

MURDER BALLADS

As far back as the Middle Ages, the sung or recited murder ballad served to disseminate news about sensational crimes to a largely illiterate populace. By Shakespeare's time, unusually ghastly slayings were quickly translated into broadside, page-long sheets of doggerel that sold for a pittance—the forerunners of modern tabloid newspapers.

Imported to America, the traditional murder ballad, both in its sung and printed forms, flourished well into the 20th century. Many of these “bloody versicles” (as the great Scottish crime historian William Rough-ead called them) described killings of strictly local interest. The popular ballad “Poor Naomi,” for example, is based on the 1807 murder of one Naomi Wise by her lover, John Lewis, in Randolph County, North Carolina. Archival evidence indicates that the real-life Naomi was a young woman who bore three children by three different men before meeting her untimely end. Through a process typical of folk narratives, the untidy facts of the case were assimilated to the sentimental plot pattern that scholars call the “murdered-girl” formula: a tear-jerking tale of a trusting young woman's death at the hands of her cold-hearted seducer.

Though its origins remain a matter of debate, evidence suggests that “Stackalee” sprang from an equally obscure crime. According to scholar Cecil Brown, this famous American murder ballad—a favorite of bluesmen and folksingers who have recorded countless versions, often under the title “Stagolee”—was inspired by the slaying of one William Lyons, shot dead in a St. Louis tavern on Christmas night 1895 by a local pimp named Lee Shelton (aka “Stack Lee”) after the two men got into an altercation involving Shelton's milk-white Stetson hat.

By contrast, “The Murder at Fall River” is a singsong synopsis of one of the most notorious homicides in American history, the savage slaying of Andrew and Abby Borden in Fall River, Massachusetts, on April 4, 1892, a crime attributed to Abby's 32-year-old spinster stepdaughter Lizzie, who, despite her acquittal at trial, has entered into popular mythology as a legendary ax-killer. Unlike the anonymous creators of most murder ballads, the author, Alexander B. Beard, not only adorned his broadside with a pen-and-ink portrait of himself but included his home address in West Manchester, New Hampshire.

Though he never attained the mythic status of Lizzie Borden, Chester Gillette achieved perhaps an even greater distinction, supplying the raw material for one of the masterpieces of 20th-century American fiction. During a trip to an Adirondacks resort in July 1906, Gillette took his pregnant girlfriend, Grace Brown, out in a rowboat which mysteriously overturned. Brown's body was found the next day at the bottom of the lake. His trial for murder became an international sensation and the basis for Theodore Dreiser's 1925 classic, *An American Tragedy*. Gillette, who was electrocuted in March 1908, went to his death asserting his innocence and, as the “The Murder of Grace Brown” suggests, the ultimate truth will always be shrouded in uncertainty.

A different sort of mystery surrounds Belle Gunness, Indiana's infamous “Lady Bluebeard” and one of the few American serial killers of either gender to be immortalized in a murder ballad, although this anonymous production is admittedly more humorous than the starker products of the early folk tradition. After dispatching her first husband with strychnine and collecting on his life insurance policy, the Norwegian-born Gunness used the proceeds to purchase a farm in LaPorte. She promptly remarried but was soon widowed again when her new husband was killed, supposedly by accident, leaving her with another hefty insurance payment. Over the next six years, a string of well-to-do bachelors were lured to her home by matrimonial ads placed in various midwestern newspapers and then vanished without a trace. After a mysterious fire destroyed her farmhouse in 1908 searchers found a dozen butchered male corpses buried around the property, along with the charred remains of Belle's three youngest children and a decapitated female who may or may not have been Gunness herself. For years rumors persisted that she had faked her own death and was still alive and well and engaged in her “favorite occupation,” the “butchering of men.”

Another ballad with a readily identifiable author is “Trail's End,” composed by one of its self-mythologizing subjects, Bonnie Parker, the distaff half of the notorious outlaw couple Bonnie and Clyde. Between 1932 and 1934, Parker and her sociopathic lover Clyde Chestnut Barrow, along with several cohorts, conducted a violent interstate crime spree of bank robbery, burglary, car theft, and murder. Romanticized as Robin Hood-style bandits, the two were shot to death in an ambush set by

Texas Rangers. Their legend would be revived by Arthur Penn's 1967 film *Bonnie and Clyde*.

Poor Naomi

Come all good people, I'd have you draw near,
A sorrowful story you quickly shall hear;
A story I'll tell you about N'omi Wise,
How she was deluded by Lewis's lies.

He promised to marry and use me quite well;
But conduct contrary I sadly must tell,
He promised to meet me at Adams's spring;
He promised me marriage and many fine things.

Still nothing he gave, but yet flattered the case.
He says we'll be married and have no disgrace,
Come get up behind me, we'll go up to town,
And there we'll be married, in union be bound.

I got up behind him and straightway did go
To the banks of Deep river where the water did flow;
He says now Naomi, I'll tell you my mind,
Intend here to drown you and leave you behind.

O pity your infant and spare me my life;
Let me go rejected and be not your wife;
No pity, no pity, this monster did cry;
In Deep river's bottom your body shall lie.

The wretch then did choke her, as we understand,
And threw her in the river below the milldam;
Be it murder or treason, O! what a great crime,
To drown poor Naomi and leave her behind.

Naomi was missing they all did well know,
And hunting for her to the river did go;
And there found her floating on the water so deep,
Which caused all the people to sigh and to weep.

The neighbors were sent for to see the great sight,
While she lay floating all that long night;
So early next morning the inquest was held;
The jury correctly the murder did tell.

Stackalee

Come all you sporty fellows,
And listen unto me,
I will tell to you the awful tale
Of that bad man Stackalee,
That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

The night was dark and stormy,
And the rain came pouring down;
There was nary a police
In that part of town.
That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

It was on this dark and
Cold stormy night
That Billy Lyons and Stackalee
They had that awful fight.
That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

Billy Lyons on the sidewalk
Dropped his razor from his hand;
In front of him a-shootin'
Old Stackalee did stand,
That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

"O Stackalee, O Stackalee,
Please spare my life,
For I have got two babies
And a darling little wife."

That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

"I care not for your babies
Nor your darling little wife;
You dun ruint my Stetson hat,
And I am bound to have your life."

That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

Then he leaned down right close
And put that gun agin Billy's breast,
And fired two shots so close to him
They sot fire to his vest,

That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

Down Walker Street
Old Stackalee did run,
Holding in his right hand
That smoking forty-one,

That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

He run into Ben Scott's saloon
And before the bar did stand,
Saying, "Take my pistol, bar boy,
I dun killed another man."

That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

Ben Scott sent for the police
And they came on the run;
The bar boy up and told them
What old Stackalee dun done,

That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

Says a police to the Sergeant,
"Now what do you think of that!
Old Stackalee shot Billy Lyons
About a damned old hat,

That bad, that bad man Stackalee."

Says the Captain to the police,
"Just keep still as any mouse,
And we will sure catch old Stackalee
At his woman's house,

That bad, that bad man Stackalee."

Two police in the alley
Hiding behind a tree;
Two more out in the front yard
For to catch old Stackalee,

That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

A man run up the alley,
Splashing through the mud;
He run right up against that tree
Where them two police stood—

That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

"Your name is Henry Wells,
But they call you Stackalee;
You are my prisoner;
Come and go with me."

That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

"My name's not Stackalee,
Nor is it Henry Wells;
I am not your prisoner
You go get someone else."

That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

They put the handcuffs on him
 And took him to the jail,
 And there they put him in a cell
 And wouldn't take no bail,
 That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

Mrs. Stackalee,
 When she heard the awful news,
 Was sitting in the bedroom
 A-taking off her shoes.
 That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

She rushed down to the jailhouse
 And fell upon her knees,
 "I'll give ten thousand dollars
 Just to get the jailor's keys."
 That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

Next morning in the jailhouse,
 Old Stackalee in bed,
 A turnkey came and told him
 That Billy Lyons was dead.
 That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

Then they took him into court
 To have him make his plea,
 The judge says, "Are you guilty?"
 "I is," says Stackalee,
 That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

"I cannot sleep,
 Neither can I eat,
 Since I shot poor Billy Lyons
 Down in Walker Street."
 That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

The judge put on the black cap,
 His voice was stern and cold;
 "I sentences you to be hanged—
 The Lord have mercy on your soul."
 That bad, that bad man Stackalee.

Now all you sporty fellows
 That have listened to my tale,
 Do not shoot another man
 Or they'll hang you in the jail,
 Like they did that bad man Stackalee.

The Murder of Grace Brown

The dream of the happy is finished,
 The scores are brought in at last.
 A jury has brought in its verdict,
 The sentence on Gillette is passed.

Two mothers are weeping and praying;
 One praying that justice be done;
 The other is asking for mercy,
 Asking God to save her dear son.

All eyes are turned on the drama,
 A-watching the press night and day,
 A-reading the sweet pleading letters,
 Wondering what Gillette would say.

He is now in State's Auburn dark prison,
 Where he soon will give up his young life,
 Which might have been filled with sweet sunshine
 Had he taken Grace Brown for his wife.

But Cupid was too strong for Gillette,
It was playing too strong with his heart,
For the one that loved him so dearly,
Yet from her he wanted to part.

'Twas on a hot sultry day in the summer,
When the flowers were all aglow,
They started out on their vacation,
For the lakes and the mountains to roam.

Did she think as she gathered those flowers
That grew on the shores of the lake,
That the hand that plucked those sweet lilies
Her own sweet life they would take?

They were seen on the clear crystal waters
Of the beautiful Big Moose lake,
And nobody thought he'd be guilty,
Of the life of that poor girl to take.

It happened along in the evening,
Just at the close of the day,
With the one that had loved him so dearly
They drifted along on South Bay.

They were out of the view of the people,
Where no one could hear her last call.
And nobody knows how it happened,
But Gillette and God knows it all.

Belle Guinness

Belle Guinness was a lady fair,
In Indiana State.
She weighed about three hundred pounds,
And that is quite some weight.

That she was stronger than a man
Her neighbors all did own;
She butchered hogs right easily,
And did it all alone.

But hogs were just a side line,
She indulged in now and then;
Her favorite occupation
Was a-butchering of men.

To keep her cleaver busy
Belle would run an ad,
And men would come a-scurrying
With all the cash they had.

Now some say Belle killed only ten,
And some say forty-two;
It was hard to tell exactly,
But there were quite a few.

The bones were dug up in her yard,
Some parts never came to light,
And Belle, herself, could not be found
To set the tally right.

And where Belle is now no one knows,
But my advice is fair:
If a widow advertises
For a man with cash, beware!

The Murder at Fall River

The crimes we read of every day
Cause many hearts to shiver;
But few surpass in magnitude
The murder at Fall River.

Now Andrew Borden was a man
 Of wealth and great renown.
 Quite unexpectedly did fall
 The blow that struck him down.

Upon the morn of August fourth,
 In eighteen ninety two
 The neighbors heard three piercing screams
 That thrilled them through and through.

They hastened to the Borden home,
 Oh! what did they find there?
 Cries of affright and deep alarm
 Broke on the morning air.

The sight they saw on entering in
 Filled each with wild dismay.
 There weltering in his own life blood,
 Poor Mr. Borden lay.

His head was by a hatchet hacked
 Which took away his life,
 And in her room in the same plight
 They also found his wife.

Investigations soon began
 To probe that awful crime.
 It still remains a mystery
 Up to the present time.

Suspicion fell on different ones
 Amidst excitement wild;
 Till they arrested Lizzie B.
 The victims' youngest child.

They placed her in the prison walls
 To let the court decide
 If she was guilty of that act
 The crime of parricide.

No evidence could her convict
 The jury did agree
 That it was all by far too weak
 So Lizzie was set free.

Now I have briefly told this tale
 Some points I have left out;
 Up to this day in many minds
 The matter is in doubt.

This much I'll say to one and all
 Let's pray with all our might;
 Whoever did that awful deed
 That God will bring to light.

Trail's End

You've read the story of Jesse James,
 Of how he lived and died;
 If you still are in need of something to read,
 Here's the story of Bonnie and Clyde.

Now Bonnie and Clyde are the Barrow gang,
 I'm sure you all have read
 How they rob and steal and how those who squeal
 Are usually found dying or dead.

There are lots of untruths to their write-ups,
 They are not so merciless as that;
 And they fight because they hate all the laws,
 The stool pigeons, spotters and rats.

They class them as cold-blooded killers,
 They say they are heartless and mean;
 But I say this with pride that I once knew Clyde
 When he was honest and upright and clean.

But the law pestered them, fooled around
 And kept locking him up in a cell;
 Till he said to me, 'I will never be free,
 So I'll meet a few of them in hell.'

This road was so dimly lighted,
 There was no highway signs for to guide,
 But they made up their minds if the roads were all blind,
 They wouldn't give up till they died.

The road it gets dimmer and dimmer,
 Sometimes you can hardly see;
 Still it's fight, man to man, and do all that you can,
 For they know they can never be free.

If they try to act like citizens,
 And rent them a nice little flat,
 About a third of the night they're invited to fight
 By a sub-machine gun's rat-a-tat.

If a policeman is killed down in Dallas,
 And they have no clues for a guide,
 If they can't find a friend they just wipe the slate clean
 And hang it on Bonnie and Clyde.

Two crimes have been done in America,
 Not accredited to the Barrow mob,
 For they had no hand in the kidnapping demand
 Or the Kansas City depot job.

A newsboy once said to his buddy,
 'I wish that old Clyde would get jumped;
 In this awful hard times we might make a few dimes,
 If five or six outlaws got bumped.'

The police haven't got the report yet,
 Clyde sent out a wireless today,
 Saying, 'We have a peace flag of white we stretch out at night,
 We have joined the NRA.'

They don't think they are too tough and desperate,
 They know that the law always wins;
 They've been shot at before, but they do not ignore
 That death is the wages of sin.

From heartbreaks some people have suffered,
 From weariness some people have died,
 But take it all in all, our troubles are small,
 Till we get like Bonnie and Clyde.

Some day they will go down together,
 And they will bury them side by side.
 For a few it means grief, for the law it's relief,
 But it's death to Bonnie and Clyde.