Mary Had a Little Lab

Mary Stults was born in 1913 in Evanston, Illinois. She studied in France for two years as a teenager, taught French, earned her medical degree at University of Chicago, and married Thomas Sherman. She did graduate work at the University of Chicago (UC), which was established by a Rockefeller Foundation grant, primarily as a research university. UC became heavily involved in biochemical research that led to the development of new drugs, which enriched the drug companies that sponsored the research. In addition to this, UC became a major point for nuclear research, and it was home to the first nuclear accelerator, commonly referred to as an *atom smasher*, which produced the first sustained nuclear reaction. Mary Sherman was at the epicenter of American research in biochemistry, nuclear physics, and genetics.

Her earliest research was in the area of botanical viruses (which live in soil). She published articles which were quoted from the 1940s through the -80s. Then she focused her research on the use of radiation for the treatment of bone cancers. In the 1940s, she was Associate Professor of Orthopedic Surgery and practiced at Billings Hospital (at UC). She was a rising scientific and medical superstar, and UC nurtured her enormous potential. That's where she met Dr Alton Ochsner, who made Mary an offer she didn't refuse.

She moved to New Orleans in 1952, where she: was in charge of her own cancer research lab, was Associate Professor at Tulane Medical School, performed surgery at New Orleans' Charity Hospital, and worked at several children's hospitals in the area. During that time, she had the support of the powerful, respected, well-connected Dr Ochsner, who had established himself as a magnet for research funds.

All orthopedic surgeons aspire to acceptance by the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons. It can take decades to achieve that lofty goal, for the chosen few who ever make it. Mary did. The best of AAOS members are assigned to powerful committees, and the best of those become committee chairmen. One of the most prized of those committees is the Pathology Committee. Mary became Chairman of the Pathology Committee, a post which involved traveling all over the world, which was no doubt less stressful because she was single again by then. (Her husband had committed suicide.)

Mary Sherman loved literature, music, wine, flowers, theater, and travel. She was a standout in the male-dominated (then and now) field of bone and joint surgery. She was well respected as a doctor and successful financially. She was a feminist before her time. And she was dead before her time. Her death was bizarre and tragic.

On July 21, 1964, Juan Valdez smelled smoke and called the police, who found Mary Sherman's apartment (on St Charles Avenue in New Orleans) filled with smoke. Firefighters removed a smoking mattress and found a body that had been both burned and stabbed. No murder weapon was found (although a knife was missing from the rack in the kitchen). Newspaper reports initially described it as a burglary, based on an empty wallet, forced entry, and her missing car. It was reported that her apartment had been burglarized before. NOPD resented the implication that they had not been doing an adequate job of protecting New Orleans citizens, prompting the standard manpower shortage defense. None of her neighbors had heard anything, even though the neighbor who lived in the

apartment below Dr Sherman's (Mrs Levy) often did hear Mary when she got home, took off her shoes, and walked around in her slippers. It had sounded like Mary had gone to bed early the previous night; there was certainly no commotion of any kind. Her housekeeper (Elmener Peterson, who had been with Mary for 12 years) last saw Mary at 4:30pm, and she said the doctor had expected a lady friend to visit that evening. The maintenance man for the building (Alvin Acorn, who had known Dr Sherman for 12 years) had seen Mary at 4:00pm. She was talking with her housekeeper on the patio. He saw Mary's car in the parking lot and told that to NOPD.

The following day, newspapers reported that it was not a burglary after all. The front door had not been forced open, the burglar alarm had been turned off, and a box of jewelry had not been taken. Her car was found eight blocks from her apartment, the keys were found in a neighbor's yard, an unidentified palm print was found on the car, and there was no sign of rape. The police began looking for a psychopath. Over the next two weeks, they interviewed 150 people (according to newspaper reports) who had known Dr Sherman professionally or socially. On August 11, the newspaper announced a press black-out by police, and that's all the residents of New Orleans knew about Mary's fate for close to 30 years. At the tail end of the last column, readers were left with a few haunting details to ponder for decades. The person who killed Mary had piled underclothes on top of her nude body, and set them ablaze. The fire smoldered for quite a while, but never erupted into flames. It was enough to scorch the innerspring mattress and burn away the flesh from her right arm, but it didn't destroy the rest of the apartment. And, by the way, Dr Sherman had been gone for two weeks shortly before the night she died. Nobody knew where she had been.

The autopsy report indicated that Mary had been stabbed several times, including a laceration to her sexual organs. Rumors started flying about a lesbian lover angle in the murder. That speculation began even before the autopsy began. Six weeks after the murder, a teacher said the doctor had been killed by Communists.

Today, we know a great deal more about Dr Mary Sherman's death, and about what she was doing during the summer of 1963. That is due primarily to the research of Edward T Haslam, author of *Dr Mary's Monkey*, and to the autobiographical account of Judyth Vary Baker in *Me and Lee*. In these two books we find an astonishing true story of love, sex, international intrigue, murder, cutting-edge science, and political corruption. We get a disturbing glimpse into a nation which had badly lost its moral compass.

Haslam obtained (in 1992) two police reports on the death of Dr Mary Sherman: a Precinct Report and a Homicide Report. The Precinct report was filed by the NOPD officers who first arrived on the scene at Dr Sherman's apartment at 3101 St Charles Avenue. It was promptly written, signed by everyone involved, and filed. The Homicide Report was filed months later, and it was signed only by the officer who wrote it, Detective Robert Townsend, Jr. It wasn't signed by the other investigator, Detective Frank Hayward, nor was it approved by their supervisor, Lt James Kruebbe, which seems to have been unusual and a violation of standard operating procedures for NOPD.

From the Precinct Report we learn that the body was lying on the floor next to the bed, with feet pointed toward the head of the bed. It says that the initial examination of the body by Dr LoCascio indicated **multiple stab wounds to the left arm and torso and a large wound on the inside of the right thigh just above the knee. . . . The right arm and a portion of the right side**

of the body extending from the right hip to the right shoulder was completely burned away exposing various vital organs. It goes on to say that, according to Elmener Peterson (Dr Sherman's housekeeper), the doctor was expecting out-of-town visitors. The body was positively identified by Dr Carolyn Talley. The report continues with a summary (written by the police captain) of the autopsy results: 1**- stab wound of the chest, penetrating the heart, hemopericardium and left hemithorax; 2- multiple stab wounds of the abdomen, with incid[ental] wound of the liver; 3- multiple stab wounds of the left upper extremity and the right leg; 4- laceration of the Labia Minora; 5- extreme burns of the right side of the body with complete destruction of the right upper extremity and right side of thorax and abdomen**.

The first half of the Homicide Report, which reported on the crime scene, was dated October 29, 1964 (about 10 weeks after the investigation had ended). When homicide investigators arrived, firemen were cleaning up the scene. They were told to stop until investigators had gone through and inspected all debris. Investigators entered the apartment (J) from the patio (the only entrance), and checked the living room, kitchen, bathroom, study, and bedroom, finding no signs of a struggle. The body was nude; however, there was clothing which had apparently been placed on top of the body, mostly covering the body from just above the pubic area to the neck. Some of the mentioned clothes had been burned completely, while others were still intact, but scorched. Sam Moran, investigator from the Coroner's office, had a look at the crime scene, and left with several of Mary's personal things, including her jewelry box, purse, checkbook, and 13 keys on a ring found in the kitchen. NOPD officers removed about 40 items of evidence, including two passports, two address books, and a pair of white gloves found in the laundry hamper in the bathroom. (They appeared to have blood on them.)

According to the pathologist who performed the autopsy (Dr Samuels), Mary was dead before the fire and before the stab wound to the labia minora. She had not been raped. Most of the clothes placed on top of her nude body were still neatly folded. The criminologist reported that the clothes were made of synthetic materials which would not burn (with a flame) under 500 degrees F.

The area around Mary's car (350-foot radius) was searched, and items commonly found in a woman's purse were found, but it wasn't clear that they belonged to Dr Sherman. The keys had been thrown over a fence and were found by the neighbor.

The second half of the Homicide Report was dated November 3, 1964. It shed no light on Dr Sherman's murder. It appeared to be an attempt to support the premise that Mary had been gay and was killed by a lesbian woman. That, apparently, was the primary (if not exclusive) focus of the NOPD investigation. It was a waste of time. That may very well explain the missing signatures.

Something didn't add up. It takes one hell of a fire to cause that much burn damage to a human body. Yet the fire in Mary's apartment hadn't really done much damage to anything else. It didn't even burn the clothes piled on her body. That just doesn't make sense. Nobody saw any flames at all in the apartment. Mostly it was smolder and smoke. And none of her neighbors had heard anything unusual the night / morning of the murder in a complex where they could easily hear more than they wanted to. Mary did not die in her apartment. Whatever happened to her took place somewhere else, and her body was placed in the

apartment to make it appear to be a sexual assault or burglary.

What really happened to Mary? Where? Why? By whom? NOPD was clueless. The coroner was no help. The authorities in NO didn't seem to care much about finding the truth. That would have probably been the end of the story if not for the digging done by Edward T Haslam 30 years later.

When a human body is cremated, the furnace is cranked up to 1600 degrees F, and the body burns for a couple of hours. If it's a large body, it may take three hours at 2000 degrees F. The fire in Mary's apartment couldn't have been above 500 degrees F, because that is the point at which flames would begin to consume everything around them. If the fire had been hot enough to burn off her right arm, it wouldn't have stopped there. It would have burned her entire body and it would have destroyed the apartment, if not the entire building. And even then, bones or parts of bones would have remained. When a body is cremated, the furnace doesn't yield just ashes. Most of what's left is bone fragments that must then be crushed into ashes before the remains are handed over to loved ones. Bones do not burn. Even bodies burned in fires with jet fuel or napalm, which generate heat of thousands of degrees, leave bone fragments behind. The cremation furnace rapidly dehydrates bones so that they fracture and splinter, making them easier to crush. There were no bones or bone fragments left from Mary's right arm and rib cage.

So, what could have caused the kind of damage that killed Dr Mary Sherman? It had to be something very unusual. A bolt of lightning? No. Even people who get struck by lightning don't end up like Mary. But that's getting closer. Something that produces heat of possibly a million degrees for only an instant, vaporizing the effected part of the body while leaving the rest of it intact. Was Mary electrocuted? Not by normal household electrical current. It would take an industrial-strength jolt of electricity. There was an electrical engineer named Jack Nygard who accidentally got in the path of a 5-million-volt linear particle accelerator around Seattle. Something like that would be closer to Mary's demise. But she wasn't an electrical engineer. There was no reason for her to have come into contact with that kind of juice. Or was there?

Haslam turned to the official autopsy report to see if it could shed any light on the mystery. There were two sets of stab wounds, and two sets of burns. Mary was killed by a stab directly into the heart, suggesting it was inflicted by someone who knew exactly what he was doing. The initial burning must have been caused by either a massive jolt of electricity or perhaps a large dose of radiation. That was the initial blow to Mary's body. That vaporized her right arm and disintegrated her right rib cage, singeing some of the hair on her head. The electricity or radiation damage was extreme, but localized, leaving her totally incapacitated, but still alive. Then came the stab to the heart. Other stab wounds were inflicted after Mary was already dead, and so were the secondary burns. Secondary stab wounds were more random, generally extending diagonally from the left shoulder to the chest, abdomen, genitals, and leg. The weapon penetrated through the clothing that had been placed on top of her body, so the perpetrator wasn't attempting to stab her genitals, and probably wasn't even aware that he had done so. There was no apparent sexual motive to the murder.

We know from Haslam's research and Judyth Vary Baker's autobiographical account in *Me and Lee* that Dr Mary Sherman was involved in a secret project during the summer of 1963. In fact, she was one of the key players in that scientific effort

to develop an effective vaccine against cancer (and a biological weapon to be used to assassinate Cuban leader Fidel Castro). Part of that project involved exposing cancer viruses to radiation, intentionally causing mutations of cancer viruses, selecting the strongest of them, and repeating the process until they had developed a cancer virus so potent that it could kill a human in a matter of days. What kind of equipment did Mary use in her lab? Was it powerful enough to produce radiation capable of causing the kind of damage Mary had suffered?

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Based on Haslam's research, this is probably what happened to Dr Mary Sherman in the hours before and just after her death.

Mary's secret work on the cancer vaccine project couldn't be done during the normal daytime workflow of people. It had to be done during the nighttime hours to maintain secrecy. On Monday afternoon, she went to the dentist and ran some errands. Around 4:00pm, she returned home and washed her hair. She advised her housekeeper that she would be receiving out-of-town guests later. She asked the housekeeper to lay out her polka-dot dress to wear to the children's hospital Tuesday morning.

When her guests left, Mary changed into some comfortable clothes and went to the lab as usual. Something went horribly wrong that night. There was a flash of light as an arc of extremely powerful electrical force raced through Mary's right arm and into her body, blowing off her arm and vaporizing her right ribcage in a giant fireball. She was instantly rendered helpless and unrecognizable, but the electrical current had not passed directly through her heart, so she was still alive.

The shocked lab workers had to decide what to do. They couldn't simply call the police, because nobody was supposed to know the lab and the work done in it even existed. Whatever they decided to do, they could not risk exposing the lab and the secret project. They didn't have much time to come up with a plan. When they did, one of them grabbed a knife and stabbed Mary in the heart, killing her instantly. At around 3:00am, they placed her in a body bag, put her in the trunk of her car, and took her to her apartment, using the keys found in her purse to start the car, unlock the gate, and open the door. Wearing white gloves, they turned off the burglar alarm, dropped her purse on the couch, then went back outside to get the body from the trunk. They placed the body beside the bed and removed the body bag, not noticing that her head was by the foot of the bed. They had to hurry, but they had to be absolutely silent. They removed all of Mary's clothes, then took a stack of neatly folded clothes from a dresser drawer, placed them on top of her nude body, stabbed her repeatedly and randomly, then started the fire. They dropped the bloody gloves in the laundry hamper and left in Mary's car. They hoped NOPD would conclude that it had been the work of a bungling burglar, a psychopathic slasher, or jealous lesbian lover and spend their time searching for someone who didn't exist.

But what kind of machine was in the lab that could so violently electrocute Mary? Was it just an accident, or had the machine (whatever it was) been sabotaged to intentionally fry the doctor and shut down the lab? Haslam still had research to do.

Haslam eventually located the site of a linear particle accelerator in New Orleans. The machine had long since been removed, but the building still had the unmistakable

remnants of its existence: extremely heavy wiring designed for extremely high-voltage equipment; a room with metal walls grounded with heavy cables; a circular room surrounded by airtight rooms (or chambers), each with 1-inch-thick asbestos covering the walls, ceiling, and door. The accelerator once housed in this building used five million volts of electricity. It had been paid for in cash, millions of dollars coming from the US federal government. It had been custom-made and installed in the USPHSH (US Public Health Service Hospital's) Infectious Disease Laboratory. It was an ideal location for a covert scientific research project: the campus was secluded, not particularly inviting in appearance to the residents of New Orleans who passed by the very high brick walls enclosing it. Trucks entered from one side, and cars entered from the other, but only the vehicles of the few people employed there, not the public. Military Police patrolled and guarded the facility, unnoticed by outsiders, and arousing no suspicions among those who might happen to see them, because it was, after all, a federal facility, and it was dedicated to infectious diseases. There was not a large group of people just dying to get in there and snoop around.

This had to be where Dr Mary Sherman lost her life. She was working with the linear particle accelerator, subjecting cancer viruses to massive doses of radiation as part of an effort to develop a cancer vaccine. She must have grabbed something with her right hand, sending megavolts of electricity through her arm, into her right ribcage, and exploding out the back of the shoulder into the grounded steel walls surrounding her, not down into her leg and out of her right foot as electrocution would normally have happened. But what would she have grasped? People working with and around the accelerator had been trained to pull down the handle to the circuit breaker if there was any sort of problem with the accelerator. That's most likely just what Mary did the last night of her life, for whatever reason. If her electrocution had been deliberate, it would have been a simple matter to reroute the main current to the circuit breaker handle. But who would kill her. Why?

In the 1950s, the federal government discovered the presence of cancer-causing viruses in monkeys. The scientists who made the discovery were punished by their thankless managers at National Institutes of Health (NIH), but the feds realized there may very well be a huge problem requiring their immediate attention. Had cancer-causing monkey viruses found their way from their monkey hosts into the polio vaccine which had already been used to inoculate millions of school children? By 1959, the answer was clearly yes, and that presented Vice President Richard Nixon with a staggering legal and political crisis. After the disastrous Salk vaccine embarrassment to NIH, Nixon had been assigned the task of getting NIH back on its feet. He had personally approved of the new Sabin vaccine. If word got out now about the SV-40 (polyoma virus), Nixon's head would be the first to roll, but hardly the last. Losing millions of American lives was bad, but the prospect of destroying Nixon's career – that was unacceptable.

Dr Alton Ochsner was placed in charge of the secret project tasked with finding a cure for cancer before the nation was clobbered with a massive cancer epidemic. He was working for the federal government, for an unspecified department or agency, in an unspecified "sensitive position". Ochsner resigned from Tulane University. He hired Dr Sarah Stewart as his scientific director. She hired Dr Mary Sherman to take charge of the medical research. Ochsner insisted that the research be based on a US government facility, so that any fallout from

the project would not destroy him, his reputation, his hospital, or Tulane. USPHS Hospital in New Orleans was selected as the base of operations and the home of the needed linear particle accelerator, which Nixon instructed the CIA to pay for out of their slush funds.

But USPHSH wasn't the only lab in New Orleans where work on the project took place. There was another lab on Louisiana Avenue Parkway, a few houses away from the residence of a bizarre man named David Ferrie. Ferrie was not a scientist, but he was a brilliant man with ties to the CIA and the mafia. He became part of the team working frantically to find a cure for cancer in New Orleans in the summer of 1963. Lee Harvey Oswald also became part of the team. They brought in a brilliant student named Judyth Vary. Mary, Ferrie, Vary, and Lee worked together through that summer. But in November, JFK was killed, and that changed everything for the four of them. Judyth Vary Baker would be the only survivor, and it is primarily through her books, *Me and Lee* and *David Ferrie*, written decades later, that we know about the experiences they shared in a drama that changed the course of America forever.

It is still not entirely clear whether Mary's death was an accident or murder. Clearly, the stab to the heart is what killed her, and it was done intentionally, which technically makes it murder. But it may have been done more as an act of mercy after the electrocution effectively ended her life. Either way, that was the end of the work at the lab, and it was most likely the end of the project. However, that may not be the end of the story. Once Mary Sherman was dead, David Ferrie still had his smaller lab, the lab animals, and the viruses. What did he do with all of it? What was he capable of doing with them? (More about that in another episode.)

Although the super virus bioweapon was never successfully deployed against Castro, it was used to kill others. To test how well the killer virus worked on humans, it was injected into several human guinea pigs. They were prisoners whose lives would never be missed, and Dr Ochsner felt justified using them as disposable human lab rats in his research project. They apparently all died. Then it was used on Jack Ruby as he sat in his prison cell. He was expecting it, and he tried to warn authorities both before and after he was injected. Nobody listened. He died in a few weeks.

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I personally do not think Mary was intentionally killed. She knew a lot of things about a lot of people who could be strongly motivated to murder her if they feared that she would start talking. Certainly there was no shortage of very talented assassins to get the job done. But killing her in that manner was not the mafia's style. It doesn't strike me as the kind of murder anyone would plan. There are easier ways. If Haslam was right about Mary grabbing the handle of the circuit breaker, that suggests something was malfunctioning in the linear particle accelerator. That suggests an accident. I think that's what happened. The accelerator was a massive, complex, powerful, custom-made piece of machinery. Murphy's law and Occam's razor both point to accidental death, not a murder plot.

Not that Mary wouldn't have eventually been executed. That was close to inevitable. She knew too much about the JFK murder. Not from her own participation, but from talking with LHO and David Ferrie. But I don't think she was contemplating talking publicly about that, and I don't think

anyone wanted Mary dead yet. She still had very important work to do. She was most likely very upset when JFK was killed, and she was no doubt uncomfortable with the way the project had been hijacked by Castro haters. But finding a cancer cure or vaccine was still what drove her, and I think she would have continued that work as long as she was allowed to. Her body was moved simply to avoid exposing the lab and the project.

In other words, we have a most ironic situation in Mary's death. In the mid 1960s through the 1970s, there were dozens (at least) of murders of potential witnesses to various aspects of the JFK conspiracy. Many of them were staged to look like accidents. In Dr Mary's case, we have an accidental death staged to look like murder.

Based on *Dr Mary's Monkey*,

Edward T Haslam,

pages 115-138, 227-270