

Chapter 4

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Lillian Lenorak and Film Director John Farrow

As previously documented, in 2003, with the post-publication discovery and release of the secret DA Hodel Files, we learned that Lillian Lenorak met with DA Lt. Frank Jemison and made a positive identification of Elizabeth Short as being a sometime girlfriend of George Hodel.

Lillian was an extremely intelligent and attractive woman, and a talented dancer with the famed Ruth St. Denis studio.

In the mid-1940s, Lillian met and had an affair with the well-known Hollywood film director, John Farrow, who at that time was married to actress, Maureen O'Sullivan. [John Farrow 1904-1963. Credited with directing forty-seven films, including: *Two Years Before the Mast* (1946), *The Big Clock* (1948), *Where Danger Lives* (1950), *Hondo* (1953), *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1956) and many more.

Out of their relationship, was born a son, "John" who would, three-years later, in January, 1950, be the eye-witness to George Hodel's brutal assault on his mother at the Franklin House. [We recall the boy's statement to officer Mary Unkefer, in route to Santa Barbara, "He knocked mommie down and made her cry hard."]

In the DA Hodel Surveillance Transcript (page 114) there is a reference to my mother knowing and having met John Farrow. Exhibit F is a scanned extract from that page. The date is March 11, 1950. The police log shows the time to be 1:59 p.m. My mother is at the Franklin House. She dials and speaks with a secretary, "Elsie", then to a person identified only as, "Bob". She talks about "John getting her a job." [Here she is referring to John Huston, her ex-husband, not John Farrow.] She then goes on to mention a story idea for a screenplay she thought might interest John Farrow.

designed and manufactured movie camera lenses and had become world famous for his development of television's Zoomar Lens.

Frank Back picked Lillian up at her Hollywood home for a weekend getaway and on Saturday, November 7, 1959 they drove from Hollywood to his vacation home, two hours away in the desert community of Palm Springs. They had known each other for about one-year.

After spending the day at Dr. Back's home, the two dressed for dinner and at about 8:00 pm left to go dine at the Riviera Hotel. In route an argument ensued in the car and Lillian, apparently having decided to return to Los Angeles, asked Frank for the keys to his house so she could pick up her clothes. He refused, the quarrel escalated, and Lillian demanded he pull to the side of the road and let her out of the car. He stopped and she got out in front of the El Mirador Hotel, and walked away. Dr. Back drove back to his home, and when Lillian failed to return the following morning, he gathered her clothes together and drove himself back to Hollywood.

On Sunday morning, just six-hours after she left Dr. Back's car, a passing motorist found Lillian's body lying just off the highway on the north-side of Palm Springs. The autopsy showed that her skull had been crushed, and she had been bludgeoned to death with the butt of a rifle.

Lillian's identity remained unknown for several days, until Dr. Back having read the article and her description in the newspaper, suspecting it was Lillian, contacted several of her friends who in turn contacted the Palm Springs authorities. Three days later, on November 10th, Frank Back returned to Palm Springs and made a positive identification of the body.

Dr. Frank Back & Lillian Lenorak



FRIEND — Dr. Frank G. Back, optical physicist, who said he quarreled with desert murder victim.



SLAYING VICTIM — Lillian Lenorak, above, described by a friend as a "girl of many romances," was found beaten to death on a lonely road near Palm Springs, Calif., Sunday morning. Police are seeking some of her many men friends for questioning. (AP Wirephoto.)

Within a week the mystery of who killed Lillian was solved.

Her killer was, Tord Ove Zeppenfield, age 21. Tord, a troubled young man lived with his mother, who owned and ran a motel a short distance from where Lillian got out of the car. Tord saw Lillian walking down the highway, approached her in his car and when she refused to get in he abducted her at gunpoint, and killed her. Here is his excerpted confession of what happened as printed in the *Los Angeles Times* on November 18, 1959, just eleven-days after the murder:

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“He was sitting in his room when he saw Mrs. Lenorak walk past. ...He followed her in his mother’s car and offered her a ride, which she refused. He threatened her with a sawed-off rifle and she got into the car. Then he drove to the north limits of Palm Springs, hit her once with the gun, dragged her from the car and struck her repeatedly.”

On March 2, 1960 Tord Zeppenfield plead guilty to killing Lillian Hamilton Lenorak. His guilty plea was entered with the understanding that the prosecution would sentence him to life in prison and not seek the death penalty.

Los Angeles Times November 18, 1959

Nov 18, 1959

Suspect in Desert Murder Case Arrested on Border

Runaway Returned to Yuma

Tord Ove Zeppenfield, 21, sought for a week as the prime suspect in the Palm Springs slaying of a Hollywood divorcee, was arrested in Mexico and extradited yesterday to Yuma, Ariz.

FBI agents said Zeppenfield, Swedish-born, was in the California Gulf port city of Eureka, 100 miles south of the border.

The arrest was made through the cooperation of Mexican authorities and the U.S. Customs Service.

Zeppenfield later was transferred to San Luis, a border city 30 miles from Yuma, and from there extradited to Yuma.

\$100,000 Bail

The bearded and disheveled youth, wanted in connection with the slaying of Mrs. Lillian Lenorak, 42, was held in a Yuma County Jail under FBI custody on a charge of unlawful flight to avoid prosecution. Bail was set at \$100,000.

Zeppenfield, who said his telephone extension has been



DESERT KILLING SUSPECT — Tord Ove Zeppenfield, wanted for questioning in the Palm Springs slaying of a Hollywood divorcee, with Sheriff Paul Neasbitt, right, as he was extradited to Yuma, Ariz.

Income Tax Slash, Sales Levy Urged

Economist Backs 7% U.S. Import at House Hearing

WASHINGTON, Nov. 18 (UPI) — House tax writers were urged today to slash income taxes by 4% to 5% and impose a 7% import duty to make up the gap.

The proposal was endorsed by William Fellner, a Yale University economic professor, as the House Ways and Means Committee held its second day of five discussions on how to make more money without raising taxes.

Mixed Reaction

Fellner's suggestion drew a mixed reaction. He predicted that income taxes to cut 5% across the board and that personal income tax be increased from 50% to 55%.

He said the resulting loss in revenue "will be made up by a 7% sales tax on about 45% of the current national consumption."

J. P. Dun, economics professor at the University of Illinois, disagreed with Fellner's suggestion.

At the time of Lillian’s murder, her son John was 13 years-old and attending Elsinore Military Academy.

John and Lillian Lenorak circa 1956



A younger Lillian as a Ruth St. Denis dancer

One self-appointed “Black Dahlia expert” who for the last fourteen-years has been claiming to be writing his own theory with his own “surgeon-suspect” in 2009, using McCarthy-like tactics, wrote an article questioning both Lillian’s morality and her mental stability. Choosing to post his article specifically on the 50th anniversary of Lillian’s murder, he went so far as to publicly “blame the victim” and advised his readers to be skeptical of Lillian Lenorak, her 3-year-old son John and Officer Unkefer statements as originally reported, adding that Lillian was “a chronic patient of mental hospitals” which was a flat-out, unmitigated LIE!

Other than *the one George Hodel/Franklin House incident*, which clearly was “a set-up”, to my knowledge there is no record of Lillian Lenorak ever having been admitted for “mental problems” at any other hospital or psychiatric facility. NONE!

The fact is that Lillian Lenorak was a bright, fully functioning hard-working mother who loved her son. She was well liked and admired by her co-workers and at the time of her murder was working as a film editor at *General Film Laboratories* in Hollywood.

A single mother, she was also worked a second job as an actress using her maiden name of Lillian Hamilton. Her filmography credits show she worked in both films and television receiving separate bit parts *every year from 1949 until her untimely death in 1959*.

Lillian Hamilton Filmography:

- 1950- *Outrage*- Mrs. Walton
- 1951- *On the Loose*- Miss Druten
- 1952- *Week-End with Father*
- 1952- *Phone Call from a Stranger*- Nurse
- 1952- *The Unexpected* (TV series)
- 1953- *Sweethearts on Parade*- Mother
- 1954- *The Pride of the Family* (TV series)
- 1956- *Storm Center*- Mrs. Banning
- 1957- *The Joseph Cotton Show*- On Trial (TV series) Mrs. Bagby
- 1957- *Sheriff of Cochise* (TV series) Mrs. Conley, Bisbee National Bank
- 1958- *Whirly Birds* (TV series) First Nurse
- 1960 *Men in Space* (TV series) Mrs. Bennett (filmed in 1955 aired after her murder in 1960)

In 1949-1950 Lillian worked on the then controversial film, *OUTRAGE* directed by Ida Lupino which starred, Mala Powers and Tod Andrews. *OUTRAGE* was one, if not *the* first film to attempt to take an honest and sensitive look at the subject of rape and how it and society's attitudes impact a young rape victim's life. [Prior to making this film, Mala had just completed sharing equal billing with Jose Ferrer, in her role as Roxane in the Hollywood film classic, *Cyrano de Bergerac*.]

In *OUTRAGE*, Lillian Hamilton Lenorak plays the mother of the rape victim, Ann Walton. (Mala Powers.)

Lillian Hamilton Lenorak and Mala Powers in clip from *OUTRAGE* (1950)



Postscript:

On October 16, 2010 I received an e-mail from Rosanna Wilson Farrow informing me that her husband John had passed away the previous Saturday. John was in Fort Bragg, California and died suddenly from an unexpected heart attack. He leaves behind his wife, Rosanna Wilson and their two daughters, Kyla and Acacia.

John passed away and the relatively young age of 64.

Since starting my Black Dahlia investigation in 1999 I had spoken to John Farrow Jr. only twice. It was obvious that he was living and attempting to deal with a tremendous amount of pain, which I assumed was mostly the result of having experienced so much sadness in his youth.

Immediately after learning of Rosanna's loss I wrote a letter of condolence. She responded informing me that John after the major traumas of his childhood, at age 19, was called to serve his country in Vietnam. I will let Rosanna's very touching e-mail to me describe those years.

Dear Steve,

Your response about John's sudden death was very touching to me. I agree with you that it takes incredible strength of character for a human being to overcome a tragic past such as his, and especially still become a kind loving and devoted husband, a tender father and a great and fun-loving friend to many. He worked very hard at having some measure of joy and happiness, however, it was not at all an easy journey for him, just so you know, nor always an easy one for us.

As if his sad childhood was not enough....You wrote that you felt you knew him but also knew you didn't, so I want to share this important information about his life that you don't seem to know about John. (Maybe because he did not tell you, or maybe you didn't chose to mention it)

John was a combat veteran in Vietnam, and he was seriously affected with PTSD during his lifetime. He was in receipt of a 100% veterans compensation for severe PTSD, a disability pension that he received 6 years ago, even though he suffered terribly from PTSD most of his adult life starting after his intense service in Vietnam.

He was in and out of vet centers and veterans' counseling offices over the years. However, he did not apply for his benefits that were certainly his due for decades. It was with my encouragement and help that he finally allowed himself to get the help he deserved.

He was drafted in 1965 at age 19, right out of high school. He chose to enlist in the Marine Corps rather than serve in the Army for personal reasons. He was sent to Vietnam right after boot camp, where he experienced a great deal of very hard combat...more than many veterans I've known, because the Marines in his battalion were deployed in more remote regions towards the DMZ, far from the comfort of military bases. John served honorably between 1966-1969. He was slightly injured on the outside and seriously injured where it was hidden. He never put in for his Purple Heart because he lost so many friends....brothers...he even lost his very best friend from high school, Steve. When he was discharged he moved back to Santa Barbara, but his was never the same. He was a sensitive..... His nerves were basically shot.

I wanted you to know this because even considering the terrible things that happened to him in his childhood, there was more drama yet to come. More acts of personal bravery as well, and this one was personally most endearing....

After Vietnam John worked at a college bookstore and started to read constantly. He chose political works, biography, commentary, history and black history. He was never college educated prior to the war, though he was a very intelligent man. These readings, the atmosphere of questioning the war on campus, the anger inside him.....it all worked on his psyche; after he read the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* he told me he became convinced that the war in Vietnam was wrong....was evil. He became very politicized and he joined VVAW (Vietnam Veterans Against the War) a very outspoken, progressive Veterans' group. He marched with fellow veterans who felt betrayed by their own country and politicians, and spoke out against the war he fought in, while still respecting and honoring those brave men and women who served their country.

There is more to say, but just know that the burdens he endured went beyond his childhood. Oddly enough it was John that made me laugh the most in this crazy life. I don't know how I will cope with the absurdities now.

Rosanna Wilson Farrow

Despite these many psychological hardships, I am informed by Rosanna that John was, "a gentle, loving man, the heart of our family, whom he was so devoted to."

It takes great strength of character to overcome the kind of shocks and traumas that we know John suffered both in childhood and as an adult and for him to rise out of those ashes and become a loving, nurturing husband and father.

Our hearts go out to his family in this time of loss and sadness.

REST IN PEACE JOHN LENORAK FARROW.

1946-2010



Photo courtesy of Rosanna Wilson Farrow

