

Murder, They Wrought

A Doctor`s Escapades

The Branion Case

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The case was summarized in an official report by Chicago Police Cmdr. Francis Flanagan:

``On 22nd December 1967, a call was received . . . for detectives to investigate the death of one Branion, Donna, (Female/Negro) 41 yrs., the socially prominent wife of the equally prominent Branion, John M., M.D., an eminent gynecologist, who had found his wife dead of multiple gunshot wounds, in the utility room of their spacious apartment located at 5054 S. Woodlawn Avenue, 1st floor.



``The doctor related that he had left the Ida Mae Scott Hospital, where he had been treating patients, then proceeded directly to the Hyde Park Neighborhood Center, where he picked up his son, Branion, John M. III, 4 yrs. old, at 1130 hours, then proceeded immediately to his home, where he found the body of his wife.``

John Marshall Branion Jr. was the son of John Marshall Branion Sr., who was orphaned at age 13 in Mississippi but put himself through school, graduating from the University of Chicago in 1923, and then took up a 34-year public-service career as an assistant public defender of Cook County.

An only child, John Jr. fulfilled his parents` fondest dream that he become a doctor despite his poor academic record by attending medical school in Switzerland. He returned to Chicago to do his internship, set up a practice in obstetrics and gynecology and marry well. His wife was the former Donna Brown, daughter of Chicago banker Sidney Brown and a cousin of the noted jazz musician Oscar Brown Jr.. The couple had two children, a boy and a girl.

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Police commander at home

As a black physician on Chicago's South Side, Dr. Branion should have had it made but for three weaknesses: fast money, fast horses and fancy women. He was once indicted as a member of an illegal abortion ring, getting off the hook only because a woman who was about to testify against him died before the trial. He owned race horses, which he stabled in Indiana. He took frequent ski trips to Colorado and was frequently seen in the company of "other" women.

All this did not go over well at home, and there was nasty talk of divorce, but the socially prominent Donna Branion did not want it.

Mrs. Branion's sister, Joyce Tyler, was probably the last person other than the murderer to speak to her. Donna phoned her sister at 8:30 on the morning of Friday, Dec. 22, and again at 10:15 to discuss baby-sitting. A little more than an hour later, the doctor's wife was dead.

Theresa Kentra, whose adjoining apartment shared a back porch with the Branions' posh 10-room unit on South Woodlawn Avenue, was putting away groceries at about 11:20 that morning when she heard a commotion in the Branion apartment, then a sharp report followed by three more.

Patrolman William Catizone was on routine patrol in the neighborhood when he was ordered by radio at 11:58 a.m. to meet Branion at 5054 S. Woodlawn

"regarding his wife." He was met by the doctor, who led him to his wife's body on the utility-room floor. Branion told the patrolman that upon discovering his wife's body, he ran out to the back porch and shouted "Helen, Helen!" to summon his physician neighbor, Dr. Helen Payne, who lived on the third floor.

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"I haven't touched her," Branion said. "As soon as I observed the lividity (settling of blood) in her legs, I knew she was dead."

Helen Payne, who was already on the scene with her brother, William Payne, identified herself to the policeman as a medical doctor, told him she had examined the victim and pronounced her dead.

By the time Detectives Michael Boyle and James McGreal got to the apartment, crime-lab people were already working the scene as Branion sat on the living-room couch, his head buried in his hands and sobbing quietly. To spare the distraught man the discomfort of having to watch the crime-lab men going about their unpleasant work while they talked to him, the detectives suggested that they go to the old Washington Park detective headquarters. Branion agreed.

Crime-lab technicians recovered three expended bullets and four

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cartridge casings. An autopsy later indicated 13 separate wounds—seven caused by entering and six by exiting bullets. The three slugs recovered at the scene had ripped through both her hands as she tried to fend off her attacker. One of the bullets then went through her head, another through her neck and the third into her shoulder and out her back. A fourth slug was later recovered from the body.

The detectives, meanwhile, could not get anything from Branion that might lead to the killer's identity, and once the crime-lab crew had left, Boyle suggested continuing their talk in the apartment.

Replacing McGreal, another detective, Charles McMillan, accompanied Boyle and Branion back to the scene. After a thorough inspection of the apartment, the men concluded that nothing apparently had been taken, that there was no sign of a forced entry and that Mrs. Branion probably knew and let the killer inside herself.

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page: 2 (http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1991-08-25/features/9103030674_1_prominent-chicago-police-cmdr-apartment/2)

As the two detectives continued to look around, Branion retired to the sun porch, where he sat sobbing into his hands. His 13-year-old daughter had come home while he was out with the detectives and was now with her younger brother and some relatives upstairs. Then one of the detectives noticed something strange: While crying his heart out, Branion was peeking through his fingers watching every move they made.

The two detectives then asked Branion if he'd mind going over everything one more time.

``Not at all,`` Branion said, stifling a sob. ``Well, like I told you before, I left my office at 11:30 this morning and drove over to pick up my son at 5480 S. Kenwood. I got there at about 11:35, and he was waiting out in front for me. Then I drove over to East 53rd Street to pick up Maxine Brown

(the ex-wife of Oscar Brown Jr.) to have lunch with us. She couldn't make it, so we drove home. When I entered the apartment, I called out to my wife but got no answer. I sensed something was wrong. I told my boy to wait in the hall, and I went in alone. I went into the utility room and flicked on the light. I saw her lying on the floor.

``I could tell she was dead. I could see lividity in her legs. I flicked off the light, then went through the kitchen and out the back door and called for Helen Payne.``

Asked about an array of guns in the laundry room, Branion replied: ``I'm a gun collector, and I make my own ammunition.

I have 25 guns-pistols, rifles and shotguns-in there.``

By then, it was 9 p.m., and the detectives decided to call it a day.

The next morning Boyle and McGreal were more than a little surprised when they discovered that Branion had taken off with his two kids for a ski vacation in Vail, Colo. ``You ask what I think?`` Boyle said. ``I think it`s time we go talk to some of the good doctor`s friends.``

From Mrs. Kentra in the adjoining apartment, the detectives learned that the sharp sounds she heard occurred around 11:30 a.m. and that 20 minutes later she heard Branion calling up to Helen Payne from the back porch.

At the nursery school, where Branion had told police he had arrived at 11:35 a.m. to pick up his son who was waiting for him outside the building, an assistant teacher said she distinctly remembered seeing the doctor entering the building between 11:45 and 11:50. ``The boy was waiting for him in the all-purpose waiting room, and I remember seeing him help the boy with his jacket,`` the teacher said.

Next stop: Maxine Brown at her office. ``Dr. Branion phoned me the previous evening, around 10 or 11, to make a luncheon engagement,`` Brown said. ``This was the first time he`d ever called me. I thought it was rather strange.``

``Strange,`` Boyle mused as the detectives left Brown`s office. ``He seemed to want to make sure someone was with him, to give him an alibi, just before he discovered his wife`s body.``

``His times don`t add up either,`` McGreal noted.

Another discrepancy cropped up when the detectives talked the following day to Dr. Helen Payne.

``As I understand it, Dr. Branion said he knew his wife was dead because of the lividity in her legs,`` Boyle said. If lividity had set in, his wife would have been dead before he left the hospital.

``There was no lividity when I examined the body,`` said Payne. ``The blood does not settle for at least an hour or two after death. She couldn`t have been dead an hour.``

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Days later, a medical report confirmed that Donna Branion had died within the hour that her body was discovered.

Another report came from the crime lab`s firearms expert, Burt Nielsen, who said Mrs. Branion was killed with a ``James Bond gun.`` Markings on the four slugs and on the cartridge casings, Nielsen explained, showed that they could have been fired only by one weapon, the Walther PPK, ``the same kind of pistol James Bond uses in the movies.``

From traffic police, the detectives learned that Branion had been

stopped for speeding several times, once for going 100 miles an hour, and on each occasion, he was accompanied by an attractive woman who was not his wife. On his most recent speeding episode, his companion was his office nurse.

On New Year`s Day, Detective John Mannion, Boyle`s regular partner who had been away on furlough, rejoined Boyle, and together they sought out the nurse in her high-rise apartment in the Hyde Park neighborhood. The nurse readily admitted having a non-professional relationship with Branion. ``In fact,`` she said, ``we just got back from a skiing trip to Colorado``-the junket to Vail with his kids the very next morning after he found his wife murdered.

Branion was emerging as a red-hot suspect. The next step was to figure out how he could have committed the crime.

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page: 3 (http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1991-08-25/features/9103030674_1_prominent-chicago-police-cmdr-apartment/3)

Armed with a stopwatch, the two detectives retraced Branion`s comings and goings on the day of the murder: from the hospital to the nursery school, passing by the Branion apartment nine blocks away, then from the school to Brown`s office, and from there to the apartment. After doing this six different times under varying weather conditions and taking turns at the wheel, the detectives concluded that Branion could have driven to the apartment from the hospital and killed his wife before going on to pick up his son, stopping by Brown`s office and then returning to ``discover`` the body.

Turning their attention to the murder weapon, the detectives asked Branion if his collection included any gun capable of firing .380 bullets.

``Why, yes, I do own such a gun-a .380 Hi Standard pistol,`` Branion said.

Crime-lab tests showed the gun was not the murder weapon. The detectives then asked Branion whether he also owned a Walther PPK. ``No. I have never owned such a weapon,`` he replied.

The evidence now gathered against Branion, though circumstantial, was convincing enough for the Cook County State`s Attorney`s office to issue a warrant to arrest him for his wife`s murder. Boyle and Mannion served the warrant themselves on Jan. 22, 1968, confronting the doctor at the hospital.

The detectives, however, still had to find the murder weapon and link it to the suspect. From a tipster came word that Branion had recently thrown a weapon into Lake Michigan. If true, it would be next to impossible to recover it. But the detectives could still

work from the bullets it had fired-German- made GECO ammunition.

Mannion and Boyle returned to the apartment with a search warrant authorizing the seizure of any GECO-type ammunition. In a closet next to a workbench, they found a box of GECO .380 ammunition with exactly four bullets missing.

There was an even better find-a box for a Walther PPK. The box was empty, but it still had a paper target from the gun manufacturer that listed the gun`s serial number: 188274. And on the box itself was the name of the gun`s importer/distributor: Joseph Galeff & Sons, New York City.

With that information, it was easy enough to establish that Walther PPK No. 188274 was sold by Galeff & Sons to Bell`s Gun Shop in the Chicago suburb of Bellwood, where it was purchased two months before the murder by a man who lived on Martin Luther King Drive, who then gave it as a birthday present to Branion. Boyle and Mannion did not actually have the murder weapon itself, but they had effectively placed it in their suspect`s hand.

Found guilty by a criminal court jury of his wife`s murder, John M. Branion Jr. was sentenced to not less than 20 or more than 30 years in prison. That, however, was not the end of John M. Branion Jr.

While appealing his case, the socially well-connected doctor was able to arrange to remain free on a low bond of \$5,000. Next, he obtained permission to move to Cheyenne, Wyo., where he married his nurse/girlfriend, divorced her to marry another girlfriend from Chicago, then divorced her to remarry the nurse, whom he divorced again to remarry the second girlfriend.

In June 1970 he flew with his wife of the moment to Los Angeles without notifying court officials. Efforts were made to revoke his bond, but clout prevailed, and the revocation request was denied.

The Illinois Supreme Court eventually affirmed Branion`s conviction by a six-to-one vote, ordering him to surrender in Criminal Court in Chicago on June 25, 1971. But by then he had moved from Los Angeles to New York, where he vanished.

The fugitive surfaced next in Khartoum, Sudan, where he was detained by Sudanese authorities in 1972 for carrying forged identity papers. Slipping away again, he was traced by Interpol, the global police intelligence agency, to Uganda, where he turned up later that year as personal physician to the ruthless dictator Idi Amin. He fled from Uganda in 1979 when Amin was overthrown, resurfaced briefly in South Africa and then in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

U.S. authorities finally caught up with him when Ugandan officials informed them on Sept. 27, 1983, that they had him in custody.

On Nov. 2, 1983, Branion, now 57, stood in manacles in Chicago Criminal Court, where he was ordered to begin serving his original sentence without further delay. A new appeal for his release was denied in federal court, but seven years later, Gov. James Thompson commuted his sentence on grounds of failing health. One month after his release, he died in the University of Illinois Hospital at the age of 64.