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Kansas City was home to the internationally known puppet manufacturer—Hazelle, Inc. At its peak, Hazelle made 250,000 puppets annually. Its most popular marionette was the white-faced clown Teto. See story on page 20.

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Murder or Self Defense?

Last Hand at Park Manor: The Trial of Myrtle Bennett

By Ralph Monaco II

In the late evening hours on Sunday, Sept. 29, 1929, socialites Mr. and Mrs. John G. Bennett and their swanky neighbors and closest friends Mr. and Mrs. Charles F. Hofman were engaged in a “friendly” game of partnership contract bridge in the Bennett’s posh Park Manor apartment on Ward Parkway in the classy Country Club District of Kansas City.

Soon the world of these two couples would irreparably crash, as would the stock market within the next 30 days on “Black Tuesday.”

The Bennetts were ahead on points and assured of victory until Mr. Bennett misread the game and played the wrong hand — a bid of four spades, doubled — and lost by two tricks. His wife, an expert bridge player, promptly decreed that her husband was nothing more than a “bum bridge player.”

With those words, John Bennett erupted into rage, slapping his wife several times. The end was climactic — four gunshots rang out, two striking John, who mortally collapsed while clasping the hand of his slayer — his wife Myrtle.

Was his homicide murder or self defense?

Myrtle Bennett, 34 years old, was immediately arrested and taken to the Kansas City Police Country Club Station before being transported to



Photographic portrait of Myrtle Bennett, Courtesy of Missouri Valley Room, Kansas City Public Library.

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police headquarters in downtown Kansas City.

There she was held in the same jail cell with 29-year-old Mrs. Evelyn Helms of Raytown, Mo., who was awaiting trial for the first-degree murder of her husband, Frank.

The two widows shared similar pedigrees. Both were young wives, without children, financially dependent upon their late spouses. Both admitted shooting and killing their husbands in their family homes. They also shared a common defense theme: victims of abuse and cruelty inflicted upon them by their now-dead husbands, who they thought were leaving them forever. Both would also be prosecuted by the elected Jackson County Prosecutor, James R. Page.

However, unlike Myrtle Bennett, Evelyn Helms was impoverished and unable to retain the most prominent defense attorney in the city. Myrtle was financially secure and socially elite, and she stood to inherit over \$30,000 in life insurance if acquitted of murdering her husband.

Within 30 days of John Bennett's death, Myrtle suffered a collapse and was taken to a sanitarium for what Dr. G. Wilse Robinson described as a nervous and mental disease. Her breakdown could very well have been spurred on by the news of the tragic misfortune of her former cellmate Evelyn.

A 12-man jury had found Evelyn Helms guilty of the murder of her husband and sentenced her to 10 years in prison. Mrs. Myrtle Bennett would certainly have to secure different legal counsel. And she had the means to do so.

The murder trial of Mrs. Myrtle Bennett did not commence until nearly 17 months after the death of her husband. By then the story of her killing of John Bennett had evolved into a frenzied media story that covered the columns of local, national and international newspapers.

Locally, the interest and frenzy about the case was comparable to a trial that had taken place 20 years earlier in the same courtroom, before the same judge, and involved one of the same attorneys — the murder trial of Dr. C. Bennett Hyde for the alleged murder of Kansas City philanthropist

Thomas Hutton Swope (for whom Swope Park is named).

National and international excitement about the pending Bennett trial was heightened by the popularity of the game of partnership contract bridge.

By 1929, the game of bridge had developed into one of the most popular games of its time. Newspapers around the world provided weekly if not daily accounts on how to properly play certain bridge hands.

Socialites such as the Vanderbilts of New York, vaudeville and Hollywood stars such as Buster Keaton, George Burns and Chico Marx, and baseball icons, including Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, played bridge. Gentlemen in elite clubs and housewives over kitchen tables spent hours turning bridge hands and studying the eyes of their partners and foes.

Ely Culbertson (born of an American father and Russian mother) and his wife Josephine ("Jo") toured the world promoting and playing the game. Culbertson had authored books which helped the game's popularity to reach its zenith.

Justice for Evelyn Helms

Helms was convicted of manslaughter and was sentenced in November 1929 to the Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City, Mo.

She was paroled by the Missouri governor after serving three years of a 10-year sentence.

She was a 28-year-old theatrical worker at the time of her conviction.

36119	Evelyn Helms Evelyn Bonell (White Female)	28	Missouri	Theatrical Worker	5 1/4 9	Sp.	Sp.	Lt.
						Brown	Red Brown	Sellow

Portion of the entry in the official Register of Inmates Received kept by Missouri State Penitentiary, where Helms was incarcerated in 1930. Helms was paroled by Gov. Henry Caulfield in 1933. Source: Missouri State Archives, Missouri Digital Heritage.

As Myrtle Bennett was awaiting trial, the Culbertson's bridge skills were challenged. In 1931, the Culbertsons had agreed to a bridge match of 150 rubbers, i.e., the best of a three-game set. The match was named the "Bridge Battle of the Century" and took place in New York City.

The bridge partners Ely and Jo tantalized an adoring and emotionally charged audience. Bridge had become an international phenomenon, and Myrtle's killing of her husband after a night of bridge only heightened the intense interest and craze in the game.

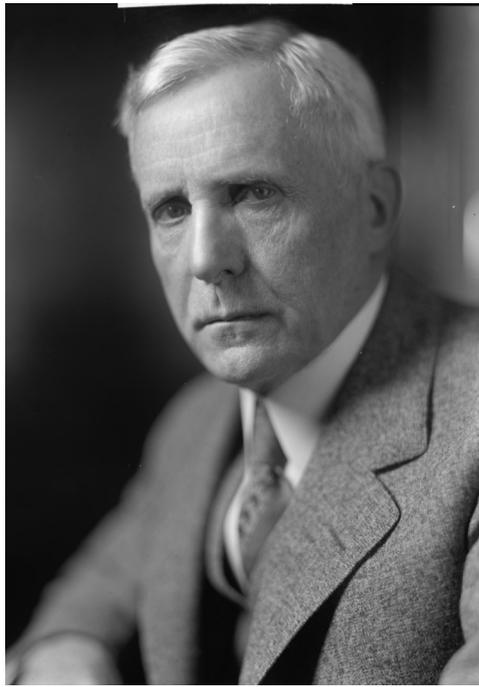
While the bridge murder theme certainly tantalized newspaper readers, the selection of her defense attorney only heightened interest. His legal prowess was legendary and well-established through several high-profile cases — James A. Reed.

The attorney had a storied career. He was elected Jackson County Prosecutor in 1898, and in 1899 unsuccessfully prosecuted Jesse James, Jr., son of the bandit Jesse James. The case was one of his few defeats during a 40-year legal career.

In 1900, he was elected mayor of Kansas City. Ten years later he successfully prosecuted Dr. Hyde for the murder of Col. Swope and was elected to the U.S. Senate, where he served for nearly 30 years.

He single-handedly ensured the defeat of President Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations following World War I.

In 1928 and 1932, Reed sought the Democratic presidential nomination losing out to two New



Photographic portrait of James A. Reed, Harris & Ewing Collection, Library of Congress, LC-H25- 133483-H.

York governors — Al Smith and Franklin Roosevelt.

Myrtle Bennett undoubtedly had retained the best defense possible — the most famous attorney in the city, if not the entire country.

Despite the frigid air on Monday, Feb. 23, 1931, a large crowd assembled outside Jackson County Courthouse — a massive building which occupied the entire block bounded by 5th St., Oak St., Locust St., and Missouri Ave.

They waited impatiently for the doors of Judge Ralph S. Latshaw's courtroom to open, hoping for a seat at the city's most-awaited criminal trial in years.

Myrtle Bennett, dressed entirely in black, ambled into the courtroom well-briefed by her attorneys on the importance of doing everything Reed directed her to do, down to her wardrobe and facial appearance — no make-up.

Ironically, it was the same courtroom and judge before which Reed had argued and pounded the counsel table until he had secured the conviction of Dr. Hyde for the murder of Col. Swope.

Reed, now 68, was determined to demonstrate he had the stamina and passion to mount a vigorous defense.

It took three grueling days to select the 12-man jury. The selection process was as intriguing as a stage show. Reed frequently challenged and argued questions asked of potential jurors by the Jackson County Prosecutor James R. Page. Reed paced, gnawing on a cigar, and whirled at Page whenever the opportunity arose.

Because of Reed's involvement, a number of Kansas City School of Law students abandoned their studies to attend the hearing to watch the jury selection — the most important part of Reed's defense strategy. He was determined to have only jurors sympathetic to his widowed client.

Reed was not known for his sentimentality. He was persuasive and determined.

He had been a gladiator in the courtroom and on the floor of the U.S. Senate. He seldom lost a trial and never backed down in debate.

Yet his strategy in defending Mrs. Bennett also personified his acting skills. He often became tearful and emotional. At one point during the trial, he faltered in tears, turned to the Jackson County Prosecutor, and proclaimed, "I can't help it, Jim."

Reed knew he needed to instill emotions in the minds and hearts of the 12 men who would



This is a 1925 photograph of the second Jackson County courthouse, which was designed by Asa Beebe Cross, regarded as Kansas City's first professional architect. He was prolific, designing over 1,000 buildings, few of which remain. Courtesy of Missouri Valley Room, Kansas City Public Library.

decide the guilt or innocence of Myrtle Bennett.

The drama and emotional upheaval of Myrtle Bennett's trial played out in Judge Latshaw's courtroom for nine grueling days.

Myrtle always wore her same black garb. And if Reed wasn't showing emotions, Myrtle did. She cried so often the press noted the "dark circles under her eyes" and general facial appearance.

"As she stood up to be sworn in the lines of worry in her face and the dark rings under her eyes were apparent," the *Kansas City Journal-Post* reported. "She was without makeup and her paleness was ascertained by her black outfit."

At one point, when the blood-stained, white polo shirt her hus-

band had been wearing at the time he was shot was displayed in the courtroom, Myrtle Bennett became so hysterical that the judge was compelled to order a recess until she was able to regain her composure.

The poignant ordeal affected almost everyone who testified or witnessed the trial. Even Myrtle's widowed mother Alice Adkins, who had testified on her behalf, collapsed following her trial testimony and required emergency medical care and treatment.

On Wednesday, March 4, 1931, at 9:40 a.m., Myrtle Bennett took the witness stand, remaining there into the afternoon. Reed gradually and artfully began by walking his client through the events of Sept.

29, 1929, until they reached the fatal moments.

Myrtle broke into hysterics when she recalled firing the Bennett household firearm — a .32-caliber Colt automatic pistol that shot smokeless cartridges.

She cried uncontrollably and was joined by other women in the gallery who wept with her. At times, Myrtle buried her face in her hands, wiping her eyes with her white handkerchief.

Reed patiently waited for the tears to stop before he continued.

She knew nothing about guns and categorically denied intentionally shooting her husband. She explained how gravely frightened she was when her husband had grabbed her forcibly and "very hard" in an attempt to take away the pistol — her dress had been torn in the struggle. She told how her husband had struck her many times during their marriage and how that evening she feared for her life.

She had begged and pleaded with him to be careful, but somehow the weapon discharged. It was not her fault; it was a terrible accident; she would have preferred to have been dead, not her Jack.

On cross-examination, Myrtle's responses to the persistent interrogation by the prosecutor were consistent. She could not recall what happened. It was an accident; she had been in a fog; it was a frightening ordeal; she wished she had died.

The prosecutor often became argumentative with her, which prompted frequent objections by Reed.



A crowd gathers outside the courthouse hoping to get a courtroom seat. Photo courtesy of Missouri Valley Room, Kansas City Public Library.

The only thing Myrtle Bennett knew was that four shots had been fired, but how or where, she did not know. It was a tragedy, but not of her doing.

She insisted she had not killed her husband — it had been an accident and he was fatally shot in a struggle.

Of the many twists and turns during the murder trial perhaps the most sensational occurred following the close of all evidence on the evening of March 4.

As the courtroom began to empty late that afternoon, Myrtle Bennett and her two lawyers, Reed and J. Francis O’Sullivan, stood huddled towards the back of the courtroom engaged in a quiet, private conversation. Preparing to leave, each had donned their hat.

The three made a perfect picture for the press. To 30-year-old George Cauthen, reporter and photographer for the *Kansas City Journal-Post*, the city and the world needed to see the image, and he promptly snapped a picture.

Hearing the camera flashbulb, Reed whirled on Cauthen, enraged and incensed over being photographed without permission.

Reed told the photographer, “I want you to understand that if this picture is published I’ll knock your head off,” and then hit Cauthen in the face.

The following day, the *Journal-Post* retaliated by publishing the photograph with this caption:

Here it is, Jim — the picture you forbade George Cauthen, Journal-Post photographer, to publish under penalty of knocking his head off. The photograph was taken by

Cauthen last night in the criminal court room before he was slapped by former Senator Reed.

This time Reed failed to have the last word. His outburst and fist-cuffs had backfired — the First Amendment right of freedom of the press was no trifling matter. Cauthen and the *Journal-Post* would not be intimidated or compromise their constitutional rights.

The jury deliberation, to the dismay of Reed, lasted well into Thursday night and Friday afternoon.

Finally, at 2:30 p.m., the jury foreman Leslie R. Choate announced the verdict of “not guilty.”

From the totality of the evidence, the jury could not conclude that Myrtle Bennett had intentionally shot her husband.

There was no dispute that the automatic pistol had been discharged



Defense attorney James A. Reed speaks to the jury during the March 1931 Myrtle Bennett murder trial. Photo courtesy Missouri Valley Room, Kansas City Public Library.

four times, but reasonable doubt existed on whether the shots had been fired by the defendant with the intent to kill her husband.

Reed's intensity and passionate insistence that the weapon had been fired accidentally had been persuasive in the minds of the jurors.

It was not a case in which the defense had proven their client innocent. Rather, it was a decision rendered because the state had failed to prove Myrtle Bennett guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

After the acquittal, Myrtle realized that she and her mother needed to forever fold their hands and escape anonymously to another city — anywhere where the world would forget her. She also knew that she needed to be dealt a better hand — the cards would always be stacked against her anywhere in the world where her past identity would ever be disclosed. Park Manor and the

Country Club District could never again be home to Myrtle.

She and her mother did disappear.

After World War II, Myrtle became executive head of housekeeping at New York City's famous Carlyle Hotel, where she lived on the third floor in apartment 3B. She was highly regarded and frequently played bridge with friends and special hotel guests.

Other than making vague, obscure and ambiguous remarks, she was very guarded about disclosing anything about her past.

When Myrtle retired from the Carlyle, she relocated to Florida. Over the years, she amassed a fortune and maintained a determined independence.

In the twilight hours of her life, she warred with family members in Arkansas and Oklahoma over various issues, especially her independent living and finances.

Myrtle also battled with herself over the disposition of her estate. In a period of five years, she re-wrote her will three times, with the last instrument being executed on Dec. 3, 1991.

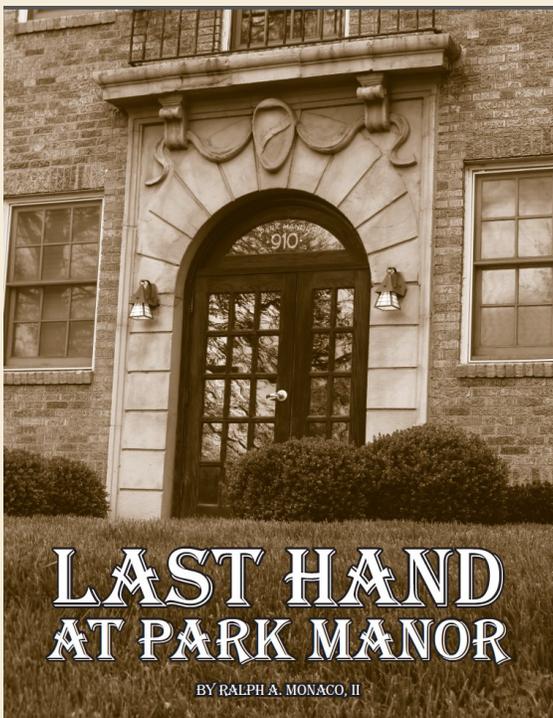
Two months later, she died in North Miami Beach, Dade County, Fla. She was 96.

Her estate was worth more than a million dollars. She died still angry and incensed with her family heirs. They were left a pittance — less than \$4,000 in assets.

She also died with the stain of Jack's blood on her conscience and soul.

In her final will — the last hand she played, and a last act of contrition — Myrtle left two-thirds of her estate — well over \$600,000 — to Mary Jacobs and Helen Fugina.

The beneficiaries were nieces of a perfume salesman — her long-deceased husband, John G. Bennett.



Last Hand at Park Manor

Myrtle Bennett's trial was reenacted in May 2015 as part of Jackson County Historical Society's living history program.

Several prominent Kansas City jurists participated in the trial, which was researched and written by Ralph Monaco II, the author of this article.

Monaco did extensive research into contemporary newspaper accounts of the trial and related developments. His research is published in a new 148-page book published by Monaco and the Jackson County Historical Society.

Copies are available through the JCHS bookstore or online through the JCHS website.

Retail price is \$15. All profits benefit JCHS.