

# Crime in Cleveland

## The Curious Case of Dr. Sam Sheppard



*Photo credit: Cleveland State University  
Special Collections.*

At 5:40am on July 4, 1954, Dr. Samuel “Sam” Sheppard placed a frantic call to his neighbor in Bay Village, telling him to come over right away because an intruder had brutally attacked him and his wife, Marilyn, as they slept. According to Sheppard, he had been sleeping in the living room and awoke to his wife’s cries coming from the bedroom. When he confronted the attacker, he was knocked unconscious for a short time before waking up to find the person downstairs. This time, he chased the intruder out the door of his lakefront home and onto the beach, where he was once again knocked unconscious. He awoke to find no sign of the intruder and

returned to his home to find that Marilyn had been bludgeoned to death.

Sheppard was arrested on July 30, 1954. The investigation and his subsequent trial, which began on October 18, became a media sensation, with publications such as the *Cleveland Press* calling for Sheppard’s imprisonment. During the trial, the prosecution made its case based on new evidence that Sheppard had been involved in an extramarital affair, claiming that as his motive for murdering his wife. Further, they argued that the suspicious circumstances of the crime scene – including the fact that Sheppard’s shirt was missing and that there was no sand in his hair despite claiming to have been knocked unconscious on the beach – suggested that Sheppard had staged the area to look like a home invasion.

Countering this argument, Sheppard’s attorney, William Corrigan, presented the report made by a neurosurgeon who examined Sheppard after the attack. This report demonstrated that Sheppard had sustained severe injuries, including a cervical concussion, on the night of his wife’s murder. Corrigan also reminded the jury that, although there was a good deal of blood at the crime scene, there was only one blood stain on the trousers that Sheppard had been wearing. Curiously, when the county coroner testified that one of the blood imprints indicated the

use of a surgical instrument, Sheppard's lawyer was denied access to the evidence and did not push the issue.



The jury deliberated for four days, and on December 21, 1954, Sheppard was found guilty of second-degree murder. For the next six years, Sheppard's appeals were rejected.

On July 15, 1964, Sheppard's new chief counsel F. Lee Bailey was granted a writ of habeas corpus. The district court judge responsible for this decision claimed that the original trial was a "mockery of justice," and the state was ordered to release Sheppard on bond. The State of Ohio appealed the ruling, and Bailey in turn appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. On June 6, 1966, the Supreme Court struck down the murder conviction in an 8-1 vote. Their chief reasons included the media frenzy that had surrounded the trial and Judge Edward J. Blythin's refusal to sequester the jury.

In early November of 1966, Sheppard's retrial opened. During this trial, the county coroner admitted that the surgical murder weapon to which he had alluded in the first trial had never been found. On November 16, after a 12-hour deliberation, the jury determined that Sam Sheppard was not guilty.



*Photo credit: Cleveland Plain Dealer.*

After his release, Sheppard returned to the medical profession and was granted surgical privileges at the Youngstown Osteopathic Hospital in 1968.

Unfortunately, Sheppard's ordeal had worn heavily on his mental health, and he developed a dependence on alcohol that negatively affected his surgical skills. Within a few months, Sheppard had made at least two fatal errors during surgery, and he ultimately resigned after the families filed wrongful death lawsuits against the hospital.

In August of 1969, Sheppard made his debut in the wrestling ring, having trained with professional wrestler George Strickland, who was a close friend during this time. He competed in over 40 matches under the curious name of "Killer" Sam Sheppard between the summer of 1969 and spring of 1970.

Sam Sheppard never recovered from his struggle with alcoholism and was found dead in his Columbus home on April 6, 1970.

Following Sheppard's death, friends and surviving relatives worked tirelessly to clear his reputation, culminating in a 1999 civil trial for wrongful imprisonment. During this time, new evidence emerged that Richard Eberling, who had worked as a handyman at the Sheppard home, could have been responsible for the murder. For years, Eberling had been associated with burglaries and mysterious deaths of women in the area. He had been given a polygraph test as part of the original investigation, but he was not pursued as a suspect when the examiner concluded that he had not shown deception in his answers. However, experts later determined that the findings were inconclusive and that there was a chance Eberling's responses were deceptive. Acquaintances of his also claimed that he had confessed to the murder of Marilyn Sheppard in conversations with them.

Ultimately, Eberling died in 1998 while serving a life sentence for the murder of Ethel May Durkin of Lakewood, and the matter was not pursued further.

On April 12, 2000, the jury unanimously ruled that the case for wrongful imprisonment was insufficient, and in August of 2002, the Supreme Court of Ohio declined to review the decision on the grounds that the statute of limitations had expired. To this day, the identity of Marilyn Sheppard's murderer remains inconclusive.

