



Gilbert Gia's Historic Bakersfield and Kern County

Murder At Mill Ditch, 1923

ver2

Gilbert Gia © 2003, Bakersfield, California

Many years ago two little girls explored Union Cemetery while their daddy wept at their mother's grave. In a neglected corner of the grounds the children found an unusual marker that told of a heinous murder.

On April 19, 1923, just before midnight, San Joaquin Light & Power canal watchman J.L. Copher was staring idling at the Mill Ditch water-intake pipe. Copher's job was to removed branches and debris that hung up on the north Union Avenue plant's intake grate. In the failing light he saw a glimmer from what looked like the patent leather shoes of a doll that had washed up on the steel bars. Copher hooked the object with a gaffing pole, pulled it out of the water, and stepped into the boiler room. "I found a doll out there. Come see it." In better light they saw the body of a toddler, yet warm in death. The child was about eighteen months-old with wavy black hair. He was wearing a pinkish-plaid dress, black-buttoned patent-leather shoes. and knee-high white stockings. Two little scratches were on his nose and one on his ear.

The steam plant, in 1923, was between 30th and Columbus Streets and about one-half block west of Union Avenue. It was bordered on the west by the Mill Ditch and on the east by the Lake Street Canal.¹

Within an hour police had arrived and were searching up and down Mill Ditch. When Detectives Tice and Kays examined the boy's clothing they found no labels- everything was hand-made, as was his cap that floated into the grate just minutes after Copher recovered the child's body. Had the little boy wandered to the edge of the canal and fallen

¹ Today is an array of PG&E high-tension transformers on the north side of 30th St. and next to a cold storage plant.

in? The banks of the two canals here were steep, but the nearest houses were in the Homeare tract more than a half mile south. Authorities speculated that the parents might have been on the road and made their camp on a flat section of ground next to the canal banks. Had the parents, too, fallen into the fast moving current? Police searched the canal banks and knocked on doors around Union Avenue and Nile Street. Other officers visited an auto camp that was about a mile south at Union and California. At two AM Friday morning police abandoned the search, but it was generally agreed that come light they would probably find another body in the canal.

That night the sheriff sent out a description of the child went to every town on the coast: Found drowned an unnamed, olive-skinned 18 month-old child, maybe Mexican or Spanish, or Italian, or Syrian, with dark curly hair.

Before sunup the canal flow was shut off at Four Weirs. Police assumed that a second body would be found downstream from the steam plant.² At three that afternoon someone noticed the folds of a dress rippling in two feet of water. It was a woman's body that had been wired to a bucket of sand. Mortician J.C Flickinger stated that the woman was Mexican, between twenty and twenty-five years old, and about 110 pounds and five-feet two-inches tall. Her face and head had been terribly beaten, and her body appeared to have been in the water two days. A hundred feet further upstream police searched an area of tall grass between the canals. There they found mashed-down, blood-saturated grass, a thin, bloodied blanket, a man's wet undershirt and dry socks, and a rock covered in dried blood. They also found a half-empty baby bottle.

In 1923, 22,000 residents called Bakersfield home, and friendships and social connections ran deep. By Monday, thousands of residents filed through Flickinger's mortuary to view the dead woman and child, but none recognized them. Later that day a report from Earlimart said that a woman and child had been seen at a restaurant a few days earlier with two men, one very tall one and one short. Another report came Wednesday when several residents said that a woman and her baby were seen in the company of two Mexican men at the auto camp near Union and California. Witnesses remembered that a fourteen year-old girl was with them, and she'd driven away with them. Witnesses

recalled that the party returned without the girl. The morning that the drowned baby was found, two men were seen driving away from the auto camp in an old Ford. The murdered woman's heel prints matched those found at the auto camp.

Dan McDonald was among those who visited the mortuary. He lived near Union and California, and he recognized the woman and child as being at the camp. McDonald recalled that one of the men in the party was about six-feet tall and thirty-five or forty years-old. The other man was considerably shorter and was only about twenty. Mr. D.A, Sanderson of 704 24th Street offered a similar story. There was now considerable reason to believe that the woman and child had been with the camping party.

On April 26 further information came to light. D.H. Wheeler, an official interpreter, told the story like this: Six months earlier a man named Tranquillo Luvino was living at Hanford with his wife and three daughters. The oldest was fourteen, the middle one ten-- and he had a year-old boy. Also living with Luvino and his wife was an unrelated male boarder. About six months ago, Luvino became suspicious of the boarder and ordered him out of the house. Shortly after this, Luvino's wife had her husband arrested, and he served fourteen days in jail. When returned home, he found that his family was gone. Neighbors told him they had left with the boarder. Luvino explained to police that he'd been looking for his family ever since. Officers drove Luvino to the mortuary, and he looked at the child and cried, "That's my baby! There can be no mistake of that." When he saw the woman, he was not sure who it was, but evidence of number of small scars on the body, the teeth, and the peculiar shape of the finger on the right hand convinced him it was his wife. Luvino mentioned that his mother-in-law lived in Los Angeles, and a few days later Los Angeles police located his wife and children at the mother-in-law's.

A week passed without further leads, and nine days after the bodies were found, Coroner N.C. Houze held an inquest. His report revealed details that had not appeared in the newspaper, and those details complicated the mystery even more: drowned child was probably not the murdered woman's son. Dr. C.A. Morris who did the autopsy wrote that the slain woman had never born children, however, she was eight to twelve weeks pregnant. The violent trauma to her body was from

² Four Weirs is near the intersection of Panorama Drive and Manor Street.

the shoulders up. Both of her eyes were bruised, and her nose was swelled from a beating. Wounds to the back of her head and temples, and the cuts on the face were judged to have been caused by the bloody rock police found near the scene of the crime. Although the woman's skull was not fractured, battering from the rock caused brain damage, and she had also been stabbed in the neck. That trauma caused her death.

Tracks found on the grass suggested that the killer had dragged her body to the bank of Mill Ditch, filled a discarded five gallon paint can with sand, and wired it to her body before dumping the woman into the canal. Dr. Morris did not find water in the lungs and so concluded that she was dead before she was dumped in the canal. It appeared that he'd wiped his bloody hands on the blanket. Other tracks in the grass fifty feet further downstream suggested that he'd reentered the canal and wired the floating body to a stand of tules growing there.

The coroner also reported that at the auto camp on California Avenue police found three and one-half-inch tire tracks of a Ford or Chevrolet. The tracks matched those found near the killing. The woman's high-heel footprints and those of a man's size 11 shoe suggested they had exited the car on its right-hand side, which opened the possibility that a third person had driven them to the secluded area by the power plant. A puddle of motor oil on the ground indicated the car had been parked for some time.³

At 2:00 pm Tuesday, following the inquest, Reverend Dominguez of the Spanish mission held a funeral service and two coffins were temporarily placed in crypts at Bakersfield Memorial Park Mausoleum near Union Cemetery.

Three days after internment, *Bakersfield Californian* headlines read, "Crazed Man Raves Over Dual Crime. Man Jailed at San Pedro Believed To Be Murderer." Raymond Sanchez, 23, was arrested after he attacked three men in a bakery wagon. The reporter wrote, "Sanchez was in a semi-nude state, with his hair disheveled and an insane light in his eyes." As police carried Sanchez away, he muttered that he had thrown a baby into a ditch near Bakersfield.

Deputy Sheriff Phil Fickert hoped that Sanchez was the killer, but there were already too many false leads and more would surely come;

³ The murders occurred between the two canals about half way between 34th Street and West Jeffrey.

Chief Stone sent photographs and information about the dead woman and child to more than a thousand jewelry stores in Southern California. Jeweler's marks had been discovered inside a watch in the murdered woman's pocket, and on the watchband was the name "Bennie".

On April 9, 1924, about two weeks shy of a year following the murders, the remains of the mother and child were quietly removed from the mausoleum and buried together in grave number 1561C in potter's field.

Directions to the grave are essential if you care to place a remembrance because potter's field has few landmarks. The entrance to Union Cemetery is near the southwest corner of King and Potomac Streets. On the right as you enter is the administration building. Turn immediately left, and continue south. The road will curve right and then head west. At the first intersection, turn left, or south, and in seconds you will be at potter's field. These grounds are not landscaped, and depending on the time of year they could be either full of weeds, or simply bare dirt. About half way down this road stop at the last tree on your left. The grave lies to your left in the direction of King Street.

From the tree, count five paces north in the direction you came from. Look to your right, or east, and spot a three and one-half-foot concrete cross marked "Lopez." Count 50 paces toward the cross. A smooth, elevated, dark granite monument, a few inches higher on one end than the other, is nearby.

Those who know headstones told me it was probably placed much later than 1924. But I don't think so. My mother told me that about 1930 when she and her sister played in the cemetery, when she was just old enough to read fairly well, the marker said the same thing that it says today: "Here sleeps an unknown mother and her infant son mysteriously murdered April 18, 1923 and sympathetically buried by residents of Kern County."
