

True Crime: The Case of the Bubble Bath Strangler

Thomas R. Schuck

January 21, 2019

Part 1: True Crime Reporting

Crime reporting is a literary genre with surprisingly respectable antecedents. The Puritan execution sermon, preached at a public hanging and then printed in pamphlet form for sale as a deterrent to sin, was popular in New England in the Seventeenth Century. When he wasn't burning witches, Cotton Mather was one of its better-known practitioners. His *Pillars of Salt* (1699) is a history of criminals executed in New England for capital crimes. It features what Mather called "dying speeches," a popular form of farewell address in both England and America whereby the miscreant acknowledged his or her misdeeds and the fate that awaited anyone who followed the same path.

At about the same time in England, Daniel Defoe reported on the lives and ends of notorious criminals, including Jonathan Wild, who styled himself "Thief-catcher General of Great Britain and Ireland" (an Eighteenth Century version of the organized crime boss), and Jack Sheppard, a burglar with a knack for breaking out of jail. Defoe's reporting had a less didactic

purpose and tone than Mather's. He was well-known as a pamphleteer before he became a novelist.

In this country, some of our most respected authors or otherwise prominent citizens engaged in true crime reporting, including the likes of Benjamin Franklin ("The Murder of a Daughter," 1734); Nathaniel Hawthorne ("A Show of Wax Figures," 1838); Abraham Lincoln ("Remarkable Case of Arrest for Murder," 1846); Ambrose Bierce ("Crime News from California," 1868-78); and Mark Twain (in "Roughing It," 1872).

Franklin published "The Murder of a Daughter" in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on October 24, 1734, recounting in gruesome detail the barbarous treatment of a teenaged girl by her father and step-mother, for which the couple was sentenced to be burnt on the hand. Showing that he was not entirely without feeling, the girl's father offered to suffer burning on each of his hands if his wife were excused from the sentence; he was told that the law would not permit it.

Hawthorne's account was of a show of wax figures in 1838 consisting of murderers and their victims. Two of the murderers were pirates who had killed a Dutch girl. They were represented "with halters around their necks, just ready to be turned off," complete with the sheriff and his watch "waiting for the moment." In the interest of verisimilitude, the clothes, halter, and

hair of one of the pirates were authentic. The display was done with sufficient good taste to permit ladies to view it. It featured a tableau of Ellen Jewett, an upscale New York City prostitute who had been bludgeoned to death with a hatchet; and Richard P. Robinson, who was accused of the crime but acquitted. According to Hawthorne, the Jewett-Robinson display was intended particularly to appeal to female visitors, “women having much curiosity about such ladies,” as he put it.

Lincoln’s contribution to the genre was an account of his defense of William Traylor for the alleged murder of Archibald Fisher in Springfield, Illinois in 1841. The prosecution was flummoxed by the appearance of Mr. Fisher alive and well during the course of the trial. Traylor stiffed Lincoln for his \$100 legal bill, so Lincoln sued him and recovered judgment for the full amount and costs. The publication of the story in the *Quincy Whig* a year later (1846) may have substituted for interest on the debt.

Ambrose Bierce, best known for stories about the Civil War such as “Chickamauga” and “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” reflects the pessimistic and sometimes satirical attitude that overtook American society after the carnage of the war. Bierce was a 20 year old lieutenant in the 9th Indiana Volunteer Infantry, Army of the Ohio at the Battle of Shiloh in April, 1862 and

was seriously wounded at the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain in 1864. He published a series of articles on notorious crimes in California while living in and around San Francisco between 1867 and 1900. One of the newspapers that championed him was William Randolph Hearst's *Examiner*. Bierce excelled in short, cynical accounts of murder and mayhem in the City by the Bay with such headers as "The Crime Market Is Active", "Californians Do Have a Certain Talent", "It's All Just Manslaughter", and "He Did It Just to Help His Mother." Bierce wrote as if such events were commonplace.

Twain took a similarly ho-hum view of such matters, writing in *Roughing It* around 1872 that "the first twenty-six graves in the Virginia [City, Nevada] Cemetery were occupied by *murdered* men. So everybody said, so everybody believed, and so they will always say and believe. The reason why there was so much slaughtering done, was, that in a new mining district the rough element predominates, and a person is not respected until he has 'killed his man.' That was the very expression used."

Lafcadio Hearn immigrated to the United States from Ireland in 1869 at the age of 19 and settled in Cincinnati, where he became a reporter for the *Enquirer*. He was known for his graphic accounts of sensational murders. In 1875, Hearn married Alethea "Mattie" Foley, an African-

American woman, which resulted in his dismissal from the *Enquirer* and subsequent employment by the *Cincinnati Commercial*. The *Commercial* dispatched him to New Orleans as a correspondent, where he and Mattie presumably found a more understanding society. He stayed there until 1887 when, having divorced Mattie, he moved first to the West Indies and then, in 1890, to Japan. He supported himself in Japan by writing and teaching in Matsue, a town on the west coast on the main island of Honshu. There he met and married Koizumi Setsu, the daughter of a local samurai, and adopted the Japanese name Koizumi Yakumo. He spent the rest of his life in Japan.

In 1876, Hearn published an article in the *Cincinnati Commercial* about a hanging in Dayton the year before, which he titled "Gibbited." This was a detailed account of the execution of James Murphy for the murder of Colonel William Dawson, complete with Murphy's written confession and an almost anatomical description of Murphy's death throes at the end of a rope. Murphy's execution was complicated by the fact that the first rope broke and Murphy fell to the floor unconscious. Hearn interviewed him when he revived, while a stronger rope was being procured. Four minutes later, the second noose was ready, the deputies carried Murphy back to the gibbet, the sheriff once again did his work, and Murphy was dispatched.

The First World War was another jolt to the American consciousness, and in its wake followed more accounts of gruesome murders by “modern” writers. In 1927, Damon Runyon published a series of articles about a chilling murder in Long Island City that he subsequently collected as “The Eternal Blonde” in *Trials and Other Tribulations* (1947). This was the story of Ruth Brown Snyder, “a chilly looking blonde with frosty eyes and one of those marble, you-bet-you-will chins,” and her “lover-boy,” Henry Judd Gray, for what Runyon called the “dumb-bell murder” because “it was so dumb.” They were accused of having done away with Ruth’s well-insured husband, Albert, by first coshing him with a sash weight, then stuffing his nose and mouth with chloroform-soaked rags, and finally garrotting him with picture frame wire while the Snyders’ nine year old daughter Lorraine slept in a nearby room. Predictably, Ruth and Judd blamed each other at trial. Gray’s lawyer described Ruth as a “jungle cat” and her lawyer called Judd “the human anaconda.” Both got what comes to criminals who fall out and ended up sequentially in the electric chair at Sing Sing. Tom Howard, an enterprising photographer working for the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Daily News* who attended Ruth’s execution, strapped a miniature camera to his ankle and photographed Ruth at the electrifying moment of her death. The *Daily News* published the photograph the following day.

Runyon's account of the Gray-Snyder trial served as the basis of James M. Cane's *Double Indemnity* (1938), which Billy Wilder filmed in 1944 based on a screenplay that he co-wrote with Raymond Chandler. Unfortunately for Gray, Ruth couldn't hold a candle to Barbara Stanwick.

As the genre matured, it took on a deeper purpose than simply the sensational; or, perhaps the moralistic purpose that originally animated it in this country never left. Nine years after Theodore Dreiser published *An American Tragedy* (1925), the fictional story of a murder by drowning involving two star-crossed lovers, a crime occurred in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania that eerily mirrored the imagined events in Dreiser's novel. Twenty-three year old Robert Alan Edwards bludgeoned and drowned his pregnant girlfriend, Frieda McKechnie, the proverbial "girl next door," during a nighttime swim in a local lake so that he could marry Margaret Crain, a young music teacher whom he had met at college and with whom he was also involved. Writing for the *New York Post* in 1934, Dreiser said after sitting through the trial that "I cannot get out of my mind – and these letters [from Edwards to Crain] that I heard [during the trial] helped to keep it there – that he was influenced by the very chemical and physical influences which betray all of us at certain times in our life, and particularly in our youth." Dreiser's sympathy for the pressures that drove a young man to murder one fiancé in order to marry the other did not save Edwards, however.

On the morning of May 6, 1935, he died in the electric chair at Rockview Penitentiary in Bellfonte, Pennsylvania.

Dorothy Kilgallen, the perennial panelist on the 1950's television quiz show "What's My Line?", made her reputation as a journalist reporting on criminal cases that caught the public's eye. In her posthumously published *Murder One: Six on the Spot Murder Stories* (1967), she wrote about "Sex and the All-American Boy," her version of the story of Bobby Edwards. Her take on the case: Bobby just couldn't bring himself to explain the situation to either girl and her parents, so he committed murder to avoid embarrassment.

Some of the best known true crime accounts have found their way into film. In addition to Damon Runyon's "The Eternal Blonde", we have Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), the story of the tragic encounter between two drifters and a Kansas farm family in 1959. This story has been the subject of three films: Richard Brooks' 1967 recounting of Capote's book; *Capote* (2005), which focuses on the author himself; and *Infamous* (2006), with Daniel Craig of James Bond fame as murderer Perry Smith.

Lee Earle "James" Ellroy is well known for his stories of crime in mid-Twentieth Century Los Angeles. Ellroy's *L.A. Confidential* (1990) has also been made into a film. Ellroy populates

his crime novels with real-life characters such as Lana Turner and Johnny “Stomp” Stompanato, a gangster whom Turner’s daughter, Cheryl, stabbed to death in 1958, as reported by author Jay Robert Nash.

Ellroy took his inspiration from the real-life murder of his mother, Jean Hilliker Ellroy, in Los Angeles County in 1958, when Ellroy was only 10 years old. Ellroy’s crime-writing was catharsis for the childhood trauma that left him an alcoholic, a drug addict, and a convicted criminal. Ellroy credits Jack Webb of “Dragnet” fame with having thrown him the lifeline that led to his successful crime-writing career. In addition to popularizing the radio and then television series “Dragnet,” John Randolph “Jack” Webb published a compendium of crime stories in 1958 entitled *The Badge: True and Terrifying Crime Stories That Could Not Be Presented on TV, From The Creator and Star of Dragnet*. Among these is the story of actress Elizabeth Short, known as the “Black Dahlia,” whose naked body was discovered one morning in January, 1947 in a weed-choked lot in the University section of Los Angeles. Ellroy used it as the basis of his 1987 novel, *The Black Dahlia*.

That murder has also given birth to two feature films: *True Confessions* (1981), involving the sordid side of church politics; and *The Black Dahlia* (2006), based on Ellroy’s novel, which

went through three edits before the producers gave up trying to satisfy the Motion Picture Association of America's censors and released the film without a rating.

Cincinnati has its share of true crime stories, some well-known and others not. Steve Strauss has given us the story of George Remus, who finalized his divorce in 1927 by shooting his wife on the way to court and then talked himself out of the crime on the ground that he was temporarily insane when he murdered Imogene.

Some years ago, Steve also talked about Anna Marie Filser Hahn, the "Blonde Borgia" of Cincinnati, who admitted to poisoning four men (Lord knows if there were more) for their money in the 1930s and at age 32, became the first woman to die in "old sparky," as Ohio's electric chair was affectionately known. She had developed a taste for gambling and seduced older single men to get money to support her habit. Her explanation: "I couldn't believe it when, in court, people came to the room and told the jury how these men died. I was sitting there hearing a story like out of a book about another person. God above will tell me what made me do these terrible things. I do not try to excuse myself for my actions. They were not me at all."

Eastside residents will remember the still-unsolved murder of the Dumler family in Mt. Lookout in 1969: the parents and Mrs. Dumler's mother were shot and stabbed to death one night

at the Dumlers' home at 1192 Beverly Hills Drive, immediately behind the house that my wife and I later occupied on Herschel Avenue, while the Dumlers' young children slept peacefully in their room. The neighborhood rumor, never confirmed, was that Mr. Dumler had run afoul of people in Las Vegas. It was commonly accepted that this was a professional job, but at least the perpetrator spared the children.

PART 2: The Bubble Bath Strangler

Those of us of a certain age remember George Fenneman's dead-pan introduction to each episode of the "Dragnet" television series: "Ladies and Gentlemen, the story *you* are about to see is true. The names have been changed to protect the innocent." The story you are about to hear is also true – but in this case, the names have been changed to protect the guilty as well.

We'll call our protagonist Harry (no last name needed). Harry was a child of privilege: he grew up on the East Coast, where his father was a stock broker of note and his grandfather a founding member of one of New York City's most prestigious law firms. The family summered

on the New Jersey shore, where Harry met and married the daughter of the next-door summer neighbors in a beach ceremony redolent of the “flower power” culture of the early 1970s. We’ll call her Sally. Harry and Sally moved to Ohio so that Harry could attend law school. Following graduation, he landed a job at one of Cincinnati’s older law firms, where he began to learn his trade. Unfortunately for Harry, his trade included wining and dining the firm’s clients, in which he excelled because of his knowledge of some of the more risqué establishments in Southwestern Ohio and probably Northern Kentucky.

Harry and Sally purchased a home in Hyde Park and began a family. They eventually had three lovely girls. All appeared to be progressing as it should.

But it wasn’t. After he followed some of the partners to another firm, Harry perennially lived beyond his means through an expense account, and continued serving as the unofficial social chairman of the specialized practice in which he was engaged. Harry was a child of the 1970s: he drank heavily and regularly used recreational drugs. How does one manage this lifestyle in the button-down environment of Cincinnati professional life, you may ask? Harry managed it by giving the appearance to all but his closest friends of being a quiet, mousy, unimaginative and unenergetic drone. If Walter Middy had a secret life, so did Harry.

At some point, Harry's disorganized financial affairs caught up with him and he changed jobs several times, working for a series of law firms and financial institutions in Cincinnati. The Hyde Park lifestyle continued uninterrupted, but forces were moving beneath the surface which would lead Harry to confront the consequences of his double life.

Sometime during the 1980s, Harry began to attend AA sessions. However, he never became a true disciple of Dr. Bill. To hear Harry tell it, he met his soulmate at one of these sessions. We'll call her Ruby. Unfortunately for Harry, what should have been support for his effort at sobriety became support for his demons instead.

Harry and Ruby maintained a secret life while Sally raised the girls in Hyde Park. One day in the late 1990s, Harry and Ruby had a disagreement. Ruby was taking a bubble bath at her apartment when things got out of hand and Harry pushed her head under the water several times. He probably didn't mean anything serious by it, but Ruby called 911. Harry had been drinking and wisely took himself outside to await the arrival of the police. Unfortunately, Harry's legal training deserted him when they arrived: he blurted, "I should have drowned the bitch when I had the chance." By this time, Ruby was remorseful, but the police were unconvinced and took Harry away.

Harry was indicted for trying to drown Ruby and spent the summer, from Memorial Day until Labor Day, in the Hamilton County Justice Center because he could not raise the \$1 million bond set for his release. He seemed perplexed about how he had ended up where he was. The family back east cut off the flow of whatever money Harry and Sally had been receiving from whatever trust fund Harry's father or grandfather had established. Harry was on his own.

Harry retained one of the partners in his latest law firm to defend him. He was examined and found competent to stand trial. Sally stuck by him and he threw himself on the mercy of the Court. He claimed that he had gone to Ruby's apartment to end their affair and pleaded guilty to attempted felonious assault. He told the Court that "this incident was born out of anger and frustration from [Ruby's] stubborn resistance to let me go It never should have happened." He accused Ruby of what amounted to blackmail: "She asked for money. She asked for attention. She asked for sex. If she didn't get them, she said she'd go to [Sally]." Sally, for her part, told the Court that she wanted Harry back so that they could work on saving their marriage. She said, "I love my husband despite what he's done." Ruby told a different story: she said that Harry sang to her, told her he loved her, and talked about marrying her. She told Harry in court, "I trusted you, but you are a man unworthy of anyone's love. You are a very sick man." The judge

apparently believed Ruby: he gave Harry two years. As Harry was led from the courtroom in handcuffs, Sally blew him a kiss. "I love you," she shouted. "I love you, too," he replied.

Harry went off to London, Ohio to serve his sentence at the Madison Correctional Institution. He was a model prisoner. Cream rises to the top: Harry soon became president of the AA chapter at the prison. Sally and the girls remained in Hyde Park awaiting his rehabilitation and return.

Although Harry's family had ceased to support him financially, they had not entirely written him off. They retained a prominent Cincinnati criminal attorney to seek what is popularly known as shock parole for Harry after he served a portion of his two-year sentence. The new lawyer played on Harry's substance-abuse history, which apparently resonated with the Court. Harry obtained judicial release and the Court placed him on community control on several conditions, one of which was that he stay away from Ruby.

Unfortunately, Harry had not learned his lesson. Having missed his eldest daughter's high school graduation but with his family still intact, Harry returned to Ruby's arms. One way or another, this came to the attention of the authorities and Harry's community control was revoked. He served out the balance of his sentence.

In the spirit of true-crime reporting, the story has an ambiguous ending. Harry and Sally were divorced and he returned to Ruby, whom he married. Harry obtained a local management position in the fast-food industry, where his lifestyle apparently presented fewer problems. I last saw Harry and first saw Ruby when I met some friends at the Beechmont Avenue Frisch's one weekend morning for breakfast. Harry and a lady whom he declined to introduce were sitting in a neighboring booth. I greeted Harry, but his obvious discomfort at having been recognized led to no further conversation. Neither Harry nor Ruby looked any better for wear at the time. They are now divorced as well.

How did Harry's demons get the better of him? Probably because there was no one to discipline them. I hope that Harry is happy in whatever life he has made for himself. I am confident that he is more at peace with himself now than he ever was while playing out the role that he inherited.