

The case of the murder and the mystery photo

By Nancy Dingler

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Dixie Shetler was helping her mother clean out the garage on Great Jones Street in Fairfield and spotted a portfolio in the rafters.

Gingerly she pulled out the dusty find. After carefully cleaning the surface, the string was loosened and the portfolio opened to reveal its hidden contents.

Starring back was a large photo of a couple dressed in what seems to be an early 1900s costume. Could this be their wedding portrait?

With the photo was a copy of the San Francisco Call Bulletin, dated July 26, 1932. Is the newspaper of significance? Why is it with the photo?

The house on Great Jones Street was built in 1939. The newspaper was kept with the portrait for some time prior to moving into the house. Why was it left behind?

The banner headline in the Extra Edition of the San Francisco Call Bulletin proclaimed: "RICH SOCIETY WIFE SLAIN: KNIFE MATE IN LOS ALTOS".

The photo of the victim and her husband did not match the portrait. The portfolio photo showed a couple dressed a good 30 to 40 years earlier, plus they bore no resemblance to the murdered woman, a Lillian Babcock. So the question kept coming up, why this story with the picture?

The front page story told how William Rider Babcock's wife, Lillian, was murdered and he was seriously wounded. Babcock was a wealthy Manila importer and exporter who was an internationally known figure in sports and business circles.

William and his wife arrived in Los Altos two weeks before they were attacked to visit Lillian Babcock's sister, Laura Buckish, and to attend the Olympic games.

Babcock came to attend the games in his official capacity as acting president of the Philippine Amateur Athletic Federation. He was traveling on an official Olympic pass issued by Richard B. Ely, assistant secretary of state. Babcock was president of the firm of Babcock-Templeton, Inc., importers and exporters.

The company had offices in New York and representatives in London. The Babcocks

had been living in the Philippines for years and were widely known in business and social circles. He was a native of Brooklyn, N.Y.

The next column goes into lurid detail: "Mystery Killer Slashed Throat of Sleeping Woman at Husband's Side . . . The killer dropping a new 40-cent, 10-inch knife at his victim's feet fled the house on Pepper Avenue near the main highway and escaped in an automobile - SLIPS INTO HOUSE - He also left a large can of coal oil after apparently abandoning a plan to set the house on fire.

"This crime has all the aspects of an Oriental murder," Sheriff William B. Emig of San Jose said after a preliminary investigation.

The sheriff noted that the killing was vicious and brutal. He speculated that it was possible that the killer was a disgruntled youth whom Babcock had rejected as a "houseboy" position applicant.

With the arrival of the posse led by Sheriff Emig the dying man was rushed to the Mountain View Hospital where he gasped: "My wife was being stabbed by a tall slender and smooth shaven youth. . . . I struggled with him . . . but he got away."

The Babcocks' stepson, Charles Brown Babcock, 20, a Stanford University student, had been staying with his aunt, Laura Buckish. The sound of the struggle awoke Laura. She ran to the bedroom, glanced at her sister's body and screamed. Young Babcock heard her cries, discovered the tragedy and phoned for help.

"I can't understand it . . . Dad didn't have any enemies that I knew about. The murderer must have been a maniac."

The next morning, Wednesday, July 27, 1932, the San Francisco Call Bulletin's lead story: "Youth Admits Murder of his Aunt."

"With a calm that amazed hardened police officers, George Douglas Templeton Jr., University of California junior student, confessed the cold-blooded murder of his aunt, Mrs. Lillian Babcock, so 'I could get money to continue my studies.' "

The verbal confession was printed alongside the photo of Templeton, posing casually with his hands in his pockets, while standing next to Sheriff Emig. "Yes, I killed Mrs. Babcock," he said, almost wearily, "I alone am responsible. I made more noise than I intended in getting into the house. I thought there would be moonlight. There wasn't. I figured that if I killed Babcock my mother would get some insurance. They are brother and sister. If both were dead I thought my father would get his job back . . . "

Could this young man have been a relation, possibly grandson of the couple pictured in the portfolio?

There is a slight resemblance. If the headline story in the newspaper is germane to the photo, then this is truly a family tragedy.

In researching Babcock and Templeton, it was interesting to discover in Yale University's graduate yearbook, a notation about William Rider Babcock. Babcock completed his work for a degree in three years and at the end of his junior year went to the Philippines where he began as a supervising teacher for the Bureau of Education.

From Jan. 1, 1911, until March 31, 1914, he became president in partnership in Babcock and Templeton Inc., Importers and Exporters.

He writes: "My main interest in life has been to build up my business interests in the Philippines, the most interesting feature of which is our export of shelled pili nuts. My partner, George Templeton, invented a device for cracking this very hard-shelled nut some years ago and we have a small factory and ship to the States. The nut is shaped like a pecan and tastes like an especially fine Brazil nut."

Somewhere along the way there was an obvious falling out between the "partners" as alluded to in the confession of George Jr. although there is no solid proof. Or maybe the newspaper has nothing at all to do with the stately couple.

It would be nice to be able to solve the mystery.

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