

Chapter Fifteen

Making Sense of Henrietta, 85 Years Later

The story of Henrietta Schmerler's life and death and its immediate aftermath effectively ended in late March of 1932 with the departure of Golney Seymour to serve a life sentence in a Washington State penitentiary. The reverberations, however, did not end there.

It is not hard to see why there have been so many different versions of Henrietta's story. Whenever there is a public tragedy, as this was, all the players have powerful self-interests in presenting one perspective or another. Since the reservation and other government officials, the anthropology community, and the writing community (both journalistic and creative) all had a stake in suggesting that Henrietta brought at least some of this tragedy on herself—whether through naïveté, carelessness, or manipulation—it is not a surprise that the dominant narrative that has endured portrays Henrietta as more than just an innocent victim.

We ourselves, immediate relatives of the victim (and children of a man who idealized the memory of his sister, Henrietta, until his own death over seventy years later), have our own interests, of course, in seeing her portrayed as serious, capable, concerned—and innocent. We will never be certain we have all the facts, or reproduced the events exactly as they happened. We do, however, try to explain

here, as fairly as we can, why others believed and spoke and wrote what they did. But then, in this account at least, the final word rests with us.

Officials

William Donner, the reservation superintendent; the Bureau of Indian Affairs, in the person of Commissioner C. J. Rhoads; and the FBI, most prominently Special Agent J. A. Street, Special Agent in Charge R. H. Colvin, and Director J. Edgar Hoover, were all quite voluble about the case.

Among the officials on the reservation and in the government who commented extensively on the case, Reservation Superintendent Donner was in the most complex, and often conflicted, position. How he acted toward Henrietta directly and what he said during her time on the reservation was one thing. Resigned and wary acceptance—and maybe even an occasional trace of gruff affection—were his most visible responses. What he said after her death, faced with many conflicting pressures, was another story.

First, there was the need to show he had personally advised her to take actions quite different from those which seemed to have led or contributed to her death: “I advised her that I did not think it possible or advisable for her to live in the type of camp and with the Indians that she desired.” Equally, it was quite important to him not to allow the impression that the reservation in his charge was run in a loose or permissive—and therefore ultimately dangerous—manner: “Of course the press has published all kinds of ridiculous stories, even to the extent of the Apaches being hostile, simply to make good newspaper propaganda... We also regret the wide publicity it has brought on and the ungrounded reports as to there being any trouble with the Indians.”

As more negative reports about Henrietta’s behavior began to circulate, Donner’s tone changed apace. “At first I did not suspicion the girl of any immoral actions... I do not care to personally condemn the girl either then or now,” he said initially. This soon became “Even the older Indians advised her against her actions... The Indians were perfectly safe while sober but should she be among them or meet up with them when they were drinking or partly drunk with tulapai or

moonshine it was dangerous. She advised me that the only thing she was afraid of around on the reservation was rattlesnakes.”

Condemnation from Donner became more generalized and personally resentful: “They [anthropology fieldworkers, particularly young women] come in with the attitude that the Indian is a superior being, that he can do no wrong and will do no wrong, that he has been abused and with proper treatment will be a perfect angel. They are harmless even when drunk if those working among them and with them will use discretion, know their place and keep it... Neither do I know of a single instance where a white woman has come onto the reservation and has been so extremely careless as the facts brought out prove this woman to have been.”

Finally, as Golney Seymour’s trial approached half a year later, Donner felt himself walking a fine line between making sure that an Apache in his charge was not too harshly punished for a crime that may have been incited by a provocative woman and, at the same time, sending a message that bad behavior (particularly murder) would not be tolerated. Donner’s perceptions were echoed regularly in the press and continually during the trial. There would be few dissenting voices to this narrative.

By the time former Governor H. J. Hagerman, “Special Commissioner to the Indians,” broadcast the results of his August visit to the reservation, there was no longer any attempt to find complexity in the circumstances: “The girl was most frightfully indiscreet—provocative would put it plainer—to the Indians, and what happened in her cabin prior to her murder is scarcely a matter of conjecture. She openly danced with the Indians all night—rode on the same ponies with them—and what she did at her cabin—seems, according to Donner’s investigations, not uncertain. Horrible—horrible—and these awfully dirty Indians! Her cabin when they found it was a filthy place. When she came in there, Donner warned her in as plain language as he felt he could against too great familiarity with the Indians—but probably not plain enough for one with her complexes.”

Now, after the arrest of Golney Seymour, the narrative was fixed. The FBI, in the person of Acting Special Agent L. C. Taylor, was reporting to Director J. Edgar Hoover that “It is commonly known that the victim upon her arrival at Whiteriver, Arizona, became intimate

immediately with the Indians and openly ignored and evaded all white persons. Her actions in this respect have prompted gossip of immorality with the Indians—even commercial prostitution.”

Anthropologists

The anthropologists who had been Henrietta’s mentors and facilitators and (at least from their previous public expression) admirers were instantly put on the defensive by the press, law enforcement, government officials, and her family. The natural first question—“What instructions did you give her?”—put them in an immediate bind. The briefing(s?) that Benedict and Mead held with Henrietta were noted, but without much specificity about the content or the length of such meetings. “Both Ruth and I spent hours advising her and she disregarded every bit of the advice,” Mead later explained to Boas. But only one such “advisement” session was, in fact, ever reported by Henrietta, and it can be questioned whether academics of the stature and wide responsibilities of Benedict or Mead would have been able to give more than an hour or two to the young graduate student.

In fact, the prevailing practice of the day was to give as much license and freedom as possible to fledgling fieldworkers. Ruth Underhill, who testified for Columbia at Golney Seymour’s trial, quoted Boas in her memoir, *An Anthropologist’s Arrival*, [Ruth Underhill, Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2014²⁶] as sending her into the field with these words, “Just find out how these people live and come tell us about it.” Mead herself later exalted the “liberality which characterized the formative period of American anthropology, when no one who wished to [do fieldwork] was turned away on account of sex or race or age.” She described this time as a “dramatic emergency,” when “every month’s delay meant that... some record of what man had been was being irrevocably lost, because there were no field workers there to write down the vanishing culture.” (Speech at Gladys Reichard memorial, December 1955.)

²⁶ Underhill died in 1984 at the age of 101, and this memoir, published ultimately in 2014, “edited by Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Stephen E. Nash, is based on unpublished archives, including an unfinished autobiography and interviews conducted prior to her death, held by the Denver Museum of Nature & Science.”

It was evident from the moments immediately following the discovery of Henrietta's body that the future of anthropological fieldwork might be very much at stake, especially among the Indian tribes of the American Southwest. Within two weeks, the Bureau of Indian Affairs was floating the possibility that fieldwork permits would subsequently be dramatically restricted, with women in particular being limited. C. J. Rhoads, BIA commissioner, wrote that, "It has been suggested that the following paragraph be included in all permits to research workers and archeologists working on Indian Reservations: 'The bearer of this permit shall not hold the Department of the Interior or any officer or employee of the government responsible in any manner for accidents of any nature.'" (August 5, 1931, "Memorandum for Mr. Burlew.") And Superintendent Donner, in Whiteriver, had been even blunter: "Under no consideration would I again permit a woman of her age to take up the branch of ethnology she was working on while here."

The continuing narrative

It is easy—if profoundly ironic—to understand why Mead, Benedict, Reichard, Boas, and Underhill, preeminent among contemporary anthropologists, might be eager to believe—and perpetuate—the more critical accounts of Henrietta's excesses, naïveté, and/or willfulness. It would thus follow inevitably that the story of this event would be told and retold in this light and that several generations of historians and writers would accept this narrative uncritically.

In one prominent example, Karen Louise Smith Wyndham, in her 2001 dissertation on "ethnographic fictions," has accepted without question the perspective of an earlier and more self-interested generation of anthropologists. "Clearly," Wyndham writes, "Schmerler wanted adventure more than fieldwork, with its boring rigors and careful dictation." The evidence cited in Wyndham's account—Benedict's objection to her going in the first place, Reichard's advice to her to avoid the men of the tribe, Henrietta's unwillingness or inability to practice "normal" female roles and behavior at Columbia, her romantic involvement with an Apache—is all totally unsubstantiated by our extensive research. For instance,

Henrietta never spoke to Reichard about her trip to Arizona, as far as we could ascertain. And there was no physical relationship with an Apache man even remotely hinted at in Henrietta's notes or in later accounts. Yet Wyndham, a self-declared feminist, seems never to have questioned this version of the narrative, much of which came from the post-murder, pretrial stories that were spread widely.²⁷

Fictionalization

Beyond what might be called the "Columbia version" of the circumstances that led to Henrietta's rape and murder, accepted so readily by academics and scholars, there lies the world of imaginative literature. The Henrietta Schmerler story has been used by various other media to create their own tales, however different from the original events. The fiction market, not surprisingly, was fertile ground for her story. Writers for the pulp men's magazines of the '30s, '40s, '50s, and '60s reveled in the image of a coed beauty being ravished by a "savage" of uncontrollable lust, either as payback for her calculated, exploitive opportunism or as a result of her—paradoxical for a New York intellectual—innocence and naïveté. Cover stories from *Argosy*, *True Detective*, and *Saga*, among others—heavily embellished by both drawings and photographs—told the tale from a variety of titillating perspectives. In almost all of those stories, though, Henrietta is the agent of her own death. And often the story of the FBI's subsequent pursuit of the killer is dramatized as a superhuman, sometimes even mystical, feat, especially to the extent that magazine writers were allowed access to government-created and "authorized" versions of the murder, the investigation, and Golney's subsequent trial

Ten years after Golney's trial, one extensive account of Henrietta's actions before the murder, along with the details of the investigation that led to Golney's confession and arrest, appeared

²⁷ Contacted in late 2015 and offered a contrary view of the historical events, Dr. Wyndham declined the opportunity to reconsider, writing, "I still don't have anything substantial to contribute to the conversation." [*Traffic in Books: Ethnographic Fictions of Zora Neale Hurston, Salman Rushdie, Bruce Chatwin, & Ruth Underhill*, Karen Louise Smith Wyndham, CCLS, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ. Doctoral dissertation, 2001, p. 315.]

in *True Detective* (May 1942, pp. 49–51, 73–75). Under the title, “The College Girl Murder Mystery”—framed with the blurb, “when her research called for attendance at an Indian dance it was bad medicine”—Edmond Van Tyne’s account begins with Henrietta on the train to Holbrook, Arizona, proclaiming, “I’m not afraid of a little dirt. My work is more important than any consideration of personal comfort.” And then comes the first of a number of warnings that this inexperienced woman should tone it down and know her proper place. “I hope for your sake, that you will change your mind,’ her knowing train companion said slowly. ‘It is most dangerous.” The crime eventually occurs because Henrietta refuses sensible direction, and the remainder of Van Tyne’s narrative focuses on just how the government agents pursued the case before cleverly tricking Golney into spilling the beans. In closing, Van Tyne claims that while at the beginning of the investigation it was “Apache no talk, white man learn nothing,’ after the apprehension of Seymour... the slogan was changed to, ‘Indian no talk, G-man know everything.” Apparently G-men are capable of solving any mystery, but the implication is that absent Henrietta’s willful behavior, there need not have been any tragedy in the first place.

In contrast to Van Tyne’s version—which certainly questioned Henrietta’s behavior but did not specifically feature her misconduct—nineteen years later the narrative appeared once again, this time in *Saga* under the following frame: “‘If sex appeal helps in my research,’ said the lovely white girl, ‘then I’ll use it.’ This was before she watched the Dance of Death” (April 1961, pp. 20–23, 97–100).

The author of “The Case of the Apache and the Curious Coed,” West Peterson, spares nothing in heating up the case: “She probably would not have been slain if only she had known the peril of riding astride a horse with a hot-blooded Apache of the opposite sex... It is an Apache legend that if a girl forks a horse in front of a brave she is clearly expressing a desire to mate with him.” Further, in Peterson’s account, Henrietta boasts, “A few drinks might make them reveal their tribal secrets to me. Don’t worry, I’ve seen plenty of inebriates right on the streets of New York. I know how to take care of myself.” And, of course, the more Henrietta resists “good advice,” the more she appears at fault.



True Detective, May 1942

Henrietta Schmerler (left) was a popular and a brilliant student, but when her research led her to attend one of the Indian dances it was her bad medicine

BY EDMOND VAN TYNE

THE COLLEGE GIRL MURDER MYSTERY

Henrietta's story... When Henrietta Schmerler was a student at Columbia University... she was a brilliant student... her research led her to attend one of the Indian dances... it was her bad medicine...

AROUND the anti-high Arizona picture, the Santa Fe creek California Limited... Henrietta Schmerler... she was a brilliant student... her research led her to attend one of the Indian dances... it was her bad medicine...

The girl died on Saturday last... she was a brilliant student... her research led her to attend one of the Indian dances... it was her bad medicine...

The girl died on Saturday last... she was a brilliant student... her research led her to attend one of the Indian dances... it was her bad medicine...



Dance of Death
BY EDWARD RADIN

Secrets from the archives of crime

Pulp magazines have sensationalized the story of Henrietta's death through the years. Edmond Van Tyne published his lurid account in True Detective in May 1942. Edward Radin re-imagined the dance at Canyon Day in the September 26, 1946, issue of the Sunday Mirror (pp.10-11 © King Features Syndicate, Inc.). And the story still resonated in 1961 when West Peterson wrote "The Case of the Apache and the Curious Coed" for the April issue of Saga.



The Case of the APACHE and the CURIOUS COED

"If you spend help in my research," said the lovely white girl, "then I'll see it." This was before she watched the Dance of Death.

By WEST PETERSON
Illustrated by Irving Zeman

The journey of many years from the campus of Columbia University in New York City to the Apache Indian Reservation in Whitehorn, Arizona, a journey of thousands of miles, a journey from an urban civilization to one that is nearly primitive.

Henrietta Schmerler it was a journey to death.

Violent death need not have been the fate of the beauty, distinguished coed who took a job when she went to live among the Apaches. She probably would not have been slain if only she had known the peril of being outside a house with a full-blooded Apache of the opposite sex. An Apache of blood unadulterated one of his blood "Civilization," the type of fanaticism is conducive to atrocious cruelty to a man toward the man who shares his blood. And it is an Apache legend that if a girl takes a love to that of a brave she is clearly expressing a desire to mate with him.

Henrietta Schmerler did not realize these things. Her knowledge of Indian lore

Even on the Columbia University campus in 2006, an incriminating portrait of Henrietta suddenly appeared. Jen Spyra related her own version of Henrietta's story, "Indian Burial Ground," in a campus publication, *The Eye: Columbia on the Street*. Spyra portrays Henrietta as "a thoroughly modern Millie in both style and spirit. Her chic, sheared bob, sumptuous lips and Roman nose conveyed the sense of style, seriousness, and progressive thinking for which she was reputed." Thus we have the picture of a fearless young woman who "had no qualms about leaving Columbia's academic candyland for wild rural living." Further, we're told that "Schmerler liked to drink and dance, ride postilion, and research. She was the kind of girl who walked around with a flask of sugared whiskey pressed against the flesh of her thigh... The kind of girl who, according to an Apache man drunk on tulapai (aboriginal moonshine), was looking for trouble." Aggressively forward, Spyra's Henrietta exhibits behavior that is questionable for an anthropologist, let alone a woman in a male arena.²⁸

As recently as 2013, Maida Tilchen—who describes herself as writing "primarily to preserve and/or dramatize lesbian history"—published a novel, *She's Gone Santa Fe* [Maida Tilchen, Salem, NY: Savvy Press, 2013], which uses Henrietta as the basis for dramatizing relationships that existed between anthropologists and Indians on reservations in the southwest. Henrietta was, indeed, as Tilchen writes, a young Jewish woman from New York City who, during her studies in anthropology at Columbia, had been inspired by Ruth Benedict. Tilchen, however, shifts the setting from an Apache reservation in Arizona in 1931 to a Navajo one in the late 1920s, with strategic stops at a lesbian dude ranch in New Mexico and the lavish quarters of Mary Cabot Wheelwright, an older, wealthy, eccentric Bostonian, intent on recording Indian customs and rituals. Golney Seymour, Henrietta's killer in real life, does appear briefly as an unsympathetic character in the novel, but this time the murderer is a white man named Sack, who

²⁸ Spyra said, in a December 2006 interview with me, that she was glad to hear of the true story behind the embellishments she created for her article, which drew its facts primarily from the "pulp magazines." She did not personally believe most of the things she wrote, but felt the dramatization was expected of her. Most significantly, she offered: "You can use my article as an example of how people distorted Henrietta's story."

in the novel was connected to “Ree” back at Columbia University and who appears at opportune deus-ex-machina moments throughout the novel. Although Tilchen refuses to accept Golney as the murderer, she also makes it clear that her character, Henrietta, is not at fault for what happens to her at the end.²⁹

Finally, in *Euphoria* [Lily King, New York: Grove Press, 2014], a loosely fictionalized account of Mead’s time in New Guinea with Reo Fortune and Gregory Bateson—Mead’s current and future husbands, respectively—author Lily King portrayed Mead sympathetically, although with full acknowledgement of the dangers of her occupation. Once again, Henrietta is employed to point out the risks at hand, but also to represent the very fearless qualities that Mead sought to impress upon other female anthropologists. When Nell [the Mead character] described her adventures visiting several nearby tribal villages, the Bateson character asked if she went alone.

“There’s no danger.”

“I’m sure you heard about Henrietta Schmerler.”

She had.

“She was murdered.” I was trying to be delicate.

“Worse than that, I hear.”

What do we think?

What are we finally to think of this woman whose story at the time—and through the years—has been told in so many ways, by so many people, to serve so many purposes? Indeed, it does not seem

²⁹Tilchen’s late 2015 correspondence with us makes clear the distance between her novel and the actual story of Henrietta Schmerler. “Please remember it is a work of fiction and very very loosely based on Henrietta’s life. I did all the research I could, but little is factual in my story of my character Ree.” She elaborated on a key plot point she had devised: “I saw such conflicting accounts of whether she had permission to go, but if I went with the version in which she did, I wouldn’t have had much of a plot.”

Tilchen had made all of this clear in the book itself, in her Author’s Note: “Since so little is known about what Schmerler did during her brief time in Columbia and in the southwest, I made it up. Changing the character’s name to ‘Ree,’ which was my creation, gave me more artistic license. My character, Ree Schmerler, is attracted to women, but I have seen no evidence that the real Henrietta Schmerler was... I choose to believe that Golney Seymour did not kill Henrietta Schmerler, but was a victim of a racist justice system. I don’t know who might have done it.”

grandiose to ask: Just what might history say of Henrietta Schmerler?

What happened to Henrietta, for instance, has been offered as a warning to anthropological fieldworkers and others who pursue their ethnographic science among indigenous peoples. In one version of this cautionary advice and guidance, the tone is mostly sympathetic: “Don’t be naïve and trusting.” “Know the people you are studying well, and especially know their language.” “Stay close to others for protection.” “Don’t show blind faith in the goodness of anyone.” “Be careful when dealing with the opposite sex.” “Prepare thoroughly.”

Yet another, more cynical, version exists. “Don’t use your sexuality to obtain information.” “Don’t drink or carouse among the people you’re studying.” “Don’t be overt in your manipulation of less sophisticated peoples.” “Be particularly wary of the opposite sex.” This cataloging of dangers similarly ends with the injunction to “Prepare thoroughly,” but in this instance the emphasis is on the specific cultural behaviors the fieldworker brings to the situation.

It pained and angered us to learn early on that Henrietta’s story was sometimes told—often by people who, above all, should have gotten their facts straight—in the latter manner. From this perspective, a tale is woven portraying an insensitive, exploitative, and ultimately very foolish opportunist who brought tragedy upon herself. Neither our pain nor our anger is any less now, at the end of this investigation, even with the understanding that Henrietta may not always have acted as prudently as we ourselves might have, in hindsight, given our current perspective.

Henrietta’s exact behaviors on the reservation—her various discussions with the white people who later contended that they gave her frequent warnings, warnings she dismissed in a manner some described as headstrong; her reputed social interactions with the young Apache men; her interviews with informants, some of whom worried about the confidentiality of their answers; and, most centrally, her dealings on July 18, 1931, with Golney Seymour, who was the center of an extensive, widely publicized trial and continuing speculation—cannot be described with total certainty.

We’ve had our own moments of pause, particularly as we’ve contemplated the breathtaking courage—or audacity—it took for Henrietta to choose to spend her summer in such lonely, alien

surroundings, not to mention what it took to persevere through the darkening days, right up to her final, desperate attempt to visit a dance that could well have seemed beyond her reach. And, as we read and reread her field notes, we could see them not only as abundant proof of the depth, intensity, and integrity of her scholarly pursuits but also see in them possible indications that she may have pushed some of her interview subjects, especially the adolescent boys, a bit beyond the point of sensitivity.

But these concerns mostly pale alongside the respect we felt for her enormous professional skill and determination, the affection we felt for her noble intentions and her human vulnerability, and the sympathy we felt for someone whose life's labors and particularly her crowning achievement on the reservation were so quickly and thoroughly undone by a single violent act. The ugliness of the subsequent tarnishing that took place in some academic circles, in the press, and even in court, promoted by numerous individuals protecting and promoting their own reputations and livelihoods, seemed far out of proportion.

We are far more convinced, after our years of research, of what Henrietta *did not do*. We are quite clear she did not willfully disregard all advice from her mentors. In fact, she received little guidance in her field activities, for this was the prevailing practice in those heady, boundary-stretching times; students were encouraged to figure things out for themselves. What advice she did receive, she generally tried her best to follow: She made several efforts to find an Apache woman to live with or to locate a more central place to live among the Apaches before settling for the lonely, secluded shack where she ended up staying alone. She worked diligently to find women to interview before concluding that many of the Apache women simply would not speak with her, while the men would.

At the same time, we are convinced that she was never advised to interview women exclusively, as was later suggested, and never told to avoid sexual topics. In fact, from all we can gather (including the all-important precedent established by Mead in Samoa), information on virtually all manner of human and societal behavior, very much including courtship and kinship patterns, sexuality and mating behaviors, and age-specific rituals, was specifically prized in such

research. Further, we do not believe for a moment that Henrietta ever used sex or alcohol as lures for information or access. Neither seems to have been much a part of her prior life. Indeed, all we know of her personality would indicate her strong aversion to such conventional manipulations.

Throughout our long search, we have frequently disagreed with each other about the extent to which Henrietta's risk-taking exceeded legitimate boundaries (and particularly whether the term "foolhardy" could appropriately be applied), or whether her innocence and trustingness were excessive to the point of dangerous naïveté. With the benefit of hindsight, we can, of course, see that they were. But placed in the context of a time when anthropology was at the height of exuberant, unpredictable expansion, and fieldworkers were at the very heart of this volatile enterprise, we doubt that Henrietta's decisions were really outside the mainstream of expected behavior.

We prefer to listen instead to the perspective of one modern historian, the biographer who wrote *Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict: The Kinship of Women* [Hilary Lapsley, Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001]. Lapsley concluded, "In Ruth's and Margaret's views, it seems, anyone who violated the norms of a culture was fully to blame for the consequences. Yet their lack of outrage at women's relationship to male violence seems a little surprising, viewed from the present. Schmerler was not alive to tell her story, there were no witnesses except the accused, and the supposition that, among the Apache, it was perfectly natural to murder following sexual rejection seems not to have been contested in their circles. Moreover, their private attitudes suggest a callousness about the victim that was uncharacteristic, perhaps demonstrating just how threatened women anthropologists felt about their legitimacy as fieldworkers" (p. 207).

The Henrietta we will remember was probably neither entirely innocent nor entirely naïve. She understood, certainly by the latter part of her time on the reservation, the challenges of the work she had undertaken—and probably the dangers, as well. She persisted with work that she took very seriously, even in the face of increasing evidence that her efforts were not all appreciated. She was doing the best she could—diligently gathering family and kinship data from

whatever sources she could find, attempting to honor every cultural signpost—and seemingly doing it quite well, as her extensive field notes demonstrate. On July 18, 1931, it turns out, she was in the wrong place at the wrong time.