



# Episode 022 – A Bludgeoning in Burbank (transcript)

## Introduction

You're listening to rememBURBANK, a podcast featuring stories from the history of Burbank, California, produced by the Burbank Public Library. Check out our collection of historic Burbank photos at [burbankinfo.org](http://burbankinfo.org).

## Announcements

Mark Twain once said, "Why waste money looking up your family tree? Just go into politics and your opponents will do it for you." The Burbank Public Library doesn't want you to waste money on looking up your family tree either so we've provided free access to Ancestry.com from library computers. Come to any of Burbank's three library branches and start your family research and then there will be no need to go into politics like Mark Twain suggested.

## Story

Mable had spent the day playing cards with friends and was settling in for the night with a new mystery novel "The Purple Pony Murders," when she was interrupted by a knock on her door. She opened it cautiously to find an anxious young woman on the other side pleading to use her phone because her car had broken down. Being both a widow living on her own and the mother to an adult daughter, she understood the plight of a fellow woman in need. But as soon as she opened the door to let the stranger in, four men came from the bushes and pushed their way inside the house. They waved a gun in her face demanding she tell them where the money was hidden. She stuttered that there was no money, but they could take whatever they wanted. They wouldn't relent and insisted she tell them where the safe was. Mable started to call out for help when the woman instructed one of the thugs to hit her with the butt of the gun. She fell to the floor and the felonious female grabbed a pillow case and suffocated the helpless old woman. It sounds like a Hollywood movie, right? But this true crime happened right here in Burbank. Poor Mable Monohan was murdered courtesy of rumors and greed.

Born in 1888 in Idaho, Mable left her home to work vaudeville with the Orpheum circuit. Her husband, George, was a professional roller skater and they met while touring. They had one daughter, Iris, who was born in 1911. George was nearly 20 years Mable's senior and died in 1940, leaving Mable a widow at the age of 52. In the late 1940s, Mable was struck by a car while crossing the street and it left her partially disabled. Mable's daughter, Iris, had an ex-husband Luther Scherer, who was referred to as Tutor. He was an investor in casinos and co-founder of the Pioneer Club in Las Vegas. He had large real estate holdings both in Nevada and California. Upon their divorce, Iris was granted their Burbank home at 1718 W. Parkside Avenue along with a settlement of \$150,000. She lived at the Burbank home with her mother until she remarried James Robert Sowder in 1952. Husband number two was an oil tycoon and Iris moved to New York to live with him. Mable was gifted the house in Burbank. She remained on friendly terms with her ex-son-in-law, Tutor. So much so, that rumors circulated about their relationship.

Word on the street was that Mable kept a safe with \$100,000 dollars for him and this scuttlebutt was what got a handful of lowbrow criminals scheming to rob the aged widow.

On March 8, 1953, ex-cons Jack Santo, Emmett Perkins, Baxter Shorter, William Upshaw, and Barbara Graham, along with, randomly enough, a deep-sea diver, John True met at a San Fernando diner to plan their crime. Santo and Perkins had a history of committing crimes together. Barbara was Perkins' new love interest who had served time for vagrancy and perjury. Baxter Shorter was a safe cracker and John True was along for the ride to get trained on cracking safes. William Upshaw had been asked by Santo to be the lookout. They drove by the Monohan home that night to scope the residence. Upshaw decided to back out of their venture. The rest planned to meet for dinner at the Smoke House Restaurant on March 9<sup>th</sup> before heading over to begin their heist.

The crime really did get away from them. It was the murder of Mable that led to their downfall. She was an invalid older woman, she posed them no physical threat. According to trial testimony, Barbara was the instigator of the physical assault. Chiding Perkins to abuse the woman and finalizing the deal by suffocating her with a pillowcase and then strangling her with strips of cloth. The joke was on them, there was no safe, no \$100,000, no riches to be found at 1718 W. Parkside. They turned the house upside down looking for the loot. Baxter Shorter was alarmed at Perkins and Barbara's callous killing of the matron. After they fled the scene, Shorter made a call to the police to inform them of a woman in need of assistance. He gave them the address, but failed to mention it was in Burbank, so the LAPD that he called looked no further than the city limits of Los Angeles. But to be perfectly clear, Shorter didn't care about Mable, he cared what her death might mean to him. "It was pragmatism and not a burning desire to do the right thing which compelled him" to make the call. On March 11<sup>th</sup>, after Mable had laid dead for two days, her gardener, noticing the front door open and also seeking payment for his services, made his way into the house to find the slain woman.

When the police examined the scene, they initially ruled out robbery. Burbank's Lt. Coveney declared, "the assailant missed \$500 in cash and diamond jewelry whose worth is estimated at more than \$5,000 which the murdered woman had stowed in a patent leather black pocket book in the guest bedroom closet. This was possible, the detective added, because in the closet were a dozen or so more pocket books which were empty." By the end of March, they had brought in five local criminals who all had ties to Tutor Scherer and three of them were former henchmen to notorious mob boss Mickey Cohen. Luckily for the police, two of their suspects had ties to the crime: safe cracker Baxter Shorter and William Upshaw who was the only affiliate to decline the job. It didn't take long for Shorter to confess to his involvement. He wanted nothing to do with being part of a murder rap and detailed the full story to the police. On April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1953, just a short time after he was released from jail, two men showed up at his house and kidnapped him. According to his wife, it was Perkins and Santo. She thought she saw a woman waiting in the car. Mrs. Shorter attempted to save her husband by grabbing a rifle and pointing it at the assailants, but she was not successful. Baxter Shorter was never seen again. Without their star witness, the prosecutors would have to find a new way to prove the guilt of the nefarious culprits.

John True turned state's witness shortly thereafter, accepting the police protection he had been offered so he wouldn't be made to disappear like poor Baxter. True had no criminal record. He had been a deep-sea diver and how he got entangled in a scenario of such lawlessness was never quite exposed. True got immunity for disclosing the details of the atrocity. He named the others and now it was up to the police to locate them. The three they were searching for: Perkins, Santo, and Graham had various hideouts from El Monte to Seal Beach to Lynwood. It was at their Lynwood refuge that the police surrounded the building and took the trio into custody.

Emmet Perkins, Jack Santo, and Barbara Graham were termed “The Unholy Trio” by news-mongering reporters. All three chose the tactic of trying to prove their innocence through bunk alibis. While in prison, Barbara had befriended another inmate, Donna Prow; and after earning one another’s confidence, Donna convinced her to use an “alibi fixer” that she knew who would give Barbara an alibi in exchange for cash. Barbara green-lighted the operation and soon met with a man named Sam. They concocted a story in which they were together at a hotel the night of the murder, so there was no way she could have been at the crime scene. After meeting three times and with a bit of coaxing, Sam got Barbara to admit that she had been with Perkins and Santo on March 9th. During the trial, a witness was called for the prosecution. In came Sam, strutting into the courtroom revealing that he was an undercover cop and had recorded their conversation. Donna Prow had set Barbara up so she could receive a reduced sentence. Barbara was the only defendant to take the stand. She made a second attempt at an alibi by telling the courtroom that she couldn’t have been at Mable’s home that night, because she was at her own house arguing with her estranged husband, Henry Graham. When Henry was questioned, he initially denied being with her, but he later changed his story and said they were together the night of the murder. Barbara’s 17-year-old quadriplegic neighbor testified that they were home fighting that night. But records indicated that the neighbor had actually been at the hospital until 8 in the evening of March 9th and therefore not a credible witness. Barbara’s alibis fell apart as the prosecution pointed out that in the secret recording she had confessed to Sam that her husband had left her days before March 9th. Two other witnesses were called, a tire reclaimer, Willis E. Carter, and a free-lance writer, Mary Heyman who admitted to being approached by an attorney to establish alibis for Perkins and Santo. Shorter and True’s confessions along with the trio’s parade of unsubstantiated alibis all only incriminated them.

While in custody, Santo and Perkins were also implicated for several other unsolved murders. In October 1952, Guard Young was coming back from the bank with \$7,100 to cash checks. Along with him for the ride were his three children and a neighbor boy. They were found beaten to death between Chester and Westwood in the mountains of Northern California. The money had been stolen. One of his children did survive, but as he was only 3 years old could not offer any clues for the case. While on trial for the Monohan murder, one Larry Shea came forward to the police and confessed to giving Perkins and Santo the information that the grocer picked up a large sum of money at a particular time and place. Law enforcement was also able to place Perkins and Santo in the town of Chester at the time the homicides took place. Another informant, George Boles, “signed an 18-page confession in which he admitted [to] the December 1951, killing of Edmund G. Hansen, Nevada City mine operator, and [he] linked Santo and Perkins to the killing” as well. According to the witness, a woman waited outside Hansen’s home while the men forced their way in, demanded \$20,000 which they thought the miner had, then shot him five times. The woman was later identified as Harriet Henson, a girlfriend of Santo’s whose car was regularly used for getaways, and she was often behind the wheel. Both men would go on to be tried and convicted of these murders as well.

But Barbara Graham was truly the star of the case. She made for some great headline fodder. After all, she was a beautiful woman and a mother of three! What could bring a woman so seemingly composed to commit such a heinous act? All clues lead directly to her upbringing. Barbara was born to a teenage prostitute in 1923. She spent much of her childhood in foster care or being raised by extended family. She was bright but had little education. When Barbara was just a teen, she was arrested for vagrancy and sent to the Ventura State School for girls. When she was released from reform school in 1939, she tried to create a new life for herself. She married a U.S. Coastguardsman in 1940, enrolled in business college and had two children, but the marriage was over by 1942. Her husband got custody of the children. She was married two more times, both of which also ended in divorce, but produced no children. She made her money as a sex trade worker usually concentrating her work near military bases.

She ended up becoming “involved in gambling and illegal drug circles, cultivating a number of friends who were ex-convicts and known career criminals.” After serving a five-year sentence for perjury, she moved to Nevada where she worked briefly as a waitress. But the traditional life was too mundane for Barbara, so she hopped a bus to L.A. and returned to prostitution. “In 1953, she married Henry Graham, who was a bartender at one of her frequent haunts.” Together they had a son named Tommy who was just 14 months old at the time of Mable’s murder. Henry Graham was also a drug addict and introduced Barbara to heroin. When she and her cronies were rounded up in Lynwood, detectives reported “she had just administered an intravenous injection from a hypodermic kit found in her purse.” Barbara was also prone to the dramatics. During her trial, she had two falls, one in her jail cell and the other down the steps on the way to the courtroom. Officials deemed it all a ploy to delay the hearings because while being examined for any injury from her first fall, she was overheard saying, “When I really get into my act I’m going to make Sarah Bernhard look like a chump.” Barbara would also take opportunities to pose for reporters when her son visited her in jail. A September 24, 1953 article in the Burbank Daily Review reported “Barbara Graham was ‘on stage’ this morning in her county jail cell when the bars were lifted for her press and television conference. With the bright lights shining on the doomed slayer of the Monohan murder of March 9, she reiterated her former remarks that ‘I’d rather die in the gas chamber than spend the rest of my life in prison for a crime I didn’t commit.’” And that’s just what happened. On June 3, 1955, Barbara Graham was executed at San Quentin. As Barbara was being strapped into the gas chamber, one of the men in charge offered her the advice to take a deep breath and it would be an easier death, to which she quipped, “How the hell would you know?” She was the only person to ever ask for a blindfold in the gas chamber. Her last words were, “Good people are always so sure they’re right.” Emmett Perkins and Jack Santo were both executed on the same day as Barbara, in the same gas chamber. Although their legacy is of scandal and tragedy, Burbank’s history is not complete without a mention of their infamous mark on the town.

## News from Burbank

Today’s news come from the April 14, 1958 *Los Angeles Times*:

### **Anxiety Jazz Killer-Diller: Barbara Graham Crime Career Being Acted Out To Cool Beat**

Jazz in movies is as old as the first sound tracks; employing it as a symptom, a symbol, of the times or playing it in counterpoint, ironic or hysterical, to enacted drama, is newer. In “I Want to Live!,” new name for “The Barbara Graham Story,” they are calling it “anxiety jazz.”

“I Want to Live!” is no merry jive session. In it Susan Hayward is playing the convicted murderess, Barbara Graham. However, Robert Wise, who is directing, believes music can be used to “tell” her story. He defines anxiety jazz as “pre-Beat Generation jazz—but with a beat, nevertheless.” Barbara’s downward slide from petty crime as a teenager to the gas chamber at 32 was paced by the sort of music that came out of San Francisco’s Tenderloin district, Wise says. The period was the late 40s.

John Mandel, a trombonist once known as “the Bearded Bard of Basie’s Band,” was recruited to compose and arrange the anxiety jazz. Walter Wanger, the producer, is getting together an all-star quintet to play it—Shelly Manne on drums, Red Mitchell on bass and a trumpet, saxophone and piano player to be determined from a list that includes Dizzy Gillespie, Shorty Rogers, Gerry Mulligan, Stan Getz, Erroll Garner, Andre Previn and Oscar Peterson. Sounds like progressive jazz—but considering the subject matter it could well be regressive. Wise defines his cool concept, at any rate, as “a new form of dramatic music especially designed for this picture.”

And that is the Burbank news from April 14, 1958.

## End Credits

rememBURBANK was researched, written, and hosted by Carolyn Alves, recorded and edited by Marcos Alves. Funding for the podcast came from the Friends of the Burbank Public Library, a nonprofit group dedicated to promoting books and the library to the Burbank community. The proceeds from their fundraising efforts help fund Library programming and purchase special equipment for the library.

The music you hear now, and at the beginning of the podcast, is Burbank's 1924 official song "In Burbank" by Code Morgan.

You can find shownotes for this episode, learn more about the show, and view historical photos of Burbank at [burbankinfo.org](http://burbankinfo.org).

Thank you for joining us today.