

# The Trunk Murderess: Winnie Ruth Judd

The Truth About an American Crime Legend  
Revealed at Last

Jana Bommersbach

Poisoned Pen Press



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*To the special people who shaped my life  
and taught me that truth must always be the goal:  
my grandmothers, Rose Portner Bommersbach  
and the late Magdalena Mary Schlener Peterschick;  
my grandfather, the late Leo Bommersbach;  
and my wonderful parents, Rudy and Willie Bommersbach.*



# Introduction

October 16, 1931, was a bloody Friday night in Phoenix, Arizona.

In a quiet neighborhood of this quiet small town, nineteen-year-old pharmacy assistant Jack West lay in wait for two hours until his sweetheart came home from a secret date with a new beau. When eighteen-year-old Pearl Mills answered his insistent knocking on her front door, he chased her into her bedroom and stabbed her to death. Then he turned the knife on himself, inflicting a superficial wound.

Just a few blocks away in a simple duplex, twenty-six-year-old medical secretary Winnie Ruth Judd was spending the night, as she often did, with her two best girlfriends. The state of Arizona would charge that on this night, she was there to murder—to eliminate her “competition” for a married man all three women adored. She supposedly waited until her friends were asleep and then shot them to death in their beds. But the world wouldn’t know about the deaths of twenty-four-year-old Hedvig “Sammy” Samuelson and thirty-two-year-old Agnes Anne LeRoi for three days. Not until the horrifying discovery that their bodies—Sammy’s cut into pieces—had been stuffed into steamer trunks and shipped as Winnie Ruth Judd’s baggage on the train to Los Angeles.

Jack West spent two weeks in the headlines and twenty-three months in prison repaying society before he blended into obscurity.

Winnie Ruth Judd became a household name across America as Arizona made her pay with one of the longest sentences this country has ever seen: thirty-eight years, eleven months, and twenty-two days.

This is her story.

Years before the country ever started wondering what happened to Amelia Earhart, it thought it knew everything that happened to Winnie Ruth Judd. Papers from coast to coast covered the gruesome story with the same prominence they gave to the sentencing of “Scarface” Al Capone and the rise of a young man in Germany named Adolf Hitler. Not since Lizzie Borden had a single name conjured up so much horror.

“The Trunk Murderess.”

“The Tiger Woman.”

“The Blond Butcher.”

That’s how the press labeled her in the thirties, when she was first convicted and sentenced to hang, and then declared insane and saved from the gallows by only seventy-two hours. That’s what they called her in the forties and fifties and sixties as she escaped with great regularity—first to the horror and then the amusement of the country—from the asylum that was her prison. That’s what they called her in 1971 when she was finally paroled, a sixty-six-year-old woman judged safe for society. That’s what they still call her today, a woman nearing ninety who is trying to live out her life quietly.

An open-and-shut case. So everyone thinks. Just as everyone thinks they know the awful things Winnie Ruth Judd did during the bedtime hours of that Friday night in 1931.

They said she was a cold-blooded killer.

They said she hacked up her best friend.

They said she was insane.

They said she acted alone.

Yet to this day—now sixty years after the fact—questions remain about just how guilty Winnie Ruth Judd was. Or

exactly what she was guilty of doing. Or if she could have possibly done the deed by herself. Or if she ever was insane.

Whispers have persisted all these years that the Winnie Ruth Judd case was really Phoenix's dirty secret.

A fresh investigation finds the rumors are true. It finds the story of Winnie Ruth Judd is really two stories: the one that history records, and what really happened.

But it's not just the story of a puzzling crime that still fascinates. Or of extreme punishment. Or, as this investigation reveals, of some of the most bizarre twists ever seen in a murder case. It's the story of a backwater town that would become one of America's major cities. It's the story of a moment in time—with its social taboos, its hysterical conventionality, and its concentrated political power—when this strange story could be orchestrated.



I first heard about Winnie Ruth Judd when I moved to Arizona in 1972 to work for the *Arizona Republic*, the state's largest and then most politically powerful newspaper. Arizona history is filled with colorful characters that are part of American folklore—Geronimo, Cochise, Wyatt Earp, Father Kino, Zane Grey. In a morbid way, Winnie Ruth Judd was one of them. She belonged to that tiny sorority of women judged so heinous society said they deserved the ultimate punishment. In Arizona, she was only the third woman on the roster. The first, Dolores Moore, had been executed in 1865; the second, Eva Dugan, was hanged in 1930—beheaded actually, in a botched execution that led Arizona to abandon the noose for the gas chamber. It wasn't until 1991 that the state added another woman to the exclusive group, sentencing to death Debra Jean Milke for having her four-year-old son killed on his way to see Santa Claus. The picture is similar across the nation: less than thirty-five women sit on death row today.

But the very first story I heard about Winnie Ruth Judd wasn't about her heinous crime, it was about how she was framed.

Sensational cases have a way of taking on their own lore, especially juicy cases that hark back to a time when the social code was so strict women didn't leave the house without wearing gloves and today's thriving cities were just wide spots along bad roads. It's far easier to imagine something sinister was at work than to believe a young beauty would hack up a rival.

Besides, this case was crammed with social taboos: a totally unacceptable love affair, the threat of deadly and incurable syphilis, snide rumors of lesbianism, outright declarations that these were "party girls"—the nice term used in the thirties for prostitutes. Add to that the widespread allegations that one of Phoenix's most prominent businessmen was knee-deep in the crime—allegations widely reported in out-of-state newspapers, excused and dismissed by the press at home. Mix in the mysterious shadow of William Randolph Hearst, the most powerful newspaper publisher for the day, and the intervention of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

The Winnie Ruth Judd case was not just another murder mystery. It was a slice of Arizona and America at a most vulnerable moment: exactly two years after the stock market crash that ushered in the Great Depression, twelve years into the disastrous ban on "spirits" known as Prohibition, and a time when media excess would be forever defined and remain a constant embarrassment for every journalist who came after.

In the twenty years I've lived in Phoenix, I have never heard a single person say Winnie Ruth Judd got what she deserved. Instead, I've heard: "She was covering up for somebody important"; "It was a powerful man who really was responsible, but you know how women were treated in the thirties"; "If the truth of this ever came out, it would ruin a lot of good ole boys." Every time her name came up, it was inevitably coupled with the question "Do you think she really did it?"

How could so many suppositions and questions still remain when the media had for so long presented this as a black-and-white case? Historical articles in Arizona journals recount the grisly crime and leave no doubt about what happened. Newspaper libraries from Los Angeles to New York maintain thick files that painstakingly provide every bloody detail. Modern books on sensational crimes invariably include a chapter on the horrible “trunk murderess.” Even the few sympathetic articles hold sympathy for her only because she was a minister’s daughter who went wrong.

So why did so many people in Phoenix act as though the city was hiding its dirty linen behind her skirts?

In 1987, I decided to find out. By then I was an investigative reporter and editor for *New Times of Phoenix*, one of the nation’s largest weekly newspapers. I’d spent years probing the political scene of Phoenix, so I knew how raw the politics of this town could be. I’d worked on a special project that reinvestigated the 1976 assassination of reporter Don Bolles—blown up at noon in a downtown parking lot by a car bomb—so I knew how the most outrageous of crimes could go unpunished in Arizona. I’d exposed a horrible cover-up of the death of a boy in the county jail, so I knew how “official” records could be distorted. If all these things happened in modern times, with a host of media eyes to inspect them, imagine what sins could have been committed in the old days, when one publisher dominated the communications system of this little town and police reporters were notorious for acting more like cops than journalists.

I’d already read several articles and books about the Winnie Ruth Judd case, and even with their “she’s guilty as hell” tone, things didn’t fit. This, coupled with all the stories I’d heard, made it obvious that the case needed a new look. If half the rumors were true, I thought, it would make a great story.

A journalist needs a “news peg” to justify a story, and the obvious peg here would be to finally get Winnie Ruth Judd

to break her silence and talk. It would prove to be the hardest part of the entire investigation.

From just preliminary information, I knew Winnie Ruth Judd now called herself Marian Lane, was in her early eighties, and lived somewhere in California. If this case was ever to be reinvestigated, it had to be soon, while she and some of the other principals were still alive.

Her last Phoenix attorney, Larry Debus, wasn't at all encouraging at first. He insisted she would never sit for an interview, just as she had refused all requests from journalists since he and famed California attorney Melvin Belli had gotten her paroled in 1971. Besides, she had no love for the media, Debus added. "She just wants to be left alone," he told me. "She's afraid if she talks, they'll come after her again because her parole specified she was never to tell her story."

That's the point, I stressed. She's never talked. She didn't testify at her trial, and by the time she tried to speak, they said she was insane and who'd listen to a crazy lady? She's stayed silent all these years, and if the curiosity about this case is ever to be satisfied, she has to talk. Debus, who owed me a favor for some forgotten reason, agreed to try because her case had always troubled him. "She was the victim of small-town politics and a justice system that wasn't just," he said. "She deserved to be punished for the right crime. She wasn't." It took three years before he was finally able to convince her to meet with me.

By the time I flew to Stockton, California, to visit her in February of 1990, I knew the rumors about her case held far more fact than fancy. I'd already started plowing through the boxes of files kept under seal by the Arizona Archives on the fourth floor of the state capitol building in Phoenix. I'd already interviewed people involved in the case who shed new light on what really happened. I'd already heard again and again an outpouring of sympathy for this woman who had been portrayed to the world as a murdering witch.

But as I sat in the comfortable living room of her apartment, I thought I had to be talking to the wrong person. The bright California morning had become an overcast afternoon before this grand-motherly woman ever mentioned the name of Winnie Ruth Judd. All that day, I was sure somehow lines had gotten crossed and my trip was a waste. This lady before me couldn't be the awful "trunk murderess."

It wouldn't be the last time everything seemed out of kilter as I reinvestigated one of the nation's most enduring and salacious murders. More than once along the way, the most outlandish allegation turned out to be true. I soon found I couldn't discount anything. And I discovered that, like all legends, Winnie Ruth Judd was wrongly credited with many sins. "She went around chopping up people, didn't she?" a Phoenix city council member asked me. "She went on a killing spree, right?" another friend offered, suggesting Phoenix had in Winnie Ruth Judd its own version of Bonnie and Clyde. One after another, middle-aged friends who grew up in Phoenix recounted how their parents had frightened them with threats that if they didn't behave, "Winnie Ruth Judd will get you." They remembered that when she escaped from the asylum—a total of seven times—they'd been kept indoors for fear of encountering the "crazy killer." Children even had a jump rope rhyme about their fear. Most of the words are long forgotten, but somewhere in the ditty, they sang, "...and she'll chop you up to pieces."



In May 1990, I wrote a two-part series on my investigation for *New Times*. The series unleashed a flood of new information. Dozens of calls brought fresh leads and new people who'd been involved, revealing amazing pieces of the story.

Fortunately, Arizona archivists and librarians, recognizing the historical significance of this case, have carefully preserved enormous amounts of information. But they went far behind that, searching on their own for obscure sources

that yielded unimagined treasures. Thousands of original documents—from personal letters and telegrams to internal memos and reports—were preserved under seal at the State Archives Office. During my research, archivists uncovered a long-forgotten box of files from a rural county that contained, to our astonishment and joy, a 1932 transcript of Winnie Ruth Judd telling the whole story to the county sheriff. This never-before-seen document provided minute details of both that deadly October night and its gruesome aftermath.

At the Maricopa County Court Records Office, the evidence box on the case still includes the actual bullets that killed Anne LeRoi and Sammy Samuelson. All the original police reports are still there, including interviews with potential witnesses who were ignored as the case went to trial. At the Pinal County Historical Society are records of Winnie Ruth Judd's life at the state prison in Florence, Arizona, and of the insanity hearing that saved her from the gallows.

Even more telling are the vivid memories. I interviewed over one hundred people, including the last living juror at her murder trial and the last living member of the grand jury that sought mercy for her. Neither had ever spoken to a reporter about the case before. I found the last woman to see the victims alive. I found the woman who was run out of Phoenix because she “talked too much” to the police about the prominent men who had befriended Winnie and the victims. I found people who'd heard the most remarkable things over the years and were anxious to talk to someone who would listen and believe. Family members of major players in the case were generous in sharing their memorabilia, including vast amounts of information that never showed up in any official file.

I took much of the information to experts for help. Hugh Ennis, a retired Phoenix police captain with thirty years' experience, helped me review the police reports for what

they did and, suspiciously, did not show. One of the nation's most respected forensic experts, Dr. Heinz Karnitschnig, reviewed the autopsy reports and pictures—pictures never seen by the public because they were too gory even for the press of the thirties. A former chief justice of the Arizona Supreme Court, Jack D. H. Hays, reviewed the trial transcripts and appeals.

And I talked at length with Winnie Ruth Judd, getting not only the first interview in twenty years but the most complete interview she has ever given. She graciously insisted I stay with her at her apartment in early 1990. I stayed for three days, and we talked all day and twice long into the night. She shared with me secrets she'd never told anyone, memories she preferred to forget. Later, we had dozens of phone conversations. We talked until she begged that she couldn't bear to talk anymore.

Then there are the people who even now—sixty years later—still won't discuss what they know. Former Arizona governor Rose Mofford, whose fifty-year tenure in Arizona politics has left her extremely well connected, said “no way” would she discuss the case, even though she has known Winnie Ruth Judd since the 1940s. Former U.S. senator Barry Goldwater refused repeated requests for an interview, relaying the message, “You tell that girl to leave that alone.”

What could be so awful so long after the fact that it must still be shielded?

That's what this book is all about.

Winnie Ruth Judd speaks at length—finally. So do the official records. So do all the people involved in the case. So do the massive newspaper files from across the country. So do the bits and shreds of evidence pieced together from thousands of sources—some never uncovered before. They are all quoted directly or used to reconstruct dialogue and scenes.

The story they tell shows history was wrong about Winnie Ruth Judd.

# Chapter 1

## The Last Train to Los Angeles

It was such an ordinary Sunday in Phoenix, Arizona.

October 18, 1931.

The mere 48,000 residents who called Phoenix home were cashing in on a beautiful eighty-nine-degree day. October had always been, always would be, the favorite month in this desert “oasis.” It meant the end of the four-month inferno of summer, with its persistent hundred-degree days and, even more intolerable, its three-digit nights. Ahead were eight months of glorious comfort—some of the nicest weather the country offered. The payback, as everyone always thought of it. No matter how bad the summers got—and with the invention of air-conditioning still a decade off, they were god-awful—at least you were assured a beautiful winter. There wouldn’t be a single hundred-degree day this October. None at all until the following June.

Most of the country soon would be fending off snow and freezing temperatures, but that kind of winter never came here. And that, everyone knew, was something to sell. For a decade the Chamber of Commerce had been marketing days like this to the country: “Phoenix, where summer winters,” one slogan went. It was working. While the rest of the nation would forever remember 1929 as the year the stock market

crashed, Phoenix would best remember it as the first year tourism meant \$10 million for its economy.

Many were getting rich on tourism, though nobody had gotten rich when Phoenix sold its weather to health seekers, especially those with tuberculosis. “Lungers,” they were commonly called. The ill still came, but as one local writer put it, “There is no rule against regaining one’s health here, but it is not in the best taste to discuss it.” The favorite winter visitors were “the elderly gentlemen who like to play golf all year around and the ladies of all ages who like to applaud them.” Most rewarding were the tourists who came for winter and decided to put down roots. Chicago’s chewing gum magnate William Wrigley, Jr., had already invested \$2 million building the Arizona Biltmore Hotel six miles out of town, a gem that would attract movie stars and kings. Wrigley liked Arizona so much he built the most lavish home in the state on a hill next to the hotel, known to this day as the Wrigley Mansion.

The kind of wealth Wrigley represented was new to Phoenix, but then, everything here was new. Arizona itself was the newest state, becoming the forty-eighth on Valentine’s Day in 1912. Phoenix had emerged as the state’s largest city only at the end of the First World War, in 1919. Now, barely twelve years later, people were already starting to talk of Phoenix as a “metropolitan city.” Not everyone was happy with the changes. One local columnist offered little sympathy for those who weren’t keeping up: “The oldtimer, pushed to the wall, looks on rather bewildered and not a little hurt. Once a year, on Pioneer Day, he parades down the street and sees on either side the outside faces watching him—gaping faces from Oklahoma, amused faces from Michigan, smug faces from Kansas, bored faces from New York. No doubt he feels embarrassed.”

There’s a cockiness in being the biggest, even if you’re the biggest in a small pond, and Phoenix was polishing the attitude. As local historian Margaret Finnerty says today,

“Phoenix was just a little farm town then, but people here were convinced it was the center of the earth.” It was best to ignore the fact that Phoenix still had more blacksmiths than architects; people preferred to boast that there were already 130 doctors and 172 lawyers.

A total of 48,118 residents doesn't sound like much—especially when Phoenix today has nearly a million and has been the largest city in the Southwest since the 1960s. The best businessmen in 1931 could do was brag that it was “the largest city between El Paso and Los Angeles.” They never mentioned that El Paso was over twice its size and L.A. outpopulated it by four times. What was important was that if you were going from one of those large cities to the other, both the road and the railroad took you through Phoenix. As the state's largest newspaper proudly gushed, about 2,000 new residents had moved here in just the last twelve months, which “unmistakably shows that Phoenix continues to make that steady progress which has characterized its growth from a frontier community to the capital of a great island empire.”

Hyperbole aside, Phoenix was doing quite fine, even if the Great Depression had slowed things down.

Phoenix measured progress by what you could see on the surface: how many miles of paved roads, how many square miles within the city limits, how many “skyscrapers”—defined here as anything over four stories. Eighty-six miles of paved roads sounds skimpy, but it was three and a half times more than this town claimed just a decade earlier. In all, the city covered just over six square miles—neatly compact, with a trolley line that could take you almost anywhere you wanted to go. Those who had bothered to count—and undoubtedly the Chamber officials already had—knew this city could cover a total of 500 square miles if it wanted. Nobody ever dreamed it would get that big in six decades, but it was nice to know there was lots of empty desert out there if millions ever came.

The skyline represented the city's greatest pride. All the great cities had skylines. New York had just built the world's tallest structure, the Empire State Building, at an astonishing one floor per day. Nobody in Phoenix could even imagine a building 102 stories tall, but they were just as excited at their own emerging profile. Already seven buildings of over four stories graced the city, including the sixteen-story Westward Ho Hotel, which would remain the tallest until 1959. There had been parties and hoopla when each new building opened.

But if you asked most residents on this October Sunday in 1931 how they would describe their community, they'd have agreed with Chamber of Commerce promotions that Phoenix was "a city of homes, schools, and churches." It wasn't just a selling point, it was the city's priority list. And nobody apologized that all three were segregated by race.

Life revolved around family and home and a strict moral code that said a man was required to be faithful and productive for his family, a woman was to raise her children to be God-fearing and successful, and the kids were to stay out of trouble. Divorce was the most horrible admission that somebody wasn't following the script and "playing around" was scandalous. "I remember the old-timers telling us boys that if we were ever caught with a woman, we were to tell the judge she was having a fit and we were holding her down—we were told never to admit to anything," says Tom Chauncey, who was an eighteen-year-old boy this Sunday but would go on to become one of the city's most prominent businessmen.

Historians recall the time as being very socially stratified, very conservative, very uptight about propriety. On the surface, everything seemed to fit those requirements. Phoenixians found it both necessary and easy to ignore the ugly underbelly of their town, pretending there was no prostitution when it was a thriving cottage industry, pretending there was no political corruption when it was rampant, pretending

men never strayed and women never wandered when it was an infamous tradition.

It wasn't hard to project a public face of strict morals when your scanty town could crow it had eighty churches. And as on all Sundays, they were filled this day. Episcopalians and Presbyterians were the "best" churches in town, counting most of the city's leading families as members. Anglo Catholics went to St. Mary's in the heart of downtown, which one day would be designated a Minor Basilica by Pope John Paul II. Mexican Catholics, tired of being relegated to the basement of St. Mary's, had recently built their own impressive church. There was one synagogue. The black Baptist churches were all in South Phoenix, the poor side of town.

From eight in the morning until eight at night, these places of worship were filled with parishioners thanking the Lord the depression hadn't hit here as hard as elsewhere.

Phoenix would feel the depression less than most American cities, would recover far quicker. The vast majority hadn't invested in the stock market—"speculation" was still considered a dirty word in these conservative parts—and the crash was so inconsequential to this community the local papers gave it little attention. Those with jobs were careful to keep them. There wouldn't be any raises; there'd be lots of pay cuts. But if belts were tightened, you could make out. Some found the imposed austerity good for the soul. As one local observer put it at the time, "Everybody has 'shortened sail,' in good nautical fashion, to meet the gale and as it lessens it won't hurt us to find ourselves wasting less, expecting less, needing less."

By October 1931, Phoenix was learning it couldn't just take care of its own and ignore the economic disaster that had hit so hard almost everywhere else. Many of these churches had already started relief funds and services for the thousands of "transients and hoboos" who came to Phoenix, hoping at the best for work, at the least for relief from winter cold. Some were Arizona copper miners thrown

out of work when the state's chief export became worthless. Others came from across the nation. Local public and private welfare funds would be exhausted by 1932 and proud, independent Arizona would be forced to turn to the federal government for help.

But on this Sunday, that thought was still considered "socialistic." Arizona didn't like federal intervention and it didn't like outsiders. Its Community Chest leader had said just the week before that he didn't mind taking care of Phoenicians down on their luck, but "it is not within the province of the Community Chest to attempt to provide for the shiftless and unwanted from other states." Governor George W. P. Hunt would soon issue the same warning as the state's official stance on charity.

For outsiders looking in, Phoenix lived up to its "oasis" PR. Although it sat in the Sonoran desert, it was green and lush. Cottonwood trees were so thick on some streets they almost formed a wall. Elm trees created a green canopy over Central Avenue, the major north-south thoroughfare. Towering palms gave a tropical look. Rose gardens were found everywhere, mostly for personal satisfaction, although the Chamber of Commerce had once launched a campaign to challenge Pasadena, California, as the rose capital of the country. A network of water canals laid out centuries earlier by Indians who mysteriously vanished were still the basic network for delivering water throughout the area. That they doubled as swimming holes for youngsters was an added benefit. There was only one genuine Victorian home in the entire town, but many that were considered grand.

Most Anglo families lived in single-family detached houses with generous front and back yards. The crowded tenements of the East were unknown here; so were the cookie-cutter subdivisions that would one day dominate Phoenix. Stucco over brick was the favorite building material, and most houses would be considered "custom-made" by today's standards. Many had hardwood floors; almost all had fireplaces;

a few even had basements, although that would never catch on. Almost everyone had a front porch, or at least a sleeping porch, where the night breezes provided relief from the summer heat.

On this typical Sunday, families gathered for a large dinner after church and then spent part of the afternoon reading the thickest paper of the week. The *Arizona Republic*, billing itself as “the State’s Greatest Newspaper,” was reporting that “Scarface” Al Capone had been convicted on five counts of tax evasion in Chicago. As the paper had been noting all week, Thomas Edison’s health continued to fail and now doctors in West Orange, New Jersey, were saying the eighty-four-year-old inventor could die at any moment. Wire service photos showed Helen Keller visiting blind World War I veterans in France. President Herbert Hoover was bragging that he practiced the cost cutting he preached: The White House executive offices had spent only \$113,694 in the first quarter of the fiscal year, down over \$68,000 from the comparable quarter in 1930.

Closer to home, a front-page story reported that nineteen-year-old Jack West had been charged with murder for the slaying of his girlfriend on Friday night when she returned from a date with a new suitor. It was big news because, as Phoenix always prided itself, murder wasn’t an ordinary thing here.

West was in the hospital recovering from the flesh wounds he’d inflicted on himself after killing eighteen-year-old Pearl Mills. The paper reported he had already confessed to county attorney Lloyd J. Andrews, admitting he was jealous because Miss Mills had thwarted his offers of marriage and had started dating someone new.

West recounted how he’d stalked her house on Thursday night and confronted her and the new beau when they returned from a dance. Then Friday night, he hid next to her house for two hours, waiting for her to come home. He chased her into her bedroom and fatally stabbed her once in the neck before turning the knife on himself.

West acknowledged he had been drinking heavily, first wood alcohol and then gin—both long outlawed by Prohibition.

The Jack West case was clearly premeditated, first-degree murder, the county attorney was saying, and the boy could expect to spend eight to ten years behind bars.

One of the most popular columns of the Sunday paper—“Little Stories of Phoenix Daily Life”—kept readers informed of who was going where and doing what. This day, the column was filled with reports of local businessmen heading north for the annual hunting season that had begun Friday morning—limit: one deer, one bear, two turkeys. And they learned that yet another bootlegger had been caught illegally “manufacturing intoxicating liquor.”

Arizona had no more luck than the rest of the nation in enforcing the twelve-year-old ban on “demon rum,” and although it officially supported the restrictions of the Eighteenth Amendment, liquor was both plentiful and common. Few here would mourn the repeal that was just two years away.

The downtown Fox Theater was advertising one of the first movies ever made in Arizona, *The Cisco Kid*, while over at the Orpheum Theater, twenty-four-year-old Barbara Stanwyck was starring in a forgettable movie entitled *Illicit*. The new Nash—“One car today has everything”—was offered by Miller Bros. Motors at from \$795 to \$2,025. “Correct hat styles for miss and matron” were on sale for \$1.94. Men’s dress shoes sold for \$3.95. A five-pound ham cost 85¢. Cabbage was 4¢ a pound.



But this was no ordinary day for Winnie Ruth McKinnell Judd.

The twenty-six-year-old daughter of a minister didn’t spend her morning at the Free Methodist Church, as she had done every Sunday of her life growing up in Darlington, Indiana. Actually, her church attendance had been spotty since she’d left home seven years earlier, the bride of a seemingly successful doctor twenty-two years her senior. But

she didn't admit that in the long letters she regularly wrote home to her parents, who were finally thinking of retirement. It wasn't the only omission. Her letters were always cheery, always filled with promise that the setbacks would be overcome.

Dr. William C. Judd hadn't turned out to be the kind of provider his wife and her family had every right to expect. Forget the image of a nice family doctor who settled into a community, supplying his wife with a home and respectability. Dr. Judd instead found work as the doctor for American mining interests in Mexico, working for little money and whatever accommodations the firm provided. He changed locations often, never held any post for long. Eventually even these second-rate jobs disappeared for him. Ruth was skilled at explaining it all away without once letting on to the parents she adored that her husband couldn't keep a position because he was addicted to narcotics. It wasn't hard to make them believe the tough times were just what everyone else was experiencing in this depression. Most of the time, she believed it herself.

For now, Winnie Ruth was taking care of herself. Like so many others, she sought out Phoenix because its dry air promised relief from the tuberculosis that had long made her weak and sick. She arrived from Mexico in 1930, without her husband, without knowing a soul, without the skills to earn much of a living. Her major assets were her looks and her "sweet disposition," as many remembered. She bore a striking resemblance to the Hollywood star of the day Norma Shearer, and given other circumstances, could have taken on the look of glamour. But she never earned enough to acquire that look. Her only coat had shrunk in a cleaning, so she wore it around her shoulders like a cape. The one luxury she allowed herself was to have her long hair cut into the bob that was so fashionable.

Fortunately, she had found a six-day-a-week job at Phoenix's first private medical clinic, the Grunow Clinic. It paid

seventy-five dollars a month. Sunday was her one day off, but it was not unusual for her to spend at least part of the day working at home. She was a medical secretary primarily responsible for typing up reports on exams for the doctors. She'd fibbed when she claimed to be proficient in typing and had quickly enrolled in a night class to develop the skill. The doctors had been patient with her, but she knew she had to get her accuracy and speed up to keep the job she so desperately needed. The pay was actually quite good for an unskilled woman those days. If she was careful, it paid her rent and food and left a little to slip her husband. She just had to keep going until he landed a job. He had been in California the last couple of months pursuing some promising prospects. Any day now...

Most Sundays found her doing the kind of things all working women did on their day off—washing clothes, cleaning her small apartment on Brill Street. The Sundays she enjoyed most included dinner with her best friends, Anne LeRoi and “Sammy” Samuelson, who lived a trolley ride away. They would pool their resources for something special—chicken was a favorite—and Anne would cook. Then they'd huddle around the radio, letting themselves be scared by the Sherlock Holmes mysteries that were such a favorite throughout the country.

But Winnie Ruth Judd did none of those things this Sunday. This day, she was busy packing—had been up all night packing. And now she had to find help. She went to her nice landlords, who lived across the alley from her apartment.

Violet Grimm knew something was wrong the minute she laid eyes on her tenant. “Ruthie,” as almost everyone called Winifred Ruth Judd, looked tired. She seemed pre-occupied and nervous. Her hand was bandaged with a towel. “I burned it ironing,” Ruth explained. Mrs. Grimm fussed at her that it should be covered with a salve and bandaged properly. Ruth insisted it was all right the way it was. But

could she use the phone? And could Mr. Grimm help her with her luggage?

Howard Grimm was reading his Sunday paper when his wife interrupted to say she'd volunteered him and their son for an errand. Mrs. Judd was taking the night train to Los Angeles to see her husband, and she needed help carting her trunks. She'd even offered a dollar and a half to pay the men for their trouble.

As Grimm would later testify, he didn't mind lending a hand because he felt kindly toward the young beauty who rented one of the apartments he'd designed and built a couple years earlier. She was such a nice young woman. She was clean, she didn't have loud parties, she paid her rent—sometimes a little at a time, but all forty-five dollars was always paid in full by month's end. Mrs. Judd had even gotten friendly with his children, especially thirteen-year-old Rita. When the girl was having trouble with her Spanish classes, Mrs. Judd had helped, surprisingly conversant in the language. And when the girl balked at her piano lessons, Mrs. Judd had taught her the simple "Black Hawk Waltz" to keep her interested.

Grimm really knew just a little about Mrs. Judd, but everything he knew convinced him she could use any help. He hadn't been impressed with Dr. Judd, who had spent a few months with his wife in Phoenix before going off again to look for work. Grimm never could understand what this pretty young woman saw in the plain, older man. He suspected the good doctor liked either his booze or his dope too much, but that really wasn't his concern. Ruthie had no such vices, as far as he could tell. Her biggest problem, Grimm thought, was being in the unenviable position of a woman on her own in the roughest of economic times. Even when his contracting business had ground to a halt, Grimm was still able to make enough so his Violet didn't have to work. It was a measure of a good man to provide for his family. Dr. Judd didn't measure up.

Besides, there was a practical reason for offering Mrs. Judd a helping hand. She was such a slip of a thing—carrying just 110 pounds on her five-foot-five-inch frame—that Grimm thought it was obvious she'd need assistance moving anything heavy and bulky.

Like everyone else who encountered Winnie Ruth Judd that day—like everyone who'd seen her since Friday night—Howard and Violet Grimm would never forget the details.

As Violet Grimm would later tell reporters, Ruth Judd came to her house twice that Sunday to use the phone. Mrs. Grimm was busy clearing off the Sunday dishes and didn't hear the local number Ruth Judd gave the operator. But she did hear the young woman asking someone to lend her five dollars.

Grimm would remember that instead of her usual cheery, pleasant self, Mrs. Judd seemed nervous and preoccupied. He'd testify that he tried to show her the drawings he'd just completed for a new building, but she paid so little attention he gave up.

The train to Los Angeles was leaving at eight p.m. so Grimm planned to collect Mrs. Judd and her luggage around six-thirty. But when he told his son, Kenneth, of the plan, he found it wouldn't work. Kenneth had a youth meeting at church beginning at five p.m. The teenager ran across the alley to inquire if Mrs. Judd could be ready earlier. She said she could.

Ruth Judd was dressed in a simple brown suit and a plain hat when the men arrived; she carried a black coat over her arm. She pointed them toward the bedroom, where they found two trunks. Grimm recalled grunting as he tried to lift the big black trunk. Mrs. Judd apologized for its weight, explaining that it contained her husband's medical books and he'd need them in California if he got the job that looked so promising. As Grimm testified, it took the strength of both men to carry the trunk to their touring car outside. They tied it to the running board on the passenger side. Kenneth

managed the smaller trunk himself, wedging it between the front and back seats. Winnie Ruth carried out a battered suitcase and a hatbox. She sat in the front seat as Grimm drove. Kenneth sat in the back.

It took only a few minutes to drive the fifteen blocks to the new block-long depot at Fourth Avenue and Jackson. As Ruth got out of the car, she fished in her purse for the promised payment. She handed Grimm a dollar bill, but apologized that she didn't have the right change to give him the fifty cents. "I'll have to get change to pay you the rest," she told him, as she hurried into the depot to buy her ticket. But she quickly returned. "Would it be all right if I paid you when I get back on Wednesday or Thursday?" she asked. "I'm short of funds and have to ask you for the dollar back." Mr. Grimm said that would be fine.

Beverly Stallings was working the 3:30 to 11:30 p.m. shift in the baggage room of Union Station when the Grimms' car pulled up in front. Stallings and Kenneth unlashed the large packer trunk. Kenneth managed the smaller steam trunk alone while Stallings started the paperwork. The larger trunk measured 40 by 24 by 36 and weighed 235 pounds. The smaller measured 15 by 18 by 36 and weighed 90 pounds. The trunks were 175 pounds overweight for standard luggage. His weight chart showed the owner would have to pay \$4.48 extra. Stallings gave the carbon-copied paperwork to fellow baggageman Avis Boutchee. Boutchee collected the extra charges from the young woman who'd arrived with the trunks and asked for her signature; he noticed that her left hand was completely covered with a bandage. He attached the top copy of each claim check to its trunk and gave her the yellow copy. Only later did he look to see what name she signed. It was B. J. McKinnell. He had no way of knowing that was the name of Winnie Ruth Judd's younger brother.

Head porter John Washington noticed the attractive woman sitting alone in the station when he arrived for work

at five p.m. that day. It seemed strange someone would be there so early. The Tucson train wasn't due until seven-thirty and the Los Angeles train didn't arrive until nearly eight. The depot was almost empty, so every now and then he found his eyes returning to the woman. As he would later testify, she seemed so nervous, so "suspicious-looking." Occasionally she'd get up and walk around, but he remembered she always kept her carry-on luggage in sight. The hatbox looked pretty new, Washington thought, but the brown leather suitcase had certainly seen better days. Washington even approached the woman once, asking if she was going to Tucson. She told him she was waiting for the L.A. train. He would testify he thought her voice was trembling.

By the time the *Golden State Limited* pulled into the station at 7:55, Beverley Stallings had already taken his half-hour supper break. He helped the baggage boys load the trunks—along with a few other pieces of luggage from the other local passenger—onto the train. As always, Stallings was in a hurry because the train stopped here for just fifteen minutes. But even in his haste, he noticed something leaking from the big packer trunk. He thought it smelled like medicine. Meanwhile, porter Washington made a point of helping the nervous young woman onto the train with her carry-on pieces. The seat she'd bought was in the rear of the chair car, third from the right. She'd be sitting up all night, Washington thought, but then he hadn't expected she could afford a berth. Nor did he expect much of a tip.

"Will you take pennies?" she asked timidly as she held out five of them, along with some other coins. "Yes ma'am," he told her, tipping his hat as he left.

H. J. Mapes was the baggageman on the train that night, managing the duties between El Paso and Los Angeles. He'd handled thousands of trunks and suitcases in his twenty-three years with Southern Pacific, but he knew right away something was wrong with the large black trunk the Phoenix crew

hoisted into his baggage car. At first he was most aware of the offensive odor. But after the train got underway, he had time to inspect. He was sure it was leaking blood. The odor seemed to grow as the train crossed the Arizona desert. And the leaking never stopped.

As soon as he unloaded his car at the station in Los Angeles the next morning around 7:45, he notified district baggage agent Arthur V. Anderson that they had a problem. "I think we've got some contraband deer out here," Mapes reported.

Anderson immediately went out on the platform, where the trunks now sat on a flatbed truck. Even in the open air, he could smell the horrible odor from twelve feet away. As he got closer, he saw what looked like blood running down the sides of the trunk. He thought Mapes was probably right. People were always trying to smuggle deer meat on the train to California. Venison was a special treat. But health officials had impressed on railroad personnel that it had to stop. Anderson tagged both trunks with a pink hold slip, signifying the luggage wasn't to be released without the approval of the front office.

Nobody noticed the young woman in the brown suit who got off the train that morning except Stella Conley, the maid in the ladies' room. The woman was carrying a hatbox and had a porter in tow carting a dilapidated brown suitcase with strap handles. They passed the storage lockers along the wall and walked directly to the ladies' room. Mrs. Conley had to step aside to let them pass. The woman instructed the porter to put the suitcase behind the rest room door, against a wall. Then she balanced her hatbox on top of it. She nodded to Stella Conley as she left the rest room and sat down on a settee in the large waiting room that dominated the depot.

Mrs. Conley didn't usually let people clutter up her rest room with their luggage. That's what the pay lockers were for. But the woman was sitting there impatiently, obviously waiting for someone, so she thought she'd let it pass.

But an hour later, when the *Sunset Limited* was called, Stella Conley walked over to the woman to see if she was

taking that train. "No, I'm waiting," the woman answered, not offering any more. Mrs. Conley tried again when the 10 a.m. train was called. "Lady, are you taking this train?" she asked, and again got the same response. The maid noticed that the woman's left hand was covered with a bandage. "What happened to your hand?" she inquired. "I burned it," the woman said.

"Will those bags be all right behind the door?" the woman finally asked, and Stella Conley thought it was about time. "Can't you check them?" the maid said, a little sharply. "I haven't got the money to check them," the woman admitted. She told Mrs. Conley she was waiting for her brother, who was a junior at the University of Southern California. She'd sent him a message to meet her, but she wasn't sure he'd gotten it before he went to his morning classes. If he didn't come soon, she'd have to go out to the school to get him, and she only had enough money for a streetcar ride.

"Well, in that case, I'll try to keep an eye on the bags," Mrs. Conley allowed. She'd already guessed the woman couldn't have much. People who did never carried tattered luggage like the suitcase behind her door.

A few minutes later, the woman got up to leave. "I'm going to go get my brother, but in case he shows up here, he's tall and has reddish-blond hair," she informed Mrs. Conley. The maid didn't think that was much of a description; too many young college men could answer to it. "Who will your brother be looking for?" she asked. The woman spelled out her name: "Mrs. J-U-D-D."

"If your brother comes, shall I let him have the bags?" the maid asked.

"No, don't let anyone have the bags until I come back," Mrs. Judd instructed. The maid insisted, "When you return, please come tell me so I know the right person got the bags." Mrs. Judd promised. After she left, Mrs. Conley tried to move the suitcase farther out of the way to be sure no one

filched it. It was so heavy she couldn't lift it. "No one will bother that," she thought.

By the time Stella Conley's shift was up at 3 p.m. neither Mrs. Judd nor her college brother had come to claim the bags behind the bathroom door.

George Brooker was the delivery clerk that day at L.A.'s Central Station. As he'd done every workday for the last four years, he exchanged claim checks for baggage and filled out the required paperwork. When he went to take down the numbers on the two trunks on the flatbed, he noticed an awful smell. Some kind of fluid was leaking out. There was already a spot on the concrete about the size of a dinner plate. He noted that both trunks were pink-tagged.

About noon, Brooker watched as a Ford roadster drove up and backed toward the loading dock. He didn't recognize the attractive woman who got out of the car, but the tall young man with her looked familiar. Brooker thought he might be one of the college boys who hired on temporarily over the Christmas holidays to help with the crunch of extra mail and luggage. Hours later, he'd finally put a name with the face. The college kid was Burton McKinnell—the only sibling of Winnie Ruth Judd.

The young man handed Brooker two claim tickets. Brooker immediately took them into the front office.

Baggage agent Anderson came out to personally handle the situation. "Who does this baggage belong to?" he asked.

"To me," the young woman answered.

"What's inside the trunks?"

"Just personal things, clothing."

"It must be something else," he insisted. "It wouldn't be a bottle of broken booze, I don't suppose?" he suggested with a laugh. The woman assured him it wasn't.

Anderson led the woman and her companion toward the flatbed. They were about four feet away when he asked if they couldn't smell the nauseating odor. The woman acted

as though there was nothing wrong, claiming she couldn't smell a thing. Her young companion looked horrified. He could see the stain on the concrete from the leaking fluid; noticed that flies were swarming around the trunks. "Well, I can smell it," he blurted out. Anderson suggested the woman move closer to the trunks. When she was right up next to them, she admitted she did smell something.

"What could be in those trunks to cause that stink?" Anderson asked rather sharply.

"Well, I don't know," the woman calmly answered. "I can't imagine what it is."

Anderson pointed out the liquid that was still dripping. The woman turned to her companion. "What do you suppose that is?" she asked him, and the young man just stared at her. Anderson noticed nothing in the woman's behavior to make him believe she was nervous or uncomfortable. In fact, she seemed as perplexed as he was. Her young companion seemed totally befuddled by the entire scene.

"Please open the trunks, ma'am," Anderson instructed. As he would later testify, "I told her that whatever was leaking would undoubtedly damage the other contents. I didn't want her to later file a claim against the railroad for what was ruined, so we should determine the extent of the problem now."

The woman seemed hesitant and her companion jumped in with an alternative: "It might cause some embarrassment to open the trunks here. Why not come out to the house and examine the contents there?" Anderson refused. The woman opened her purse and fumbled around inside with her one good hand—Anderson now noticed that the other was bandaged—as though looking for the keys to unlock the trunks.

"My husband has the keys," she told him, and Anderson took it for a lie right away. The woman said she'd have to telephone her husband to bring the keys to the station. Anderson offered the use of his office phone. She went inside and thumbed through the L.A. phone book, claiming she

didn't remember her husband's number and couldn't find it listed. "I'll have to go get my husband and bring him down here," she informed Anderson. The boy with her still looked as if he couldn't figure out what was going on, the baggage agent thought. He watched as the woman and the young man calmly walked to the car and drove away.

They never returned.

At 4:30 that afternoon, Anderson called the Los Angeles Police Department to report two suspicious trunks.

Detective Frank Ryan's normal 8 to 5 shift was nearly over when the call came in, and he hoped he could head straight home after a quick stop at the depot. He had no idea he was in for a long night. After ten years with the L.A.P.D., Lieutenant Ryan knew what blood looked like and how it smelled, and he was sure the sticky liquid oozing out of the trunk was blood. Anderson brought him a sack of passkeys and Ryan picked the lock of the big black trunk.

On the top was a piece of rug. He moved it aside and found a number of books and papers. Beneath them were pieces of women's clothing, some smeared with blood. They were piled on top of a homemade quilt. He lifted a corner of the quilt.

He was looking at the head of a woman.

As he instinctively jerked his hand away, the quilt was pulled aside. Crammed into the trunk was a dark-haired woman wearing pink pajamas. She was on her side, her head in one corner and her knees drawn up.

Lieutenant Ryan recoiled so violently the lid slammed shut with a thud. He rushed into the depot office and called precinct headquarters, requesting fingerprint men and the guys from the morgue.

As he waited for the backup, Ryan opened the smaller trunk. Several sheets of paper lay on the top, some stained with blood. A light cotton blanket was stuffed around the contents. Underneath were two bundles wrapped in women's clothing. He unwrapped the first one.

It contained a human foot and a leg from the knee down. He opened the second.

Inside was the torso of a woman from the head to the navel.

Ryan decided he'd seen enough and had better wait for the lab men. But he already knew something that made him sick.

The pieces in this trunk didn't add up to a whole body.

The trunks were put in an ambulance and taken to the morgue.

There was nobody around to alert railroad officials or the L.A.P.D. that two more bags were still stashed behind the door of the ladies' room.

*Winnie Ruth Judd Speaks*

—From a letter to her attorney, 1952

*I was born on January 29, 1905 during a blizzard in a parsonage at Oxford, Indiana, where my father was a minister. My mother and father both had been school teachers. My mother was thirty-eight years of age when she married and I was the first of two children. Because of her age, quick medical care had to be given her, and I chilled and contracted pneumonia at birth. At age four, my weakened lungs were susceptible, and I contracted tuberculosis, which has sapped my vitality all through life. Some years I might feel fine and be doing well in school, and the next year I might run a low temperature and be so toxic from my condition that it made me feel stupid—and hindered my learning.*

*My brother was 19 months younger than me and we were very affectionate towards each other. My father was one of the most kindly and Godly souls. He was a Free Methodist minister and a great man in my heart and also in the heart of thousands of his parishoners. He believed that everyone had some good in him. He addressed everyone as "My good man," "my good woman." He preached love, not hell fire, from his pulpit. The world*

would seem brighter just to talk to him. He was an old-fashioned circuit rider.

*My mother was a kindly Christian woman—a bit timid—but a hard-working person, a tidy housekeeper and always willing to make a sacrifice for her family and others who needed her services in sickness.*

*I usually went with my father when he filled the pulpit at his country churches. He taught me that the most important thing in life, besides believing in God, was to like people and have them to like me. This charming characteristic of his grew up with me. Only recently, a news reporter described my personality as hypnotic, because of my many friends. This is preposterous. I like everybody and want them to like me. This trait is a natural part of my personality.*

*When I attended school I did not fit in with modern school activities. I had never attended a circus, carnival, ball game, movie, skating rink or bowling alley; nor was I allowed to wear jewelry. My mother did not think these things were wrong, but our church did not approve of it.*

*We lived a simple life in a comfortable home, but I did have a repressed childhood and later a very repressed marriage.*