

Interview with Barbara Lunsford, author of “Killer for Hire”

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Barbara Lunsford, who is here to talk about her new book “Killer for Hire: The Final Chapter of the Alabama Twins Murder Case.”

Barbara Lunsford was introduced to the Alabama twins murder case in 1997. She became intrigued with the case because, even though both twins were tried with the same circumstantial evidence and the testimony of one derelict conman, one twin was convicted and the other acquitted. Convinced the convicted twin was innocent, Barbara setup an extensive website seeking new evidence to help the incarcerated twin which resulted in a witness coming forward, but the witness was betrayed by the antics of the Three Stooges, a backwoods southern lawyer, a dimwitted college professor and a two-bit PI. This incidence inspired “Killer-for-Hire - The Final Chapter of the Alabama Twins Murder Case.”

Tyler: Thank you, Barbara, for joining me today. To begin, will you tell us a little bit about the background of the real life crime your book is based on?

Barbara: On May 22, 1992, Dr. Jack Wilson, a prominent Huntsville, Alabama citizen was found brutally beaten and stabbed to death in the upstairs hallway of his mansion. Betty Wilson, his wife, and Peggy Lowe, her fraternal twin sister, were arrested and tried for supposedly hiring James White, an alcoholic, drug addict, handy man, to kill Betty’s husband for the sum of \$5,000 with \$2,500 down and \$2,500 upon completion. The DA’s office and homicide investigators had no real evidence against the twins so they offered White a deal he couldn’t refuse. If he would help them convict the twins of capital murder, he could avoid going to the electric chair and receive a life sentence with a chance of parole and be out of prison in seven years. White agreed. He didn’t want to have a seat in Yellow Mama. He gave seven different recorded statements with each one becoming progressively more detailed. It was obvious that the homicide investigator was helping White “remember” how this horrendous murder came about.

Betty was tried first. Her flamboyant reputation attracted the national news media. Bobbie Lee Cook, the infamous lawyer from Atlanta, was her lead attorney. His expertise was discrediting witnesses of James White’s caliber. Unfortunately, he had given no consideration to Betty’s infidelities especially with several black men. She was tried in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where the KKK was alive and well. When the prosecution tossed in the racist card by calling one of her black lovers to testify about having an affair with her, nothing more nothing less, the jury heard nothing else. She was guilty. She was sentenced to life in prison with no chance of parole. Betty has said, “I think I was convicted for having an affair with a black man. I was convicted for being a rich bitch.”

Peggy was tried several months later. Peggy was a church-going-do-gooder. She was an elementary school teacher and lead singer in the church choir. She and her husband were always willing to lend a helping hand to the less fortunate including James White. This type characterization did not attract the news media. In fact, unlike DA Jimmy Fry who scrambled to prosecute Betty in hopes of climbing the political ladder, none were to be found to prosecute Peggy including Fry. The state had to provide the prosecuting attorney, Assistant Attorney General Donald Valeska.

In spite of Peggy’s saintly character, her defense had to prove both of the twins were innocent. Peggy’s lawyers did an excellent job in bringing out the truth and proved both sisters were innocent. After the jury deliberated only two hours, they found Peggy not guilty.

After James White testified at both trials, he was sentenced to life in prison with the possibility of parole.

James White has recanted his trial testimony several times. He has stated that neither sister hired him to kill Betty's husband and that he did not kill her husband. The first time he recanted, the night before he was to appear in court, he received a visit from Fry who told him that if he recanted he would be guilty of perjury and go to the electric chair. White took the 5th the next day in court.

There have been numerous TV shows regarding Betty's unjust incarceration: the Medical Detectives, Inside Edition, The Leeza Show, and City Confidential, but these shows only provided exposure to her innocence. None of these shows provided any new evidence to get Betty a new trial. This happened when Dennis Johnson, an ex-Marine and former undercover agent for the government contacted me after he saw White's mug shot on the website I had created for Betty. He could prove that James White received an advance of \$2,500 to steal a car, a Mercedes that belonged to Betty Wilson, and \$2,500 upon delivery. He could also prove that White had three accomplices with him the night of the murder and that there was no contract made to kill anyone. But, he was betrayed.

Tyler: Barbara, what made you decide to tell Betty's story in your book?

Barbara: After spending a decade along with others trying to get some help for Betty only to have the best chance she had ever had come crashing down because of the antics of the Three Stooges, a backwoods southern lawyer, a dimwitted college professor and two bit PI, I felt that this was a story that needed to be told.

Tyler: How did you first hear about the case, and what about it intrigued you enough to devote so much time to it?

Barbara: In 1997, a dear friend of mine, Bobbie Greer, was telling me about a book she had read about twin sisters, Betty Wilson and Peggy Lowe, who were tried for supposedly hiring this handy man to kill Betty's wealthy husband. Betty, the alcoholic, foul-mouthed, adulterous twin was convicted and the saintly Peggy was acquitted. I found this to be an interesting scenario, good versus evil.

Bobbie had been corresponding with Betty for about two years, and she and a number of other supporters including Peggy were involved in a writing campaign trying to attract some media attention regarding Betty's innocence. She asked me if I would be interested in helping. At first I was reluctant but Bobbie was persistent, so I bought a copy of the book, *By Two by Two* by Jim Schutze. I read it in one sitting. The author attended both trials. After attending Betty's trial he thought the twins were guilty but halfway through Peggy's trial he realized both of them were unquestionably innocent.

After reading the book, I was absolutely appalled at the injustice that had occurred in this case. If one twin were guilty, the other one should have been guilty. If one were innocent, the other should have been innocent. How could this happen? There was no logic here whatsoever. Being somewhat a crusader against injustice I was hooked. I started corresponding with Betty and joined the writing campaign.

Tyler: I understand the two sisters, Betty and Peggy, were both tried, and Betty went to prison, but Peggy was acquitted. Why was Peggy found not guilty?

Barbara: Peggy was found not guilty not only because of her saintly character but because of good lawyering. Betty's defense relied on the State's forensic expert. Peggy's lead attorney, David Johnson, hired an outside forensic pathologist, Dr. Kris Sperry, to examine the crime scene evidence. Dr. Sperry concluded from his examination that Dr. Wilson was not killed in the hallway of his home due to the lack of virtually no blood splatter and missing pints of the doctor's blood. He surmised that the doctor was killed elsewhere by two or more persons and brought back to the Wilson home and "planted" in the upstairs hallway where he was found.

Tyler: Will you tell us more about the role of White, the believed hired killer, in the conviction of Betty? Where is this man today?

Barbara: White's role in convicting Betty was that of a desperate man. He was coerced by the investigating officers who were coerced by the district attorney's office to close this high profile case so the district attorney could get elected to his appointed position at the expense of Betty Wilson. White was promised parole in seven years. After eleven years, he had his first parole hearing, which was denied. He is currently incarcerated at the Hamilton Aged & Infirm Center in Hamilton, AL. His next hearing will be in 2009.

Tyler: Betty had hopes of being acquitted, but it fell through. Will you tell us more about this situation?

Barbara: When Dennis Johnson came along eleven years after Betty's unjust incarceration, she had a very good chance of getting another hearing. With the information Dennis had provided, she could have been a free woman today. Dennis had given a lengthy deposition regarding what he knew about the night of the murder but he did not know the legal names of White's accomplices. He only knew them by their street names. Betty's backwoods southern lawyer felt he needed to include these names plus a few more details in the petition so he sent a two-bit PI down to Florida where Dennis lived to get him to sign an affidavit that the PI had prepared. Dennis refused to sign the affidavit because it contradicted what he had given in his deposition. The PI, wanting to get his pay of \$5,000, forged Dennis's signature on the affidavit and returned it to Betty's lawyer, who filed it along with the petition and Dennis's deposition. When Dennis found out that the phony forged affidavit had been filed, he contacted Betty's lawyer and told him he never signed any affidavit. Her lawyer promised that he would get the matter corrected but never did.

The conflicts between this "affidavit" and Dennis's deposition made it appear that Dennis was involved in the murder and could face conspiracy murder charges if he testified at a hearing. The bottom line was the stooges were apparently trying to sit Dennis up to take the fall so they could get Betty out of prison. Dennis refused to testify. The judge denied her a hearing because of the severe discrepancies between Dennis's deposition and the phony forged affidavit.

Tyler: Will you tell us more about Betty's relationship with a black man and how the jury could have used this relationship as evidence against her? Did they really think adultery was evidence enough that a woman would want to kill her husband? Is justice in Alabama that backward that race can still affect justice?

Barbara: You have obviously never lived in the South, especially Alabama. Even to this day black people are referred to as niggers in some southern states. According to Dennis Johnson, Betty's backwoods southern lawyer used this term frequently. The KKK is alive and well. It just uses a different name, "The Patriots."

The Tuscaloosa jury wouldn't have thought that if Betty, a married white woman, had slept with a white man, that was evidence enough to convict her of wanting her husband killed, but a white woman sleeping with a black man in Alabama is a death sentence crime.

Yes, justice in Alabama is racist. It may have improved some in the last fifteen years but racial prejudice still exists in the South.

Tyler: Where is Betty today and what hope is there for her release in the future?

Barbara: Betty is still in Tutwiler Prison in Wetumpka, Alabama. The latter part of last year a young lawyer fresh out of law school took on her case pro bono. He put together a petition based on some violations of Betty's amendment rights including being sexually coerced by one of her trial lawyers. The judge denied the petition. Dennis Johnson was her last chance. Short of a tremendous miracle, Betty Wilson will die in prison.

Tyler: What do you hope "*Killer-for-Hire - The Final Chapter of the Alabama Twins Murder Case*" will do for Betty's case, maybe bring another witness forward?

Barbara: I spent years building the original Wilson website seeking new evidence to help her. When that evidence materialized with Dennis Johnson coming forward, it was squashed. There are other people who know that Betty is innocent, but there would be a one-in-a-million chance that one of them would read this book and be so moved to come forward and tell the truth. And, if they did, what would be the chances of them also being squashed?

I believe there are many innocent people in prison because of ambitious district attorneys and no matter how many legitimate appeals are filed with concrete evidence that the "convicted" is innocent, the state will do anything in its power to keep that innocent person in prison to avoid a multi-million dollar lawsuit for wrongful conviction. As James White put it, "It's a catch 22 situation."

Perhaps, if a really ingenious criminal lawyer read this book and was willing to take this case on pro bono and had unlimited funds to investigate this case thoroughly, he/she might be able to help Betty but I do not see that happening. At this time, I don't believe that the truth will ever be known about who really killed Dr. Wilson and why.

Tyler: Will you tell us about Betty's husband, the murder victim, Dr. Jack Wilson? What was he like, what was their marriage like, and what motivation might she have had to hire a killer?

Barbara: Jack was very well liked especially by his patients. He was devoted to his practice. He loved to clown around. He had a closet full of costumes that he would put on to entertain his grandchildren. On occasion he would embarrass Betty by taking off his shoes and socks in a restaurant to clean the jam between his toes. He would do things like that to get a rise out of Betty.

Their marriage was a little rocky when Betty was drinking. She literally made Jack's life miserable. One day he had had enough and told her he was going to leave her if she didn't do something about her drinking. She immediately joined AA and has remained sober to this day. Jack, also, had Crohn's disease, which eventually led to his having a colostomy that required him to wear an ostomy bag. His desire for sex gradually dwindled to none at all. Betty loved having sex. She was addicted to it. Jack told her to do what she had to do; it was only sex. They had an understanding with each other. She could do her thing and he would do his.

Betty had absolutely no motive to have her husband killed. If she had wanted him dead, she could have easily done it herself. Dr. Wilson's health was declining. He had to have his medication intravenously and would allow no one but Betty to do it. Betty was a nurse by trade and could have easily given him a shot of something to kill him and no one would have been the wiser. The prosecution portrayed her as a vile and greedy woman who wanted all her husband's money and wanted it now. A life insurance policy for one million dollars on Jack was found on the night stand next to Betty's bed. All it needed was her signature and social security number. She had forgotten to sign it.

No, Betty had no motive to kill or have Jack killed but his ex-wife and her son did.

Tyler: It sounds like Betty could have easily killed her husband and made it look like a natural death if she had a nurse's background. There would be no reason for a brutal murder that obviously looked like a murder. How long did Betty care for her husband once he became ill?

Barbara: Prior to their marriage, Betty had been offered a job in Atlanta as an administrator setting up dialysis clinics in the South. By this time, she was serious about Jack and really didn't want to go, but he persuaded her that she should. Their romance continued long-distance, and in alternating visits to and from Atlanta and Huntsville.

When Betty was up for a promotion, Jack called her. The Crohn's disease that he had been suffering from had reached a critical point. He was going to have to undergo a colostomy. Jack proposed to her that night. She quit her job, returned to Huntsville, and they were married. They had been married fourteen years when Jack was murdered.

Tyler: Tell me about his ex-wife and son? What motive did they have, and were they tried as suspects?

Barbara: Dr. Wilson's ex-wife, Julia Wilson, and her son Perry, who was adopted by Dr. Wilson, were disinherited from the doctor's six million dollar estate. Dr. Wilson's two sons by Julia and Betty's three sons from a previous marriage were to share equally in approximately one-half of the estate. Julia was very jealous of the lifestyle that the doctor had provided Betty. She had to work at two part-time jobs just to pay the bills. Perry and the doctor's two other sons resented the doctor's favoritism to Betty's sons. Perry was a bisexual drug addict and had been physically violent with the doctor on occasion. The injuries that the doctor sustained appeared to be inflicted out of rage and vengeance. According to two homicide investigators the doctor was killed homosexual style.

Dr. Wilson fought with his attackers. On the night of Dr. Wilson's murder, Perry was observed by the Huntsville Police Department as having abrasions on his face and hands which he said were caused from an attack by some black guys who were attempting to rob him. James White, the convicted killer, had no abrasions. Perry had some of his friends provide him with an alibi the night of the murder so the HPD didn't investigate further.

Shortly after the doctor's death, Julie and her two sons from the marriage filed three civil suits against the Wilson estate. Could jealousy and money have been their motives? I think so.

Tyler: Did you consider writing the story as fiction rather than non-fiction? Why did you choose to write it as non-fiction?

Barbara: I had never given this matter any thought. When I first learned about this case, I was left with the impression that this story was very much like science fiction. It is unbelievable. That is what attracted me to it. I am a Sci-fi fan.

Tyler: Will you tell us about the research that you did in writing this book?

Barbara: I have spent years researching information regarding this case. I have spent a great deal of money obtaining court records. I have literally “studied” both trial transcripts which are over 4,000 pages and made carefully typed notes of all the testimony. I spent months on end searching the Internet for newspaper articles or anything related to this case. I have a collection of over 4,000 emails regarding this case and many letters from Betty discussing this case with her. I have read the other two books written about this case. I spent several years searching for the CBS TV movie made about this case and finally found a copy of it in the UK. After I viewed it, I understood why it was so hard to find. It was less than a third rate movie and not very factual. I have copies of all but one of the TV shows about the Wilson case and have viewed them several times. I even recorded the audio of two of the shows and transcribed them.

Tyler: What did you find to be the most difficult part of writing “Killer for Hire”?

Barbara: The research and putting it all together.

Tyler: Barbara, have you written any other books, and will you tell us about them?

Barbara: At this time, I have no plans to write another book, but if I do it will be Dennis Johnson’s story. He is probably the most interesting character I have ever met. The only writing I am currently doing is content for my new website, MysteryCrimeScene.com which, incidentally, was inspired by the Wilson case.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, Barbara. Before we go, will you tell us about your website and what additional information may be found there?

Barbara: Until May of 2006, I had an extensive Wilson website. It had both trial transcripts, White’s recantation, documents from one of her many appeals, transcripts of two television shows, crime scene photos, photos of those involved in the case, case background and much more. I removed this portion of the website and replaced it with brief commentary about the case and all the documentation related to the Three Stooges’ bungling of Betty’s last chance of freedom. It has the petition, Dennis’s deposition, the phony forged affidavit, a handwriting expert’s report on the forged signatures, the state’s answer and the judge’s order denying her hearing.

I have been giving some consideration to re-uploading the original site but believe it will be a waste of time because as the title of my book says this is “The Final Chapter of the Alabama Twins Murder Case.”

Besides mysterycrimescene.com, readers can also purchase copies of “Killer for Hire” at www.hankford.com/wilson

Tyler: Thank you, Barbara. Betty is fortunate to have you so interested in her story. I hope “Killer for Hire” helps to bring about justice for her.

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