

Excerpted from *Black Dahlia Avenger: A Genius for Murder* Chapter 23 – More 1940s L.A.

Murdered Women Cases

...

Ora Murray (July 27, 1943): The “White Gardenia” Murder

Early on a Tuesday morning, July 27, 1943, the fifteen-year-old son of a golf course greenskeeper discovered the nude body of Ora Elizabeth Murray, age forty-two, lying on the ground near the parking lot of the Fox Hills golf course in West Los Angeles. The victim's dress had been wrapped around her body like a sarong, a white gardenia placed under her right shoulder. She had been severely beaten about her face and body. The wristwatch Ora Murray was wearing had been smashed and broken during the assault, probably as a result of her raising her arms to defend herself against the blows to her head as her assailant repeatedly struck her with a heavy blunt instrument. The destruction of her watch in all likelihood fixed the exact time of her murder, 1:50 A.M., consistent with an early-morning attack just six hours before the body was discovered. At the scene that morning, detectives picked up what was described by the newspapers as “a torn credit card from an oil company, containing a serial number,” a potentially important piece of evidence that detectives said they would investigate.

The autopsy performed on the victim revealed that the cause of death was due to “constriction of the larynx by strangulation” along with the contributory factors of “concussion of the brain and subdural hemorrhage.” The body was found just outside the Los Angeles city limits, and therefore was in the jurisdiction of the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, whose homicide division handled the investigation.

Sheriff's detectives quickly discovered that the victim, who was married to an Army sergeant stationed in Mississippi, had only arrived in Los Angeles the previous Thursday. Mrs. Murray had been

visiting her sister, Latona Leinann, and her husband, Oswald, who lived in L.A. and who, at the time Ora Murray's body was discovered, was in the process of filing a missing persons report with the sheriff.

Tracing Ora's movements the night before her murder provided homicide detectives with the following information from Latona:

On Monday night, July 26, 1943, Ora and her sister decided to go dancing at the Zenda Ballroom, at 7th and Figueroa Avenue, in downtown Los Angeles (one block from Father's medical office at 7th and Flower). At the Zenda, Ora and Latona met two men whom the latter described as "Preston," an Army sergeant, and a civilian, "tall, thin, with black hair," named "Paul," whom she characterized as "very suave and a very good dancer." Latona said that Paul was wearing "a dark double-breasted suit and a dark fedora." She also remembered, "Paul told us that he lived in San Francisco and was just down visiting Los Angeles for a few days."

The foursome danced for some time, then Paul offered to show the two women "around Hollywood and go dancing at the Palladium." At that point, Preston took off, leaving the two women with Paul.

Latona reluctantly agreed to go along with her sister and Paul, but only on condition that they drive to her house to pick up her husband. Paul agreed, and drove the women in what Latona told detectives was "a flashy blue convertible coupe" to Latona's house. The *Los Angeles Examiner* quoted Latona as saying, "We went home to get Oswald, but he was sleepy and wouldn't go and finally my sister told the man she would go with him anyway." Latona said she saw her sister leave her residence with the handsome stranger and that was the last she saw of her until she identified the body for sheriff's detectives the following afternoon.

The Los Angeles Sheriff's Department continued its search in an effort to identify Paul, whom they considered their prime suspect. By the following week they took a statement from a witness, thirty-one-year-old secretary Jeanette Walser, who said she had met someone who might be connected to the Murray murder investigation. The man called himself Grant Terry and told her he was a federal attorney from the East Coast. After what Jeanette Walser called a "whirlwind ten-day courtship," they became

engaged and were to be married five days later. However, it turned out the man called “Terry” was a con man who bilked Walser out of \$700 cash and her diamond ring before he vanished.

The jilted witness told detectives that she had also loaned Grant Terry her blue convertible the day before the murder had occurred, and he had returned it to her the day following the murder. At that time, Terry had told his fiancée that “he had to go to San Diego with a man named *George* [my emphasis] to try a case that had unexpectedly come up, but would return in two days.” Grant Terry never came back.

Jeanette Walser also provided detectives with a photograph of Grant Terry, which ran in the *Los Angeles Examiner* on August 5, 1943, alongside the front-page story Walser had told police.

Detectives showed Walser's photograph of “Grant Terry” to Latona, as well as to several other unnamed women who saw “Paul” with the victim the night of her murder. These witnesses, while not making a positive identification, said that the photograph strongly resembled “Paul,” but that none of them could remember Paul's having glasses—in the Walser photograph he was wearing glasses.

The case was submitted to the district attorney's office. Based on the circumstances and tentative identifications, Deputy District Attorney Edwin Myers issued a felony fugitive warrant charging “Grant Terry, age 34,” with the murder of Ora Elizabeth Murray.

In a related article in the *Los Angeles Examiner* three days later, headlined, “U.S. Joins Hunt for Gardenia Slayer Suspect,” the newspaper reported that a U.S. federal warrant had also been issued by the FBI on August 7 charging separate felony counts and naming “Grant Terry” as a fugitive. The felony warrant, based on the information provided by Jeanette Walser, charged Grant Terry with “impersonating an attorney of the lands division of the War Department, in which false capacity he allegedly obtained \$700 from Miss Jeanette J. Walser, 8019 South Figueroa Street.”

At a coroner's inquest on August 5, Ora Murray's sister provided a hesitant but tentative identification of the photograph of “Grant Terry” provided by the witness Jeannette Walser, stating, “It could very easily be Paul, but I can't say positively.” She told the inquest jurors that “while the photograph strongly resembled 'Paul,' that at no time during the evening, either at the dance hall or while driving the convertible did he wear glasses, as seen in the photograph.”

A *Los Angeles Examiner* story on August 6 reported that, even though a felony warrant had been issued for a suspect by the name of "Grant W. Terry," the coroner's inquest jury returned a verdict that the death of Ora Murray was "caused by person unidentified to the jury." The jury's ruling was based on the fact that they considered the sister's tentative identification insufficient to name Grant Terry as the murder suspect.

The investigation remained dormant until the arrest of a man named Roger Lewis Gardner, aka "Grant Terry," on the fugitive warrant in New York in March 1944. Gardner was extradited to California, where, after Latona Leinann changed her tentative identification to a "positive," he was formally arraigned for the murder of Ora Murray.

At Gardner's two-week jury murder trial in Los Angeles in October 1944, the defendant took the stand in his own defense and, while he admitted that he had "promised to marry Jeannette Walser and did commit the theft of her ring," adamantly denied knowing or ever seeing Ora Murray or her sister Latona. He stated he had never set foot in the Zenda Ballroom and denied any involvement whatsoever in the murder of Ora Murray.

Gardner testified, and his alibi was confirmed by defense witnesses, that he had been with his "fiancée" Jeanette Walser until 8:15 P.M. on the night of the murder, therefore making it physically impossible for him to be at the downtown dance hall at 8:30 P.M. Further testimony showed that on the night of the murder, just minutes before "Paul" was seen dancing with the victim, Gardner was twenty miles away wearing "sport clothes" rather than the dark suit and fedora known to be worn by "Paul."

On November 11, 1944, the jury was "hopelessly deadlocked," with half of them convinced that it was a case of mistaken identity. Gardner, some of the members of the jury believed, while a self-confessed con man, lothario, and thief, was nevertheless not the same sophisticated, well-dressed "Paul" who drove Ora Murray away from her sister's house to see Hollywood and later bludgeoned and strangled her to death at the nearby Fox Hills golf course.

The Walser photograph of "Grant Terry" that appeared in the newspaper and was later determined to be Roger Lewis Gardner was of poor quality. In checking records, I found that the

photographic negative from the *Los Angeles Times* article of August 5, 1943, still remained in the file at UCLA. An eight-by-ten print from that negative (shown below as exhibit 53) was a snapshot taken by Walser during her “whirlwind ten-day courtship” with Gardner in July 1943. While the image was slightly out of focus, it revealed, despite the wire-rimmed glasses, a striking similarity between Roger Lewis Gardner and George Hodel and how easy it would have been for witnesses to mistake one for the other.

Exhibit 53



1943 Roger Gardner

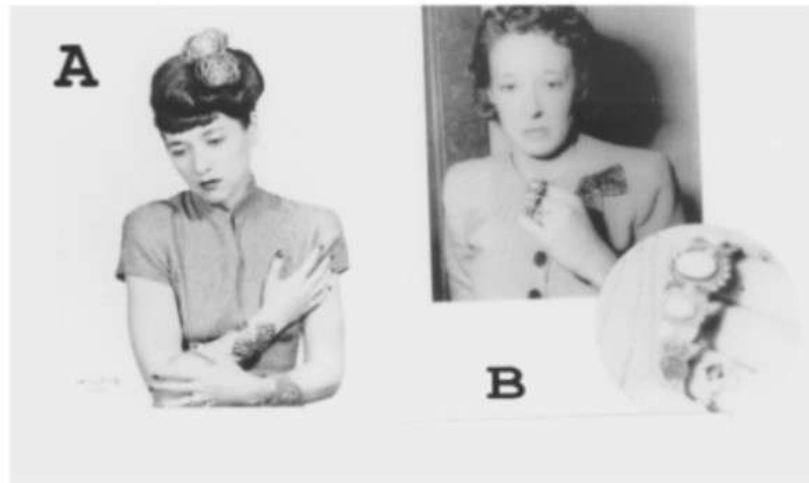
1943 George Hodel

Both of the above photographs were taken in the same year, 1943. The photo of Father, where I am seated on his knee, was taken in November 1943, just three months after the Ora Murray murder.

At the Ora Murray crime scene, police also discovered a Native American bracelet on her wrist, the kind of bracelet my father collected when he was working for the Public Health Service on the Navajo and Hopi reservations. My father had given just such a bracelet to my mother (exhibit 54a), which she was wearing in the photograph taken by Man Ray in Hollywood in 1944. Man Ray's photograph clearly shows the Indian bracelets and Thunder God ring my father had given her at the time of their marriage three years before this photograph was taken. The sheriff's department detectives never released a

photograph or a complete description of the Native American jewelry that “Paul” gave Ora Murray on the night they met and danced together; the actual bracelet, or photographs of it, may still be in the unsolved-case file.

Exhibit 54



Dorothy Hodel

Jeanette Walser

Photograph B shows a Southwest Native American bracelet given to witness Jeanette Walser by con man Roger Gardner, which is also similar to my mother's, and is identical to the type given to the murder victim, Ora Murray, by the suspect.

Some of the available information pertaining to the Ora Murray murder investigation remains confusing and unclear. Without access to the actual case files a number of questions remain unanswered. For example, to whom did the torn credit card found next to the body belong? And did the detectives ever check out this easily traceable evidence, as they told the press they would? Certainly the card did not belong to their suspect Roger Gardner, because the information was never introduced at his trial. Could the credit card have been exculpatory evidence and thus, the way things were done in 1944, held back from the defense?

From researching the investigation and trial testimony prior to Gardner's release from custody, I found that on the night of the murder Gardner had borrowed Jeanette Walser's blue convertible, which he claimed he drove to the Ambassador Hotel and parked overnight. Upon preparing to return it the following morning, Gardner discovered that it had a flat tire. Gardner also had given Walser an Indian bracelet, similar in appearance to the one found on victim Ora Murray's wrist. Gardner, having completed his con and theft of her jewelry, then told his fiancée—who at this point had become his victim—that something unexpected had come up and “he had to go to San Diego with a man named George, to try a case.” Was the mysterious “George” actually George Hodel?

While all of these facts may be an accumulation of coincidences, the very real possibility exists that Gardner and Hodel knew each other and that George Hodel may have either knowingly or without Gardner's knowledge “borrowed” the convertible from where Gardner had parked it at the Ambassador Hotel. The cocktail lounge at the Ambassador was one of Father's favorite hangouts. It is possible that after taking the car, George Hodel, calling himself “Paul,” drove Ora Murray on her late-night tour of Hollywood, committed the murder in the early-morning hours, and returned the vehicle to the hotel, where Gardner found it parked with a flat tire.

In all likelihood, we will never know the facts surrounding this murder. I strongly suspect, however, that Hodel and Gardner did know each other and that Dr. George Hill Hodel did murder Ora Murray.

Ora Murray did not immediately fade into history after the trial and acquittal. Her name resurfaced two years later on January 23, 1947, when she was mentioned by crime reporter Agness Underwood in her feature article wherein the reporter asked rhetorically in a headline, “Will Dahlia Slaying Join Album of Unsolved Murders?” Underwood raised the possibility that the 1943 Ora Murray, the 1944 Georgette Bauerdorf, the 1946 Gertrude Evelyn Landon, and the 1947 Elizabeth Short murders might all be connected.