



Parked in the Past

The short, tragic life of Anna Blythe Speas

Belle of Boulder, suspected criminal in Como, dead in Denver at 28

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There are very few people living who have experienced riding the narrow gauge through Platte Canyon into South Park. The last passenger train left Como in April 1937, but the return of a portion of the 1878 Denver, South Park & Pacific passenger car to the Como roundhouse this past March (see The Flume of May 11) makes one wonder what it was like.

Some rode the rails to the city to visit old friends or for cultural activities that were not available in small mountain towns. Others may have taken a trip back home to bury a loved one.

But not many were riding the train escorted by the sheriff; not many had a court date to be tried as an accessory to murder.

Anna Blythe Speas was an exception. She was a passenger on the train from Boulder to Fairplay 118 years ago this month. The Flume of May 17, 1894, said that Sheriff Wilson escorted Mrs. Anna Speas from Boulder on Tuesday, May 15, in preparation for her trial answering charges of “accessory to

the killing of Town Marshal Cook, of Como, a few weeks ago.” The story said that Mary Jane Blythe, Anna’s mother, was with her.

Belle of Boulder

There was a time, however, when Anna Speas’ life was a young girl’s dream.

Anna Blythe met Sam Speas in Boulder in 1884. He was one of the many railroaders who lived at Joe and Nellie McCabe’s boarding house. Anna, who was Nellie’s sister, served meals at the house.

Anna Blythe was the belle of Boulder; she was beautiful and was sought after by all the young men in town, according to Margaret Cole, the granddaughter of Sam Speas and the author of the book on Speas’ life, “Goin’ Railroading.”

Anna, at age 17, probably had dreams of “happily ever after” when she married Speas on Sept. 30, 1886.

Murder of the marshal

In 1894, less than eight years later, Anna was caught in the middle of a murder investigation. The marshal of Como, A. E. Cook, was shot and killed at Levi Streeter's home in Como when he was investigating a loud party. Anna and her friend Lillian Robinson were there.

Streeter was charged with first-degree murder; Anna and Robinson were charged as accessories.

Death in Denver

Anna was acquitted of the crime, but two years later she was dead – beaten repeatedly and left to die in Denver by a man she may have considered a friend.

Marriage

During the two years between 1884 and 1886, while Anna was working in her sister's Boulder boardinghouse and Speas worked for the Greeley, Salt Lake & Pacific Railroad out of Boulder, the two spent as much time together as they could. In summertime, they took long walks, they went roller-skating, and they attended shows of traveling entertainers. In winter, they went sledding.

In 1886, they were married. They lived in Boulder for the next 14 months. It was a town of about 3,000, with a fledgling new college housed all in one building, called "Old Main," the beginnings of the University of Colorado.

In November 1887, Sam Speas was promoted to engineer with the Denver, South Park & Pacific Railroad and transferred to Como.

First arrival in Como

The first time Anna Speas arrived in Como on the train, she was 18 years old. Her husband was the tall, handsome, redheaded Sam Speas. At 29, he was 11 years her senior and destined to become

one of the highest-ranking engineers in the Como yard.

Sam had arrived a few weeks before Anna and bought a home in Como next to the Dunbar Livery. Sam was waiting for Anna on the depot platform that November day to take her to their new home.

Life in Como

Sam Speas loved Como. From the moment he first saw South Park from the Kenosha Station, he knew that Como was the place he wanted to stay. His career as a railroad engineer was thriving. Como was a busy thoroughfare and engineers were the railroad aristocracy, looked up to and admired by almost everyone in town.

Speas ran freight trains in his first years as an engineer, and in that job, each time he reported at the roundhouse for work, he never knew where he was going or when he would be home.

That lack of routine was a big attraction to railroad men. They liked living on the edge, the feeling of not knowing what lay around the next curve in the track. It was an adventurous life, according to Coel's book.

The women in Como were left behind to take care of the routine chores. They chopped firewood, shoveled snow, milked cows, cared for the children, and made repairs to homes. And when a train pulled into town, they had meals ready – at any hour of the day or night – for their returning men. They worked the long hours that the men did, but without the adventure and excitement that riding the train afforded.

Anna may have had a hard time fitting in with life in Como. She was young, perhaps younger than the wives of the

other railroad men. She spent time with some of the high school girls, but she didn't fit in with them either. Many young wives met other women through children's activities, but Anna had no children. Many young women made acquaintances through work, but Anna did not work in Como.

Sam was Anna's anchor, but with him away much of the time, it seems likely that Anna was very lonely.

During the seven years she lived in Como, Anna had three babies, all of whom died at birth or soon after. There is no way to know today, but there is a good chance that Sam Speas, because of his work schedule, was not home for the birth and death of his children. His absence would have made the losses more heartbreaking for Anna.

And even today, the story of the Speas babies is heartbreaking. The only record of them is a shared deteriorating headstone in the Como Cemetery.

After the loss of her children, Anna Speas began drinking heavily, according to family stories. And she may have finally found her niche when she met others in town who shared that pastime, among them Levi Streeter. He ran a shoe making and shoe repair service out of his home. Another acquaintance was Lillian Kennedy Robinson, the other identified woman at the party where Cook was shot.

(Robinson's husband divorced her during the trial. Her surname was changed to Kennedy halfway through the trial transcripts and is now referred to as Kennedy in this story.)

Como crime

It was Friday, April 6, 1894, when Cook lost his life.

The Flume of April 12, 1894, reported Cook went to Streeter's home about midnight investigating a loud party. Anna Speas and Kennedy were in the home. The Flume reported that there might have been two other men and another woman present, but it was never confirmed. Both women testified there were no others at Streeter's home that night.

According to Streeter's story, when Cook knocked on the door, he ordered Streeter to hold up his hands. Streeter said he thought he was about to be robbed. He opened the door and without hesitation began firing his gun at the man on the doorstep. After the shooting, Streeter beat Cook's head with the handle of the revolver, cracking his skull. Cook died instantly.

There was speculation at the time that Streeter thought it was Sam Speas at the door, and that Streeter feared being caught with Mrs. Speas in his house.

Anna testified she never heard a knock on the door, but she said Kennedy told her someone was knocking. When Streeter answered the door, both women broke a window and went out the back. They cut themselves on broken glass and authorities were able to trace a blood trail to the Speas home.

Anna Speas told investigators, "I went down to Mr. Streeter's after my shoe which was there to be fixed" (at his shoemaker's shop). She said, in her signed statement, that she and "Lill Kennedy" went out the window because "we wanted to go home and Streeter didn't want us to go." She said she did not drink anything at Streeter's house.

Kennedy told a slightly different story. She said the two went to Streeter's house about 9 p.m., stayed for about an hour, and had no particular reason to go there.

She said, "We drank whiskey with Mr. Streeter." But she said they were not intoxicated.

Kennedy wrote in a statement, "We could not get (the) door unlocked and broke (a) window out. When we were breaking (the) window we heard Mr. Streeter talking to somebody and were afraid somebody would come in and see us."

Trial

Anna Speas, Kennedy and Streeter were taken to the Fairplay jail after the murder. The women were confined in the stone jail on the courthouse lawn for at least one night, but later were allowed free on bond until the trial in May 1894. Streeter stayed in jail until the trial.

Sam Speas supported his wife throughout the trial and hired the most prosperous attorney in Park County, Webster Ballinger of Como, for her defense. Ironically, Ballinger was also the court-appointed attorney for Streeter.

Both women were found not guilty.

Streeter was convicted of murder in the first degree and sentenced to hang in June 1894 at Cañon City. His sentence was later changed to life imprisonment, which didn't buy him much time. He died in prison on April 9, 1896.

After trial

Even after being found not guilty, Anna Speas' life would never be the same. At the age of 25, she left Como on the train as soon as the trial was over. She never returned.

To get order back in his life, Sam Speas went to court and divorced Anna on the grounds of drunkenness and cruelty on July 10, 1894. His attorney, Ballinger, was with him, but Anna was not in court.

And Sam Speas went on with his life. On Oct. 29, 1895, he married Ellen O'Leary, who worked at the Pacific Hotel. They raised three boys, all of whom followed their father's profession and became railroad engineers.

Anna went back to Boulder and later moved to Denver and continued to drink heavily, according to family stories. In Denver, she met and moved in with Andrew Lyles, a black man who lived in a shack near 21st and Lawrence streets. Lyles mistreated Anna and often beat her. Her mother begged her to come home to Boulder, but Anna refused.

And then her life deteriorated further. On the night of July 5, 1898, Lyles had "beaten her into insensibility," according to testimony by neighbors. They said they heard the beating going on all night. Anna died in the morning.

Lyles and another man who lived in the home were arrested and charged with Anna's murder, but even in that violent death, it appears Anna may not have gotten justice. The men were cleared of murder charges when the autopsy report said she died of internal abscess, pneumonia and alcoholism, and not specifically from the beating.

Anna Blythe Speas died alone on July 6, 1898, in a rundown Denver shack. Less than 12 years had elapsed from a young woman's dreams of "happily ever after" to death at the hands of a supposed friend. She was 28 years old.

Sources for this story are the book "Goin' Railroadin'" by Margaret Coel (granddaughter of Sam Speas); newspaper articles from The Fairplay Flume in the years 1893-1896, emails between the author and Margaret Coel in 2011 and 2012, and court records from

*the trial of Levi Streeter, Anna Speas and
Lillian Kennedy Robinson.*

Images on the following page.



First Look

The Pacific Hotel (predecessor of the current Como Eating House and Bed & Breakfast) was the first site Anna Blythe Speas saw when she arrived in Como in November 1887. This photo is circa 1886. The Pacific Hotel burned in November 1896. (Photo courtesy of the Park County Local History Archives, source: South Park Historical Society)



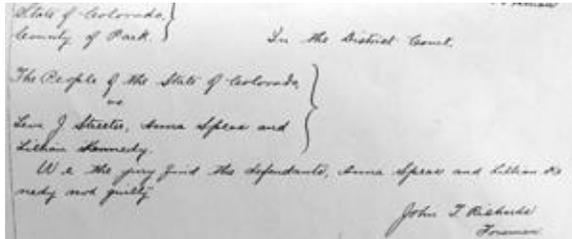
Luxurious ride

This narrow-gauge passenger car gives an idea of the luxurious ride passengers enjoyed at the turn of the 20th century. Anna Speas may have been too preoccupied with her thoughts to notice the elegance when she rode in a car like this one from Boulder to Fairplay accompanied by Park County Sheriff Wilson. He was escorting her back to await trial for the murder of the Como marshal in May 1894. As she was facing possible imprisonment or death, she may not have noticed the red velvet seats that could face to the front or back, the brass lamps with green shades, or the coal stove in a corner for warmth. It may have been too early in the spring on May 15, 1894, to open the windows and let in a cool mountain breeze. (Photo from the Tom Klinger collection)



Only memories

Very little documentation remains of the children of Sam and Anna Speas. The three infants all died at birth or shortly after and are buried in the Como Cemetery. This deteriorating headstone marks the area of the three graves. (Photo by Laura Van Dusen/The Flume)



Not guilty

The jury found Anna Speas and Lillian Kennedy not guilty as accessories to the murder of Marshal A. E. Cook of Como, as shown in this official document from the trial. This photo is a portion of the full page of trial documentation. The original document, dated June 2, 1894, is stored at the Park County courthouse in Fairplay. (Photo by Laura Van Dusen/The Flume)