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# Reuter Murder

By Terrell Lester World Special Writer  
10/12/1997

## 1912 Trial Was Big News in Young City

It was a trial that titillated a young city, a trial rife with sex, betrayal and murder for hire.

Nearly four decades later, the Tulsa World called it "Tulsa's most notorious murder," saying that "Tulsans rolled the spicy tidbits of the case on their tongues for many years after all the participants had vanished completely."

A prominent Tulsa attorney and school board member, Charles T. Reuter, was shot to death in his home on May 5, 1912.

His widow, Laura Reuter, and two men later were convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison without parole.

However, five days following her conviction, Laura Reuter was granted a new trial, in which she was found not guilty.

The murder and subsequent trials were big news in a city that was barely 15 years old and in a state that was celebrating only its fifth year. Newspapers across the nation took note of the case in which a young woman was charged, along with her boyfriend, with murdering her husband.

Reuter, 40, was shot in his home at 625 N. Cheyenne Ave., at 1 a.m. on May 5, 1912. He and Laura, his second wife, whom he had married when she was 14, had arrived in Tulsa from Illinois in 1907 with two small children.



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Police initially concluded that the murder had been committed by a robber, because Laura Reuter claimed that a large roll of bills her husband carried and a large diamond were missing.

In a few days, officers arrested Guy D. McKenzie, a water- well driller who lived two blocks from the Reuter home; Grover C. "Bud" Ballew, described as McKenzie's chauffeur; and Joe Baker, a friend of McKenzie's.

Laura Reuter was arrested on May 16 when she returned from taking her husband's body back to Peoria, Ill., for burial. All four were charged on May 21 with conspiracy to murder Charles Reuter.

The three male defendants were denied bail. Laura Reuter was freed on \$5,000 bond.

Nearly a month before the trial, Ballew turned state's evidence and signed a written confession implicating the other three defendants and admitting his role as driver of the car that took Baker from the murder scene.

Ballew said Baker had agreed to murder Reuter for \$500 and that the plot had been engineered by McKenzie and Laura Reuter.

In October, Tulsa Judge Maurice Breckinridge granted Laura Reuter's motion for a severance from a trial with Baker and McKenzie.

Following a 28-day trial, Baker and McKenzie were found guilty and were sentenced to prison.

Newspaper reports called the trial "by far the longest in the annals of Oklahoma court history." It attracted, reports say, "tremendous crowds of the curious and morbidly inclined."

Laura Reuter succeeded in obtaining a change of venue, and her trial was set for Sept. 13, 1913, in Bartlesville. Pat Malloy, Tulsa County attorney, represented the state. Moman Pruiett of Oklahoma City, J.R. Charleston and Ben Thompson combined for the defense.

Tales of an illicit affair between Laura Reuter and McKenzie surfaced during the trial. On Oct. 3, 1913, Laura Reuter was found guilty of conspiring with McKenzie and Baker to murder her husband. The jury recommended a life sentence without parole.

Much of the credit for the conviction went to Malloy, the 28-year-old Tulsan. His eloquent closing argument lasted five hours, repeatedly driving home the point that Laura Reuter had conspired to do away with her husband.

According to newspaper accounts, it was "a scene the like of which never before was enacted in an Oklahoma courtroom."

"Mrs. Reuter collapsed in a swoon when the verdict was read," articles read.

" `Come back from your grave, Charley Reuter, and tell these men I am innocent! Guilty! Oh! My God, no!" she yelled."

With her two children, Marcella, 7, and Johnny, 5, in her lap, she threw her hands in the air and fell back in a swoon. She was prevented from fainting only by her lawyers, who fanned her and dashed cold water in her face.

Regaining her composure, she addressed Judge Henry Hudson: "I can make any bond, Judge, but please don't send me to jail. Let me go now and be at peace for a few days with my babies."

Hudson agreed to allow her to remain free on the same appearance bond posted at her arrest. Even during the trial, she stayed in Bartlesville's Maire Hotel. Following the verdict, she took the Santa Fe train back to Tulsa.

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A day after the trial, Pruiett told reporters that his client would never serve a day of her sentence.

"I am as sure of it as that we've had a trial," he said.

Five days after the conviction, the motion for a new trial was granted by the court, on the sole grounds that the oratory of Malloy was so overpowering that the jury could not, and did not, return a fair, unbiased verdict.

In his decision on Oct. 8, Hudson said: "I am convinced that the jury would not have returned a verdict of guilty if it had not been for the wonderful closing argument of state's attorney Pat Malloy. The only way I can account for the action of the jury is that the 12 men who were to pass on the fate of Mrs. Reuter were momentarily influenced by the hypnotic address of Mr. Malloy, which was the most wonderful analyzation of evidence I ever heard."

Newspaper accounts of the trial called Malloy's argument "one of the most lucid and logical ever presented in a murder trial in Oklahoma."

Today, Malloy's son, Pat Malloy, is a practicing attorney in Tulsa. He said his father "was considered, at that time, the best orator in the state by far."

When Hudson made known his decision for a new trial, a smiling Laura Reuter approached the bench and shook the judge's hands.

She had, apparently, arrived in Bartlesville that day prepared to go to the penitentiary if the motion for a new trial should be overruled.

As the second trial began, on Jan. 14, 1914, Laura Reuter was reported seriously ill. Doctors who examined her for the state declared she was faking. When proceedings opened, she was carried in and out of court in a big chair and was attended by two nurses and two doctors.

Perhaps moved by her seeming illness, the jury acquitted her.

Malloy did not prosecute the second trial. He had left the County Attorney's Office and had entered private practice.

Laura Reuter was seldom seen after the trial. Her last appearance in Tulsa came in 1915, when she reportedly married a young man who had been a clerk for one of her lawyers. It is said that they took the children and moved to Cuba.

In April 1915, McKenzie and Baker attempted to escape from prison, slipping out in civilian clothing that had been smuggled to them. They were caught.

Baker, 28 when he was imprisoned, was paroled in 1935 and was given a full pardon in 1942.

McKenzie, 32 at the time of the murder, was granted clemency in 1919 and was in and out of jail on other charges until 1938. He died in 1952 in Sand Springs.

Neither Baker nor McKenzie ever admitted guilt in the case. Ballew was not heard from again. Laura Reuter left no traces of her whereabouts once she moved from Tulsa.

In his memoirs, Laura Reuter's attorney Pruiett wrote that McKenzie was the well driller on Reuter's North Cheyenne property.

According to Pruiett's biography: "Laura had saved her figure and didn't want to be a sedate little housewife. She wanted to play, so when old Charley'd come home an' read his paper, an' go off to bed by hisself, she opens up for the well digger.

"Guy wasn't no piker when it came to housewives. He'd spud into a preacher's bedroom if he got half a chance.

"Laura always had a sign so Guy could tell whether Charley was at home or not. When the shade in a back window upstairs at Reuter's house was down it meant that Charley was at home, an' when it was up it meant that he was away an' the coast was clear."

Pruett said Reuter found out about the affair a year before the murder and was inclined to kill

them both but decided against it because of the two children. Instead, he moved his things into a separate bedroom, and that's how the couple remained until May 5, 1912.

[By Terrell Lester World Special Writer](#)

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