

JANIS THORNTON

NO PLACE LIKE MURDER



TRUE CRIME IN THE MIDWEST

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Forewords by Larry Sweazy and Ray E. Boomhower

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This collection of stories is a tribute to the innocent victims whose time on earth was deliberately and viciously cut short. Among them, and most heartbreaking, are four children: Dee McClure, age two, and his brother Homer, age three; eight-year-old Mollie King; and eleven-year-old Mary Elizabeth Breeden. Their precious lives were stolen from them almost before they began; and even worse, they were taken by someone they had trusted and loved. Rest in peace, sweet angels.

FOREWORD

Crime and the Writers

ON JANUARY 15, 1951, IN ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN, AN UNKNOWN assailant crept up behind Pauline Campbell, a thirty-four-year-old nurse on her way home from work, and viciously smashed her in the skull with a heavy rubber mallet. The murder sent shock waves through the quiet college town (home to the University of Michigan campus), with police believing the crime had been committed by “a maniac.”

Residents were stunned when, a few days after the murder, police were tipped off that three young men from the nearby town of Ypsilanti—Bill Morey Jr., Max Pell, and Dave Royal—had committed the crime, with Morey doing the actual killing. A jury found Morey and Pell guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced them to life in prison (Michigan did not have the death penalty at the time) without the chance for parole, and Royal was convicted of second-degree murder and received a jail sentence of twenty-two-years to life. Morey’s father’s reaction to the news—“I can’t believe it; I just can’t believe it”—reflected what many parents in the community were thinking.

To most, it seems that little could be learned from such a heinous crime. The case, however, soon drew the attention of a dogged freelance writer, John Bartlow Martin, who had not consciously set out to specialize in the subject but saw that “a criminal case offers an opportunity to write about people in crisis, and their problems.” He realized that crimes did not happen by “blind chance—that something causes them. Sometimes the matrix is social, sometimes psychological, most often both.” Writing

about an individual criminal case, then, he noted, offered an “opportunity to write about a whole society. Crime in context.”

In a four-part series published in the *Saturday Evening Post*, one of the most difficult pieces he had ever worked on, Martin, in talking with those involved, realized that when he was the same age as Morey, he and his friends had done some of the stupid and dangerous things Morey had done: drink alcohol before they legally could, drive around recklessly in cars looking for excitement, and base their actions on the opinions of their peers. Martin attempted to write not a sensational story but rather “a thoroughgoing study for a serious magazine [the *Post*] that would try to discover *why* it had happened.” Although no final answer might be found for the question of why they killed, perhaps an understanding could be reached by getting at the facts of the case. “All is not,” Martin added, “cannot be, darkness and mystification.”

Martin, lauded by his contemporaries as “the ablest crime reporter in America,” would be proud of the work done by Janis Thornton in her new collection *No Place Like Murder*, in which she presents twenty historic murders that, like the Morey case in Ann Arbor, shocked those in the Indiana communities where they occurred. Both the victims and the perpetrators in these cases would be recognizable today—a jilted lover, a couple stuck in an unhappy marriage, a soldier trying to adjust to civilian life, a crooked politician, an alcoholic, and other troubled souls. As Thornton has discovered, those who have come before us were not so different from us today. “We have all experienced,” she notes, “the same range of human conditions—from joyful and wonderful to tragic and heartbreaking—regardless of the century we traverse.”

As Martin discovered in his work, the reportorial question almost everybody finds hardest to answer is why. Why did you do this instead of that? Why did it happen just that way and no other? We may never know the final answer in the cases featured in this book, but at least, as Martin and Thornton discovered, there is something honorable in trying.

Ray E. Boomhower
Indianapolis, Indiana
June 25, 2019

INTRODUCTION

WHO DOESN'T HARBOR A MORBID CURIOSITY ABOUT MURDER? WHO hasn't succumbed to the allure of a sensational crime and taken a peek behind the headlines? While many readers revel in crime fiction, it's true crime that reigns supreme among hard-core armchair detectives.

Hours of TV time are dedicated to it. The internet abounds with it. Hundreds of books flaunting every salacious true crime detail fill the shelves of bookstores everywhere. Even an annual CrimeCon was launched in 2017, drawing fifteen hundred true crime fans to the inaugural event in Indianapolis.

True crime aficionados are fascinated by the havoc their fellow humans are capable of wreaking. For them, learning details of the victims' worst nightmares is not only tantalizing; in a perverse way, it's almost comforting because it happened to someone else. In a sense, true crime offers its readers a "there but for the grace of God" revelation that allows them to vicariously experience unimaginable horrors behind a safety buffer of time and space.

No Place Like Murder emerged as the manifestation of my love for local history and my fascination with mysteries and true crime.

The former is a passion that developed as I researched and wrote a history book about my hometown of Tipton, Indiana, in 2012. Delving into the past introduced me to many intriguing people who, decades before, spent their entire lives in the same corner of the world I occupied. The project convinced me that the challenges our ancestors experienced a hundred or more years ago were not so very different from our challenges

of today. People encounter the same range of human conditions—from joyful and magic to heartbreaking and tragic—regardless of the century they traverse.

The latter, my fascination for true crime, developed as an offshoot of my love for mysteries, which I have consumed for years in all forms—books, movies, and TV—as well as making up my own. Nothing gets my curiosity churning like trying to figure out why two plus two equals five.

This book examines the underbelly of our history through the retelling of twenty criminal incidents that ripped apart small-town Indiana between 1869 and 1950. As I scoured old court records and vintage newspapers, gleaning story material, I discovered that crimes committed a century ago were no less harrowing than any perpetrated during this century. Conventional wisdom tends to float the belief that horrific incidents didn't happen in the "good old days." But that's the thing about conventional wisdom: it's a belief, not science. One of the truths behind true crime is that a crime-riddled society is not unique to modern times.

Reams have been written about the likes of Belle Gunness and H. H. Holmes, two of Indiana's most infamous serial killers; and, of course, celebrated Depression-era Hoosier gangster John Dillinger has captured the public's fascination since 1933. But who else, I wondered, had been largely overlooked by biographers and true crime documentarians, and were they ink-worthy?

Combing through old Indiana newspapers, I quickly discovered the answer. The terrible crimes of passion committed by people such as Grover Blake, Virginius "Dink" Carter, John Chirka, Nora Coleman, and Harry Rasico more than confirm that evil lurks in the most innocuous places, often around the corner, and sometimes, even more frighteningly, under one's own roof. The stories in this book paint portraits of these and other homegrown killers, depicting them as ruthless opportunists whose selfish ambitions and vain conceit pushed them over the edge.

More importantly, the stories are intended as tributes to the innocent victims whose lives were stolen—Garnet Ginn, Amos Hamilton, Nellie Hiatt, Leland Holliday, Fairy McClain, Belle Shenkenberger, and Hannah King Snider among them. In a sense, recording their stories brings them back to life and embeds their memories in readers' hearts and minds.

No Place Like Murder also reveals how communities responded to losing one of their own to a soulless killer. Often the public's first response was

the threat of a lynch mob, although one rarely materialized. Conversely, once the suspect's trial resulted in a guilty verdict, the jury often—though not always—showed mercy and tended to give the convicted killer life in prison rather than the death penalty. The way the killers chose to respond to the juries' leniency provides yet another layer to the story. Some of them stubbornly maintained their innocent plea, while others deeply regretted their murderous deed; a few turned their lives around and won a pardon, while others lost the will to live and died in prison.

All the stories told on the pages that follow dominated the newspaper headlines of their day, and some even gained national attention. Retelling them today allows readers to learn aspects of their past that they might never have known. Most importantly, *No Place Like Murder* provides a mirror that reflects a time and place not so very different from our own. I hope you find these stories as fascinating and unforgettable as I do.

Janis Thornton
Tipton, Indiana
May 1, 2019

PART I
ALL IN THE FAMILY

1

THE MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF BELLE SHENKENBERGER

DATELINE: FRANKFORT, 1898

State vs. Sarah Shenkenberger was the trial of the century for Clinton County. For the first time in the county's sixty-eight-year history, a woman was to be tried for murder. If the jury found her guilty, she would surely face life behind bars or worse—the hangman's noose. After Sarah Shenkenberger had been arrested and charged with the murder of her daughter-in-law, Belle Sheridan Shenkenberger, Frankfort's *Daily Crescent* gleefully wrote: "The murder, if murder it proves to be, was one of the foulest, blackest and most diabolical ever conceived and carried out by the mind of a woman. To do such a deed, Sarah Shenkenberger must be a veritable Lucretia Borgia, and no punishment could be too severe."

Belle

A few hours before Belle Shenkenberger drew her last breath early Saturday, August 27, 1898, she sent for her three brothers. There was something she needed them to know.

Over the past month, her health had deteriorated at an alarming rate, while the doctor who tried to stop the encroachment of her mysterious malady couldn't even diagnose it. Belle was only twenty-three, and

until this illness had taken hold, she had been a strong, vibrant wife and mother with a future full of potential.

Her brothers, Harry, Squire, and Elmer Sheridan, had a hunch the end was near when Belle summoned them from their beds at one o'clock that morning. While Frankfort slept, they tore into the hot August night, traversing the desolate city streets, rushing to their beloved sister's bedside.

Belle's husband, Ed, was currently serving in the US Navy aboard the USS *Minneapolis*. While he was away, she and their two-year-old son, Donald, had been living with Ed's parents, Henry and Sarah Shenkenberger. In the short time Belle had been sick, her family had begun to question Sarah's caregiving skills as well as her moral character. Consequently, they moved Belle to the home of her sister, Kate Cohee, two days before her passing. They hoped Belle's health would return once she was plucked from her mother-in-law's grip. Unfortunately, Belle's decline persisted, and she grew even more frail.

When the Sheridan brothers reached Belle's bedside that Saturday morning, she could barely speak above a whisper. Harry positioned his ear over her colorless lips as she recited her dying wish for her son's welfare and accused her mother-in-law of murder. Harry repeated her words to Squire and Elmer, who scribbled them on a tablet.

"I realize I am dying," she said. "I know she has systematically poisoned me, and I know that she wants my child. Do not let her have him. This is my dying request and statement."

Too weak to hold the pen, Belle touched it as her brother signed her name.

Belle and Ed

Belle Sheridan and Ed Shenkenberger caused quite the scandal when they left Frankfort to elope in Chicago on December 1, 1894. An intelligent, introspective, pretty young woman, Belle was just nineteen when she gave up a promising career at the Frankfort library to marry Ed. He, on the other hand, hadn't yet found his niche. At age twenty-four, he had already worked a variety of jobs and liked none of them. A year later, when Belle became pregnant with their son, Ed took off. In May 1896, when the baby was five months old, Belle filed for divorce, citing her husband's laziness, abandonment, and cruelty.

The couple never finalized their divorce, and Belle returned to the marriage, following Ed back to Chicago. They rented a flat there and took in boarders to supplement Ed's income as a pressman. It was yet another job he couldn't stomach. Melancholy nearly consumed Belle. She told friends she had nothing to live for and wanted to die. In late 1896, Ed sent his wife and son back to Frankfort to stay with his parents, freeing him to seek work in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he was promptly arrested for nonpayment of his debts. Belle met him in Albuquerque after he was released six months later, and they returned to Chicago.

Ed, ever one for a new adventure, joined the navy in July 1898, at the height of the Spanish-American War, and sent Belle and little Donald back to Frankfort to live with his parents once more. It was at this point that the final events of Belle's life fell into place, like a line of dominoes waiting for the first to topple. Less than one month later, she would be dead of arsenic poisoning, and her mother-in-law would be charged with murder.

Sarah

Sarah McLaughlin was born in 1845 in Harmer, Ohio. She married fellow Ohioan Henry Shenkenberger, a shoemaker, in Lafayette, Indiana, in 1869. They settled in the Benton County town of Oxford, where Sarah kept house and raised her three children—Eddie, Laura, and Charlie. She was proud of her family and her home, cultivated many friendships, and seemed happy. In 1882, however, her even-tempered behavior underwent a change. As Henry later explained, she began to suffer "sick spells" that required medical treatment.

He called Dr. S. R. Roberts, who described Sarah as "peculiar." She would move about quickly while speaking alternately low and loud, Roberts said. She felt her life was a failure and feared someone would hurt her; at times, she wanted to die. Once, in the doctor's presence, Sarah pressed a revolver to her head and threatened to pull the trigger. The doctor diagnosed Sarah's erratic behavior as "woman trouble," a common malady of the day for which he had the perfect remedy. "I gave her a grain of morphine," he said. "Afterward, she became quiet and wanted more."

The use of addictive drugs such as morphine was common during the Victorian era. Access to drugs was unchecked. Opiates such as heroin,

cocaine, and morphine were unregulated, misunderstood, and often misprescribed. Morphine in the late 1800s was considered a magical cure-all for a range of medical complaints, particularly among women.

Roberts said that over the next four years, he supplied Sarah with morphine at least a half dozen times. However, he likely had underestimated that number because after the Shenkenbergers moved to Frankfort in April 1896, Sarah became well known to all the local druggists. Her frequent purchases of morphine flagged her as a “known morphine eater.”

The Murder

Belle and her two-year-old son moved into the Shenkenbergers’ Frankfort home on West Wabash Street on Sunday, July 31, 1898. She agreed to pay twelve dollars each month for room and board but failed to mention that in seven or eight months, she would be giving birth to another child. Perhaps it was too early in the pregnancy for Belle to be certain, or perhaps she had other plans. Either way, her secret was exposed the very next day after she suffered a miscarriage.

Sarah had spent Monday afternoon at the Fuller farm picking fresh fruits and vegetables. When she arrived back home at five o’clock, she found Belle sick in bed, suffering from severe cramps in her lower abdomen. Electric heating pads had not yet been invented, so Sarah applied hot stove lids to Belle’s belly to ease the pain. Sarah returned to Belle’s room a couple of hours later and noticed something awful in her “slop jar.”

“Belle’s had a miscarriage!” Sarah shouted to her husband. “Call the doctor!”

By the time Dr. M. V. Young arrived, Belle had lost a considerable amount of blood. The heavy flow continued until Saturday, August 6, before it finally began to wane. But by then, Belle was almost too weak to get out of bed and had developed a fever and chills. Curiously, Young, who had known Belle her entire life, diagnosed her symptoms as malaria and left quinine and strychnine, a common treatment in those times.

The doctor returned every day that week. At first, he was encouraged by Belle’s improvement, but by Thursday, August 11, her condition had taken a dive. She was nauseated, and her stomach hurt. By Saturday, August 13, she had developed an unquenchable thirst, her hands and feet were numb and cold, her body itched, her face was puffed, and her eyelids were swollen. She could not retain food or liquid and often vomited,



Belle Sheridan Shenkenberger of Frankfort was only twenty-three when, in 1898, she was poisoned by her mother-in-law, Sarah Shenkenberger.
Photo courtesy Sharon Cowen.

purging a dark, coffee grounds–like substance. The doctor suspected she had overdosed on morphine, but Belle insisted she had not taken morphine. It was then that Young considered a more concerning possibility: poison. The Sheridan family was frantic.

All the while, Sarah dutifully tended to Belle, waiting on her hand and foot, preparing her meals, bathing her, helping her dress, cleaning up her messes. Sarah told Belle’s family that she loved her daughter-in-law

like her own flesh and blood, and she never missed an opportunity to demonstrate her selfless devotion. But to friends and neighbors, Sarah told a different tale.

“Sarah told me she couldn’t stand her daughter-in-law,” said Shenkenberger neighbor Minnie Steed. “Sarah called her ‘lazy’ and complained that instead of helping with housework, Belle spent all her time in her room reading novels.”

One of Sarah’s friends, Ella Campbell, confirmed Sarah’s intense dislike for Belle. “After Belle’s last visit about a year ago,” Ella said, “Sarah told me that if ‘that woman’ ever came back to her house, she would scald her with a pot of boiling water and lock the door in her face.”

On Thursday, August 25, Belle’s mother, Mahala Sheridan, sat at her gravely ill daughter’s bedside, feeding her spoonfuls from the glass of crushed ice Sarah had provided. After a few bites, Belle refused to take more, complaining of its bitterness.

“Mother, what’s on that ice?” she said.

Mahala inspected the ice and noticed something odd: it was dusted with white powder. Mahala immediately hid the glass under the bureau and sneaked out of the house, heading to the next-door neighbor’s to borrow an empty bottle. Later, Mahala poured the melted ice water into the bottle and gave it to her son Elmer, who delivered it to Dr. Young.

The doctor analyzed the liquid and was stunned by what he found—arsenic. He urged Elmer to get Belle out of the Shenkenberger house immediately. The Sheridan family acted without delay, moving Belle to her sister Kate’s East Clinton Street home that very evening. For a few hopeful hours, Belle’s outlook brightened, and she seemed to improve. However, any appearance of recovery was short-lived, and as her brother Elmer put it, “She began to sink.”

By Friday morning, Belle’s condition was alarming. She moaned continuously and weakly acknowledged imminent death. She could barely lift her head off her pillow when, shortly past 1:00 a.m. on Saturday, August 27, she asked Kate to fetch her brothers. Harry, Squire, and Elmer arrived within the hour. Belle drifted into a coma soon after and died at 4:35 a.m.

Young immediately conducted a postmortem with the help of Dr. William H. McGuire and the coroner, Dr. John M. Wise. They attributed Belle’s death to arsenic poisoning and sent her stomach to Dr. John N. Hurty, secretary of the Indiana State Board of Health. On Thursday, September 1, Hurty sent his findings to town marshal George W. Bird. Hurty



Frankfort's police department of 1898 is shown in this photograph. Standing from left are Albert Nichols, Til Alford, Ed Miller, and Taylor Hill. Seated from left are Deputy John Denton, Mayor Barney Irwin, and Chief George Bird. Denton and Bird were the officers who arrested Sarah Shenkenberger and took her to jail, where she was charged with murder. Photo courtesy Frankfort, Indiana, Police Department.

had found more than enough arsenic in Belle's stomach to kill her. Bird read the report and went to find deputy John Denton, who already had the warrant for Sarah Shenkenberger's arrest.

Greeting Denton and Bird at her front door, Sarah remarked calmly, "I'm not surprised." She offered no resistance as they arrested her, charged her with murder, and locked her up in the city jail.

The Trial

Judge James V. Kent's Clinton circuit courtroom was packed from day one. Women, who far outnumbered the men, brought their dinners and ate them in the courtroom. Reporters from the Clinton County newspapers recorded every word of the drama. Their coverage dominated the front-page news, while banner headlines screamed each development, from "The Poisoning Case" to "Guilty as Charged."

The defense team's strategy was simple: they would prove Belle Shenkenberger committed suicide or that she died accidentally. As a backup, the defense team was prepared to plead that their client was insane.

Proving either of the first two scenarios was an uphill climb. Witness after witness took the stand relating the rapid decline of Belle's health, Sarah's overt contempt for her daughter-in-law, her addiction to morphine, and her recent purchase of arsenic. Proving Sarah was insane became problematic as well, particularly after the judge was quoted saying, "[Sarah's] own wonderful memory and intelligence upon the witness stand precluded the idea of insanity."

The trial lasted two weeks, while the jury heard testimony from some two dozen witnesses. The roster was composed of the Shenkenbergers' neighbors, Frankfort druggists, doctors, the coroner, an undertaker, expert witnesses, members of Sarah's and Belle's immediate families—including Edward Shenkenberger, on leave from his battleship after learning of his wife's death allegedly at the hands of his mother. Sarah, too, took the stand in her own defense.

The witnesses painted a picture of an unhappy social snob, resentful of the intellectually superior but sad young woman who ran away with her ne'er-do-well son and married him. In addition, druggist Charles Ashman swore that between August 15 and 20, he had sold Sarah two hundred grains of arsenic in powdered form. Sarah had claimed the arsenic was needed to kill a dog that had been killing chickens in her neighborhood. Apparently, the dog was the size of a house because, as Ashman said, less than five grains would kill a person.

Hurty, who made the chemical analysis of Belle's stomach, agreed that less than five grains would have proven fatal. In his testimony, perhaps the most damning for the defense, he said he had found 17.8 grains of arsenic in Belle's stomach.

Conversely, Dr. J. S. McMurray of Frankfort appeared on behalf of the defendant in exchange for a one-hundred-dollar stipend. It was McMurray's contention that Belle died not of arsenic poisoning but of Bright's disease, an acute kidney disorder. In response, a heated exchange between McMurray and prosecutor W. F. Palmer erupted, with Palmer berating McMurray as "a paid perjurer."

Closing arguments began after lunch on Friday, December 2, and continued until late the next afternoon. The jury began its deliberation

shortly after. At about 9:00 p.m., word was spreading that the jury had reached its verdict.

“The courtroom, containing a half a hundred spectators, was quiet as a grave,” the *Frankfort Crescent* reported.

Judge Kent was first to break the silence. Before signaling the bailiff to let the jury file in, Kent warned the courtroom that no demonstrations of approval or disapproval would be tolerated after the verdict was read.

“Have you agreed upon a verdict, gentlemen?” the judge asked the jury foreman.

“We have,” the foreman said weakly.

“Then pass it to the clerk,” the judge said.

The foreman walked slowly to the clerk and handed him the paper on which the verdict was written. The clerk gave it a quick look and read it out loud. “We the jury,” he said in a strong voice, “find the defendant guilty of murder in the first degree and that she be imprisoned in the penal department of the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls during the remainder of her natural life.”

Henry Shenkenberger buried his head in his hands and gave a shriek of anguish. Ed stepped to his mother’s side, while his sister, Laura, looked on in silence. Sarah sat through it all seemingly unfazed.

The *Frankfort Crescent* noted, “It was a most remarkable and never-to-be-forgotten scene.”

Although the defense team immediately petitioned for a new trial based on a list of thirty-seven errors in the judge’s rulings, the petition was denied.

The Monday following the trial, a *Frankfort Crescent* reporter visited Sarah in her jail cell. He reported that she was out of touch, irrational, and incoherent. Rambling, Sarah explained that she was merely boarding at the jail. She insisted Belle wasn’t dead and was living with Edward and little Donald in Chicago.

“While she may not at this time be insane,” the reporter wrote of Sarah, “there is good reason for thinking she soon will be.”

Epilogue

On December 23, 1898, Sheriff Clark escorted Sarah Shenkenberger to Indianapolis, where she entered the women’s prison to begin her life



On December 23, 1898, convicted murderer Sarah Shenkenberger entered the Indiana Women's Prison, where she spent fifteen years, until Indiana governor Samuel Ralston pardoned her. She was released on December 23, 1915.

Photo courtesy Indiana Historical Society, PO265.

sentence. Thus began her family's relentless pursuits to get her paroled. Their final attempt, made in the summer of 1913, asserted that they wanted their mother home before she died in prison. Sarah's daughter, Laura, made an emotional plea to the parole board on June 24, 1913. With tears streaming down her face, she implored, "Gentleman, has not my mother already paid her price? Is it asking too much to allow her to be surrounded by loving hands and voices soft with sympathy during the period of life when the shadows each day grow longer and blacker?"

Indiana governor Samuel Ralston signed Sarah's parole on December 23, 1913. She was released from the Indiana Women's Prison the next day, fifteen years to the day after she had entered. Sarah was sixty-eight. From there, she and Laura traveled to Chicago, where she lived the remaining days of her life with her son Edward and his family.

Sarah's husband, Henry, died in early 1912 in Chicago. Sarah died in Chicago on February 12, 1930, at the age of eighty-four.

Why Sarah disliked her daughter-in-law enough to kill her was never understood. Could it have been that she blamed Belle for embarrassing the Shenkenberger family when the young couple ran off to Chicago to elope? Did she resent Belle for filing for divorce from Ed, or perhaps resent her for not going through with it? Was she trying to gain custody of her grandson, Donald? Or, as a *Frankfort Crescent* reporter asked shortly after her sentencing, was she simply insane?

“No!” she proclaimed. “I’m not crazy and never have been, and I’ll not say I am. I’ll tell the truth. I know I’m in my right mind. Belle killed herself, but I don’t suppose the truth will ever be known.”