

For whom the Belle tolls: the murderous Belle Sorenson Guinness

By R. Marc Kantrowitz

Lonely men came to the doorstep of Belle Sorenson Guinness one by one with their life savings in hand. Dreams of newfound wealth and comfort on Belle's farm in La Porte, Ind., danced in their heads as they responded to her matrimonial advertisements. The stout, Norwegian-born widow and mother had the appearance of a busy and well-to-do housewife.

Most of the men who arrived on her rural altar and entered her farmhouse were never seen again.

Judge R. Marc Kantrowitz sits on the Appeals Court. He can be contacted at rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net. Amal Bala assisted with the research of the column, which is based primarily on "Belle Guinness: The Lady Bluebeard" by Janet Langlois.



LAW 'n HISTORY

Belle was born Brynhild Paulsdatter Størset on Nov. 11, 1859, in Norway. She was raised in poverty on a small farm, fleeing when she was in her early 20s to Chicago, where she joined a sister.

In Chicago, a city drenched in what Brynhild believed was wealth and opportunity, she adopted a new name and, soon, a new husband. In 1884, "Belle" married Mads Sorenson and two years later opened a confectionery store. But business was slow. Within a year the shop mysteriously burned down. An insurance payout allowed Belle and Mads to buy a home. That, too, was

consumed by fire. Another payout and another home.

The couple had four children: Caroline, Axel, Myrtle and Lucy. Both Caroline and Axel died after showing symptoms of colitis — and signs of having been poisoned. They also had life insurance policies.

When Mads passed away on July 30, 1900, it was the only day on which his two life insurance



policies overlapped. While poisoning was again suspected, the family doctor who had been treating him placed the cause of death on heart failure.

An \$8,500 insurance payout allowed Belle to buy a farm on the outskirts of La Porte in 1901. She moved there with her two remain-

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ing children and an adopted girl named Jennie.

A year later, in 1902, Belle remarried, this time to Peter Gunness in La Porte. Eight months later, Peter died. Belle reported that part of a sausage-grinding machine had fallen from a shelf and fatally struck him on the head. Another insurance payout.

Shortly after Peter's death, Belle gave birth to her next child, Philip. Three years later, in 1906, when her adopted child, Jennie, dropped out of sight, Belle casually explained that she had left for school in California.

With Peter dead, Belle managed the farm by hiring workers. She also started taking out matrimonial advertisements in newspapers. Neighbors recalled seeing middle-aged men coming to visit but not ever leaving.

In 1906, she hired a farmhand named Ray Lamphere. When Lamphere grew enraptured with Belle and jealous of her other suitors, he was fired.

The tranquility of La Porte was blown asunder in the early hours of April 28, 1908, when Joe Maxson, hired to replace Lamphere, awoke to the strong odor of fire in his room. Though flames lapped at his feet, he escaped unscathed. The house wasn't so fortunate.

The authorities combed through

the ruins and discovered four bodies. Three were Belle's children: Myrtle, Lucy and Philip. The fourth body — headless — was thought to be that of Belle's, especially after teeth matching hers were discovered in the ashes.

The investigation lasted into the early weeks of May 1908. Crowds gathered to watch as the authorities sifted through the wreckage, soon pulling out corpses from garbage-laden pits 150 feet behind Belle's house. At



Belle, with her children Lucy, Myrtle and Philip

least 10 men, two women and numerous bone fragments were found. The victims had been drugged, bludgeoned, dismembered with a meat cleaver, and doused in lye. Among the dead was Belle's adopted child, Jennie.

The coroner concluded that the headless woman was Belle. In short order, ex-handyman Ray Lamphere was charged with arson and four counts of murder. His trial started Nov. 9, 1908, in a packed county courthouse. Tickets were sold, and overflowing crowds spilled into the hallways and onto the lawn. The story went national.

The testimony and evidence were conflicting, including whether Belle was even dead, which inured to Lamphere's benefit. While he was found guilty of arson, he was acquitted of the murders and sentenced to 20 years.

He was dead, of tuberculosis, within a year.

Epilogue

As he lay dying, Lamphere reportedly made a deathbed confession. Belle, whom he assisted in her murderous ways, was still alive. The headless corpse was that of a

housekeeper, another of Belle's victims. Belle had killed her own children, arranged the bodies in the basement, threw in her false teeth, burned the house and fled. Lamphere helped, but she had betrayed him, leaving by a different route.

Theories of Belle's escape abounded. One had her living in California in 1931 as Esther Carlson, who had been charged with poisoning a wealthy man in order to steal his money. Carlson died of tuberculosis before her trial, and her identity was never confirmed despite a physical resemblance to Belle.

Numerous sightings were made throughout the years in different parts of the country, all to no avail. In November 2007, almost 100 years after the fire, the headless corpse pulled from the scene was exhumed in an effort to learn its true identity. DNA tests were inconclusive, but efforts were ongoing in the hope of finding a reliable source for comparison.

What was true and beyond contradiction, however, was the fate of Belle's children and her many other victims.

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