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Officials sift through the ashes of the Gunness family home that burned to the ground on April 28, 1908. Four bodies were found — Belle Gunness' two daughters, a son and a headless torso that was believed to be Gunness. More bodies would be found buried on the farm. **LA PORTE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

THE 'LA PORTE GHOUL'

Belle Gunness' siren song led lonely farmers to an untimely demise

By Ron Grossman | Chicago Tribune

In March 1908 Asle Helgelien, a South Dakota farmer worried about his missing brother, wrote to Belle Gunness, who had a farm near La Porte, Indiana.

Andrew Helgelien hadn't returned after telling his brother that he would be "back home in a week away surely," and correspondence was found suggesting a romantic relationship between him and Gunness.

"You wish to know where your brother keeps himself?" she wrote back to Asle Helgelien. "Well this is just what I would like to know but it almost seems impossible for me to give a definite answer."

Andrew had responded to an ad Gunness placed in the Minneapolis Tidende, a Norwegian-language newspaper:



Sightseers view the holes where several bodies were found on the Belle Gunness farm in 1908.
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Belle Gunness with her children Philip Gunness, on lap, Myrtle and Lucy Sorenson, right, in the late 19th or early 20th century.
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WANTED — a woman who owns a beautifully located and valuable farm in first class condition, wants a good and reliable man as partner in same. Some little cash is required and will be furnished first class security."

In subsequent letters she'd offered Andrew not just a job but love and moving advice.

"I place you higher in my affections than anyone on this earth," she wrote. "Take all your money out of the bank, and come as soon as possible."

Andrew had joined her, Gunness told Asle, then taken off for parts unknown, adding that if Asle came there to search for his brother, she'd do whatever she could.



Lamphere

But on April 28 Gunness' home burned down, and by the time Asle Helgelien got there it had become the site of a macabre carnival. A thousand curiosity seekers were joined by the relatives of missing men, as word spread of evidence that Gunness was both a murder victim and a murderer.

A Tribune headline reported that her corpse had been horribly mutilated: "Fire Victim's Head Missing." Alongside Gunness' headless corpse were the bodies of three young children, apparently seeking refuge from the flames in their mother's embrace.

Ray Lamphere, her former hired hand, was arrested on suspicion of setting the fire. He had been seen around town in February wearing a fur coat that belonged to Asle Hegelien. Under questioning, he admitted being jealous of his successor.

"We got along all right before that and she used to come to my room at night," Lamphere said in his cell at the La Porte County Jail. "But after Helgelien came she had no use for me."

Meanwhile the authorities were digging in Gunness' farmyard searching for her missing head. It wasn't found, but other bodies were. Her neighbors had long looked at her suspiciously. Her husband had mysteriously died, five months after they were married six years earlier.

Peter Gunness was found in a pool of blood on the kitchen floor with a hole in the back of his head in 1902. She said a meat grinder had fallen off a shelf and hit him. An inquest was held and her explanation accepted, but her neighbors weren't buying it.

"Peter Gunness was killed with a meat grinder dropping on his head?" one woman asked an Indianapolis Star reporter.

"A very likely story!"

Six years later 10 bodies had been uncovered by the time Asle Helgelien arrived at the farm May 3. None resembled his brother, and he was ready to move on when he noticed a soft spot, suggesting soil had been removed. Digging was resumed, and a sack was discovered.

"The sack was opened and the pieces of the body fell out," the Tribune reported. "Helgelien almost fainted."

It was his brother, Andrew. By then the story had gone national, and Gunness was no longer its hero: a mother who died trying to protect her children.

From coast to coast, newspapers recognized the circulation benefits of the grisly tale. Gunness was proclaimed "the La Porte Ghoul," a "Female Bluebeard" and "Hell's Princess."

Local reporters matched their visiting colleagues' hyperbole. The Chicago Evening American said that if Edgar Allan Poe "were to come back to life he might write a new and more thrilling story of 'The Fall of the House of Usher,' " based on Gunness' farmyard full of graves.

Reporters pressed by editors, and Indiana officials by public outrage, looked into the backstory. They found that mysterious fires, unlikely deaths and handsome insurance settlements predated Gunness's arrival in La Porte.

She was born in Norway in 1859 with the given name was Brynhild Paulsdatter Storseth. She immigrated to Chicago, married Mads Sorenson, and when their two homes and a candy store burned they collected on insurance.

While Sorenson had life insurance, she persuaded him to buy another policy.

On July 30, 1900, the older policy expired and the new one kicked in. So when Sorenson died that day, Gunness collected money from both insurance companies, and with that $8,500 bought the farm near La Porte, about 60 miles east of Chicago

The mystery of her death in La Porte prompted the Chicago police to take another look at her husband's death.

"Considering the suspicious circumstances at the time with present developments, I am led to believe that M.D.A. Sorenson, the first husband of Belle Gunness, was poisoned," J.B. Miller, the Chicago doctor who conducted the inquest, said in May 1908.

By then La Porte's authorities realized that Andrew Helgelien was only one of the victims lured to Gunness' farm. The editor of the Skandinaven newspaper reported Gunness placed an ad with him identical to the one Helgelien read in Minneapolis' Norwegian newspaper.

"There are many young Norwegian farmers in the northwest who after becoming well to do, want to marry, but who have not had time to become acquainted with women," the Skandinaven's editor explained.

Hoping to tie up the mystery's loose ends, La Porte's district attorney put Ray Lamphere, the displaced hired hand, on trial for killing Gunness on May 12.

The public's morbid obsession boiled over. The Lake Erie and Western Railroad ran excursion trains from Chicago and Indianapolis. The town of 3,000 had 10,000 visitors. Every hotel room in La Porte and Michigan City was booked. The jury, being sequestered, slept on cots set up in the courthouse.

The strategy of Lamphere's attorney was straightforward: He wasn't guilty because Gunness wasn't dead. That idea was given traction in the court of public opinion by reported sightings of her. Fearing her crimes would be discovered, she must have faked her death. The headless corpse was her last victim.

The prosecutor countered by showing jurors Gunness' teeth. The sheriff had hired a veteran gold prospector who ran ashes from the farmhouse through a sluice.

"They're found!" the sheriff shouted when Louis Schultz produced a pair of dental bridges that Gunness' dentist verified were hers.

But at the trial the defense said Gunness might have removed them and tossed them into the cellar to sustain her ruse of perishing in the flames. Each side produced expert witnesses who debated the possibility of a layperson plucking an upper and lower bridge from her gums.

The jurors began their deliberations on the eve of Thanksgiving and resumed them the next day. Ten thought him guilty; two didn't. So they compromised and found Lamphere guilty of arson.

Still, the townsfolk hoped he would fill in the blanks.

He'd confessed to the Rev. Edwin Schell, who gave him spiritual guidance in the La Porte County Jail. But Schell said that whatever Lamphere told him was inviolable: "If I should reveal this confidence, the ministry would be discredited and would lose some of their power to do good by hearing confessions."

Sentenced to a minimum of two years in the Indiana State Prison in Michigan City, Lamphere neither publicly confessed nor proclaimed his innocence. There he died on Dec. 29, 1909, as the Tribune noted: "With the secrets of the Gunness murder farm buried forever in his breast."

Have an idea for Vintage Chicago Tribune? Share it with Ron Grossman and Marianne Mather at rgrossman@chicagotribune.com and mmather@chicagotribune.com.