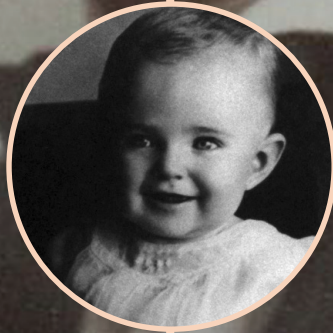


Killing Albert Berch



Alan Berch Hollingsworth

Foreword by Yvonne Kauger

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*To
Albert Berch, Lula Berch,
and their daughter, Almarian Berch Hollingsworth*

The only thing new in the world is the history you don't know.

—Harry S. Truman

Only a dream, only a dream,
And glory beyond the dark stream;
How peaceful the slumber,
How happy the waking;
For death is only a dream.

Refrain from "Death Is Only a Dream"
lyrics by C. W. Ray, music by A. J. Buchanan, 1892
(favorite hymn of Albert Weldon Berch, sung at his funeral December
19, 1923, shortly before his widow stormed out of the church)

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Foreword

The obsession of three generations to uncover the unvarnished truth about a double murder integrates a family into events that shaped Oklahoma, the United States, and, by butterfly effect, the entire world. Several religions teach that everything is interrelated. This book, a potpourri of history and mystery, certainly illustrates that tenet.

We are given a close-up look at early aviation, the oil business, the suffragette movement, religious intolerance, conspiracy, politics, education, the Underground Railroad, racism, the Civil War and civil rights, the formal recognition of osteopathy, burlesque, the Ku Klux Klan, the impeachment of a governor, a precedent-setting opinion by the Oklahoma Supreme Court, and two miraculous cures of breast cancer. And that is just for starters.

I first met Dr. Alan Hollingsworth when my mother, Alice Bottom Kauger, consulted with him about her surgery. I was honored to be asked to write the foreword to his book and to be able to read his work after hearing updated snippets from time to time—usually during my annual examination. It is a page turner that I couldn't wait to finish, and it cries out to be a television series.

I am so pleased that our serendipitous friendship prompted the appearance of the trial transcript in *Lincoln Health & Accident Ins. Co. v. Johnigan*, 1926 OK 356, 245 P. 837. It exhibits the theory of six degrees of separation, first espoused in 1929 by the Hungarian author Frigyes Karinthy. The concept is that anyone can be connected to any other person through the chain of a “friend of a friend” with no more than six intermediaries. I certainly experienced it when I introduced Dr. Hollingsworth to Oklahoma Supreme Court Chief Justice Douglas Combs—only to discover that they were fraternity brothers, as well as distant cousins, who could trace their ancestry back to the Earl of Combes and Stratford-upon-Avon. One of the Combs relatives sold land

to William Shakespeare, and another was left Shakespeare's sword in his will. In 1923, at the time of the murders described in this book, Hall of Famer Earle Combs, another cousin, was waiting to be called up to the New York Yankees to become the best lead-off man in the American League. He played on what was considered the best team the Yankees ever had, with teammates Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Waite Hoyte, Tony Lazzeri, and Herb Pennock. And Doug has the autographed baseball to prove it. See what I mean? If only the widow of Albert Berch, Lula Combs, had known.

While the rest of the nation was fascinated with gangster and mob stories of Al Capone in Chicago in the mid- to late 1920s, Oklahoma apparently had its own little gangster/mob paradise in Marlow. It took the form of organized KKK membership, coupled with prominent citizens who fought ruthlessly for its success. Thankfully, other town leaders fought back, eventually putting the Klan to rest.

For those fortunate enough to have taken Oklahoma history in high school, one doesn't recall any mention of Marlow, Oklahoma nor its colorful past that included outlaws and mob rule. I suspect if textbooks were written as this story has been, history would be one of the most popular subjects at school! With facts that are quintessentially "stranger than fiction," with remarkable coincidences, Dr. Hollingsworth has woven a tale that engages readers from beginning to end and teaches them a little fascinating history along the way.

Yvonne Kauger
*Oklahoma Supreme Court Justice (1984-present),
Chief Justice 1997-98*

Killing
Albert
Berch



Albert Weldon Berch



Lula Combs Garvin Berch



Almarian Berch

The Cascade

The social experiment failed after a mere ten days, the peril too great. Hotel owner Albert Weldon Berch settled onto the edge of his bed and said with a sigh, “I’m indeed sorry to lose you.” He wrote a severance check for the departing porter, a man eager to catch the next train out of town.

Berch was disappointed, if not drained. His heartfelt, or foolhardy, undertaking to challenge bigotry had been thwarted. His wife, Lula, who stood nearby in the owner’s suite, holding their young daughter in her arms, harbored more pragmatic thoughts, such as how to replace the dedicated porter when no whites in town, boys or men, were willing to stoop to shine another man’s shoes. With their hotel business flourishing in the midst of an oil boom, the demand for quality help was greater than the labor pool could satisfy.

Turning back our clocks to this precise moment on the evening of December 17, 1923, Albert Berch has three minutes left to live, while the departing porter, a “crippled negro” named Robert Johnigan, will yearn for a death so swift.

With a morbid nod to destiny, it was fortunate for my two sisters and me that our maternal grandfather was shot and killed at age thirty in the lobby of Johnson’s Hotel in Marlow, Oklahoma. Had Albert Berch lived to continue as proprietor of the hotel, we three siblings would not have appeared on this planet. The unusual cascade of events that followed the murder led to our existence, and the murder profoundly altered our family’s history.

Johnson’s Hotel was owned and operated by Albert and Lula Berch when our mother was born in one of its rooms, located only steps away from where her father would be murdered. Our grandmother and mother barely avoided the spray of bullets that killed Albert Berch and Robert Johnigan, the latter being the primary target. Or so we were told.

Almarian, named for her father, Al, was a couple of months shy of her second birthday when the murder occurred. She was in the arms of her mother, and according to Lula, the mother-daughter duo entered the lobby at the exact moment that gunfire erupted, whereupon a bullet intended for Lula pierced Almarian's baby gown without causing harm. So, to take the conjectural folly of "what if" one step further, the trajectory of this bullet charted the course of our existence, my sisters and me, even more than the one that killed Albert Berch.

Our mother spent much of her life embroiled in the "why" of it all until she was finally laid to rest in a Marlow grave eighty-eight years after the murders. Oddly, prior to her death, Almarian orchestrated a family burial plot for her father, her mother, and herself, the only child of the Berch couple.

This was "odd" for several reasons. First, Marlow had not offered consoling arms after the murders. In fact, when our grandmother left town with her life in jeopardy and her daughter in tow, Albert was resting eternally in a poorly marked grave, with Lula vowing never to return during her lifetime. She came close to fulfilling that promise. It was odd, too, that our mother had such a strong need for the three of them to be together, even though they had been a family for a mere twenty-two months. She had no memory of her father or of being a Marlow resident. My sisters and I marvel at this bond, so powerful for our mother that our father's remains went along for the ride. We are bewildered that the ashes of Francis W. Hollingsworth, MD, are now part of the landscape in a town that he had barely visited. Meanwhile, the cemetery in our hometown of El Reno, Oklahoma doesn't host a single blood relative.

I am the fourth-generation Al Berch. Indeed, the Berch saga should begin with Albert's father, "Doctor" Albert W. Berch, Sr., the quotation marks as apt today as when they enclosed his title in a 1924 anonymous letter to my widowed grandmother, claiming shady maneuverings on the part of her father-in-law. Yet, newspapers after the murder refer to Albert Sr. as a "prominent physician," a peculiar description in light of the fact that he was new to Marlow and arrived there apparently free of the nagging need for credentials.

Let me interject a comment about the personal pronouns that will be scattered throughout this narrative. When I say "my grandmother" or "my mother," it is really "our grandmother" or "our mother." For Susan Hollingsworth Aggarwal and Dawn Hollingsworth, my two sisters, this is their family story, too.

As for source material, I will offer references as the story requires, while letting the reader judge reliability. Nothing has ever been formally assembled and published to chronicle this notorious double murder other than newspaper accounts, in spite of the fact that the crime extended beyond the “crippled negro” and into the heart of white America, a particularly egregious act in 1923 that drew nationwide attention.

My grandmother was a prolific scribbler. In fact, both my mother and grandmother were afflicted by hypergraphia, faithfully recording minutiae into their diaries throughout both of their long lives. But it didn't stop at the diaries. Their free-floating anxieties found a place to land on any available scrap of paper. My grandmother was particularly resourceful here, often mimicking the ancient palimpsest where parchment was scraped clean and reused. Lula wrote her notes between the lines on Procter & Gamble invoice forms, the flip sides of personal letters, and the backs of many envelopes. On one occasion, during a tense mother-daughter imbroglio, they became dueling banjos thirty miles apart, each feverishly writing about the other.

Still, many blanks remain in the story of this double murder. While reconstructing the crime and its aftermath, then by sleuthing through the evidence for long-lost answers, I will leave the blanks alone and simply tell the tale, as true to the facts as I can be. And when I drift toward speculation, I will paint it as such. Furthermore, I pledge not to pad the story with the intent to impart fabled nobility, a common theme in genealogic pursuits. Whether or not my grandfather died as part of an honorable act is a central issue in the differing versions of the murder. I do not seek blue blood. Hasn't history already taught us that blue blood tends to run downhill? If my research indicates an ancestor to be a scalawag, then so be it.

Grandmother Lula was, of course, the first to become obsessed with this story. Then, in midlife and with an empty nest, my mother and her lifelong fixation hit full stride, so my narrative addresses that angle as well, including her search for her father's grave followed by her novelization of the saga.

And finally I turn to my obsession, which began with the death of my mother, the moment when this ripening tale slipped from her fingers to mine. Up until that time it had been *her* story, *her* entrée as an author, *her* obsession, *her* unknown father. For me, it had been unconfirmed rumor. Did Albert Berch even exist? Even as his namesake, I had only seen one photographic portrait, and we were led to believe that this

was all that remained. For me, Albert Berch was mythical, providing a colorful conversation starter, from playground days (“my grandfather was killed by the Ku Klux Klan”) extending to the present, where the refined version draws in complexities and nuances, kicking and screaming all the way toward a disquieting truth.

My name is Alan Berch Hollingsworth, and this is my take on the murder of my grandfather, Albert Berch. But it’s Lula’s story, too, and my mother’s. Indeed, it is a family plot.