

**DARK**

*Love, Murder, and Revenge in 1930s' Kentucky*

**HIGHWAY**

**ANN DANGELO**

This is a work of nonfiction. It is based on years of meticulous research that includes the close examination of trial transcripts, attorneys' letters, newspaper accounts, and other documentation, as well as interviews with Taylor and Denhardt family members. The observations and conclusions expressed in this volume are the author's alone.

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*This book is dedicated to Dr. Elissa May Plattner,  
and to my daughters Kelly and Linton.*

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# INTRODUCTION

In the final months of 1936 and throughout most of 1937, Kentuckians were riveted by a tragic drama playing out in three adjoining Kentucky counties: Henry, Oldham, and Shelby. The death of an Oldham County woman, Verna Garr Taylor, and the subsequent murder trial of her fiancé, Kentucky politician and brigadier general Henry Denhardt, mesmerized the reading public, both locally and on a national scale.

The small-town tale of a mysterious death had all the scandalous and lurid elements needed to capture the imagination of the 1930s' reading public—a beautiful woman brutally shot to death, a powerful politician suspected of her murder, and a sensational trial to determine his guilt or innocence. The story made its debut in the *New York Times* on November 8, 1936, two days after Verna Taylor's death. More coverage quickly appeared in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life* magazines. Daily newspapers from coast to coast reported the latest news on the murder case for nearly a year. For quiet Kentucky, rarely in the spotlight, the continuous national news coverage over such a long time was unprecedented. Not since 1925, when Floyd Collins was trapped in a cave, had a Kentucky story merited such protracted national attention. The attempts to save Collins, a trapped spelunker, captured the nation's imagination for nearly three weeks in 1925. Ironically, General Henry Denhardt was a major player in that tragedy, too.

In 1936, Kentucky was a rural, farming state that depended on growing tobacco, producing excellent bourbon, and breeding a yearly crop of fine thoroughbred racehorses. Its people were

grounded in traditional values, strong family ties, and religion. Time generally passed with few sensational events that the world outside the state would consider newsworthy. But the latter part of 1936—and the year 1937—would be different.

During the murder trial of Denhardt and the later trial of the Garr brothers, Kentucky was on center stage, and its rural way of life and its citizens were under intense scrutiny. The often-predatory “big city” reporters, looking for a scandalous and titillating news story, descended on rural Kentucky with the fervor of bloodhounds. The reporters brought with them preconceived ideas of what the state and its citizens were like, and they incorporated those unflattering notions into the articles they wrote. Even the venerable brick courthouse in New Castle received criticism. The *Associated Press* described it as “weather rotted” and “worn,” while *Newsweek* reported that chunks of the ceiling fell during Denhardt’s trial, but the large crowd in attendance did not move.<sup>1</sup> The locals were widely portrayed as simple country people, farmers and their wives who left the spring plowing and planting to witness the trial of a former lieutenant governor accused of murder. But as it turned out, the stereotypes they published of gun-toting citizens and frontier retribution were not so far removed from the truth. In the case of Henry Denhardt, people eventually discovered that while they outwardly considered themselves law-abiding with a belief in legal justice for the accused, they also quietly supported taking the law into their own hands if they believed it was justified.

On the morning of November 6, 1936—when Brigadier General Henry Denhardt and Verna Garr Taylor left LaGrange on a day trip—Denhardt was a controversial political figure, but his legacy was fairly secure. By the time he closed the door of his home behind him that night, the reputation and persona he had spent a lifetime creating had vanished. After Taylor’s death, Denhardt was popularly viewed as a black-hearted villain. If he

was ever kind, loving, or considerate, there is no mention of it anywhere. Almost overnight, he had become the man Kentuckians loved to hate, and the newspapers of the time obliged by painting him in the worst possible light. William Shakespeare could have penned his phrase from *Julius Caesar* for Henry Denhardt: “The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.”<sup>2</sup> If Henry Denhardt had any good deeds associated with his name, they were forgotten after the death of Verna Taylor. Today he is not remembered as a man with serious aspirations to the governorship of Kentucky. If he is remembered at all, it is for the final disastrous year of his life.

I am often asked how I became interested in this tragic story. I remember reading with great interest a local magazine article in 2007 marking the seventieth year of Denhardt’s murder. I must have stored it away in my mind because a couple of years later, it came rushing back with a vengeance. In September 2009, another prominent Kentucky politician named Steve Nunn was accused of murdering his ex-fiancée. That tragedy triggered my memory of the previous murder; I suddenly had to know more about what happened in 1936. The story of Verna Garr Taylor and Henry Denhardt gripped me and held me in its clutches as tightly as it did people in the 1930s. I found the story compelling and haunting; its issues of domestic violence, justice, and revenge were universal and just as important today as they were then.

In the past, the focus of the story had been on the downfall of the distinguished General Denhardt. But I discovered that Verna Garr Taylor was just as remarkable a person as Denhardt. She did not run for public office or command troops in a world war as Denhardt had done, but she was a very unusual woman for the 1930s. Her abilities as a businesswoman during the worst economic time in American history have largely been overlooked. At the time, society did not routinely recognize the ability of a woman to operate a successful business, support her household,



and raise children by herself as a widow. In news coverage, Verna Taylor became merely the victim whose death led to Denhardt's fall. Yet both Verna Garr Taylor and Henry Denhardt were remarkable, unusual people.

In writing this book, I learned firsthand how violent crime can continue to haunt a family for generations. Some of Verna Taylor's direct descendants were hesitant to speak of their family's tragedy. After meeting them, I recognized in their attitudes my own mother and grandmother, women who did not speak about family problems and took most of their secrets to the grave. Typical Kentuckians—proud and private—Verna's family members remain anonymous sources for this book. There is no doubt that the murder of Verna Garr Taylor and the spectacular fallout from her death changed the dynamic of her family forever.

Descendants of the Denhardt family were more matter-of-fact. Denhardt left no children to contend with his mixed legacy, so there are only collateral descendants. They were delightful to interview, and for them 1937 was a long time ago. While Denhardt's family remains uncertain of his guilt or innocence, the shock waves from his trial and ignominious death were felt throughout his immediate and extended family. Before 1936, Denhardt was a source of family pride, a war hero and successful politician. After his death, he became the relative that no one wanted to discuss. He died a disgraceful death for someone who had once played an important role in Kentucky politics. His final self-destructive year is a tragedy that Aeschylus, Euripides, or Shakespeare would recognize. I have done my best to be fair to the general, even when it was hard.

If the crime had occurred today, the case would probably have been solved using modern forensics and crime scene investigation techniques. The general, of course, would have been referred to as the "alleged murderer." He was at the scene with the victim and

had a motive. As attorney Ralph Gilbert said during his defense of the Garr brothers, “Whether or not General Denhardt killed their sister in cold blood, the facts are she was in his presence when she came to a horrible death.”<sup>3</sup>

In researching this book, I found that most people accept the prosecution’s version of events—Verna spurned Denhardt and he chased her down a dark highway and shot her. For months, I tried to make the facts fit the theory. Denhardt was probably guilty, but I do not think it happened in the way we have been led to believe.

After so many years, the physical evidence and exhibits from Denhardt’s April 1937 trial have disappeared. Somewhere out there is a .45 caliber revolver that once belonged to Henry Denhardt. I was able to handle an exact replica of the revolver, thanks to staff at the Kentucky Military History Museum. The 1917 officer’s revolver is heavy and unwieldy, measuring a foot in length from the grip to the end of the steel barrel. It is hardly a weapon that a woman could turn on herself with one hand, as Denhardt claimed Verna had done.

The most important items still in existence from 1936 and 1937 are the court transcripts. Without them, I would have been left with only the newspaper accounts, which were sometimes inaccurate and exaggerated.

When I could not locate a transcript from the murder trial of the Garr brothers, I used testimony from their examining trial, along with newspaper accounts to recreate key elements of the murder trial.

When I was very young, my grandmother would turn to me on rainy summer days and ask how I wanted to spend my time. I would invariably reply, “Let’s go exploring in the attic.” In the attic of the nineteenth-century home where I grew up, there were always undiscovered treasures—yellowed documents, aging

clothes from another time, personal items left behind from family members I never knew.

During the years I've spent researching and writing about the tragically intertwined lives of Verna Garr Taylor and Henry Denhardt, I've remembered those rainy summer days many times. Digging into the fact and fiction surrounding this case has been an opportunity to "go exploring in the attic" as an adult. For that reason alone, this story has been an unexpected gift, but it has not been without its challenges.

My manuscript was complete and in the hands of my editor when I located an astonishing document. Henry Denhardt had either dictated or written it a month before his trial, and it revealed what John Berry mysteriously referred to as the "secret angle" or the "dangerous element" of the case. The most daunting challenge as a researcher was attempting to sort truth from fiction in the thirty-three-page document. Some of the accusations made by Denhardt are so detailed and specific that they have the ring of truth, while other allegations make no sense. The document confirmed one of my suspicions in the murder case, but also offered a look into the mind of a once-capable and intelligent man descending into madness.

The memorandum had been stored in Berry's office files for seventy-eight years. At Berry's request, Denhardt's allegations were never revealed in past articles written about the murder case. The document has now been released to the Filson Historical Society in Louisville along with the rest of Berry's files. The time has come to thoroughly examine the case against General Denhardt from all possible angles.

In writing this book, I made a promise to Verna's descendants that I have tried very hard to keep. Much has been written that is exaggerated or blatantly untrue, and I promised to keep as close to the facts as humanly possible. There is no need to sensationalize this story or make it more fantastic. It is one of those stories where

the truth is just as amazing as fiction. I have simply been the mechanism by which it has been told.

Like many others who spend untold hours researching and writing about a group of people long dead, I have come to know and appreciate them as more than just names from Kentucky history or players in a tragic drama. I am thankful to each of them for sharing their lives and giving me this story to write.

---

*Part I*

# LAGRANGE

“Verna Garr Taylor was a woman of unusual ability, unusual personality; a friendly, vivacious, loveable, and companionable person . . . and she endeared herself to everybody who knew her in the community where she lived and those with whom she came in contact.”

—  
H. B. Kinsolving  
opening argument, April 23, 1937

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*Chapter 1*

## A MYSTERIOUS DEATH, NOVEMBER 6, 1936

Funeral director W. S. “Smith” Keightley had just turned on his favorite radio show and settled into a comfortable chair. The evening of November 6, 1936, had been quiet at the McCarty-Ricketts Funeral Home in LaGrange, Kentucky, until the phone rang at about ten o’clock.

Keightley was always on duty and urgent phone calls were part of his job. In a busy town where the trains rolled through the heart of the business district, thirty-eight-year-old Keightley was always prepared for the call that meant someone had died and his services were needed. The passing trains claimed their victims, as did disease, old age, or automobile accidents. Death came for the elderly members of his community as a long-expected visitor, and sometimes it ambushed the young and unsuspecting. But death was Keightley’s business, and over the years, he had learned to accept its presence and his role as a funeral director and embalmer.

When the telephone rang that Friday night, it was safe for Keightley to assume that this was an ordinary death call and someone in LaGrange had passed away. But the call was far from ordinary.

Keightley answered the phone. The local barber was on the other end of the line and he sounded excited and nervous.