

## GOD ONLY KNOWS

by Glen Haney

I wish I knew more about Marie Ferguson. For example, I do not know exactly where or when she was born. Nor do I know when she died or where her final resting place is. Yet, sandwiched in between her coming and going on earth, is a fascinating story that is filled with all the stuff that comes across as fiction – but it's real. Unfortunately, I only have some newspaper accounts of some of her more notorious exploits to share with you. Perhaps someone someday, can fill in the missing pieces of the story.

This much is certain, bad things seemed to follow Marie around. The only thing is, the bad stuff did not usually happen to her - but to someone who got in her path.

There seems little to be known of her early years in Kentucky. She was born about 1870(1) in either Carter or Greenup County. Her first husband, name unknown, died ominously, by drowning. Not long after she married a man named Bryant. Poor, Mr. Bryant didn't last long either, succumbing to "heart disease".

About that time, maybe before or maybe after Bryant's untimely death, Marie met Dr. William Ferguson, a local middle age practitioner in Greenup. That meeting may have been bad break for the Doctor's wife because soon after she too fell ill and died.

Are you starting to see a pattern develop?

In October, 1898, the widower Dr. Ferguson and the widow Mrs. Bryant tied the knot across the river in Portsmouth, Ohio. On the house ledger at the Hotel Portsmouth the pair listed their home address as Argentum, Ky.(2) The wedding was quite a sensation – landing on page 5 of the Portsmouth Times –the social page.. The Doctor had tried to keep the event quiet but Marie would have none of it and she created quite a stir. Dressed in a "custom made pale pink silk dress with black ribbon and French lace" she was - well let's just say she was hot. This, her first public appearance in Portsmouth left a lasting impression on the local newspaper scribes It would began an association that would always send them scurrying when the name Marie Ferguson was mentioned, because a good story was sure to follow. It was also a harbinger to the misery that was in store for Dr. Ferguson.

Although blessed with uncommon beauty and a sophistication that belied her rural background, Marie was not the demure, genteel type and it didn't take long to show. By early 1901 Marie was well known to the Portsmouth police. Portsmouth and the turn of the century was a bustling small city and Marie, no longer confined to the morose confines of rural life, was quick to adapt to all the glitz that she had been missing in the country.

Renowned for her temper and willingness to take on either sex in a brawl, Marie was not one to trifle with. In one incident at a group picnic, Marie and a chap named Ed Cameron, got into a regular stand-up, knock-down affair. As the crowd cheered them on, Marie was well ahead on all scorecards until Ed got in a wild haymaker and knocked Marie cold.

In time, the notoriety of Marie was making it difficult for Dr. Ferguson to get an effectual practice off the ground in their new location. Money was not coming in, the marriage was coming apart and the Doctor was starting to lose his mind. Prone to frequent headaches and seizures he was steadily going down hill.

In September of 1901 more trouble was heaped on. Having moved to a succession of ever more modest living quarters, the Doctor and wife had just two days prior, moved into their Fourteenth Street rental when it exploded and burned to cinders within an hour, the blast being heard all over town. The Doctor was not home but Marie was seen stumbling out of the inferno. When questioned as to what happened, Marie could only gasp, "God only knows".

Among the possessions lost in the fire was the Doctor's prized grand piano that by its self was worth far more than the \$1300 insurance.

Soon it was determined that the fire was caused by the explosion of a gasoline can. Suspicion fell on Marie and she was brought to trial for arson. Her motive was said to be \$1300 insurance money. In what would become a familiar pattern the accused was found not guilty. When the insurance company still balked at paying off the money Marie sued them - and won.

Marie's social path seemed to pass somewhere between the riverfront crowd and the society crowd. She could be disarmingly charming, or withdrawn, depending on the role that was required. To supplement her husband's failing practice, (a failing, do in no small part, to her reckless adventures) Marie tried her own career. She advertised herself as Mademe De Bryant, and her business cards credited her as being "A Beautifier of Homely Women". It is not known how many clients she had that would acknowledge to requiring such help - or if she had clients - what service or remedies were rendered.

By late 1902 Marie's conduct had fairly well wiped out the Doctor, both financially and mentally. There remained one more scrape with the authorities to push him over the edge.

In October 1902 a clerk at a Mortgage firm owned and managed by Ben Ostseifer, returned from lunch and found Osteifer dead, slumped over his desk with a bullet hole straight in his heart. The clerk said that when he left for lunch Mrs. Ferguson was there but when he returned she was gone. The only item that appeared to be missing from the safe was a mortgage note that the firm held on Mrs. Ferguson.

A trial was held in December. Predictably, Marie managed to cajole her way out of trouble with the all male jury. Having being in at out of court so often, Marie by now was a self-trained masterful actress on the stand. Dabbing at or eyes or rending her features heartbroken, she was the consummate thespian at play. It is interesting to read the news coverage that was printed in Portsmouth Times detailing the appearance of Marie in court. She would exhibit the appeal that she would have on spectators and of course the jurors. A sampling:

*“Throughout the examination Mrs. Ferguson seemed nervous, but regained her assurance as soon as she had stepped off the stand. This morning she came into court dressed in a very kittenish and girlish manner. She had her hair done up in a long braid flying loose at the ends, hanging down over her back and she flitted all about the court room like a school girl.*

*Mrs. Marie is certainly a remarkable woman.”*

What mental faculties that Dr. Ferguson still possessed were finally crushed. His practice was shot, his marriage was unraveling, and the Doctor’s mental state finally collapsed. Separation of their marriage soon followed. A shaken, beaten-down Ferguson went back to Greenup County to a cluster of houses called Maloneton,<sup>(3)</sup> hoping to pick up some pieces of life. Life with Marie however had taken its toll and within a few months of his return to Greenup he was adjudged insane and carted off to the state asylum in Lexington. Taking into account all that had preceded, perhaps he considered himself lucky - at least he was still alive.

It wasn’t long until Marie found herself dissolute with no means of support other than that which is always offered a woman of the streets. Taking stock of her situation, she decided that she had not hit bottom just yet but she had to get a fresh start somewhere else. As it turned out, somewhere else turned out to be Olive Hill, Ky. at the home of Lewis and Katherine Wilson.

Before leaving town, she had to clean up loose ends at the Portsmouth courthouse. By chance, there was a Times reporter who recognized her and they struck up a conversation. Marie proceeded to pour out a litany of her latest woes; her mother had gone blind, her step-mother and her sister had just died and her brother was “dangerously” ill and worst of all, the love of her life, the good Doctor, had been put away reduced to cutting out paper dolls. But life goes on, Marie was off to a new beginning.

The title of Postmaster in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was a lofty one. Although the appointment itself was not well paying, the position provided a steady stream of potential customers to the Postmasters regular enterprise. Lewis Wilson ran the Post Office from his Tonsorial establishment. The twin billing worked well providing Lewis and his wife Katherine with a comfortable living. Lost in history, is how and why Marie wound up in the Wilson home to begin with. Some newspaper accounts refer to her as a domestic and some called her a boarder. It would seem clear that Lewis, being Postmaster and local Barber, both gossip gardens, would know who Marie Ferguson was and her past resume. The Wilson's hailed from Clark County, Ky. so it is not likely that there was a family relationship. But there Marie was, and once again tragedy would soon follow.

It was Friday March 20, 1903 and Marie had barely settled in to her new surroundings when something went awry. Exactly what set Katherine Wilson off is not clear. Newspaper accounts referred to it as "indiscretions" perpetrated by Marie. Whatever it was, Mrs. Wilson was hopping mad that morning. She wanted Marie out of the house at once. Neighbors could hear Katherine shouting and Marie calmly trying to settle things down. Finally, Marie offered to make a nice cup of tea for them both, over which she flatly told Katherine that she was not about to leave – and that was that.

Shortly thereafter Katherine grew ill, vomiting and complaining of stomach pain. Put to bed, she grew worse by the day. The seemingly anxious Marie tended to her bedside, soothing her brow, and making her more comforting tea. Physicians were summoned but Katherine continued to decline. On Wednesday, April 8<sup>th</sup> she died.

News travels fast in small towns. It wasn't long until authorities were alerted that this might not be a routine death. A meeting was held and doctors Hanfield, Armstrong, McCleese and Strother were summoned to do a post-mortem examination. Their conclusion was that the "stomach was congested and the membrane was considerably corroded" but they could not decide what that meant. Someone would to escort the stomach to Cincinnati for expert analysis of possible poisoning.

That statement, along with the by now known rap sheet attributed to Marie Ferguson, was all that was needed for the town fathers to send Marshall Gus Hall to arrest Marie for the death of Mrs. Wilson. [Marshall Hall would take the opportunity to confiscate for his own use, her fine Colt 44 revolver which he assumed she would no longer need.] Not having proper jail facilities for ladies, Marie was housed in the hotel, with a guard posted until the next step was figured out.

The Wilson's were well liked. There was talk of a lynching but no one wanted to head up the mob that would lynch a woman. Nevertheless, it was decided that it was best to move her out of the county for safe keeping. Marie was hustled off to Catlettsburg to await her day in court.

The press took up the investigation. The most damning evidence against her was that Marie was seen making a purchase of a cleverly named product called Rough-On-Rats. A primer on arsenic is called for here. Arsenic in its raw form is a poor choice for murder. It has an objectionable metallic taste that turns the victim off. However, when formulated properly and administered in small doses it is very effective. Another shortcoming is that it stays in the body even after death. Unlike some other chemical agents it will not deteriorate over time. It is therefore necessary for the killer to administer the poison in such a way so as not to attract suspicion thus prompting an investigation. The poison must also be served in a manner that the victim will freely consume it. In the early twentieth century, the product sold over the counter at the local drug store called Rough-On-Rats was found to be equally rough on humans. Containing an especially formulated mixture containing arsenic it was odorless and tasteless and lethal. [Comedians liked to joke that Rough-On-Rats was a divorce lawyer's biggest competitor.]

Further digging lay open the sordid background of Marie and the unfortunates she had parted with along the way. All of it surely would be enough this time to bring justice.

The practices of the judicial system as performed by our forefathers sometimes appear peculiar to us now. Appointing a physician, rather than an officer of the law, to escort an important piece of evidence such as deceased's stomach to a laboratory a long distance away appears unusual, but that is what was done. With the box securely tucked under his arm, Dr. Strother headed off to Cincinnati. A few days later making the return route from Lexington through Winchester and Mt. Sterling Dr. Strother was not shy when speaking with reporters. "No doubt about it, boys, and the laboratory verified it", he would say. Then he paused and smiled as he dropped the bomb, "there was *no* poison in the stomach".

This setback to the absolute guilt of Marie seems to have taken the sails out from under the press and little more was printed about the matter. However, the prosecution still thought they had a case and went ahead with the trial. The jury took four long days to make their decision – not guilty. So, on July 1, 1903 she was set free. As we all know, being found not guilty is not the same as being innocent. It merely means that there was not sufficient evidence in the minds of the jury to convict. So, the question will forever remain: did she do the deed or not?

There is another bizarre twist to this chapter. Remember Marshall Gus Hall? The one who confiscated Marie's Colt 44 when he arrested her? On June 25, in Olive Hill, a week before Marie's release, Hall was on the losing end of a blazing gun battle with a man named Everett Beaty. Marshall Hall's weapon of choice was – of course - Marie's revolver.

Having enough of Olive Hill, Marie packed her things, along with the Colt 44 which was returned to her, and headed back to Portsmouth. For the next ten years or so she stayed out of trouble although she still made the papers now and then. She remarried to a man named Churchill but the newspapers referred to her still as just Marie Ferguson. She was often seen roaming around town on a horse carrying her revolver rolled up in a newspaper.

By 1915 she had found her way to Harrison Township a rural community just northeast of Portsmouth. There, she began to make a nuisance of herself hanging around the home of a neighbor, Frank Pool. Despite several attempts to shoo her away, Marie would soon come back. One Sunday afternoon in November, 1915 Frank and his wife returned home from doing some chores around the place and found Marie in the house. He again remonstrated with her for coming there and taking her by the arm led her out of the house to the front gate. As he turned to leave, Marie whipped out the ole' colt 44 and let off two quick rounds in the direction of the terrified Pool. One shot whizzed by his ear and the other took a nick out of his shirt. Fleeing into the house he armed himself and watched her until she was out of sight. He notified the authorities at once and an arrest warrant was put out for her.

Marie went in to hiding but was eventually tracked down back in Portsmouth. After several delays because of Marie fainting and the like, her trial finished up on March, 15, 1916. The Marie of old was no more. She was no longer the dazzling, vivacious, vixen of earlier days, when she was capable of holding the jury in the palm of her hand. Now she was just a middle age matron with 100 years of life packed into a frail 46 year old body. Barely able to mumble when speaking with the judge, her attorneys managed to plea bargain down to a concealed weapons charge. She was sentenced to an indefinite term in the Ohio Penitentiary.

Evidently a year in the pen was a cure. On April, 1917 Marie was released on parole and vanished from history, leaving behind a store of unanswered questions for posterity.

**Sources were newspapers; the Portsmouth Times, The Mt. Sterling Advocate and The Winchester News.**

(1) Her maiden name was Alexander and there is strong evidence that her full name was *Mary Elizabeth Alexander*. In one conversation she alludes to having roots in Carter County probably around the Carter – Greenup line.

(2) Argentum is/was about where Bennett's Mill Covered Bridge is today

(3) Maloneton was/is on modern day Route 7. It is better known today as the home of retired Cincinnati Reds great, Don Gullet.

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