

Museum News: "Poison is a woman's weapon of choice."

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We have all heard that old canard, which, while not statistically true, seems more often the case. Some of the most famous murders in history were committed by a woman with a bottle of poison.

Even our little town has had its cases of poisoning. A total of seven men died by accidental poisoning at Dead Man's Tank in north Terrell County back in 1911. It made national headlines and the true cause and true culprit was never determined.

But without a doubt, the most sensational poisoning in the annals of Terrell County crime history occurred in 1931 when young Bessie Mae Rivers Sharp administered three doses of rat poison to her unsuspecting cowboy husband, Telefus Sharp, on the Big Canyon Ranch. As they say, the third time's the charm, and after the last dose, he did not recover.

Bessie and Telefus had known each other for a long time and had married just out of high school. Telefus was that kind of guy that everybody loves...outgoing, good looking, charming, athletic...he had it all going for him. And he was beloved by his friends and family. Everybody loved Telefus.

Bessie Mae Rivers came from London, Texas, and soon fell madly in love with Telefus. They married in 1928, and the next year, little Jack was born. Telefus landed a job with the Big Canyon Ranch and they moved out to the ranch to begin their new family life. And that is where the trouble began.

In that day and age, the sprawling Big Canyon Ranch hired many cowboys and herders. Shortly after moving to the ranch, Telefus introduced a co-worker, Willie Burselson, to Bessie Mae. He was an older man and quite handsome.

Soon, friendship turned to flirtation, which in turn brought about an illicit affair. Telefus was a nice boy, but that was just it...he was a boy, and Bessie Mae wanted a real man. Willie was enamored and he wanted Bessie Mae to divorce Telefus and move in with him, or at least, that's what Bessie Mae thought. But Bessie Mae did not want to go through the long divorce proceedings. She wanted a quicker solution to her problem. In her immature, 20-year-old mind, murder was an acceptable solution, but Willie would have none of that. She could not talk him into taking care of the matter, so she took matters into her own hands.

On Tuesday, April 28, 1931, Bessie Mae made her first attempt. She offered Telefus a cup of hot cocoa laced with a half teaspoonful of strychnine...rat poison. After one sip, Telefus refused the rest, complaining that it was too bitter. Just that one sip, though, made him very ill and he spent the night in pain and distress. However, by morning he was feeling a little better and was making a recovery. Bessie Mae talked him into taking castor oil to settle his stomach, which he thought was a good idea.

This time, he became violently ill from the second half-teaspoonful of rat poison that she had put into the castor oil. He was rushed to Sanderson for medical treatment, and by Saturday, May 2, he was able to get out of bed and move about town, visiting with friends.

On Sunday, he and Bessie Mae went back to the ranch, but he still wasn't feeling well. He asked Bessie Mae to mix up a dose of Epsom salts, which was used internally to settle stomach distress, a popular and effective medicine. But along with his Epsom salts, she administered a third half-teaspoonful of rat poison. The new dose made him violently ill and they made a mad dash back to the doctor in Sanderson. But this time, he did not respond to treatment, and by 11:30 p.m. Sunday night, he was dead.

The town was shocked to learn of his death. Bessie Mae went into hysterics and put on a good show for the mourners at the funeral. But she couldn't keep her mouth shut.

At the gathering of family and friends after the funeral, relatives overheard some strange remarks from Bessie Mae. Almost immediately their suspicions were aroused. The family got together and decided to send his viscera to Austin to be tested to see what actually killed Telefus. They weren't so sure his was a natural death. They were shocked at the results. Telefus had died of acute strychnine intoxication...he was poisoned!



When Bessie Mae was questioned in an all-night session at the sheriff's office, her demeanor changed from grieving and distraught widow to a cold, hard woman. Almost immediately she admitted that she had poisoned her husband, but she said it was Burleson who suggested the poisoning. When Burleson was questioned, he admitted to the affair, which had gone on for several months, but he vehemently denied that he had instigated the poisoning. He claimed that she came up with that on her own, that he only wanted her to divorce Telefus. Enough was learned to place both under arrest for first degree murder, he, eventually, with a \$5000 bond and she with bond denied. And so, they were incarcerated in the brand new jail that had been built on the third floor of the new courthouse.

After about two weeks, Burleson paid his bail and got out of jail. At the bail hearing, Bessie Mae, who had been cold and calculating and quiet, suddenly became animated and began to cry out and pull her hair and talk in a simpering baby voice, whining "Why can't I get out on bail?" She became so hysterical that the doctor had to be summoned to give her a tranquilizer. It turns out she had been refusing to eat the jail food, and would eat only if taken out to a cafe. She was acting like a petulant child.

By June, Bessie Mae was still sitting in jail and had become seriously ill. On advice of her doctor, she was taken to San Antonio by train by the sheriff and her mother, where she underwent major surgery. She made a full recovery, but her troubles were far from over.

Because of the love that was universally felt for Telefus, a Terrell County jury could not be selected for her trial. Everybody despised the young widow and could not be impartial. A change of venue was in order and the trial was moved to Fort Stockton. On July 28, 1933, a full two years after the murder, the Fort Stockton jury delivered their verdict: guilty. But, she was assessed only a two-year sentence in the penitentiary. Her lawyers tried to get her two years waiting for the trial as time served, but the judge would have none of it. She had spent those two years in and out of jails and at institutions for mental observation. She was sent away.

As for Willie Burleson, the local grand jury returned a no bill on his charges and he was released without a court trial. They felt that the plan to murder Telefus Sharp was hers and hers alone.

But, that was not the end of the story. It was brought to the attention of Governor Miriam Ferguson that Bessie Mae Sharp was being incarcerated in the penitentiary when what she really needed was mental counseling. She ordered that Bessie Mae be removed to the state hospital for treatment and to serve her time there. After her release, Bessie Mae Sharp dropped from sight. In the aftermath of the murder and arrest, the young orphan Jack was raised by his grandparents.