

The Mysterious Death of Jane Stanford

For those of you who may be new to Summit history, here 's a little background. Leland Stanford was one A"Big Four" of the Central Pacific Railroad, which along with the Union Pacific created the first transcontinentalrailroad Leland Stanford was governor of California and US. Senator, as well as a major stock holder in the CPPR. In the other Stanford stories on this site you will learn more about this interesting couple but for now, let 's go to the end of the story and the widow Jane Stanford.

You often find history in unexpected places and sometimes real events read like an Agatha Christy mystery. While visiting Waikiki a few winters ago, we toured the oldest hotel there, the Moana, built in 1901. Poking around its history room I found an article written by an investigative reporter about the death of Jane Stanford, widow of Leland Stanford.

After Leland's death, Jane remained in their Nob Hill mansion in San Francisco, with her servants and her long time companion and secretary, Bertha Berner. On January 14, 1905, Jane noticed a peculiar taste in her Poland mineral water, which she used as an emetic and took daily. Taking it to a pharmacist he reported that the water contained 3/4 gram of strychnine. Fearing for her life Dr. Jordan, president of Stanford University, urged her to get away and so she set sail for Hawaii with her companion and maid. Of course she stayed at the luxurious Moana.

On February 28, she and her companion took a carriage to the Pali for a picnic. She later attended a 6:00 dinner, and then visited with other guests on the verandah, finally retiring at 8:30. As was her usual routine she took bicarbonate of soda and Cascara (a popular laxative at the time).

At eleven o'clock her companion was awakened by her screams and cries, "I am so sick. I think I've been poisoned again!".A doctor, who was a guest at the hotel, came to her aid and administered emetics and called for another doctor. Jane Stanford went into violent convulsions and rigors and at 11:40 was pronounced dead. Both doctors and coroner described her death as a "classic case of strychnine poisoning introduced by some person or persons unknown.."

Dr. Jordan, friend Timothy Hopkins, and two detectives immediately sailed to Hawaii to make arrangements for Jane's return to San Francisco.

Now, comes the mystery. Dr. Jordan, when he returned to San Francisco, hired detectives and doctors to discredit the investigation in Honolulu and was somewhat successful. For example, the author of the book, Jane Stanford, Her Life and Letters, Gunther W. Nagel, accepts Jordan's theory that Jane died of a coronary. In the latest book about the affair, The Mysterious Death of Jane Stanford, Robert W.P. Cutler, M.D. shows that Jane was poisoned by the strychnine in the bicarbonate of soda that was purchased in Palo Alto prior to the Poland water poisoning.

I thought it was too late for a "Cold Case File" investigation since most of the pharmaceutical records and reports were destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and fire, but Dr. Cutler has done just that.

As to who did it. The only suspects are the butler, the maid, and her companion Bertha Berner. Dr. Jordan and Jane had a huge falling out over a professors politics and antics, but Dr. Cutler felt that Jordan's motive for covering up the poisoning was to save any notoriety that would be connected to the university. To that end, he was successful, as most writers used his evidence to concur with the heart attack story. After all the reading, I agree with Dr. Cutler. She was poisoned, and I chose the maid. The motive; jealousy. She hoped the blame would fall on Bertha Berner. But, then again, maybe the butler did it.

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