

Psycho USA: Famous American Killers You Never Heard Of

By Harold Schechter

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AMERICA'S MOST COLD-BLOODED!

In the horrifying annals of American crime, the infamous names of brutal killers such as Bundy, Dahmer, Gacy, and Berkowitz are writ large in the imaginations of a public both horrified and hypnotized by their monstrous, murderous acts. But for every celebrity psychopath who's gotten ink for spilling blood, there's a bevy of all-but-forgotten homicidal fiends studding the bloody margins of U.S. history. The law gave them their just desserts, but now the hugely acclaimed author of *The Serial Killer Files* and *The Whole Death Catalog* gives them their dark due in this absolutely riveting true-crime treasury. Among America's most cold-blooded you'll meet

• Robert Irwin, "The Mad Sculptor": He longed to use his carving skills on the woman he loved—but had to settle for making short work of her mother and sister instead.

• Peter Robinson, "The Tell-Tale Heart Killer": It took two days and four tries for him to finish off his victim, but no time at all for keen-eyed cops to spot the fatal flaw in his floor plan.

• Anton Probst, "The Monster in the Shape of a Man": The ax-murdering immigrant's systematic slaughter of all eight members of a Pennsylvania farm family matched the savagery of the Manson murders a century later.

• Edward H. Ruloff, "The Man of Two Lives": A genuine Jekyll and Hyde, his brilliant scholarship disguised his bloodthirsty brutality, and his oversized brain gave new meaning to "mastermind."

Spurred by profit, passion, paranoia, or perverse pleasure, these killers—the Witch of Staten Island, the Smutty Nose Butcher, the Bluebeard of Quiet Dell, and many others—span three centuries and a host of harrowing murder methods. Dramatized in the pages of penny dreadfuls, sensationalized in tabloid headlines, and immortalized in "murder ballads" and classic fiction by Edgar Allan Poe and

Theodore Dreiser, the demonic denizens of *Psycho USA* may be long gone to the gallows—but this insidiously irresistible slice of gothic Americana will ensure that they'll no longer be forgotten.

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Editorial Review

About the Author
A professor of American literature and culture at Queens College, **Harold Schechter** is the dean of American true crime. The author of more than thirty books, he is best known for his historical true-crime writing. His essays have appeared in various newspapers and magazines, including *The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, The Wall Street Journal,* and the *International Herald Tribune*. He lives in Brooklyn and Mattituck, New York, with his wife, the poet Kimiko Hahn.

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I

Fiends of the Early Republic

1782-1826

WILLIAM BEADLE, FAMILY ANNIHILATOR

The different eras in our nation's social history have been distinguished not only by their specific fads and fashions—the kinds of clothes people wore, food they ate, music they listened to, slang they spoke, and so on—but also by the particular criminal types that captured the public imagination: the tommy-gun-toting gangsters of the 1920s, the switchblade-wielding juvenile delinquents of the 1950s, the sex-crazed psycho killers of the 1970s, and—in our own post-9/11 age—the suicidal mass murderers, whether school and workplace shooters or apocalyptic terrorists.

During the early years of the Republic, for reasons that historians and sociologists have been at pains to understand, America was gripped by fears of a new kind of killer: the so-called family annihilator, the formerly loving father and husband who, in a sudden fit of homicidal frenzy, hideously slaughtered his children and wife. And of these nightmarish figures, perhaps the most infamous was William Beadle, perpetrator of what one contemporary described as "a crime more atrocious and horrible" than any ever committed in New England "and scarcely exceeded in the history of man."

Born in England in 1730, Beadle emigrated to America at the age of thirty-two and eventually settled in the village of Wethersfield, Connecticut, where he operated a country store stocked with an unusually "handsome assortment of goods." Surviving documents show him to have been possessed by the sort of overweening egotism typical of family annihilators. Though acknowledging his unprepossessing looks, he regarded himself as far superior to the run of humanity. "My person is small and mean to look on," he wrote in one journal entry, "and my circumstances were always rather narrow, which were great disadvantages in the world. But I have great reason to think that my soul is above the common mould." In his self-conceit, he likened himself to "a diamond among millions of pebbles."

For several years his business thrived. Fiercely proud of his success, he maintained a handsome residence and entertained guests in grand style. He was held in high esteem by his neighbors, who saw him as an honorable tradesman, generous host, loving husband, and doting father.

In the aftermath of the Revolutionary War, however, Beadle suffered reversals that left him in dire financial

straits. Unable to “bear the mortification of being thought poor and dependent,” he struggled to keep “up the outward appearance of his former affluence.” Eventually, however, he succumbed to despair. The thought of being perceived as a failure by his townsmen was more than he could tolerate. “If a man, who has once lived well, meant well, and done well, falls by unavoidable accident into poverty and submits to be laughed at, despised, and trampled on by a set of mean wretches as far below him as the moon is below the sun; I say, if such a man submits, he must become meaner than meanness itself.”

Concluding that suicide was less shameful than poverty, he decided to kill himself and his family. Like other killers of his psychopathic breed, he justified his intended atrocity as an act of kindness, even love. “I mean to close the eyes of six persons through perfect humanity and the most endearing fondness and friendship; for mortal father never felt more of these tender ties than myself.” Initially, he thought he might spare his wife. After much deliberation, however, he concluded that it would be cruel “to leave her behind to languish out a life in misery and wretchedness.” With her entire family suddenly gone, death would be a mercy for her.

As he began to mull over his plan, he “kept hoping that Providence would turn up something to prevent it, if the intent were wrong.” Instead, “every circumstance, from the greatest to the smallest trifle,” only served to convince him that destroying his family was the only sensible course. For a while, he prayed that his twelve-year-old son and three little daughters might perish accidentally, thus sparing him the necessity of killing them. To facilitate that end, he removed the protective wooden cover from the backyard well. He also encouraged them to swim in the deepest and most treacherous parts of the nearby river. When the children stubbornly survived these perils, he resolved to take more direct action.

Though uncertain at first as to when and how he would accomplish his “great affair” (as he described the intended massacre), he had no doubt that he would not quail when the time came. “How I shall really perform the task I have undertaken I know not till the moment arrives,” he wrote in his journal. “But I believe I shall perform it as deliberately and as steadily as I would go to supper, or to bed.”

He eventually fixed on the eighteenth of November for the execution of his plan. He first “procured a noble supper of oysters, that my family and I may eat and drink together, thank God, and then die.” He was forced to abandon his plan, however, when the maid—who had been sent off on an errand—returned unexpectedly and “prevented him for that time.”

A few weeks later, he made another aborted attempt that he described in his journal:

On the morning of the sixth of December, I rose before the sun, felt calm, and left my wife between sleep and wake, went into the room where my infants lay, found them all sound asleep; the means of death were with me, but I had not before determined whether to strike or not, but yet thought it a good opportunity. I stood over them, and asked my God whether it was right or not now to strike; but no answer came: nor I believe ever does to man while on earth. I then examined myself, there was neither fear, trembling, nor horror about me. I then went into a chamber next to that to look at myself in the glass; but I could discover no alteration in my countenanced of feelings: this is true as God reigns, but for further trial I yet postponed it.

Five days later, in the early morning hours of December 11, 1782, Beadle finally carried out his atrocity. Tiptoeing into the second-floor bedchamber shared by his four children and the housemaid, he shook the latter awake, then “ordered her to rise gently without disturbing the children” and meet him downstairs. When she appeared several minutes later, he handed her a note for the family physician, Dr. Farnsworth, who lived about a quarter-mile away. His wife, Beadle explained, had been “ill all night.” The housemaid was to proceed to Farnsworth’s home at once, give him the note, and remain there until he “should come with her.”

No sooner had she left on this errand than Beadle hurried into his bedroom, where he had stashed a newly sharpened ax and carving knife. After crushing his sleeping wife's skull with the ax, he slit her throat with the knife, taking care to drain the blood into a vessel so as not to stain the bedsheets. After covering her face with a handkerchief, he proceeded to the children's room, where he committed the same butchery upon them. He left the little boy lying in bed. The slaughtered girls were placed side by side on the floor, "like three lambs," and covered with a blanket.

Leaving a trail of bloody footprints on the stairs, Beadle then descended to the kitchen, placed the ax and knife—"reeking with the blood of his family"—on a table, and seated himself in a Windsor chair by the fireplace. Several weeks earlier, in preparation for this moment, he had brought his two flintlock pistols to the village gunsmith for repair. He now took a pistol in each hand and, supporting his elbows on the arms of the chair, pressed the muzzles against his ears and pulled both triggers simultaneously, "splattering his brains against the walls and wainscoting."

By then, Dr. Farnsworth had been roused from his bed by the maid and handed the note, which "announced the diabolical purpose of the writer." Though Farnsworth "thought it impossible that a sober man could adopt so horrible a design," he immediately alerted his neighbor, the Hon. Stephen Mix Mitchell, later chief justice of the state. The two men then rushed to the Beadles' house, where they were greeted by the "tragical scene."

Before long, news of the atrocity had spread throughout the village. "Multitudes of all ages and sexes" overran the house for a firsthand look at the carnage. The scene was described by Judge Mitchell, whose narrative account of the "horrid massacre" became one of the best-selling true crime pamphlets of its day:

The very inmost souls of the beholders were wounded at the sight and torn by contending passions. Silent grief, with marks of astonishment, were succeeded by furious indignation against the author of the affecting spectacle, which vented itself in incoherent exclamations. Some old soldiers, accidentally passing through the town that morning on their way from camp to visit their friends, led by curiosity, turned in to view the sad remains. On sight of the woman and her tender offspring, notwithstanding all their firmness, the tender sympathetic tear stealing gently down their furrowed cheeks betrayed the anguish of their hearts. On being showed the body of the sacrificer, they paused for a moment, then muttering forth an oath or two of execration, with their eyes fixed on the ground in silent sorrow, they slowly went their way. So awful and terrible a disaster wrought wonderfully on the minds of the neighborhood. Nature itself seemed ruffled and refused the kindly aid of balmly sleep for a time.

"Frantic with indignation and horror at a crime so unnatural and monstrous," the inhabitants of Wethersfield refused to allow its perpetrator a Christian burial. Tying the bloody carving knife to his breast, they dragged him on a small sled to the riverbank, dug a grave in the unconsecrated ground, and tossed his uncoffined body into the hole "like the carcass of a beast." A few days later, after deciding that the site was too close to the ferry landing, "sundry persons" dug up the corpse and transferred it "with utmost secrecy" to an "obscure spot." Despite this precaution, "some children accidentally discovered the place." The body was exhumed again and removed to yet another place "where it is hoped mankind will have no further vexation with it."

In stark contrast to the contemptuous treatment of Beadle's corpse, his victims' funeral was a ceremonious affair. "The remains of the children were borne by a suitable number of equal age, attended with a sad procession of youths of the town, all bathed in tears," wrote one observer. "Side by side the hapless woman's corpse was carried in solemn procession to the parish churchyard, followed by a great concourse who, with affectionate concern and every token of respect, were anxious to express their heartfelt sorrow in performing the last mournful duties."

Though subjected to an ignominious burial, William Beadle was granted a kind of immortality in the form of a widely circulated broadside ballad, illustrated with a woodcut showing a knife-wielding Beadle attacking his children:

A bloody scene I'll now relate,

Which lately happen'd in a neighboring state

A murder of the deepest dye, I say,

O be amaz'd for surely well you may.

A man (unworthy of the name) who slew

Himself, his consort, and his offspring, too;

An amiable wife with four children dear,

Into one grave was put—Oh drop a tear!

Soon in the morning of the fatal day,

Beadle, the murd'rer sent his maid away,

To tell the awful deed he had in view;

To their assistance the kind neighbors flew.

It truly gives me pain for to pen down,

A deed so black, and yet his mind was sound.

Says he, "I mean to close six persons' eyes,

Through perfect fondness and the tend'rest ties."

Detest the errors to this deed him drew,

And mourn the hapless victims whom he slew;

And pray to God that Satan may be bound,

Since to deceive so many he is found.

Fly swiftly round, ye circling years,

Hail the auspicious day,

When love shall dwell in every heart—

Nor men their offspring slay!

[Sources: S. M. Mitchell, A Narrative of the Life of William Beadle (Greenfield, CT, 1805); John Marsh, The Great Sin and Danger of Striving with God. A Sermon Preached at Wethersfield, December 13th, 1782. At the Funeral of Mrs. Lydia Beadle, Wife of the Late William Beadle, and Their Four Children, Who Were All Murdered by His Own Hands on the Morning of the 11th Instant (Middleborough, MA: N. Coverly, 1783).]

Domestic Slaughter Then And Now

“Something strange and horrible happened in a number of American households of the early republic,” writes scholar Daniel Cohen in a groundbreaking study of family annihilators such as William Beadle. “In a series of curiously clustered incidents, a handful of men, loving husbands and affectionate fathers, took axes from under their beds, or off their mantelpiece, and slaughtered their wife and children.”

To be sure, though the public was transfixed by reports of these atrocities, the crimes themselves were actually quite rare during the first quarter century of our nation’s existence. Cohen himself cites just five instances of familicide—“the slaughter of an entire family by its patriarchal head”—between 1781 and 1806. Uxoricide—the murder of a wife by her husband—was only slightly more common. According to recent research by historian Randolph Roth, “In all of New England, only about 35 spouses?.?.?.?were murdered before 1800.”

For complex social and cultural reasons, the situation began to change in the early decades of the nineteenth century, when “the rate of wife murder increased fivefold” throughout the north. At the same time (as crime historian Karen Halttunen shows in her classic book Murder Most Foul), printed accounts of familicide began to appear with increasing frequency, offering detailed descriptions of domestic butchery that sometimes bordered on the pornographic. Moralists who believe that today’s popular culture is unusually graphic in its depiction of violence might consider this passage from an 1857 crime pamphlet called The Triple Murderer, recounting the enormities of a midwestern family annihilator named Reuben Ward. After killing his wife Olive, Ward proceeded to dispose of the corpse in the most grisly way imaginable:

I tore the clothes open from the throat down. I then took a small pocket knife and opened the body, took the bowels out first, and then put them in the stove upon the wood; they being filled with air would make a noise in exploding, so I took my knife and pricked holes through them to prevent the noise; then took out the liver and heart?.?.?.?I then took out the blood remaining in the cavity of the body by placing a copper kettle close to the same and cupping it out with my hands?.?.?.?I broke off the ribs and took out the breast bone, and threw it into a large boiler; unjointed the arms at the shoulders, doubled them up and placed them in the boiler; then severed the remaining portions of the body by placing a stick of wood under her back and breaking the back bone over the same, cutting away the flesh and ligaments with a knife.

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