

## In the death of Doctor Mary Sherman, strange myths pale next to stranger facts

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At 4 a.m. July 21, 1964, a seemingly routine call came into [New Orleans police](#). Juan Valdes, a tenant at the Patios Apartments on St. Charles Avenue, could smell smoke. Officers arrived at the scene to find a blaze in Apartment J, at the back of the building.

Firefighters hauled out a burning mattress, and found the body of Dr. Mary Sherman lying face up on the floor. She was severely burned on her right side. Her liver, intestines and charred lung were exposed. And her right arm and right torso were gone.

Blood spatter on the walls, floor and chest indicated she had been stabbed there in her apartment. She was sliced through the heart and several times in the abdomen and on her left arm, possible self-defense wounds.

Aside from the bed, there was minimal fire damage to the room. The curtains and furniture were unaffected. A look at the door locks uncovered no conclusive evidence of a break-in. Sherman's white purse, her jewelry, even prescription drugs were all still there.

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[See a hand-written list of the objects that detectives first found in Sherman's apartment.\)](#)

Neighbors told police that Sherman's car, a white 1960 Valiant, was missing from its usual parking spot at the complex at [3101 St. Charles Ave](#). Detectives found it at 1:08 p.m. that day, about nine blocks from Sherman's house, parked in the 2600 block of Chestnut Street. A tube of lipstick, an empty Diet-Rite can and a black perfume dispenser lay on the street. A spent cartridge of a tear gas container was found nearby. The car's keys were missing until the following day, when a man clipping a hedge three blocks away, at 1233 Conery St., found them. No fingerprints were recovered.

The coroner ruled that Sherman had been killed by a stab wound in the heart.

Though the murder occurred 50 years ago Monday, it remains unsolved. And theorists and crime writers have alleged a government cover-up as well as connections to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, which occurred eight months prior.

But a 117-page police report and 70 pages of case files recently obtained by [NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune](#) paints only a picture of detectives tracking leads that went nowhere. The report contains no obvious smoking gun, no definite suspect to the crime. But it does show police tracking down what they at one point describe as the "word on the street" with little other support: that the murder was a crime of passion, committed by a woman who was involved with Sherman.

In the interest of that hunch, detectives scurry around French Quarter hangouts while giving less weight to the testimony of those that Sherman spent most of her time with: the doctors she worked alongside at Ochsner, where she was recruited to work in 1952.

On the day after the murder, John L. Ochsner walked into Sherman's lab and told residents, "You better have a good alibi." As he recalled in an interview with documentary filmmaker Stephen Tyler, he had made the comment in jest - an example of a doctor's gallows humor - but from the very first interview conducted at Ochsner, as reported in the case file, administrators told police to look at other hospital residents or at one of Sherman's "deranged patients."

Rather than focus on those suspicions, the report shows detectives looking in every other direction. In an investigation that lasted five years, detectives questioned at least 104 people and snooped around 49 locales in the New Orleans metro area - from dive bars in the French Quarter to Moisant Airport, where flight records might reveal the names of those who fled the crime by air.

[\(Read an NOPD release to The Times-Picayune in 1965, making public various aspects of the investigation.\)](#)

The report contains a never-publicized letter from the [Metropolitan Crime Commission](#), which reported receiving a call from an anonymous woman. The woman said that Sherman was "the second one of my friends here at Oschner who has been mysteriously killed in the past year." She told the MCC that Latin Americans, wrapped in casts, were coming into the Ochsner clinic and disseminating drugs in a narcotics operation that went all the way up to Mafia boss [Carlos Marcello](#).

[\(Read the MCC letter to NOPD.\)](#)

Those allegations do not appear, in the police report, to have ever been taken seriously.

### **Who was Doctor Mary Sherman?**

Born in Chicago in 1913, Sherman was trained to sing opera by her father, a voice instructor, and studied in Paris before returning to receive a medical degree from the University of Chicago. An internationally-known orthopedic surgeon

known for her work in the treatment and research of bone cancers, she was the director of the bone pathology lab at Ochsner Medical Foundation. Somehow, Sherman still found time to mingle with the literary set in the French Quarter - including novelist Max White and playwright Chris Blake, whose work she once supported with a \$2,000 check.

They must have been an entertaining crew, to balance the dryness of hospital work. Her best friend, a doctor named Carolyn Talley, told officers that Sherman had warned her about going to White's apartment - Talley would not like him much. Officers did not either. White spoke "in a typical novelist's fashion, being very dramatic," the police recorded.

[\(Read the police interview of Max White.\)](#)

Some New Orleanians hearing about Sherman's strange death would not need a novelist's imagination to compare the crime to the assassination of John F. Kennedy. For District Attorney Jim Garrison, the connection was in the fact that Sherman studied cancer, that [an alleged associate of Lee Harvey Oswald's had an amateur interest in cancer research](#), and that the man who shot Oswald before he could stand trial - Jack Ruby - died shortly after of cancer.

For writer Ed Haslam, a child in New Orleans at the time of Sherman's murder, Garrison's theory inspired him to launch his own investigation. Haslam believes that Sherman was involved in covert research that involved the use of a linear particle accelerator, which he says electrocuted Sherman and burned away half of her body. His theory connects Sherman to Lee Harvey Oswald's alleged associate [David Ferrie](#) and a vast government cover-up, but ends with a theory on the advent of the AIDS virus.

In August 1964, investigators systematically dismantled Sherman's apartment. They took note of the black-and-white dotted dress she had laid out before her murder, and pulled aside objects they wanted to put into evidence. But not before a thorough walkthrough by the executor of Sherman's estate, described in the report as attorney John L. Glover, who worked for the New Orleans' firm Monroe & Lemann. Partner Stephen B. Lemann has been alleged by JFK theorists to have been chief over all New Orleans-based CIA operatives.

And though police did interview the young couple living between Sherman and Juan Valdes, who called in the fire, they did not find what Stephen Tyler found when he interviewed them decades later. Owen Hawes and Victoria Hawes Sulzer recalled to Tyler how Valdes, with an interest in orchids, would have rare flowers delivered to his home; that Valdes could be heard flushing his toilet over and over; and that police officers would stomp in and out of his home at all hours. Quirky New Orleans character, or drug-ring kingpin running with corrupt officers? The Hawes did not claim to know. Sulzer, who went to middle school with Oswald, remembered Oswald coming by the apartment one time, knocking on their door, and asking "Where's Juan Valdes?"

To Tyler, who has spent a decade at work on a documentary on the case, the mystery that swirls around Sherman's death typifies life in this city, where run-ins with the crazed, the violent, and the wonderful are part of the daily grind.

"New Orleans embraces bizarre characters. It tolerates them. And on the micro-level, these people typified or exemplified New Orleans characters," Tyler said. "On the macro-level, people talk about six degrees of separation. This is more like two degrees of separation. That fascinates me. Because out of one hundred cases of two degrees of separation, maybe one of them means something."

### **The theories, and the forensics**

Haslam's theory on the Sherman crime is rooted in his single belief that her body - as documented in photographs taken in a coroner's examination - could not have been burned in an ordinary house fire. "Here is the big point," Haslam said. "She did not die in her apartment."

But three forensic pathologists who reviewed the photos and police report disagreed. All three said a normal fire could have caused the severe burn [shown in the photos](#) that incinerated Sherman's right arm and trunk, exposing her liver, intestines and a charred lung. The unevenness of the burn - her left side of the body, legs and feet appear to be relatively untouched - is only indicative that someone doused the affected area with an accelerant and likely lit the mattress or something else on fire and placed it on top of her, said Dr. Gregory Davis, an assistant state medical examiner in Kentucky with 28 years' experience.

"Acid wouldn't do that, lye wouldn't do that - this is heat," Davis said. "This is fire. It could be nothing else."

Another forensic pathologist, Dr. Scott Denton, an Illinois coroner's physician, noted that the burned mattress, of which the box springs are visible in a photo, "accounts for the severe fire burns to the right side of her body." He said based on the photos and the report, he believed Sherman was stabbed to death then "partially burned after death to attempt to conceal the homicide, all right in that room."

Both Davis and Denton said it appeared Sherman died of a stab wound to the heart, not smoke inhalation, indicating the fire was set after she died.

"This does not fall into any unusual hair-raised-on-the-back-of-my-neck type of crime," Davis said.

A third forensic pathologist, Dr. Judy Melinek of San Francisco, however, said the poor quality of the photos and lack of a toxicology report and autopsy records made it difficult to make a conclusive judgment. "I just find it strange that the upper extremity (bone and all) was completely incinerated, while the rest of the torso spared," she wrote in an email. "If the body was stabbed and burned elsewhere and then dumped in the apartment at a later time (minus the fragile disarticulated upper limb) that might explain" the lack of fire damage to the apartment and the uneven burn pattern.

It's that burn pattern that helped cement the conspiracy theory for Joan Mellen, a New Jersey-based author whose suspicions are aligned with Haslam's.

"No way that that part of her body that was mutilated was done by a fire," Mellen said. "It had to be something much stronger. Was she cut then to make it

look like a murder? I think yes. She was murdered after she was dead. It seems absurd, and yet it's true."

In Mellen's book, she quotes Frank Hayward - the lead detective on the case, who died in 2007 - as saying he believed the murder may have been committed by the very man who called police in to discover the body: Juan Valdes.

And the case file stowed away for 50 years reveals that although Valdes was responsible for halting the blaze - by alerting police to it - he was still a somewhat suspect character. Valdes' former landlady told police Valdes had made "obscene advances or suggestions" toward one of her employees, and a prominent attorney told the Metropolitan Crime Commission of similar advances Valdes had made. A young couple nearby had placed a restraining order on Valdes. A year later, a tenant of the Patios Apartment building told police that Valdes would tell and re-tell the story of Sherman's murder, making claims he had known Sherman well - information he had not initially given to police when he told them: "She would only say 'Good Morning' and at other times, she would just walk by you."

Valdes' initial account of Sherman is closer to what doctors at Ochsner recalled to police. "She was a person who kept to herself, was rough on new doctors," Robert Brumfield is quoted in the report as saying. Sherman was known by her colleagues as a brilliant doctor and a "ball buster," as former resident Gordon MacFarland remembered in an interview conducted by Tyler six months before MacFarland's death in 2008. "She didn't suffer fools," MacFarland said.

Police sought but never found a murder weapon similar to a scalpel, described by a lieutenant as "an autopsy knife." Could it have been the same weapon used on the morning after the murder on the 1800 block of Mandeville Street, where a 72-year-old man reported that a young man approached with a surgical instrument and "attempted to cut him," the report read. In the man's opinion, the lunatic was on "dope." And on July 23, another doctor at Ochsner - Carolyn Talley -- received a threatening phone call. "Dr. Talley will be next," said a man's voice. Could the killer have been a hospital worker who knew both doctors?

But at the hospital, police probed not for evidence of problem patients or disgruntled residents. Rather, they searched Sherman's office "for any evidence of her personal life with negative results," the file reads. In an interview in December, detectives started questioning doctors specifically about a resident who had worked under Sherman, Stanley Stumpf.

Stanley Stumpf had worked alongside Sherman at Ochsner in 1964 as Sherman's resident - one of the names that Ochsner doctors immediately gave to police as suspect. Ochsner doctors interviewed in Tyler's documentary remembered Stumpf coming in for surgery on the night of the murder, when he was off shift and making a fuss of his presence, as though creating an alibi. "In a case full of apocryphal stories, this is one of them," Tyler said.

[\(Doctors tell police about Stanley Stumpf in 1964.\)](#)

But police never interviewed Stumpf. On Jan. 31 1969, a West Jefferson Medical

Center pharmacist named Doris Haindel told police about the strange man she had been dating, and had placed a restraining order on.

Haindel, a pharmacist, told police that when she and Stumpf began dating, she quickly learned he was a drug addict and his behavior started to frighten her, she told police. Stumpf would talk about Sherman at strange moments. Haindel said Stumpf carried a tear gas canister - of the sort found at Sherman's discarded car - and that in his trunk he would regularly carry "a chain saw, a can of gasoline, a sharpener for his saw, an ax, all of his fishing equipment." Haindel told police that after she cut off his supply to the pharmacy, Stumpf had threatened her. She placed a restraining order against him.

Neither of the theorists who have dwelled on Sherman's murder - Tyler or Haslam - makes a claim to know what happened. "I would never make such a claim," Tyler said. "I don't know who killed her." To Haslam, withheld evidence of a 50-year-old crime makes the task impossible. The FBI will not release to him Sherman's address book - a piece of evidence in what is still an open case - without the redaction of one name he suspects to be Oswald. Police will not show him a blood-stained glove. "I'm one guy with a word processor," Haslam said on the Thursday before the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her murder. "I don't have a staff, I don't have subpoena power. I just piece things together."

And to those that knew Sherman, her death remains a terrible hole. Like Haslam, Michael Rachal, an administrator at Loyola University, was 12 years old when Sherman was murdered. A patient of hers, whom she worked with closely, Rachal said he is still deeply moved by her memory. "To this day, I still get tears in my eyes when I think about this tragedy," he said. "Recently, while searching for a file, I came across the original newspaper reporting her death and teared up reading it."

"She was my hero and would have been for many others if she had the opportunity to continue living. Her absence has left a hole in my life that will never be filled."