

So I'm guessing when people think of murderers, the same names always come to mind...and usually men. Well there have also been female murderers throughout history. Elizabeth Bathory, Mary Bell, Delphine Lalaurie, Lizzie Bourdon..to name a few. But I am here to tell a family member's story. I discovered when researching my family history on my mom's side years ago...that there's a murderer in our bloodline..that god it was by marriage! LOL But here is the story of Cordelia Botkin.

Cordelia Brown Bodkins:

B: 1854

D: March 7, 1910 in San Quentin prison

Married my ancestor, Malcolm A. "Welcome" Bodkins on September 22, 1872.

Cordelia Bodkins, is a murderer, who died in San Quentin prison.

In the year 1895, she meets 30 year old John P. Dunning, while sitting on a park bench in San Francisco, California. John P. Dunning was married with a daughter. That didn't stop him and Cordelia from entering into an affair. Cordelia claimed estrangement from her husband, Welcome Bodkins. Days after their meeting they started the affair. During the next two years, Dunning was seen by neighbors as a frequent guest at the Bodkins house on Geary Street. Besides cheating on his wife, and on occasion Cordelia Botkins, Dunning began to drink and lose money at the racetrack. He was fired from his job, and his wife took their daughter home to her family in Delaware. While his family was in Delaware, he moved in with Cordelia. Two months after they moved in together where Cordelia resided at the Victoria Hotel on Hyde Street, Dunning received a reporting assignment to cover the Spanish-American War from Cuba and Puerto Rico. Before leaving San Francisco, Dunning had more bad news for Cordelia. He missed his wife and daughter, and when he came back, he was going home to them. The affair was over, but not in Cordelia's mind.

Soon after Dunning left, his wife started receiving anonymous letters mailed from San Francisco the summer of 1898. These letters referring to her husband's affair with an interesting and pretty woman. The letters were signed, A Friend. In August Mrs. Dunning received an anonymous note signed, "With love to yourself and baby. Mrs. C." The latter communication was accompanied by a Cambric handkerchief and a box of chocolates.

On August 9th 1898, after dinner at the Pennington House, Elizabeth passed the mystery box of bonbons to family and friends gathered that evening on the front porch. The group of four adults and three children, included Mrs. Dunning's sister, Leila Deane and Mrs. Dunning's daughter, Mary. A few of those gathered on the porch passed up the chocolate while Mrs. Dunning and her sister helped themselves to several pieces. That night, everyone who ate the candy became sick. Mrs. Dunning and her sister, having eaten so much of the chocolate, became violently ill. On August 20th, 11 days after the candy arrived in the mail, Leila Deane died. The next day Mrs. Dunning passed away. Both women had

suffered extremely painful and agonizing deaths. The presumed cause of their deaths: Cholera morbus, a common ailment in the era before refrigeration. John Dunning, still overseas when he received the news, arrived back in Dover ten days later. When John Pennington showed him the anonymous letters, including the note that had come with the chocolates, Dunning simply said, "Cordelia."

Mr. Pennington, Suspecting that his daughters had been poisoned by the candy, had the uneaten chocolates analyzed by a chemist who worked for the state. The chemist reported that some of the remaining chocolates had been spiked with arsenic. Autopsies were not performed on the bodies because the physician in charge believed that the victims' prolonged vomiting had cleansed their bodies of the poison. Had toxicology, as a forensic science, existed in 1898, a toxicologist would have known that although arsenic, a heavy metal poison, is excreted from the damaged cells, traces are sequestered in the victim's bone, fingernails and head hair. The discovery of the poison in the candy prompted a coroner's inquest. When presented with the basic facts of the case, the coroner's jury ruled that the two women had been poisoned to death by the arsenic-laced candy which had been mailed from San Francisco.

Although the deaths had occurred in Dover, the authorities in Delaware requested that the case be investigated by the San Francisco Police Department. A pair of Dover police officers, bearing the key evidence- the candy, the paper it had been wrapped in, and the anonymous writings-boarded a train for San Francisco. The man who would be leading the investigation, I.W. Lees, he had been appointed chief of the San Francisco Police Department the previous year. He had been, as captain of the detective bureau, a high-profile investigator who had solved several big cases. He was also an innovator, in 1854 Lees became the first American police administrator to regularly photograph arrestees. As a result, the San Francisco Police Department had a large rogues gallery. Lees had used daguerreotype photograph until 1859, then had switched to the colloidin wet process, allowing the permanent mounting of the photographs in record books. Chief Lees, convinced that his prime suspect, Cordelia Botkins, would break down and confess if arrested, found her at her sister's house in Heraldsburg and placed her under arrest for the murders of Elizabeth Dunning and Leila Deane. Because the suspect vehemently proclaimed her innocence, Lees was forced to solve the case the hard way, by conducting a detailed, painstaking investigation. He began by tracing the arsenic to the Owl Drug Store on market Street where a clerl had sold arsenic, in June of 1898, to a woman meeting the description of Cordelia Botkins. Lees also questioned an acquaintance of the suspect who told him that Mrs. Botkins also told this woman she was worried about having to sign her name at the post office when sending registered mail. The acquaintance had assured Cordelia that she would not have to sign her name on either occasion. Lees also spoke to a physician who had been asked by Cordelia to describe the effects of various poisons on the human body.

When Lees searched Mrs. Botkins' room at the Victoria Hotel, he found the wrapping paper, bearing a gold seal and a company trademark, that had enclosed the chocolates in the candy box. From this he learned that the bonbons had been purchased from the Haas Candy Store in San Francisco. A sales clerk at the store remembered the customer who had purchased the candy because the woman had wanted half a box because she planned to add in her own, homemade chocolate. The clerk's physical description of this customer fit the description of Cordelia Botkins. To Identify the person who

had addressed the mailed package, and penned the questioned document, examiner Daniel T. Ames, didn't have far to look. The San Francisco based expert was considered the preeminent handwriting man in the course-of-business handwriting with the writings in the questioned documents brought to San Francisco from Dover, he confidently announced that Cordelia Botkins, to the exclusion of all others, had written the questioned material. Two other document examiners brought into the case, Carl Eisenschimmel and Theodore Kytka, agreed with Ames that Cordelia Botkins had written the letters as well as the address on the package of chocolates.

This was all still circumstantial. There was one problem. Not all of the candy in the box had been spiked with arsenic, and since autopsies had not been performed on the dead sisters, there was no direct proof that they had died from arsenic poisoning. Still, to draw any other conclusion from these facts would not have been reasonable. In October 1898, Lees presented his case to the grand jury, which returned an indictment charging Cordelia Botkins with two counts of murder in the first-degree.

Amid intense media coverage, the Botkins trial began in early December. On the first day of the proceedings, five hundred spectators were lined up outside the courthouse door. Having pled not guilty, Cordelia Botkins, sat stiffly at the defense table dressed in black, holding a white lace handkerchief. She showed thinning hair, on the stand. Dunning admitted having an affair with the defendant as well as three other women in San Francisco. When, on cross examination, he was asked to identify the other three women, he refused. When Dunning refused the judge's order to reveal their names, he was held in contempt and hauled off to jail. A few hours later, when the defense attorney withdrew the question, Dunning was back in the courtroom. In the wake of the impressive testimony of Daniel Ames and the other two document examiners, the burden of guilt shifted to the defense, that is, unless Cordelia Botkins could prove she wasn't the writer of the questioned documents, she would be convicted. Ames and the other two handwriting experts had used impressive courtroom exhibits in the form of word charts highlighting the similarities in the questioned and known sets of writing. At the close of the questioned document phase of the case, the prosecution rested.

Given the persuasiveness of the prosecution's evidence, the defense had no choice but to put Cordelia Botkins on the stand, a move that thrilled the press and the millions of people following the case. Cordelia did not deny that she had purchased the arsenic in June, 1898, explaining that she had used the poison to clean a straw hat. Moreover, the arsenic she had purchased was powdered, and the arsenic in the candy was crystalline. On the dates the candy was purchased, and the package mailed, the defendant produced alibi evidence that was not substantiated with back-up testimony. Following Botkins' stint on the stand, the defense rested its case. The jury would have to choose whether they believed the defendant, or the prosecution's three expert handwriting witnesses.

After four hours of deliberation, the jury returned its verdict: guilty, on two counts of first degree murder. The jurors, impressed by the prosecution's handwriting evidence, had spent most of their time in the jury room arguing over whether to recommend the death sentence, or life in prison. In the end, the jury decided to recommend life. Perhaps, because she was an attractive woman, and the case against her was circumstantial, the jury chose to spare the defendant's life. In 1898, had a man confessed to killing two people this way, he would have surely been hanged.

Cordelia could have been sent to San Quentin prison to serve her sentence, but the judge worried what would happen to her there, sent her to the county jail in San Francisco where, in exchange for sexual favors, Cordelia would come and go as she pleased. A few months after sentencing her, the judge saw Cordelia shopping in downtown San Francisco. While Cordelia shopped downtown, her lawyer appealed her conviction on a procedural issue. The appellate court's overturning of her murder convictions, led, in 1904, to a second, less sensational, trial. Once again, on the strength of the handwriting testimony, Cordelia was convicted and sentenced to life. Two years later, after the great earthquake destroyed the county Jail where she was serving her sentence, Cordelia was transferred to San Quentin. In 1908, she applied for parole on the basis of bad health, a motion that was denied. On March 7, 1910, at the age of fifty-six, she died. The official cause of death : "Softening of the brain, due to melancholy."