

The LAPD and the Press: The Joint Investigation

Los Angeles was used to bizarre crimes, and, although this crime went beyond brutality, into the world of pure evil, the LAPD command tried to take it as much in stride as possible. But even in 1947, Los Angeles, like New York, was a media capital, with a corps of crime reporters who knew well how the scent of blood sold extra editions of papers and could make a crime reporter's career. Therefore, even in the earliest hours of the investigation into the death of Elizabeth Short, as the sensational nature of the case began to overtake the gumshoe routine of LAPD Robbery-Homicide, the crime reporters themselves quickly got involved. Over the next few weeks it would be the reporters who were calling the shots as they tracked down leads, witnesses, and suspects for the police in exchange for exclusives. The police knew that once they arrested the "Black Dahlia Avenger," as he had called himself in a taunting note to investigators, their case would have to stand up to the scrutiny of a clever defense attorney. Thus they began to worry about disclosing too much sensitive information. Sloppy police work, either at the investigation or arrest stage, could result in an acquittal, no matter how compelling the evidence. The police brass had seen it before and did not want to walk around with mud on their faces as some clever defense attorney like Jerry Giesler took his client by the arm and walked him out of court a free man. This time it would have to be different, because this person was more than a killer: he was a "fiend," a "sex-crazed torture killer," as the papers were calling him.

The LAPD needed to rely on the newspapers if they wanted to keep up with fast-moving crime reporters, but they also knew they had to keep some cards face down on the table.

To see what aspects of the investigation actually made it into the light of day it was necessary for me to document how the case actually unfolded, which witnesses were brought in, what they said. I needed to discover what was consistent and what was not.

I have therefore laid out a chronology of the early months of the investigation, not only to see how the police proceeded in the Dahlia case during its first stages, but to establish a timeline enabling me to set the Dahlia murder in the context of the disconcertingly high number of other murders of lone women taking place in L.A. during the same period.

Wednesday, January 15, 1947: LAPD's 1947 investigation begins

The detectives who responded to the crime scene in Leimert Park, some five miles south of Hollywood, probably knew that the location where the body was found was a vacant lot that had been characterized by police as a “lovers’ lane.” They therefore knew that whoever had placed the body must have been familiar enough with the location to have felt secure that he, or they, would not be seen. Investigators were also quick to note that the victim’s body had been deliberately and carefully placed just inches from the sidewalk, as if posed for maximum effect.

While the surrounding grass near the body was dry, the grass under the two sections was wet, leading them to conclude that the body had been placed there after dark, once dew had formed on the ground.* Police canvassed the neighborhood for any potential witnesses. Within days, people started to come forward.

Betty Bersinger

Housewife Betty Bersinger, a resident of the Leimert Park area, discovered the body of “Jane Doe Number 1” while walking along Norton Avenue with her three-year-old daughter, Anne. Mrs. Bersinger, who did not give her name when she called the police on the morning of January 15, finally

* Investigator’s note: An alternative theory, which LAPD hadn’t seemed to consider, is that the killer, who we know had washed the body clean, could have placed it at the location *while it was still wet*, which could explain their observations yet still account for a later—6:30 or 7:00 A.M.—placement of the body, which would be consistent with a sighting of a possible suspect vehicle parked near the body at that time.

contacted police on January 24 after learning through the press that they were trying to locate her and thought “she might be a suspect.”

Mrs. Bersinger said that when she saw the body she grabbed her daughter and ran to the nearest house, which she described as “being the second house on Norton Avenue from 39th Street, and that it belonged to a doctor.” She phoned the police but “the police didn’t ask me for my name and I was too upset myself to think of giving it to them. I do recall that the policeman asked me for the telephone number I was calling from, and I looked at the number on the dial and gave that to him.”

Embarrassed LAPD detectives later admitted to the press that the original officer receiving the call from Mrs. Bersinger not only neglected to take her name but lost the number she had given him. In an audit of their own records, the University Division station officers, ten days after the call-in, on January 25, located the ticket on Betty Bersinger’s call, which documented that she had originally notified the police of her discovery of the victim’s body at 10:54 A.M. on January 15, 1947.

Robert Meyer

Leimert Park resident Bob Meyer, interviewed on the morning of January 15 by both police and press, said that between 6:30 and 7:00 A.M. that morning he saw a “1936 or 1937 Ford, sedan, black in color” pull up to the curbside near where the body was found. The car was there for “an estimated four minutes, and then left the location.” Mr. Meyer was unable to get a clear view of the driver because weeds were blocking his view.

Sherryl Maylond

Sherryl Maylond, one of the seven girls sharing room 501 with Elizabeth Short in Hollywood, also worked in Hollywood as “a bar girl” at an unidentified bar. She told the police and press that on Wednesday, January 15, 1947, a man, who gave his name as “Clement,” came into the bar and asked the night bartender if he could “speak with Sherryl.” The bartender told him it was Sherryl’s night off, whereupon the man left. He returned the following evening, and again asked for Sherryl Maylond, who was working that night and agreed to talk to him. Clement, “a slight, dapper, olive-skinned man, with hair graying at the temples,” told Sherryl he wanted to talk to her about Betty Short. Despite his repeated requests, she refused, until he finally left.

Thursday, January 16, 1947

Once the identity of the victim had been established, the investigation intensified. For a city with more than its share of bloody homicides, including the violent sexual murders of women, the characterization of the Elizabeth Short murder by LAPD as the city's "most brutal killing ever" made the local press corps even more frantic, desperate for every scrap of news, even if they had to create it themselves.

Gradually, as the LAPD crime laboratory developed more information, the police, under increasing pressure to feed a crime-hungry public, released information that the victim "was killed elsewhere." She was murdered by a sadistic killer and then driven to the crime scene, where the suspect's vehicle "hurriedly stopped as evidenced by tire tracks in the gutter."

The same day the police released information about the tire tracks, detectives brought in policewoman Myrl McBride to question her about the woman she had reported seeing near the downtown bus depot. Officer McBride positively identified the victim in the photograph as the same woman who had come to her "sobbing in terror" on January 14 and whom she later saw leaving a downtown bar in the company of two men and a woman. At that point, the police had, via a reliable witness, Officer McBride, a description of the three people who were with the victim only hours before she was murdered.

The group of witnesses referred to in LAPD press releases as "five unidentified youths" told detectives that they had been with the victim at various Hollywood nightspots both in December 1946, and also a few months earlier, when she had told them about her plans "to marry George, an army pilot from Texas." Also on January 16, the police interviewed in Hollywood two of Elizabeth's former roommates, Anne Toth and Linda Rohr, as well as Inez Keeling, the former manager of the Camp Cooke PX.

Friday, January 17, 1947

The consulting psychiatrist for the Los Angeles Police Department at the time of the murder, Dr. Paul De River, said in the *Los Angeles Evening Herald Express* two days after the murder that whoever the suspect was, he "hates womankind," a "sadistic fiend." The killer was unlike a typical killer

the LAPD might face because, said, Dr. De River, "In his act, the murderer was manifesting a sadistic component of a sado-masochist complex. He evidently was following the law of analytic retaliation, 'What has been done to me, I will do to you.' These types of killers," he continued, "are usually highly perverted, and resort to various forms of perversion and means of torture to satisfy their lusts."

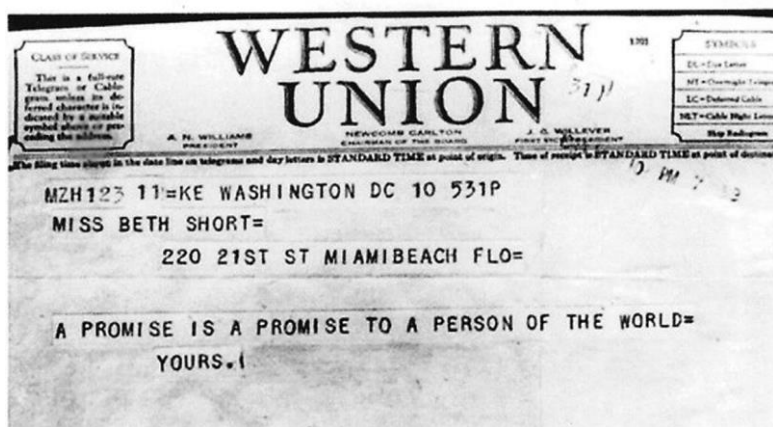
The psychiatrist further noted, "This type of suspect above all seeks the physical and moral pain and the disgraceful humiliation and maltreatment of his victims," adding, "These sadists have a superabundance of curiosity and are liable to spend much time with their victims after the spark of life has flickered and died." Moreover, he said, "The suspect may even be a studious type who delighted in feeling himself into the humiliation of his victim. He was the experimenter and analyst in the most brutal forms of torture."

Saturday, January 18, 1947

By the weekend, the investigation had widened its circle of witnesses to include Dorothy and Elvera French in San Diego, California, whom reporters from the *Examiner* newspaper had been able to locate from the return address on a letter Elizabeth had sent to her mother in early January. The Frenches told reporters that Elizabeth had stored a trunk at the Railway Express station in Los Angeles. The reporters quickly located the trunk and *Examiner* city editor Richardson cut a deal with Captain Donahoe to reveal the location of Elizabeth's luggage in exchange for an *Examiner* exclusive on its contents. Captain Jack didn't like the condition that he had to open the trunk at the *Examiner* offices, but getting his hands on the trunk was more important than butting heads with a hungry city editor, so he reluctantly agreed.

The detectives and reporters who opened the trunk found many photographs of Elizabeth posed with a variety of men, most in uniform, from enlisted men to a three-star general. They also found love letters from Elizabeth to a Major Matt Gordon and a Lieutenant Joseph Fickling, along with telegrams sent to her by a number of people.

One of these telegrams—undated—was sent to "Beth Short 220 21st Street, Miami Beach, Florida," presumably from an unknown suitor in Washington, D.C., who gave no name and no return address. The telegram simply read:

Exhibit 15

A promise is a promise to a person of the world=Yours.

LAPD sent investigators to Miami Beach, but whatever they found was not released to the public. As curious as the telegram may seem today, it's obvious the sender knew that Elizabeth would know who it was from. The telegram was too familiar, too confident in tone, to have been a prank or a joke. This was a real message from someone in an ongoing relationship with Elizabeth, someone who felt he or she had been crossed because Elizabeth had gone back on her word. Given Elizabeth's oft-related fears about a jealous boyfriend, and Myrl McBride's report to her superiors of spotting Elizabeth in downtown L.A. too afraid to go back into a bar to retrieve her purse, there is no doubt Elizabeth was very afraid of someone not just during the second week in January but much earlier.

The police also interviewed Mrs. Matt Gordon Sr. by phone in Colorado about a separate telegram she had sent the victim notifying her of her son's death, which was also found in the victim's luggage while detectives in Charlotte, North Carolina, were interviewing Joseph Fickling. The Fickling interview was important because it revealed that Elizabeth, evidently believing she was about to escape from whoever was pursuing her, had written that since she "would soon be leaving for Chicago, not to write her in California."

That same Saturday also saw some crack investigative work by crime reporters from the *Examiner*, who interviewed the Frenches in San Diego about a man named Red Manley. They obtained a description of his car

from Vera and Dorothy, searched the surrounding area, found the motel where Manley had signed for a room, got his license number from the registry, and called it in to city editor James Richardson. From the California DMV, Richardson got Manley's home address in the L.A. suburb of Huntington Park and sent reporters to stake out the location. When on January 18 Manley returned from a business trip to San Francisco, the reporters were there to greet him, along with the cops, who took him in for questioning. He was grilled at the station house for the next twelve hours without a lawyer and without being charged. He adamantly stuck to his guns that he knew nothing about the murder, and begged the detectives to administer a polygraph or shoot him up with sodium pentathol to satisfy themselves that he was telling the truth.

Sunday, January 19, 1947

Manley, still in police custody, took an initial polygraph, which according to LAPD was "inconclusive." He continued to deny any involvement with the murder, but the police remained unconvinced and had a second polygraph test administered by criminalist Ray Pinker, during which Manley fell asleep. He was awakened and pressured further, but eventually Pinker had to admit that Manley had passed the test, removing him, at least temporarily, as a suspect.

At the request of the police, *Herald Express* crime reporter Agness Underwood subsequently interviewed Manley at the police station to see if she could find out anything the police had overlooked. In the course of her interview she learned of a phone call Elizabeth had made to an unknown man from the San Diego restaurant where she and Manley had stopped. During this call Elizabeth had made arrangements to meet someone on the evening of January 9, in downtown Los Angeles.*

Monday, January 20, 1947

In what might have been the first real solid eyewitness lead, East Washington Boulevard Hotel owners and managers Mr. and Mrs. William Johnson told the police and reporters that Elizabeth Short and a man claiming to be her husband had registered for a room as "Mr. and Mrs. Barnes" on Sunday, January 12, 1947, only two days before the murder. The Johnsons described what they termed the man's "bizarre behavior," particularly

*LAPD in the following weeks would send detectives to San Diego to pursue this lead and search the paper trail of phone records.

his nervousness and agitation after his return to the hotel on January 15. When “Mr. Barnes” showed up in the hotel lobby on January 15, Mr. Johnson joked that because he and his wife had disappeared for three days, he thought the couple was “dead,” at which Mr. Barnes, visibly shaken, turned and walked out of the hotel.

After detectives showed the Johnsons separate photographs retrieved from Elizabeth Short’s luggage, the Johnsons positively identified both the victim and the man who had checked in as Mr. and Mrs. Barnes. This photo identification was a vital clue for detectives, because it was the first time someone had actually put the person calling himself Elizabeth Short’s husband together with the victim at the same place only two days before the murder. Then, when “Mr. Barnes” had returned alone, his behavior had been so bizarre that Mr. Johnson remembered it clearly. As of January 20, 1947, LAPD detectives therefore had in their files a photograph of someone who should have been their prime suspect in the Black Dahlia case, a man identified by two eyewitnesses as being with the victim alone in a hotel room just forty-eight hours before her murder. Who was this man? Where is that photograph today?

In addition to the Johnsons’ interviews, a new search of the crime scene by fifty LAPD officers combing the area in a human grid turned up a man’s military-type wristwatch lying in the vacant lot close to where the victim’s body was originally discovered. The watch was taken into custody and, according to the newspaper reports, “Police chemists were checking ownership of the military watch,” which was described as a “17-jewel ‘Croton’ with a leather-bound, steel snap band. Engraved on it are the words ‘Swiss made, water proof, brevet, stainless steel back.’”

Wednesday, January 22, 1947

At division roll calls that morning, homicide detectives circulated the following Los Angeles special police bulletin (exhibit 16) containing a photograph of Elizabeth Short and a detailed description of her clothing, and provided copies to uniformed officers working the various foot beats throughout the divisions. The bulletin requested officers to try to locate anyone with knowledge of the victim in the week preceding her murder. This special bulletin was posted in bus and cab terminals to enlist the public’s help.

There was also a brief statement released to local newspapers concerning fingerprints that were lifted from a wine bottle found in the room at the East Washington Boulevard Hotel where Elizabeth and her “husband” had stayed. The paper quoted two unnamed detectives, believed to have

Exhibit 16

SPECIAL

Daily Police Bulletin

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF POLICE DEPARTMENT, CITY OF LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
CHIEF'S OFFICE, City Hall (Phone Michigan 2811—Connecting all Stations and Depts.) C. B. HERRALL, Chief of Police

Vol. 40 Tuesday, January 21, 1947 No. 14

WANTED INFORMATION ON ELIZABETH SHORT
Between Dates January 9 and 15, 1947



Description: Female, American, 22 years, 5 ft. 6 in., 118 lbs., black hair, green eyes, very attractive, had lower teeth, finger nails chewed to quick. This subject found brutally murdered, body severed and mutilated January 15, 1947, at 39th and Norton.

Subject on whom information wanted last seen January 9, 1947 when she got out of car at Biltmore Hotel. At that time she was wearing black suit, no collar on coat, probably Cardigan style, white fluffy blouse, black suede high-heeled shoes, nylon stockings, white gloves full-length beige coat, carried black plastic handbag (2 handles) 12 x 8, in which she had black address book. Subject readily makes friends with both sexes and frequented cocktail bars and night spots. On leaving car she went into lobby of the Biltmore, and was last seen there.

Inquiry should be made at all hotels, motels, apartment houses, cocktail bars and lounges, night clubs to ascertain whereabouts of victim between dates mentioned. In conversations subject readily identified herself as Elizabeth or "Beth" Short.

Attention Officers H. H. Hansen and F. A. Brown, Homicide Detail.

KINDLY NOTIFY C. B. HERRALL, CHIEF OF POLICE, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

LAPD Special Bulletin, January 1947

been from the Gangster Squad, assisting in the investigation, as having said they "were satisfied that it was perhaps a case of mistaken identity" since "the fingerprints did not belong to the victim, Elizabeth Short."*

An LAPD organizational explanation is here called for. The "Gangster Squad" no longer exists as an entity within the LAPD. In 1947, however,

* Investigator's note: This official public statement was of immediate and grave concern to me when I first read it. A seasoned homicide detective would never make such a statement. The absence of the victim's prints on the bottle indicated absolutely nothing. Neither did these detectives address or comment on the possibility that the unidentified prints could have belonged to the suspect, "Mr. Barnes." By making this statement it seemed as if they were attempting to publicly discredit Mr. and Mrs. Johnson's identification and statements. Why?

it was a separate squad of a dozen or so detectives, within the Homicide Division. The detectives assigned to this squad were supervised by their own lieutenant. Under his leadership, they were responsible for gathering intelligence and surveillance of “known gangsters,” as well as for conducting city-wide investigations to identify and prosecute abortionists. The Gangster Squad detectives were the first officers to be loaned to assist regular homicide squad detectives in their manpower needs for any high-profile investigations. Historically, an uneasy relationship always existed between these interdepartment units and squads, each acting almost as its own fiefdom, with a lieutenant as lord. This was especially true in the 1940s when LAPD was rife with corruption, with many officers on the take. Anyone outside the separate squads, including “brother officers,” were not to be trusted. After Chief Parker’s selection as chief of police in 1950, the Gangster Squad was eventually split to become OCID (Organized Crime Intelligence Division) and PDID (Public Disorder Intelligence Division).

Thursday, January 23, 1947

Others conducting the investigation obviously took the Johnsons seriously, as newspapers reported that all LAPD officers had been instructed to “be on the lookout for a man who might have registered with Miss Short as ‘man and wife’ at a hotel located at 300 E. Washington Blvd., on January 12.” A detailed description of “Mr. Barnes,” positively identified by the Johnsons as checking in with the victim, was given to officers, but his description was not released to the general public.

Police also re-canvassed the Leimert Park neighborhood near 39th and Norton for a third time, conducting a door-to-door search for possible witnesses to the crime in yet another effort to identify somebody who might have seen anything on the morning of January 15. As part of this follow-up investigation, officers asked citizens in the immediate neighborhood the following two questions:

- 1) “Do you know anyone in the neighborhood who is mentally unbalanced?”
- 2) “Do you know of any medical students?”

But the re-canvass turned up no new eyewitnesses whose names police could release to the newspapers, whose coverage had already begun to



Los Angeles Herald Express, *January 23, 1947*

turn against the police and their apparent lack of progress. On January 23, Agness Underwood wrote, in the *Herald Express*, a story under the headline “Will ‘Dahlia’ Slaying Join Album of Unsolved Murders?” in which she included the names and photographs of Ora Murray, Georgette Bauerdorf, and Gertrude Evelyn Landon, three earlier Los Angeles–area unsolved murder victims. The story suggested there might well be a connection between these previous unsolved homicides and that of Elizabeth Short.

Underwood’s article began:

Werewolves Leave Trail of Women Murders in L.A.

In the gory album of unsolved murders, kidnappings and crimes against women in general, Los Angeles police may have to insert a new page—“The Mystery of the Sadistic Slaying of Elizabeth Short—the Black Dahlia.” So far all clues have failed. This latest murder mystery which has provoked the greatest mobilization of crime detection experts in the city’s history, is the latest in a long series. The finding of her dismembered body was preceded by other gruesome discoveries of women victims slain for lust, for revenge, for reasons unknown.

Underwood's article provided the names and details of seven recent L.A. lone female victims of unsolved sex-related murders.

On the afternoon of January 23, *Los Angeles Examiner* city editor James Richardson received a phone call from a man identifying himself as the Black Dahlia killer. In Richardson's autobiography, *For the Life of Me: Memoirs of a City Editor*, he describes the eerie call and the killer's follow-up. Richardson explained that he never published the story in the paper at the time because he wanted to keep the evidence confidential, even though there was a feeding frenzy among crime reporters for any stray piece of information on the case. His revelation of the phone call became an important piece of evidence for me, primarily because of his verbatim description of his brief conversation with the killer and his impressions of the suspect. That this call came from the real killer is not in doubt. During their conversation he promised Richardson to send him "a few of her [Elizabeth's] belongings." As Richardson described the conversation:

The story dwindled to a few paragraphs and was about to fade out altogether when one day I answered the phone and heard the voice I'll never forget.

"Is this the city editor?" it asked.

"Yes."

"What is your name, please?"

"Richardson."

"Well, Mr. Richardson, I must congratulate you on what the *Examiner* has done in the Black Dahlia case."

"Thank you," I said, and there was a slight pause before the voice spoke again.

"You seem to have run out of material," it said.

"That's right."

A soft laugh sounded in the earpiece.

"Maybe I can be of some assistance," the voice said.

There was something in the way he said it that sent a shiver up my spine.

"We need it," I said and there was that soft laugh again.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," the voice said. "I'll send you some of the things she had with her when she, shall we say, disappeared?"

It was difficult for me to control my voice. I began scribbling on a sheet of paper the words: "Trace this call."

"What kind of things?" I asked as I tossed the paper to my assistant on the desk. I could see him read and start jiggling the receiver arm on his phone to get the attention of the switchboard girl.

“Oh say, her address book and her birth certificate and a few other things she had in her handbag.”

“When will I get them?” I asked, and I could hear my assistant telling Mae Northern the switchboard girl to trace my call.

“Oh, within the next day or so. See how far you can get with them. And now I must say goodbye. You may be trying to trace this call.”

“Wait a minute,” I said but I heard the click and the phone was dead.

Richardson concluded his book with some observations and reflections about the caller/killer he had spoken with seven years earlier. He was, Richardson was convinced, an egomaniac who planned the murder to show the world he was a superman, someone who could “outwit and outthink the whole world.” He also stated—and again he was right—that the killer had placed the body where it would be quickly found, and mutilated it so horribly to attract the greatest attention on the part of the police and public. “He would be one against the world,” he wrote, “the perpetrator of the perfect crime.” Richardson was also certain the killer would strike again, and in the same manner, but that ultimately he would make a mistake that would result in his capture. Richardson hoped that the Dahlia killer would again pick up the phone, dial the city desk, and ask for him. He revealed that his switchboard operators had developed a sixth sense and screened the “nuts and crackpots,” but every now and then did put through a call to him, which invariably was important. He said he still believed that one day he would pick up the receiver and “again hear that soft, sly voice.”

Friday, January 24, 1947

Police claimed a major break in the case when they learned that the suspect originally had left Elizabeth Short’s purse and shoes atop an open trashcan in front of a restaurant and motel located at 1136 South Crenshaw Boulevard, approximately twenty blocks north of 39th and Norton. Robert Hyman, the manager of a café at 1136 South Crenshaw, the witness who found the purse and shoes, said he observed a pair of women’s shoes inside a black handbag just as the garbage truck was picking up the trash in front of his café. Hyman described the purse as “large and oblong, and the shoes as black with very high heels.”

Hyman spoke to the trash collector and suggested that “perhaps the purse and shoes should be turned over to the police.”

“Oh, we find lots of things like this, and they never amount to anything,” the city employee responded. The man then dumped the purse and shoes in his truck along with the other trash and drove away.

Hyman called LAPD, and officers were dispatched to the city dump, where, after an extensive search, the purse and shoes were found. An LAPD unit brought them to University Division police station, where, as noted, Red Manley identified them.