

THE TALE OF MARY DACH



Ralph Barrera photo

It's nearly Halloween — and time for a true story that ended in the Fayette County Jail in 1933. In the decades since, some have spoken of strange events there. Old buildings, it seems, may be slow to let go of the past.

*Mary Dach 1933 Acme Newspictures photo
courtesy Fayette Heritage Museum & Archives*

By Denise Gamino

NEARLY 90 YEARS AGO, a widowed mother chose to starve to death in a Fayette County jail cell rather than die in the electric chair for the killing of a farmhand.

She lost 150 fatal pounds.

Before she died, Mary Dach wished aloud to someday be free, and to get a job in the jail that confined her.

Perhaps she did.

Can anyone say, beyond a reasonable doubt, whether Dach's spirit lingered and led to the many mysterious occurrences reported in the old 1883 Victorian Gothic stone jail in downtown La Grange? Eerie episodes over the decades



Above, Henry Stoever, the murdered farmhand, in a photo taken years before the events related here. At left, Cathy Chaloupka in front of the historic old Fayette County Jail in La Grange, which now houses the Texas Heroes Museum. She recalls peculiar sights and sounds from the time she worked in the building as tourism director for La Grange's Chamber of Commerce. Others have reported unexplainable incidents, and more than a few locals say the building is haunted.

Henry Stoever photo from 'Famous Detective Cases' magazine, June 1935

“There are unsettled spirits” in the old jail.

— CATHY CHALOUPKA
Former director of tourism,
La Grange Chamber of Commerce

include sightings of orbs and apparitions, doors slamming, lights swinging, objects moving and even the sounds of heavy chains toppling.

“There are unsettled spirits” in the old jail, said Cathy Chaloupka, who officed in the renovated jail as director of tourism for the La Grange Chamber of Commerce for nine years, until 2005. “They got used to me, and I got used to them.”

Could the phantom presence of Mary Dach, a towering woman with braided black hair wound around her head, have turned on darkened lights, opened drawers meant to be closed and creaked loudly on the wooden staircase?

Some say yes; others say no way.

But few can argue that the saga of Mary Dach — which

made international headlines at the time, but is little known or talked of today — has not lost its shock factor.

If someone's afterlife spirit really could be unsettled, hers would be a contender.

Mary Dach, a woman of German heritage who spoke little English, confessed to fatally shooting the farm helper she hired after her husband died of cancer in 1929 or 1930, leaving her alone with three young children on a 168-acre farm 17 miles south of La Grange. According to period accounts, Dach claimed farmhand Henry Stoever had been abusive to her and

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the children, two girls and a boy, ages 8, 6 and 4 at the time.

Dach's oldest daughter, who is now deceased, finally broke the family's public silence about the case with the Fayette County Record when she was 89. The farmhand who was murdered was mean and abusive, regularly assaulting her mother and little brother, she said. She did not witness his murder but remembered circumstantial evidence that someone other than her mother killed Stoever. The grown daughter, Annie Polnick, remembered hearing someone tell her mother that she and her three children would be killed if the truth came out.

"Mama was real dumb as she could have told the truth and got her life safe," Polnick said in a 10-page, handwritten memoir dated 2001 — the year she told her own three children about their grandmother for the first time. By then, her oldest child was 55. "So to me as I understand it, she died for us kids."

The official version of the Mary Dach crime story began in mid-April 1933, when Fayette County law officers began searching for Stoever after his brother reported him missing. Dach gave conflicting accounts about Stoever's whereabouts each time law officers visited her farm during their first week of inquiry. On the seventh day, investigators found Stoever's body. It was burned and buried in an 8-by-16-foot hole filled with debris and dirt and topped by a new chicken coop, just 18 feet from Dach's farmhouse.

After being taken into custody and interrogated in German and English by four investigators for four hours, Dach admitted to shooting Stoever in the head with a shotgun as he slept to protect her family, according to press accounts.

The Austin Statesman, the capital city's afternoon newspaper at the time, reported that the "Widow Dach" admitted shooting her laborer "because he was cruel to her children and herself, threatened their lives and swore he would throw their bodies into a hole he had dug near the house for a flower pit."

Instead, the paper noted, "it was his body which finally rested in that grave he had dug with his own hands," per-

'Famous Detective Cases' magazine courtesy Fayette Heritage Museum & Archives



The June 1935 issue of 'Famous Detective Cases' magazine featured 'widow Dach' and details of her case, which had become a national media sensation. Below, Mary Dach with her three children. Her oldest daughter, Annie Polnick, broke the family's public silence about the case in 2014, when she was 89. She believed her mother did not kill Stoever. 'So to me as I understand it, she died for us kids,' she wrote in a private memoir.



haps as a planned cellar.

The sad case only turned more tragic when Dach refused to eat after her arrest. "I'll not eat until I know what they are going to do with me," she told jailers, according to a June 1935 Famous Detective Cases magazine article that recounts the case in an as-told-by format with then-Fayette County Chief Deputy Sheriff Jim Flournoy. (He later became sheriff and reluctantly shut down the infamous "Chicken House" brothel after an exposé by a Houston reporter.)

Dach lost 50 pounds in the five weeks between her arrest on April 18, 1933, and opening day of her four-day trial in La Grange on May 22. She had sipped little more than a bit of soup and some coffee. "She held out for thirteen days, then began to eat slowly. She cried constantly and asked to see her children," stated an Associated Press story in The Dallas Morning News.

It took two days of questioning two jury pools — 125 men — to find 12 qualified jurors. Women were not



Goose Creek Daily Sun photo, August 1933 (courtesy Sterling Municipal Library, via The Portal to Texas History)

allowed to sit on a jury in Texas until 1954. "Many of the talesmen [potential jurors] disqualified themselves because they said they were opposed to infliction of the death penalty on a woman," the AP reported.

"The court room is crowded and the heat is fierce but the spectators, men and women are not to be robbed of



The old Fayette County jail, home to the Texas Heroes Museum since 2016, features a replica of one of the old jail cells. At left, Charles Murray, museum manager, shows some of the items on display there. Below, Murray holds a replica of a key used to open the old jail. The museum is temporarily closed due to COVID-19.

FROM INMATES TO GREATS: THE TEXAS HEROES MUSEUM

The Texas Heroes Museum opened in 2016 in the old jail building in La Grange. It is fully operated by volunteers and offers a variety of military-related exhibits. Key exhibits include:

- The historic 1883 jail building itself, including part of an original jail cell, bunk, washbasin and commode. Sheriffs' memorabilia include badges, handcuffs, a hanging rope, Sheriff Will Loessin's gun holster, Sheriff Jim Flournoy's white hat, photographs and more.
- Tribute exhibits to military veterans from Texas, including Sam Houston, Audie Murphy, Chester Nimitz and Chris Kyle. One display has artifacts from an F-100 fighter pilot who flew 287 combat missions in Vietnam and received a Silver Star and two Distinguished Flying Crosses.
- Bob Lain Memorial Library of more than 1,000 military and Texas history books. Lain, a Marine veteran who lost both legs in a land mine explosion in the Vietnam War, became a longtime history professor at Austin Community College. He donated his 868-book collection to start the library, which is open for on-site research.



Ralph Barrera photos

ADDRESS: 171 S. Main St. La Grange
HOURS: Closed during COVID-19 pandemic. Keep checking Facebook for reopening information.
PHONE: 361-210-7318
ADMISSION: Free. Group tours by arrangement.
SOCIAL MEDIA: <https://www.facebook.com/TexasHeroesMuseum/>

their curiosity and interest,” stated a May 25, 1933, article in the weekly La Grange Journal. Dach required an interpreter to translate the English dialogue. “She remains mute as she sits beside her attorney and regards the proceedings.”

When the verdict came at 9 p.m. on May 25, Dach couldn't understand much besides the word “death.”

She was found guilty and sentenced to be executed. She would have been the first woman in Texas to be put to death in the electric chair at the state penitentiary in Huntsville.

“She received the verdict without a word,” according to the La Grange Journal. “Her face blanched when the word ‘death’ was pronounced, but she made

no effort to speak. She was entirely alone in the courtroom, no relatives were there to comfort her. She was lead (sic) slowly away to her cell, where she gave way to a burst of weeping, but still refused to say anything about the sentence.”

Even though her attorney immediately filed a motion for a new trial, Dach told a jailer, in German, “I will not eat,” according to a media report. “It is no use to live any longer,” she reportedly said. “It is about all over with me, I fear.”

She sought comfort from a German bible. And she reportedly hung the chair in her jail cell from the ceiling to place the “the electric chair out of reach,” the La Grange Journal reported.

News accounts of the day often gave varying ages and first names for Dach. Public records and christening documents show her name inconsistently as Maria, Marrie, Marie and Mary. Conflicting reports varied her age from 34 to 43. Her 1933 death certificate states she was 43.

Officials did not try to force feed Dach. Days before her death on Aug. 23, 1933, “she was unconscious on the cot in her jail cell. A physician watched her closely and then began to treat her for a stomach ailment,” according to an AP story. Dach's three children were reported to be present at the time of their mother's death.

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On her death certificate, the cause of death was “voluntary starvation.”

She weighed 100 pounds.

Dach’s children were raised by their maternal grandmother. The family — and the community — was tight-lipped about the entire ghastly episode. Even today, not everyone in Fayette County feels comfortable talking about the 1933 event.

In her memoir, Dach’s oldest daughter, Polnick, wrote about then-Fayette County Sheriff Will Loessin and deputy Flournoy accompanying the young Dach children to school after their mother’s death: “They both talked to all the kids in school and then they took us in and introduced us to the children and (there was) not a one time that one of the children would mention anything about us.”

That silent community pact kept Mary Dach’s grandchildren from knowing what had happened.

“It was mind-boggling to the entire family” when Polnick revealed the story to her own children in 2001, said her oldest son, Sonny Polnick of Houston, the oldest grandchild of Mary Dach. She decided to open up after a writer sought her out, he said.

Suddenly, he said, it made sense “why people looked at me kind of weird” during childhood when he was introduced as Annie Polnick’s son.

Annie Polnick raised her family in Houston, where she worked for the National Biscuit Co. and volunteered for 13 years at the Harris County Sheriff’s Office to help children in need. It is not known whether Annie Polnick knew that her mother had a similar aspiration to work with law enforcement.

Mary Dach had told the Austin Statesman after her conviction: “I tell myself sometimes, if I get out of my trouble maybe I could get a job at the jail doing some kind of work.”

Sonny Polnick has visited the old jail in La Grange, where just a remnant of a jail cell remains. He said “it was eerie” to see the cell and couldn’t imagine his grandmother “being cooped up in there and starving herself to death.” He wonders whether his grandmother would be convicted if her trial were held in today’s criminal justice system — with modern forensics, a diverse jury, accommoda-



The Mary Dach story made a name for the county’s Chief Deputy Sheriff Jim Flournoy, above right, who provided the details to ‘Famous Detective Cases’ magazine. Beside him in the photo is then-Fayette County Sheriff Will Loessin.

Photo from ‘Famous Detective Cases’ magazine, June 1935

tions for language barriers and the rights afforded today’s criminal suspects.

Although Sonny Polnick never felt his grandmother’s presence in the old jail, others say they have. “I did see her image one Saturday morning,” Chaloupka said. “It was just a fleeting kind of thing for me.” But one of Chaloupka’s colleagues worked in the area where the women’s jail cell had been, on the second floor, and saw a figure watching him one day. “It made the hair stand up

on the back of my neck,” that worker told the Houston Chronicle in 2002.

When unsettling things happened to Chaloupka — such as the sound of heavy chains dropping to the ground behind her chair or a light bulb flying out of its socket toward her — she tried to tell the spirits that she needed to work. After the light bulb incident, “I would sing ‘Amazing Grace’ in the mornings, and it never happened again,” she said. “They got used to me, and I got used to them.”

However, “sometimes the toilet lid would fly up with a loud bang. I think that was Sheriff Jim’s joke,” she said, referring to Flournoy.

The old jail now houses the Texas Heroes Museum, which honors Texas veterans. At least one otherworldly episode has occurred since the museum opened in 2016. A no-nonsense, all-business volunteer was surprised to see a second-floor security camera pick up the image of a large white orb floating in the air. “It was about the size of a basketball,” the volunteer said. “I watched it for about 10 minutes.”

Paranormal activity by definition cannot be explained.

Today, the museum simply displays a visitor information sheet about deaths in the old jail. It concludes: “You’ll need to come visit and decide for yourself if there are any unhappy souls still not at peace in the old jail.” ■



File photo by Sarah Beal

STORIES FROM A CEMETERY

The event is canceled this year, but the stories live on. Every October for 16 years, the Lockhart City Cemetery has been the site of a spooky event, ‘Speaking of the Dead: Night Ramblings in a Texas Cemetery.’ Volunteers wearing period costumes stand by headstones and tell the stories of people buried there. The 2020 event is cancelled due to COVID-19, but you can still get a chill by reading some of those stories on the Caldwell County Historical Commission’s website, bit.ly/2EUtPAB. Want to see the gravesites? The cemetery, 705 Wichita St. in Lockhart, is open to the public every day from 6 a.m. to sunset. Did we mention the haunted old jail built in 1909? The Caldwell County Museum is in that building, at 315 E. Market St., and it is said to have a few ghosts of its own. As of September, it was closed due to COVID-19, but check the historical commission’s website for updates on reopening.