

FAQ 51
(August 2, 2007)

51.1

Q: I have read varying reports on how Elizabeth Short's body was first discovered. Did the police ever identify and interview the original witness?

Yes.

The reporting witness' name was Betty Bersinger. She was a resident of the neighborhood and lived just one block north of the vacant lot, at 3705 Norton Ave.

On the morning of January 15, 1947, at approximately 10:45 a.m., Mrs. Bersinger, accompanied by her 3-year-old daughter, Anne, was walking south on Norton and spotted a body in the vacant lot. She quickly grabbed her daughter into her arms and ran south to the nearest house; where she used the neighbor's phone to call the police. Mrs. Bersinger described the residence location where she called the police as being, "the second house from 39th St. on Norton, a doctor's I think."

BELOW 1947 HERALD EXAMINER PHOTO SHOWS WITNESS BETTY BERSINGER REENACTING HER PHONE CALL TO POLICE.

BASED ON HER DESCRIPTION OF THE LOCATION, MRS. BERSINGER MOST PROBABLY CALLED FROM THE HOME OF LOS ANGELES PHYSICIAN DR. WALTER BAYLEY, AT 3959 S. NORTON AVE.

(FIFTY YEARS LATER, IN 1997, LARRY HARNISCH, A LOS ANGELES TIMES COPY EDITOR, WOULD GO PUBLIC WITH CLAIMS THAT HE BELIEVED THIS SAME DR. BAYLEY WAS ELIZABETH SHORT'S KILLER.)



Below is the complete article documenting Mrs. Bersinger's original statements which includes the fact that she called from a doctor's home:

Los Angeles Examiner Jan. 24, 1947

WOMAN TELLS FINDING BODY

Police Interrogate Tipster
Who Sent Officers to Scene

Exactly eight days to the hour after she had made a telephone call that resulted in the finding of the mutilated body of Elizabeth Short in a Norton avenue lot, the woman who made the call identified herself yesterday.

She was Mrs. John W. Bersinger, whose home at 3705 Norton avenue is about two blocks north of the place where the killer carefully laid the body.

"I was walking with my little 3-year-old daughter, Anne, at about 10:45 a. m. the morning of January 15," said Mrs. Bersinger, a 25-year-old brunette.

"We were going south on Norton avenue to the Leimert Park section, where I was going to have Anne's shoes repaired.

SEES BODY—

"As we passed that vacant lot between 39th street and Coliseum avenue, I saw the body about a foot or two from the sidewalk. It was lying face up—and I could see it was cut in two."

Mrs. Bersinger couldn't recall whether at the time she was aware the body was that of a woman or a man. She continued:

"I was so shocked and scared, and so worried my little girl would see it, that I gathered her up in my arms and ran to the nearest house—it was the second house from 39th street on Norton avenue, a doctor's, I think.

"After asking to use the phone, I telephoned the police. I don't recall whether I told the policeman with whom I talked that the body was cut in two. And I'm sure I didn't say whether it was a man or woman.

"But I told him exactly where it was and said there was a body there. I didn't say anything about thinking it was a man or that it was a drunk. I saw no clothing or anything else.

GAVE NUMBER—

"The policeman to whom I talked didn't ask me my name or address. All he did ask was what the number was of the



INFORMANT—John W. Bersinger and his wife, Betty. She was the one who notified police on the original finding of Elizabeth Short's body.

—Los Angeles Examiner photo.

telephone I was calling from. I recall looking at the dial and giving him the number."

Mrs. Bersinger then took her young daughter to the shoe repair shop, where she waited until the child's shoes were ready, she said.

"My little girl didn't see the body. I made sure she wouldn't. I'm glad she didn't," Mrs. Bersinger said. "We don't talk about the case in front of her."

Mrs. Bersinger made her statement at the University Police Station, to which she went accompanied by her husband, a salesman.

STORY DIFFERS—

It was at the University Station that her call was received. It was clocked by the officer on the switchboard as coming at 10:54 a. m. January 15.

The officer apparently lost the telephone number given him by Mrs. Bersinger at the time, as for eight days the police have been seeking her.

The slaying investigators noted that Mrs. Bersinger made no reference either to the sex of the body or to a "drunk" in her statement concerning the telephone call.

The officer who took the call reported she had mentioned a

"drunk" and had used language indicating she thought it was a man.

A police radio car was dispatched to the Norton avenue lot three minutes after Mrs. Bersinger's call.

In the original publication of BDA (April 2003) on pages 344-345, I made reference to the above article and the fact that Betty Bersinger indicated she ran to a doctor's house for help. At that time, I speculated that this residence could well have been the home of Ruth and Walter Bayley M.D... I also noted that this information, (Bersinger/doctor connection) had apparently been overlooked by the press, police, and Dahlia researchers for more than fifty years, as there was no mention or reference to it anywhere other than in the above original newspaper article.

In 1997, a copy editor for the L.A. Times wrote a 50th Anniversary article on the Black Dahlia murder, where he pointed an accusing finger at a Dr. Walter Bayley. (Bayley, a highly respected physician and surgeon, died at age 67, of natural causes, less than a year after the murder. See my FAQ 29 for Walter Bayley summary) From reading the 1947 headlines we know that all the dailies underscored LAPD's belief that "a doctor or someone with "medical finesse" committed the crime." This, coupled with Betty Bersinger's public statement that she had called from the home of a doctor who lived in the neighborhood, in a house just a short distance from where the body was found, may have well been the LA TIMES copy editor's—"original source and inspiration."

I believe that there is a strong likelihood, that the residence that Betty Bersinger ran to and called the police from --WAS THE HOME OF RUTH & WALTER BAYLEY.

Her verbal description of the residence location matches almost perfectly! The Bayley home was located at 3959 S. Norton Ave. Today, all the open lots are gone and a dozen houses have been squeezed into the distance between Bayley's then existing house and the corner of 39th & Norton. Back in 1947, Liemert Park was just beginning to be developed and the Bayley residence could well have been as Betty Bersinger described it, "the 2nd house from 39th & Norton."

DIAGRAM SHOWING LOCATIONS OF: BERSINGER HOME, CRIME SCENE, BAYLEY HOME



Distance from Betty Bersinger residence to body= 266 yards.
 Distance of body to Ruth & Walter Bayley residence= 280 yards.