

The Bennett Murder



In Kansas City, Kansas, John Bennett was a successful business man who had become prosperous selling perfumes. He and Myrtle Bennett, and Charles and Myrna Hoffman, lived in the same building. All four shared a common interest. They all played bridge. It was to become a fateful evening. During the court trial, which ensued, it was brought out that John Bennett had several times abused his wife physically during heated arguments when they played bridge together. On the evening of September 29, 1929, when the game of bridge was still in its early stages, John and Myrtle Bennett invited Charles and Myrna Hoffman to their apartment for an evening of rubber bridge. Myrtle Bennett became curt with her husband for not bidding and playing correctly. As the game continued, the Bennetts' criticism grew more and more caustic. Finally, they had this auction:

John Bennett	Charles Hoffman	Myrtle Bennett	Myrna Hoffman
South	West	South	East
1 ♠	2 ♦	4 ♠	Pass
Pass	Pass		

Myrna Hoffman continued to relate later on that Myrtle Bennett, as dummy, laid down a rather good hand. But her husband evidently did not plan the play well. John Bennett managed to go down 2. This infuriated his wife, and she began goading him with remarks about, as she put it, bum bridge players. As Myrna Hoffman described the situation, John Bennett came right back at her. The confrontation continued for several minutes. The row became so pronounced that John Bennett, reaching across the table, grabbed Myrtle's arm and slapped her several times. Myrtle Bennett repeated over and over, in a strained sing-song tone, that nobody but a bum would hit a woman. John Bennett then shouted, after jumping up from the table, that he intended to spend the night at a hotel, and that he was leaving town the next day. It was then that Myrtle Bennett turned to Charles and Myrna Hoffman and said that they had better leave.

While Charles & Myrna Hoffman prepared to leave the apartment, they noticed Myrtle Bennett quickly going into the bedroom of her mother, where she retrieved an automatic gun from a dresser drawer. It was reported later that Myrtle Bennett said to her mother that John was going to St. Joseph, Missouri, and that he wanted to be armed. Her mother did not seem alarmed by this.

John Bennett had gone to his den (located near the bathroom) to pack for the intended trip to the hotel and for the days he was to be out of town. Charles Hoffman, putting on his muffler, had turned back and saw his friend, John Bennett, alone. It was during this time that Myrna Hoffman, who was standing at the front doorway, was waiting for her husband, when Charles Hoffman decided to approach John Bennett, hoping to say a few words of comfort which could relieve the feeling of

anger and depression. Charles Hoffman engaged John Bennett in a conversation, and it was at this time that Myrtle Bennett seemed to dart into the room with the pistol unconcealed in her hand.

In a matter of seconds, John Bennett saw his wife brandishing the gun. He ran hurriedly to the nearby bathroom, slamming the door behind him. As the door slammed shut, Myrtle Bennett fired two shots into the bathroom door. She missed John Bennett both times. Charles Hoffman, too astonished at what was happening, became immobile. Myrna Hoffman, hearing the shots, ran down the hallway of the apartment building and began pounding on the door of the nearest apartment, seeking help. Myrtle Bennett simply remained standing in front of the bathroom door with the pistol hanging by her side. However, in the commotion, Myrtle Bennett realized that she had not shot her husband. She heard him nearing the door which leads to the street. She followed, still furious about the play of the hand and the slaps she had received from her husband in front of friends. Determined to take revenge, she fired two additional shots, which allegedly killed her husband.

John Bennett didn't die immediately. He was able to drag himself back into the apartment, where he staggered to a chair, sat down, and moaned "She got me," his last words. Afterwards, he slumped to the floor unconscious. Myrtle Bennett stood rigidly in the room with the pistol in her hand, and then it seemed that whatever power had held her left her mind and body. She had become again a rational person. She immediately went to her husband. She kneeled down, and began to cry uncontrollably. This is how the police found her. Myrtle Bennett was charged with first degree murder.

While this scene was being acted out, it seems that the bridge cards were neglected. When John Bennett was hitting his wife, the cards were flying around and off the table. The exact nature of the holding between North and South, and East and West, will most likely never be revealed, although Charles and Myrna Hoffman attempted to reconstruct the hands as best they could remember. The four hands played that evening, reconstructed by memory, began to circulate in periodicals shortly after the crime, and they were analyzed by the governing authorities on bridge of that time. The hands, as delivered to the present time, are illustrated below.

		Myrtle Bennett		
		North		
		♠	A1063	
		♥	1085	
		♦	4	
		♣	A9842	
	Charles Hoffman			Myrna Hoffman
	West			East
♠	Q72	♠	4	
♥	AJ3	♥	Q94	
♦	AQ1092	♦	KJ763	
♣	J6	♣	Q753	
		John Bennett		
		South		
		♠	KJ985	
		♥	K762	
		♦	85	
		♣	K10	

After the shooting, many bridge players became intrigued by the cards. They were reconstructed by the three remaining survivors to the best of their ability. Mr. Sydney Lenz and Mr. Eli Culbertson actually proved that John Bennett could have successfully fulfilled the contract. However, the opening by John Bennett was criticized as being too light since he did have insufficient values to make an opening bid. The lead, by West or Charles Hoffman, was the Ace of Diamonds, which took the trick. Charles Hoffman, after seeing the dummy void of Diamonds shifted to the Club suit, and lead the Jack on the second trick. John Bennett won this trick with his King of Clubs and began pulling trump. The more appropriate play would have been for John Bennett to establish the Club suit after ruffing his last Diamond.

If John Bennett, after winning the Club trick with his King of Clubs, had led his last Diamond and trumped it with one of the dummy's small trumps, he could then lead a trump and go up with the King. Then he would lead the Club 10, and , when Charles Hoffman followed suit, his worries would have been over. John Bennett would play the Ace of Clubs and lead the Nine or Eight. If Myrna Hoffman would have played the Queen of Clubs, John Bennett would have trumped and allowed Charles Hoffman to overtrump, if he decided to overtrump. If that were the case, then Charles Hoffman, if he led a Heart, the contract would have been fulfilled. If Charles Hoffman had instead led a Diamond, the contract would also have been makeable. If Charles Hoffman had decided to lead a trump, then John Bennett may not have been able to fulfill the contract. The conclusion of both Sydney Lenz and Eli Culbertson was that John Bennett did not plan his strategy before playing the cards, and that was his fatal mistake.

Although the story occurred in Kansas City, Kansas, the larger metropolitan newspapers got a hold of the details and the New York Time and the Chicago Tribune reported it. At the trial for first degree murder of her husband, Myrtle Bennett was advised by her lawyer to alter somewhat the alleged confession. Myrtle Bennett wept ostensibly throughout the proceedings, and at one point avowed that she would rather have been dead than to have in any fashion caused the death of her husband.

It seems that this line of defense was advantageous when the judge declined to admit into evidence the original statement Myrtle. Bennett had given to the police. Even the last words of John Bennett had been altered to the degree that the impression was left that John Bennett had meant to state that he was leaving his wife forever, and that he was conducting business the next day in St. Joseph, Missouri. During the trial it seemed that Myrtle Bennett convincingly stated that her husband had requested her to retrieve the pistol, since he normally carried the weapon while on trips out of town. This statement was backed up by her mother, Mrs. Alice B. Adkins.



Myrtle Bennett was also able to alter the circumstances to leave the impression that while she was retrieving the weapon, she stumbled over a chair and the pistol went off accidentally, wounding her husband, and when her husband grabbed her arm in order to remove the pistol, the pistol once again discharged, this time fatally wounding her husband.

Myrtle Bennett was acquitted, because the jury decided to ignore the physical evidence of the two bullet holes found in the bathroom door. The jury also found nothing strange that the body of John Bennett was found lying on the living room floor and no suitcase to be found. The jury also ignored the fact that the pistol had been fired four times. The jury found that the death of John Bennett had been an accident. After the acquittal, Myrtle Bennett collected \$30,000.00 from her husband's life insurance policy, which was a significant sum during the years of the depression. Myrtle Bennett resumed her hobby of playing bridge soon thereafter, but it seems that her partners were rather cautious in their bidding and playing.

This incident happened during the time when the game of bridge was emerging as a favorite pastime. But this pastime was headed by the males of the bridge community, and women had very little to say when it came to the conventions, the guidelines, conduct and propriety. Women were not exactly quoted in the many books published by the so-called authorities. It was, however, Myrtle Bennett who gave the women of the bridge world an impetus to become bolder in their conduct, and not present themselves as the weaker sex. It seems that the males heard the message, and understood it. It was not that Myrtle Bennett was idolized in any fashion by the female bridge players of that era, but her example and acquittal were the talk of the bridge community for some time.