

A Conversation

with Lisa Melville

Homicide Historian

Montgomery resident Lisa Melville talks to Shifa Mahmood about researching a 1912 murder, digging through old documents, and learning from the past. This local history buff shares her findings in her upcoming book on this long forgotten Orange County homicide.

Orange Magazine: How did you hear about this murder?

Lisa Melville: I am a trustee in the Walden Historical Society and I heard a couple of folks talking about it there. There's an old manuscript about the history of Walden and the murder is mentioned in there, but very generally. So I looked it up and became interested in researching it.

OM: So that's how the journey began.

LM: Yes. The more I dug into it, the more engrossed I became.

OM: You must enjoy history.

LM: I do, very much. Local history is very interesting to me. My mother was into history and got me into it from an early



age. I have a master's degree in history, which is different than my bachelor's in environmental planning, which is my day job. So history is a hobby of mine. I enjoy all aspects of history. Especially the people of the past. The mistakes that people made back then, unfortunately people keep making the same mistakes. You learn that by studying history.

OM: This Walden murder was a mystery at first. Were you into reading mysteries as a kid?

LM: Not only mysteries, more history books. But I really enjoy shows like CSI and Bones, which are about mysteries and murders. I'm interested in how people kill each other and the horrible ways it has happened throughout history.

OM: How long did the research into the murder take?

LM: Actually, because I wasn't working on it full time, it took me about four or five years. I took my time with it and every time I went back to it, I found out more information.

OM: What kind of research did you do?

LM: First I got the actual court case. The case was tried in Newburgh. So I went to Goshen and got the actual case. I read through that and it told me a lot. I went through all the dates in the newspapers from that time. It was a really big story at that time, 1912. Even the New York Times covered it, as well as papers all over the state.

OM: So you went to libraries, looked through microfiche?

LM: Yes, I did some old fashioned research, but the Internet helped a lot too. It's such a great resource. I looked through census records to get some information. The man accused of the murder, Bill Grace, was actually electrocuted at Sing Sing, so I went to their historical society and reviewed the record of his time there. I wanted to cover the story from the beginning to the end.

OM: Wow. When you read about it, it's really a grisly murder.

LM: It is. It's about two brothers from Fall River, Massachusetts who come to live in Walden, NY. Interestingly, Fall River is where the Lizzie Borden murder took place; they grew up about a mile from her. She was accused of murdering her parents with an axe, but she was found innocent. Bill Grace, who had a few different names, was found guilty of

murdering his brother Jack Grace with an axe in Walden. They were working in Walden, and he was going to marry this woman. The problem was that Bill was already married; he was a bigamist. Jack didn't want Bill to marry her, probably because he liked her, so he told Bill that he would reveal their past. Jack was also a bigamist but that fact didn't seem to bother him.

OM: This sounds like the plot of a movie.

LM: It does. It has romance, lies, violence, and murder, so yeah. (Laughs). So Jack was going to tell and Bill got angry and stole his money and jewelry and killed him. Jack was sitting in a Morris chair, and Bill came up behind and hit him with the meat cleaver. Then he left Jack's decomposing body in a building, where it was discovered a few days later.

OM: That's absolutely disgusting. So he was caught.

LM: Yes, he ended up marrying the woman. He had just come back from his honeymoon and was arrested. Technology then was so different. They did have some evidence, like Jack's missing jewelry and money were with Bill, but it was circumstantial. Now, with forensic equipment and testing, they would definitely be able to tell if Bill was guilty.

OM: What did you come away from looking into this murder for so many years?

LM: It's a sad case, because it's a brother versus another brother. Every time I walk in Walden and I pass the building, I think of it. The place is still there. Ultimately it just makes me say, again, people haven't changed that much since then. Problems with family and other people still exist. I think it's important for people to know about where they are living. Because there are other people that come before you and there's a lot to learn there. Soon I think I'm going to look into another mystery, called the Black Hand Murder. It had the same chief of police as this case.

OM: All your research into this murder culminated into a book. It's a nice manuscript. Are you looking for a publisher?

LM: I am. Actually I contacted a couple of them and they suggested that I talk with local publishers, because this is about local interest, a local story. Publishing, it's a whole other world. (Laughs).

OM: I agree. Print publishing is tough, but don't give up. It's a cool story.

LM: Thank you.



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