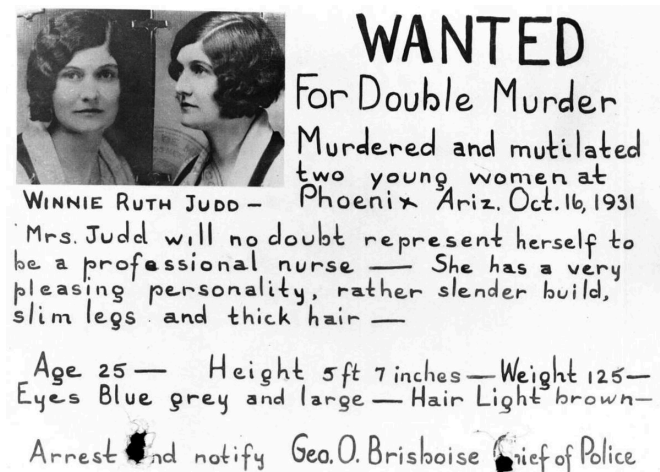


Offbeat Oregon: Oregonians played prominent role in 1930s' most horrific murder

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OREGON DIVORCEE AGNES Anne “Annie” LeRoi arrived in Phoenix in the first few months of 1931 with her best friend and roommate, schoolteacher Hedvig “Sammy” Samuelson. They were climate refugees: Sammy had tuberculosis, and at the time the only cure for “consumption” was a dry climate and rest.

Back then, many patients with TB waited until they were so far gone that the climate couldn’t save them; essentially, they moved to Arizona to die. Sammy wasn’t one of them; her case was mild. But, although she didn’t know it, she, too, was moving to Arizona to die. She had less than nine months to live. So did Annie.

Neither one of them would die of tuberculosis, though.

WHEN THE FIRST WORLD WAR broke out, Dr. William Craig Judd was in his early 30s — a fresh-faced young physician, the scion of a prominent Salem family and a recent graduate of the Willamette University College of Medicine. When the U.S. joined the fighting a few years later, naturally he wasted little time rallying to the colors. Commissioned a first lieutenant, he soon was in France, patching up doughboys on the front lines.

Doctors in the Great War didn’t face off with the enemy over No Man’s Land or swarm “over the top” in bayonet charges, but nobody in the trenches was safe from the number-one killer of the war: artillery shells. And in 1918, a German shell flew through the air with young Lt. Judd’s name on it.

The wounds the shell inflicted were very painful, so Lt. Judd found relief from his suffering the way many Great War soldiers did: from morphine. But unlike the other soldiers, nobody forced him to stop taking the stuff after his wounds healed. As a licensed physician, Dr. Judd was fully empowered to prescribe himself anything he pleased ... and so it was that Dr. William Judd mustered out of the Army with the monkey of morphine addiction clinging tightly to his back.

His career, naturally, did not prosper. He drifted from position to position, dropping lower on the physicians' pecking order with each move. But on his way down the medical hierarchy, he took a position at the Indiana State Hospital; and there he met a vivacious 17-year-old blonde hospital orderly named Winnie Ruth McKinnell, the daughter of a local Methodist minister. Despite being more than twice her age, he fell hard for her, and she for him. Soon they were married; and, when Dr. William found it necessary to move on from Indiana, she accompanied him.

The couple ended up in Mexico, where Dr. William found a job as a company doctor at a copper mine. It was a hard life, and not at all what the new Mrs. Judd had been expecting. Winnie — who went by her middle name, Ruth — was vivacious and outgoing, but she was very slender (less than 120 pounds soaking wet) and not very robust. She suffered two miscarriages in Mexico, which devastated her; she very much wanted a baby.

Then, Ruth caught tuberculosis. Dr. William sent her to convalesce at a facility in California, and she seemed to get better; but when she rejoined him in Mexico, it flared up again. She tried several more times, but by this time Dr. William had lost his copper-mine job and was basically blowing around Mexico from village to village. She couldn't survive the lifestyle, so she returned to the States in 1930, and settled down in Phoenix, taking a job as a governess in wealthy plutocrat Leigh Ford's family home.

A wealthy lumberman named "Happy Jack" Halloran lived next door to the Fords, with his wife and several children. Happy Jack, a notorious philanderer, soon noticed the pretty blonde governess and moved in on her. The legendary Happy Jack charm worked as advertised; a few weeks or months later the two of them were embroiled in a secret affair.

A few more months went by, and she left the Fords' employ — possibly they found out about her nocturnal rendezvous with their neighbor — and took a job as a medical secretary at the Grunow Clinic. The job paid fairly well — well enough to pay for a small place of her own and send a little extra off to help out Dr. William, who had checked himself into a drug-rehab facility in California.

At the clinic, Ruth quickly made friends. Soon she was spending a lot of time with two of her clinic co-workers — a 32-year-old X-ray technician and a 24-year-old orderly, who had just moved to town earlier that year and taken jobs at the clinic.

Their names were Annie LeRoi and Sammy Samuelson.

RUTH'S FRIENDSHIP with Annie and Sammy started out strong, but there was a problem in their relationship right from the start, and that problem's name was Happy Jack Halloran — Ruth Judd's playboy

“side piece.” Whether Ruth introduced the girls to him, or whether they met him in some other way, he was far too much of a hound to not make a move on them. And none of the girls was overmuch pleased at the prospect of sharing him.

The tensions came to a head on Oct. 16 of 1931. That night, Ruth had been invited to come play bridge with Annie and Sammy, but she’d turned them down; she had a date with Happy Jack. But, by 9 p.m. it was clear that Happy Jack was standing her up. So Ruth hopped on the trolley and headed for Annie and Sammy’s place to see if they were still up for some bridge.

When she arrived, she found her two friends loaded for bear. According to Ruth’s later recollections, they were angry because she’d widened Happy Jack’s extramarital dating pool by introducing him to a dishy co-worker earlier in the day — a pretty, single co-worker who they happened to know (or believe) had syphilis. Annie and Sammy called Ruth a slut and threatened to tell Dr. William that his wife was sleeping around with the town wolfhound. She hit back by calling her hosts “perverts” — they were extremely close and lived together like sisters, which had been more than enough to start whispers of lesbianism making the rounds on the local rumor mill.

Furious, Ruth stood up to go. She took her drink cup to drop it off in the kitchen sink. When she got there — well, something happened. Something involving a kitchen knife, a Colt .25 automatic, and possibly another, larger-caliber pistol.

Whatever it was, it resulted in Sammy getting stabbed once and shot three times, in the shoulder, chest, and head; Annie shot at least once, in the head; and Ruth shot in the left hand. Ruth found herself alone, wounded, in the kitchen, with her two ex-friends dead on the floor.

RUTH MADE HER WAY back to her house. Her plan was to call her husband, Dr. William, in California; but when she arrived at her apartment, she found Happy Jack waiting for her. Jack didn’t believe her at first, but when she brought him back to the scene and showed him the aftermath, he quickly took charge. He assured her that he would take care of everything, and helped her clean up the mess. Then he sent her home to bed and called in a marker from a physician friend, who came over and dismembered the corpses so that they would fit into a heavy steamer trunk — probably the one that Annie and Sammy had used to ship their clothes when they moved to Phoenix. The plan was to take the trunk out into the desert and leave it there, far away from anything, hopefully never to be found.

The next day, Ruth was scheduled for a shift at work, and she didn’t want to draw attention to herself by not showing up. When she got home, she found that Jack had changed his mind about taking the trunk out and dumping it in the desert. Instead, he wanted her to check it as baggage on the train, ship it to Los Angeles, and dump it in the ocean. If anybody asked questions, she’d have a great reason for going — her brother and her husband both lived there.

But the trunk turned out to be too heavy to ship. By the time Ruth learned this, Happy Jack had left the house; so Ruth had to repack the corpses into smaller luggage. She did this, managing to fit Sammy in one and most of Annie in another. Annie’s lower torso went into a smaller suitcase by itself.

And then Ruth was off to the train station.

BUT BY THIS TIME, the bodies had been dead for a good 48 hours. Even in late autumn, Phoenix isn't always cool enough to keep decomposition at bay that long. The trunks apparently smelled OK when they went on board, but by the time they arrived in L.A. they had a distinctive smell about them that drew the attention of the baggage crew. One of the trunks was also oozing something liquescent and awful from one corner.

So when Ruth arrived with her brother to pick them up, the baggage handlers refused to release them unless they were opened for inspection. Ruth told them she didn't have the key, and would go get it, and they hurried away. The baggage handlers took another sniff, and called the L.A.P.D.

When the trunks were finally opened, the police thought they would find a deer carcass in them; destination hunters who traveled to Arizona to stalk deer and bear sometimes tried to ship their kills home in trunks. Instead, when they opened the first lid, they found the glassy, sightless eyes of Agnes Anne LeRoi staring up at them.

BY THIS TIME Winnie Ruth Judd had, of course, gone on the lam. After the scene at the train station, she knew it was a matter of hours before the cat would be fully out of the bag; so she had her brother pull over and let her out of the car, and she tried to disappear. It didn't work, of course; it never does. She was captured a few days later trying to hide out at a funeral parlor.

When the story got into the papers, it held the entire country spellbound. Ruth became "The Trunk Murderess" and "The Blonde Butcher" in headlines nationwide, and probably even a few overseas.

In Phoenix, civic boosters quickly closed ranks. In the battle for reputation and growth, small on-the-make cities in the American West could not afford the kind of reputation for lawlessness, cronyism, and anarchy that this story painted their town with. This is probably why almost everyone in Phoenix seemed absolutely determined to see her as a stone-hearted femme fatale of the Bridgid O'Shaughnessy type.

In court, the prosecution's claim was that she'd snuck into the house and shot both the other women in bed, then chopped them up to fit in the trunks, gone in to work a shift, come home, shot herself in the hand so she could claim self-defense, and headed for Los Angeles.

As a story, this narrative barely held together, and it shouldn't have lasted a minute in court under competent cross-examination. The mattresses on which the victims had been supposedly shot — which would be soaked with blood if the story were true — had vanished, allegedly hauled away and disposed of by the 120-pound tubercular defendant, either on foot or in an unmentioned accomplice's car (she did not, of course, have one of her own). Also, the cops had allowed the house where the murders took place to be thrown open for visitors to tour for ten cents a head, so there was no untainted evidence there at all. And, as soon became clear, the bodies had been dismembered by someone with surgical tools and surgical skills — neither of which Ruth had.

But the jury bought it. Her trial was short and one-sided. They sentenced her to hang.

At the last minute, she was judged insane and remanded to the state asylum, where she remained for many years. Finally, in 1971, her sentence was commuted; she moved to California and lived out the remainder of her life there, finally dying in 1998 at the age of 93.

“Happy Jack” Halloran, although he did manage to stay out of prison, didn’t get off completely unscathed. His days as a V.I.P. in Phoenix were over; his business backers pulled out, forcing him to sell his lumber yard for whatever he could get; and he sort of slunk out of town and disappeared from the historical record shortly afterward. He died in Tucson in 1939, in his early 50s.

As for Dr. William Judd, he seems to have never given up on his wife. She was still married to him when, in October 1945, he died at the age of 62.

(Sources: Portland Oregon Journal archives, October 1931; The Trunk Murderess: Winnie Ruth Judd, a book by Jana Bommersbach published in 1992 by Simon & Schuster; murderpedia.org)

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