisted corpse was found sprawled on the embankment, more than 235 inquiries were received and studied, 59 teletype messages handled by Maryland state police at Frederick for Berkeley Springs, including numerous radio messages and phone calls, police had traveled more than 2,000 miles and worked the day of the discovery.

Then on June 23 another clue dropped into the laps of police which eventually ended in the arrest of an entire family of 11.

This came June 23 on a tip that the dead woman was a "Lillian Grimes," common-law wife of a "Frank Basham" from Black Oak, in Fulton County, Pa.

Frank was described as a member of an old and clannish family, notorious for their violent outbursts throughout the county. It was only 13 days before that one of the members of the clan shot and killed his brother during an argument over some furniture and was awaiting trial in the Fulton County jail.

Four days later, Burke, Sheriff Munson, Trooper Basore, Trooper Garvey and eight Pennsylvania state troopers met at the Pennsylvania-Maryland state line and swooped down on the village of Black Oak at dawn. Every member of the Basham family that could be found was arrested and taken to the county jail where they were grilled throughout the day.

While the family was being questioned, their homes were searched for possible evidence. When nothing was found the 11 were released.

Young Cab Driver Offers a Lead

However, police learned that "Lillian" had visited the family early on the morning of May 8 and that she arrived in a taxicab from Hancock. Police also found that "Lillian" departed on the afternoon of May 9 in company with the brother who was later shot and killed.

Two days later on July 4, police converged on the town of Hancock and took into custody the drivers of every taxicab in operation.

After a lengthy grilling, 22-year-old Lloyd Emons Munson admitted that he had picked up an unidentified red-head on the streets of Hancock about 1:50 a. m. May 6, taking her to Black Oak.

Munson claimed he had been reluctant to report the incident because he was afraid of the Basham family. Police later learned that the missing "Lillian" had a brother in Akron. The brother told Akron police that his sister was alive and well in Michigan.

The hopes of police were dashed when "Lillian" showed up in Berkeley Springs and identified herself. It was, she said, "Lillian" herself that had taken the cab from Hancock to Black Oak, thus establishing the identity of the unknown traveler from Columbus.

One last and mystifying clue popped up on Jan. 10, 1951, which led police through a maze of events that still defies belief.

A young Berkeley Springs girl, whom we shall call "Jane Doe," approached Burke declaring she knew the dead woman to be a "Daisy Post," common-law wife of Jane's cousin.

Jane said Daisy and her cousin, whom we shall call "Harry Light," operated a beer joint at Colonial Beach in Prince George County, Va.

Cleaning Fluid Drink Killed Brother

Jane said Daisy had once been married to Harry's brother, who died under mysterious circumstances several years before in Washington, D. C. She recalled that at the time Harry was a suspect in the death but was released after police determined that the brother had died from drinking cleaning fluid in a Washington laundry.

Jane declared further that Harry and his mother had arrived in Berkeley Springs on May 8, two days before the body was found, driving a jeep station wagon with a large steamer trunk roped on the top. She said they left on the afternoon of the 10th.

She also said that a letter was received several weeks earlier by Berkeley Springs Police Sgt. Brooks Dyche, naming "Daisy Post" as the dead woman.

Burke later called Sgt. Dyche into his office where Dyche admitted he had received the letter from Colonial Beach police, adding that he had known the victim was "Daisy" all the time. Burke added that Dyche described the woman as "a common old drunk who wouldn't be missed anyway."

On Jan. 21, 1951, Burke and Sheriff Munson motored to Colonial Beach where they were told by city police that Harry and Daisy had operated a beer joint about two miles out of town but had moved away a short time earlier.

The two then contacted Prince George County Sheriff J. S. Dishman of Ninde, Va., who said he had arrested Harry and Daisy several times and remembered them well.

Sheriff Dishman said all the residents around Colonial Beach were convinced the dead woman was Daisy, adding that the couple once was very popular but lost out when they started running around with a rough crowd.

Dishman then sent the hopes of Burke and Munson soaring again when he told of a jeep accident in which Daisy hurt her right wrist and was admitted to a Richmond hospital.

"Daisy" Was the One, Agents Sure

The two West Virginia officers learned further that Daisy was being sought by a Richmond finance company for missing two payments on a jeep station wagon she had bought. The finance company said Daisy had always been prompt in her payments until she dropped out of sight the last of April.

At the same time Burke and Munson checked the Richmond hospital and the Medical College of Virginia, where they were told that Daisy bore the same identical operation scars that were found on the body.

To Burke and Munson this information was almost positive proof that the dead woman was Daisy.

Hurrying back to Berkeley Springs Burke again contacted young "Miss Jane Doe," learning that Daisy had a brother and several sisters living in Cumberland.

On Jan. 23, Burke finally found the father of Daisy and her five sisters. All said the picture of the dead woman looked very much like sister "Daisy."

All six were questioned extensively by Burke, Munson and Trooper

that a jeep station wagon was seen parked on the highway near Hancock a short time before the body was found.

The next day Burke, believing he was on the brink of solving the seven-month-old mystery, put in a call to Capt. B. E. Wright at Elkins for more help in running down contacts in Washington, Richmond, Catonsville, Md., and Florida before their quarry became wise to the progress of the investigation.

On Jan. 26 Trooper Baker called Burke from Catonsville to meet him at Hancock. There Baker told Burke he discovered that Daisy and Sam had been employed in a mental institution at Catonsville and that Daisy had been fired in April for excessive drinking.

Baker said Daisy was authorized payment to May 15. She was not seen again after returning May 5 for a partial payment on her severance allowance. The Trooper said Sam was authorized payment until June 18, but left employment there on June 10.

19-Month Search Is Far From Ended

Baker also discovered that Sam had married a "Daisy Post" on May 5 in Elliot City, Md., and supposedly left the city for Florida on June 25.

After arriving in Florida they wrote to a sister of Thompson's in Baltimore giving their address. On learning this Burke put a rush call through to Miami police who reported the woman described as Thompson's wife was alive and well.

It was a heart-breaking turn for Burke and his hard working aides, driving them to the brink of exasperation.

However, still suspicious of the woman who bore the same scars as the murder victim, declared as an almost impossible coincidence, Burke prevailed upon the sisters of Daisy once more for aid.

At his request a letter was sent to the Miami residence asking for a picture of Daisy. A short time later the picture was received, but of a woman lying on the beach with a towel over her head!

The gaping question remained. Was it really Daisy lying on that southern beach, or was it some other woman posing as the Cumberland native to throw police off the trail? Or, was there any woman down there at all?

Although 19 months have now elapsed since the lonely mushroom hunter's discovery, police are far from ending the search. Burke, a 41-year-old native of Grafton, is convinced that some day he'll find the unknown hands that dumped the unidentified red-head from a car on that lonely road near Hancock.

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