

## TALES OF THE OLD WEST

### Benders: The Bloody Family

You surely remember the old saying that a family that murders together stays together, don't you? Me neither, but it is appropriate for the vilest family in American history and probably the first serial killers in the US. Credit for being first is given to Dr. H. H. Holmes who was active from 1890 to 1894. The Benders were known to be active from 1870 to 1873. They could have been active before that in another area.

Nobody knows where the Benders came from. They just showed up and homesteaded in Labotte County, Kansas in 1870. No one knows if they were actually a real family, but probably were not. Kate (the elder) and John Bender, Sr. were probably man and wife. It is not certain that John, Jr. and Kate were actually brother and sister, some say that they claimed to be man and wife. No one knows where they came from. Ma and Pa both talked with a very heavy German sounding accent and were often almost impossible to understand. John, Jr. had a slight accent and Kate had almost none at all.

Pa (far left) was judged to be about 60-years-old and Ma (second on left) was estimated by



some as young as 42 and as old as Pa. Some folks called Ma a "she-devil" because she was always mean. It has been reported that she was married several times and each marriage was followed by the groom's death from head wounds. Pa was

just as unfriendly as Ma. John Jr. (second on right) was about 25-years-old and considered by most to be a somewhat handsome young man. He had a tendency to give a silly little chuckle every time he spoke, and this led some folks to falsely believe he was a lame brain. The real brains and beauty in the family was Kate (far right). She was around 23, was cultivated and attractive and she spoke excellent English with very little accent. A self-proclaimed healer and psychic, she distributed flyers advertising her supernatural powers and her ability to cure illnesses, conducted séances and also gave lectures on spiritualism for which she gained notoriety for advocating free love. She even advocated that incest was no more of a sin than lawful sex on the marriage bed and murder was sometimes dictated for good. Kate's popularity became a large attraction for the Bender's inn. Although the elder Benders kept to themselves, Kate (photo at right) and her brother regularly attended Sunday school in nearby Harmony Grove. Kate was outgoing and aggressive. Men were immediately attracted to the tall, copper-haired beauty.

Many historians have written about the Bender family and there are only a couple things that all agree on and report the same information. First, their homestead was on the Osage Trail (later the Santa Fe Trail), the only east west road available at that time. So, the travelers were frequent, and the house was built 100 yards from the road. The house was approximately 16 feet by 24 feet with only one room. The Benders attached a canvas wagon cover to the ceiling and divided the room into two rooms. One room was the sleeping quarters for the family and contained two beds. The other room was the kitchen and dining room and a store for selling a few necessities to travelers and locals who didn't wish to go all the way to town. The room held a few cabinets and shelves for sugar, flour, tobacco, salt, canned tomatoes and peaches, horse-feed and black powder.

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Bender Inn at time of search

The Benders placed the dining table very near the dividing curtain and either a bench or chair was placed so that the back of the intended victim would be up against the curtain. After eating, Kate would entertain the victims and keep their attention on her. Either John Jr. or Pa would slip behind the curtain, and when sure the victim's head was against the curtain, a heavy hammer would be brought down hard on the top of the head. This would kill the person instantly, but Kate would make doubly sure and slit the throat. Under the table was a trapdoor covering a pit about five feet by six feet. The body would be dropped into the pit and be buried when it was safe to do so. Some writers place the trapdoor under the stove or under one of the beds, but having it located where the body lies makes a lot of sense.



The Benders did not kill local people. Not out of regard for their life, but fear of the suspicion if local people started coming up missing. Travelers could go weeks or months without being missed by friends or family. The trail itself was covered with thieves and Indians, so it could be assumed that was the cause for the missing person. They also did not kill if the potential victim was most likely not to have money. Kate's friendly conversation could usually illicit information like whether they were going west to buy land, a mine or supplies. This would indicate some possibility of cash. If they were traveling with first grade horses and fancy rigs that could be sold for cash, they became victims.

The second thing that all historians seem to agree on is that the murder of a man named York in the winter of 1872 was the murder that brought about the downfall of the Bender's heinous activities. York was also the last murder they would commit.

The number of actual murders they committed will never be known. But the following list almost certainly were all victims of the Benders and all except the young girl had the heads crushed and throats slit:

May 1871: A man named Jones was found in Drum Creek with crushed skull and slit throat

Winter 71/82: Two unidentified men with the same cause of death.

1872: Ben Brown buried in the orchard. \$2,600 missing:

1872: W. F. McCrotty—Co D 123rd Illinois Infantry. \$38 and a wagon with a team of horses missing.

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December 1872: Henry McKenzie—Relocating to Independence from Hamilton County, Indiana. \$36 and a matched team of horses missing.

December 1872: Johnny Boyle. From Howard County, Kansas. \$10, a pacing mare and an \$850 saddle missing. Found in the Benders well.

December 1872: George Loncher and his daughter (contemporary newspapers variously reported her age as either eight years old or 18 months old with the younger age more likely). \$1,900 missing. Buried together in the apple orchard. Some say she was strangled by a scarf around her neck. Most believe that she was buried alive.

Spring, 1873: Dr. William York. \$2,000. Buried in the apple orchard.

Unknown date: John Greary. Buried in the apple orchard.

Unknown date: Unidentified male. Buried in the apple orchard.

Unknown date: Unidentified female. Buried in the apple orchard.

Various body parts not belong to any of the above victims.

1873: During the search, the bodies of four unidentified male victims were found in the area around Drum Creek. All four had crushed skulls and throats cut. One may be Jack Bogart, whose horse was purchased from a friend of the Benders after he went missing in 1872.

With the exception of McKenzie, York and the Lonchers whose recovered remains were buried in Independence, none of the other bodies were claimed and they were reburied at the base of a mound one mile southeast of the Benders orchard.

At the same time as the search for bodies, the house was searched and three hammers were turned up that supposedly fit the holes in the skulls.

Sometimes, the downfall of a serial killer happens when the wrong person to kill is chosen as a victim. That is certainly true in the Bender case. During the winter of 1862, George Newton Longcor, or George Loncher, had to bury his wife in Independence, Kansas. Following the funeral, George and his young daughter left Independence to resettle in Iowa. The father and daughter were never seen or heard of after their departure. Loncher had been a neighbor of Dr. William Henry York, and the good doctor went in search of his friend. He searched all the way to Fort Scott, Kansas. Dr. York had a powerful brother living in Fort Scott, Colonel Alexander M. York a former Kansas State Senator. On March 9 Dr. York informed his brother that he was returning to Independence and gave him his travel plans. Along his route, he interviewed every homesteader about Loncher and his daughter. In May of 1873, he stopped at Bender's little inn.

When his brother failed to make it home, Colonel York began an all-out search. Leading a group of about 50 men, every traveler and homesteader was questioned. On March 28, 1873 he reached the Bender place. The Benders admitted that Dr. York had stayed there and suggested that an Indian attack or highway bandits along the way might be responsible for his disappearance. Colonel York agreed with that and had dinner with the Benders.

Colonel York learned of a woman who had fled from the Bender place after Ma Bender threatened her with a knife. On April 3, he returned to the Bender inn and Ma Bender alleged she did not understand English and the younger Benders denied the claim. When York repeated the claim, Ma Bender suddenly understood and spoke English and became enraged. She said the woman was a witch who had cursed her coffee and Ma Bender ordered York and his men to leave her house. Kate tried to smooth the situation over and told Colonel York that if he returned alone on Friday night she would use her psychic powers to find Dr. York. She claimed she would be unable to do this with all the men and unbelievers present. York's men wanted to hang all of them, but York refused until evidence could be found.

At the same time, the community was making noise that someone in the area must be responsible for all the disappearances. A meeting was arranged in the schoolhouse and the 75 attendees included Colonel York and John Sr. and Jr. It was decided that a search warrant for every homestead along that part of the road would be obtained. The weather turned bad and it was several days before a search could be organized.

Three days later a neighbor, Billy Tole, happened to notice that the inn seemed to be empty and that animals had not been fed. Tole went into town and reported the fact to the authorities.



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Again, the bad weather caused a delay of several days before his report could be investigated. The authorities called for volunteers and several hundred men including Colonel York, turned out for a search party. They found the inn to be in a complete mess and the only things missing were food, clothing and personal items. A really bad odor led them to the trapdoor which had been nailed shut. Upon opening the trap door, they discovered the small room and all the dried blood that had soaked into the soil, causing the odor. The stone floor was broken up with sledge hammers, but no bodies were found. The men then actually picked up the house and moved it out of the way so they could dig up the dirt. Again, no bodies were found. They then began to probe into the ground in the garden and orchard area with a metal rod. The rod brought up pieces of clothing and hair and the first body recovered was Dr. York (Grave photo at right) who had been buried face down. The probing continued long into the night and another nine suspected graves were marked for digging. The next day nine more bodies were recovered in eight graves, the Loncher child was buried lying on her father. They also uncovered numerous body parts that did not belong to the bodies that were recovered.



The search party was so angry that a friend of the Benders named Brockman was hung from a beam in the inn. After strangling for a bit, he was let down and questioned, then hung again. After the third hanging, they released him and he staggered home "as one who was drunken or deranged." After several weeks, Addison Roach, his son-in-law, and ten other men were arrested as accessories. It would have been impossible for the Benders to dispose of all the horses, carriages, clothing and other valuables stolen from the victims. These twelve men had helped in those tasks. One of these men was a member of the vigilance committee and he had been involved in forging a letter from one of the victims to the man's wife informing her that he had arrived safely at his destination.

Word of the murders spread like wild fire and 3,000 people gathered at the sight along with reporters from all over the country. Souvenir hunters completely destroyed the cabin. They took everything, including the bricks that lined the cellar and the stones lining the well. When they had collected everything, it wasn't possible to determine there had ever been a cabin.

Dr. York's brother offered a \$1,000 reward for the arrest of the Benders. On May 17, Governor Thomas A. Osborn offered a \$2,000 reward for the apprehension of all four.

Posses searching for the Benders followed wagon tracks till they found the Bender wagon abandoned near Thayer and an almost starved team still attached. A railroad agent confirmed that he had sold the Bender family four tickets on the Leavenworth, Lawrence & Galveston Railroad for Humboldt. The Benders were never seen or heard of again. From that point there is almost as many stories of what happened as there are writers of the tale.

One story has the younger Benders exiting the train in Chanute, Kansas and taking the Missouri, Kansas and Texas (Katy) Railroad to Dennison, Texas. They then traveled to an outlaw colony on the Texas and New Mexico border. One lawman claimed he had traced the pair to the border and found that John Jr. had died of apoplexy.

Supposedly, Ma and Pa did not leave the train in Humboldt, but went on through to Kansas City, where they purchased tickets to St. Louis.

Many stories claim that a vigilante group caught up with the Benders and shot all of them except Kate, and they burned her alive. Another vigilante group claimed to have hung all four of them and thrown the bodies into the Verdigris River. Another group claimed to have gotten into a gunfight with them, killed all four and buried the bodies on the prairie. Whatever, no one ever made an attempt to collect the reward and the search continued off and on for 50 years. Often groups of two women traveling alone would be arrested as the Bender women. It was reported

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that Pa committed suicide on Lake Michigan. On October 31, 1889 it was reported that a Mrs. Almira Monroe and Mrs. Eliza Davis had been arrested in Niles, Michigan (often reported as Detroit) weeks earlier and that their identities had now been confirmed by two witnesses from a tintype photograph. Mrs. Davis also signed an affidavit admitting that Mrs. Monroe was Ma Bender and they were both extradited to Oswego, Kansas for trial. Originally scheduled for February 1890, the trial was held over to May and, unwilling to accept the expense of boarding the two women for three months, the county released both.

In a recent book I read, *Pistol Pete: Veteran of the Old West*, Frank Eaton's autobiography, Frank said he was at the barn one morning when he heard his stepfather and one of the hands, Ben Saffle, talking. Frank's stepfather said to Ben, "Did you have any trouble with them?" Ben replied, "John and the old man were gentle as milk cows, but Kate fought like the devil. Look here." Ben raised his right arm showing a bloody bandage where a bullet had gone through. ... "I've got the gun that made it, but don't let the boys know or they'll make me throw it away." Ben told that the bodies and all the Bender belongings were placed in the Bender wagon and the whole thing driven into the Arkansas River. Eaton says that when his family moved to the Indian Territory, Ben gave him the gun and told him it had belonged to Kate Bender.

It is also plausible that the Benders got away scot free. If they did, there is no evidence that they went back into the same business. There are certainly more unanswered questions than answered. Function. In this respect she was very active. Were they actually a family, or just a group of killers? It is hard to believe that four killers could come together and somehow form a team. How many people did they actually kill? How did they dispose of all the horses and wagons? Did they have accomplices that helped them? Did these accomplices help to cover their flight? Did they get away scot free or were they caught by vigilantes? The true answers will never be known.

Another remarkable story is told in the June 1972 issue of *True Frontier* magazine. In 1950, a supposed highly respected minister died in Missouri. Among his effects, his son found a confession written in long hand as requested by the confessor. Reverend Cole promised to make it public after the confessor died. The death occurred in December of 1935. Pastor Cole decided not to make the confession public. The writer of the article says that he was given permission to read the original copy and publish it for the first time. Pastor Cole had attached a note to the confession which said in part, "*When Dorothy Hamm called, as we have known her for years, I was not in the least surprised thinking she wanted to discuss some church function. In this respect, she was very active. Then she informed me that she was the notorious Kate Bender. I could not believe it. But when she began her confession, all doubt left my mind. No human on God's green earth would confess to this diabolic existence, unless she was that person.*"

The article then states that Kate Bender died on December 17, 1935 and then prints the alleged confession in its entirety, which I will not do. It says she was born December 13, 1850 in Chicago. Her name was Mary Ann Baree. Her father was a well-to-do harness maker. She claims she was accused of being a witch by the age of ten. She would destroy small children's toys just to hear them cry. At age 15 a boy threw a stone at her. She lured him into the basement of a deserted house and killed him.

At seventeen she visited her grandfather, which she was not allowed to do. She felt he embraced her inappropriately and struck him several times. He took a switch to her and sent her home. Instead she watched him chop wood and when the chance came, she took a small ax and beat him to death. She buried the body and went home. A week later he was reported missing. She became afraid, stole her father's money and caught a train to Kansas City.

She got a job, enticed a big, strong coworker John Hardwick to become her partner in crime. She lured a fine young westerner to a secluded spot on the river. John struck the guy with a large hammer, put the body in his carriage and pushed it into the river. She got \$300 off the body and gave John \$50. The next victim was an old lady that hired John as a handy man. John discovered where she kept her money. She was also struck on the head with a hammer and thrown down a well. The house yielded \$700 and was burned down.

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She rented a furnished house and began holding séances. A German couple named Alfred and Myrtal Holtz came to contact a dead relative. She talked them into a get rich scheme and the Bender family was born. (The confession continued and sounded very much like what we know took place in Kansas.) During the getaway, she decided that the rest of the members had served their purpose. She poisoned the Holtzs and stabbed John while they were in an embrace. (She does not say what she did with the Holtz bodies.) She left John laying where he died. She went to St. Louis, married a grocer named Hamm. He died of natural causes. She sold the business later on and moved to Springfield, Missouri where she died. There was no significance to the Kate Bender name. She stayed in the Kate rooming house and out her window was the Bender saloon.

Is it true? Who knows? But if it were believed and proven, the Bender story would have a closing.

Sources: True Frontier, July 1973, There-Headed Witch of LaBette County by Fred Harrison  
True Frontier, June 1972, Confession of Kate Bender ... Self Styled Devil's Disciple, by Wayne Montgomery  
Real West, April 1984, The Bloody Benders by Eve Ball  
Pioneer West, April 1970, Bloody Benders of Kansas  
Badman, Summer 1971, Cabin of Death by Warren Kuhn  
*Golden West, November 1968, The Goings on at the bender Place by Vera Holding*  
*Several Internet sites*