

Crime in Cleveland

Velma West: The Modern Murderess



On March 5, 1928, a small and fragile-looking young woman of just 21 years took the stand in a Painesville courtroom and pled guilty to the brutal murder of her husband. This brought an end to the sensational story of Velma West, dubbed by the local newspapers as “the Modern Murderess.”

Velma West was born Velma Van Woert in 1906 and grew up in Cleveland. In 1926, she married Edward “Ed” West and moved to his home in Perry. Right away, it

became clear that life in the small town would be quite an adjustment for Velma, who was known to love the city and its vibrant nightlife.

As newspapers would report later, the West home quickly became unharmonious, due in part to the couple’s differing tastes. It did not take long for the Perry community to ostracize Velma, whose flapper style and affinity for “kicks and thrills” they found alienating and distasteful. To compensate for the lack of social engagements in Perry, the couple often drove to Cleveland to take in its nightlife and socialize with Velma’s old friends. Although they made this trip three or four times each week, Velma was still left wanting more.

Her husband, meanwhile, wanted less. According to her attorney, it was during this time that Edward began to suffer from depressive episodes and often behaved cruelly to his wife. He also began to ask Velma if they could stay home more often, which led to frequent arguments.

The breaking point finally came on December 6, 1927. Velma’s friend had invited her to a bridge party in Cleveland a few days prior, a plan to which Edward allegedly agreed. However, when the time came to leave for the city, he had apparently changed his mind, telling his wife, “I won’t have you running with that crowd.” The headstrong Velma balked and continued

dressing to go out as the argument grew increasingly heated. Finally, in a fit of rage, Edward struck his wife. This would prove to be his fatal mistake.

“I saw red,” Velma later admitted. She shouted at her husband that she was going to leave and never return, to which Edward allegedly responded that he would kill her before letting her leave.

She then picked up a hammer that was lying nearby and warned Edward not to come any closer. When he did, she struck. He made several attempts to stand up, but Velma continued to strike him with the hammer until he “lay quiet.” Believing him to simply be unconscious, she then bound his hands and feet with some nearby cord, tied a handkerchief over his mouth, and left him lying in their bedroom.

After burning her blood-soaked dress, Velma set out for Cleveland, where she attended the bridge party after all.



The following day, she and her mother went Christmas shopping, where she purchased a present for her husband. By the time they returned home, the police were waiting for her. Initially, they did not consider that Velma was to blame for her husband’s murder, believing her to be too small to overpower him. However, just a few hours after the police brought her in for questioning, Velma confessed.

She was initially charged with first-degree murder, and the story began to make headlines across the country. The media quickly became fascinated with this pretty young flapper, who seemed to embody all the traits of a modern young “city

girl,” and their interest was compounded by the fact that the crime did not seem to match the perpetrator. How could this “fluffy blonde-headed bride”

have committed such a heinous act? The question was not *if* she had done it, but *why*.

Possible motives presented by the newspapers initially included physical abuse and insanity. However, as alleged “love letters” between Velma and her female friend (incidentally, the one who had hosted the bridge party on that fateful night) began to emerge, the media also began to speculate that she was carrying on an affair that, at the time, was considered highly scandalous.



Photo credit: Cleveland State University Special Collections.

Ultimately, Velma’s true motive was never determined in a court of law. Before the case could go to trial, she pled guilty to murder in the second degree and was sentenced to life in prison at the Ohio Reformatory for Women in Marysville.

Although she expressed hope that she would be paroled, she was denied parole in 1934. Having lost hope of ever being freed, she escaped with three other prisoners in 1939 and made it as far as Dallas before being returned to Marysville. “I needed to have one last adventure in this dull life of mine,” she said of her escape.

Velma lived another 20 years behind bars before her death on October 10, 1959. She was 53 years old.