

10-2011

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Recommended Citation

Hanners, John (2011) "'We Just Come in to See the Show.'" Velma Patterson's Sensational 1936 Hunt County Murder," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 49 : Iss. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol49/iss2/10>

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**“We Just Come in to See the Show’:
Velma Patterson’s Sensational 1936 Hunt County Murder Trial”**

BY JOHN HANNERS

Velma Patterson died on January 2, 1993, in a hospital in Sulphur Springs, Hopkins County, Texas. Ninety years old, she died as she had lived, an enigma to the end. And to the vexation of those who want to know more about her character and motives, she also took with her the truth, a slippery thing to begin with, behind the events that made her one of the most notorious individuals in Northeast Texas history.

Patterson was a rebel whose lifestyle defied Northeast Texas notions of marriage, family, and decorum. She lived life on the wild side, gathering around her men, money, and liquor—lots of liquor, nearly all of it illegal. Nicknamed “Voluptuous Velma” by the newspapers, she was, in the lingo of the day, both a “looker” and a “fast” woman, who married four husbands by the time she was thirty-four years old.¹

What separated Patterson from the rest of her flamboyant Great Depression contemporaries was that she stood accused of that most heinous of crimes—felicide. She was indicted, arrested, and tried in 1936 for murdering her two daughters, eleven-year-old Billie Fae and twelve-year-old Dorothy Leon.

Her trial drew national attention, attracted spectators in record numbers to a Hunt County courtroom gallery, and exposed some uncomfortable truths about the accepted Northeast Texas social order. Accounts from Greenville and Commerce newspapers and court records in Hopkins, Delta, Lamar, and Hunt Counties provide the known facts.

She was born Velma Williams on April 1, 1902, in Hopkins County. Her folks, hard-scrabble cotton farmers, were from the Cumby/Brashears area. In his Audie Murphy biography, Don Graham explains to non-Southerners that in the world of cotton farming, lunch is called dinnertime, dinnertime is called supper, and there is no cocktail hour. It was obvious early on that Velma wanted the cocktail hour but not the cotton farm. She married twenty-eight-year-old William Wesley

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McCasland in Sulphur Springs in October 1917, when she was only fifteen-years old.² Velma claimed she married McCasland, called Vester by friends and family, out of spite. She loved another boy that her father objected to, so when McCasland showed up she ran off and married him. The couple came back to Sulphur Springs to live. When Prohibition came in 1920, Vester began his checkered criminal career running bootleg whiskey.³ The couple had three children: William, Jr., Billy Fae, and Dorthy Leon.

Velma divorced McCasland in 1928 while he was serving his second state prison term for bootlegging. The two maintained a friendly relationship until the 1936 murder trial when they turned on each other with a vengeance. After the divorce Velma moved to Commerce, Hunt County, and from 1929 until 1931, she claimed that she was married to a railroad brakeman and bootlegger named Raymond W. Kelly.⁴ The children apparently caused friction in their marriage, an omen perhaps of future tragic events. "We got along famously," Velma said of her relationship with Kelly, "until difficulties arose because of the children . . . he made me a good husband."⁵ A more plausible reason is that Kelly was caught "transporting a load of illicit whiskey from Oklahoma" and went to prison. Rumors floated that Velma had turned him in to clear the way for husband number three.⁶

After the short-lived marriage to Kelly, Velma learned the hairdressing trade and opened up a beauty shop under her first married name, McCasland. Permanents were \$2.50 and up, and finger waves, a hairstyle favored by Velma until her death nearly sixty years later, were twenty-five cents.⁷

She married a third time in 1932 to William R. "Willie" Patterson, yet another bootlegger, and the criminal partner of her first husband, Vester McCasland. Twelve years older than Velma, Willie was a fun-loving, practical joker and a divorced father of four children. He is listed in the *1935 Commerce City Directory* as a trader, but the only thing he seems to have traded was whiskey for money. Patterson was arrested several times for illegal possession, and he, like his partner McCasland, was little more than a bad-luck petty criminal with big intentions.⁸ Patterson and McCasland loaded up their cars with whiskey, according to police records, in amounts ranging from eighteen to thirty-two gallons and delivered throughout Hunt, Delta, and Hopkins County.⁹ Bootleggers and moonshiners in the area came from all walks of life.

However, most were farmers, men who had easy access to remote locations and the machinery necessary for producing the potentially-lethal hooch. The two most lucrative sales periods were the Christmas season and summer church revivals, where liquor provided holiday relief during the worst of the Depression—and, in the latter case, relief from overzealous preachers. Authorities likely caught Patterson and McCasland so often because of an early example of police profiling. Primitive suspension systems on 1930s automobiles meant that a load of whiskey forced a vehicle down low to the ground, making it easy for police to spot bootleggers. The accepted pursuit procedure was to shoot out the car's tires.¹⁰

Patterson, like Velma's first husband, McCasland, went to State prison for running whiskey. It appears that in their absences Velma took up the slack. She acquired a "maid," more likely a prostitute, an attractive, fiery woman named Annie Cooper, and the two of them set up house at Harrington and Fourth Streets in Commerce. The well-mannered children attended school regularly despite their unusual home life with its all-night parties, bootleg liquor, and prostitution. Velma was frequently absent, attending late-night dances in Wolfe City, Paris, and at East Texas State Teacher's College, where she and her dates were fixtures at the President's Annual Christmas Ball. It must have been quite a sight to see Velma cavorting among middle-aged professors and their prim, disapproving wives. Velma was described by a contemporary in 1934 as being a "tall, medium-framed woman with dark hair and a very neat and attractive person." The children attended Central School, where they were universally well-liked and "always . . . well dressed" by their mother.¹¹

During the late summer and fall of 1935, Velma lived through two traumatic events that started a tailspin from which she never recovered. First, her husband, Bill Patterson, died from injuries suffered during an impromptu wrestling match with his brother Fred. He endured agonizing pain for several days, finally expiring of peritonitis during an emergency operation at a Greenville hospital. He was forty-four-years old.¹² After her trial, Velma claimed that Patterson was the only man she ever loved.¹³ She used his life insurance money, \$1,300, to buy a new house by the railroad yards in northeast Commerce.¹⁴

Then, on November 24, Velma was seriously injured in an automobile accident. Driving her late-model automobile to Shiloh, a

small Delta County town, she took a curve on a county road at too high a speed, skidded on the wet highway, and slammed into a stalled car that had run out of gas. A third vehicle rear-ended her car. A woman passenger, a friend of Velma's, unidentified, but probably Annie Cooper, was thrown into a field. Velma suffered head injuries so severe that she was taken to a hospital in Allen, some seventy miles away to the west.¹⁵

Meanwhile Vester McCasland, paroled after his second prison stint, was living with his father in Sulphur Springs. In December he moved in with Velma to help care of the children. Soon after, he and Annie Cooper became lovers.¹⁶

Things then got tragically worse. Just after New Year's 1936, a mysterious illness struck eleven-year old Billy Fae. A local doctor diagnosed it as "intestinal influenza," and she suffered from convulsions, high fever, delirium, sensitive joints, and an inability to urinate. She lingered four agonizing days, dying at last on January 7.¹⁷ On January 13 a paid advertisement in the *Commerce Daily Journal* read "In memory of Billie Faye [sic] McCasland . . . quiet, noble, gentle, obedient, and ambitious child."¹⁸

Then Dorothy Leon, Velma's younger daughter fell ill. She suffered horrible pains for several days, displaying all of her old sister's symptoms, before dying on February 16. Dorothy was twelve years old. Within six weeks, Velma had lost both of her daughters. The girls were interred in a family plot at Pleasant Grove Cemetery, just outside Cumby in Hopkins County.

The coincidences of the girls' deaths were too much for Hunt County Sheriff D.M. Newton. A World War I veteran and former Cotton Belt Railroad engineer, Newton did not buy the "intestinal influenza" diagnosis. It did not help his suspicions that party girl Velma was a member of a criminal enterprise that he seemed incapable of eradicating or even slowing down—arrests for bootlegging actually went *up* in dry Hunt County *after* Prohibition was repealed. Hunt County Prosecutor Henry Pharr convened a grand jury to investigate the deaths. Sheriff Newton simultaneously asked the Commissioners Court for an order to exhume the girls' bodies. Velma gave her consent, and the bodies were dug up. Bits and pieces of internal organs were removed and placed in glass jars, which were then transported to Dallas to the private laboratory of the noted chemist Dr. Landon C. Moore.¹⁹ Moore, born in England and the Chief Chemist for the City of Dallas, as well as the

grandson of a former Ohio governor, had earned a PhD at Harvard, where he taught chemistry to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. For the past thirty years, he had busily carved out a career and persona in Texas. His social schedule and cheery exploits brought him much attention in the local newspapers, with descriptions of his elite get-togethers at his mansion on Ekard Street. He had also once owned a motion picture house and a prize-winning filly named "Colonial Girl." However, his penchant for amusements later came back to vex him during Velma's trial.²⁰ He was as "connected" as possible, claiming as a brother the man who discovered helium.

Moore developed his unique rapport with juries early in his career. He had testified in a 1902 murder trial of a Commerce man accused of killing his wife with strychnine. Before a spellbound jury and a packed gallery, Moore injected a frog with strychnine, and as the assemblage watched the hapless amphibian die, Moore carefully pointed out the effects of the poison on the nervous system. He then dissected the frog, showing the jury how he looked for traces of strychnine.²¹

Now, thirty years later, Moore was comfortably middle-aged and at the peak of a distinguished career. He reported to Hunt County officials that he had discovered a "large quantity of poison" in Billie Fae's and Dorothy Leon's "viscera." The children were murdered with arsenic "administered in either food, medicine, or drink." A grand jury indicted Velma on March 31, and Sheriff Newton arrested her on the charge of murdering Billy Fae. He also jailed Vester McCasland and Annie Cooper as material witnesses.²²

The reaction was electric. Reporters from across the country flocked to Hunt County and breathlessly recorded the personal backgrounds and daily doings of all the principals. Deputy Sheriff V.L. Delaney told reporters that a search of Velma's cell had turned up "a bottle of poison, a razor blade, and several letters, in which she gave instructions for disposition in the event of her death and also instructions for the care of her fifteen-year-old son."²³ The poison turned out to be a bottle of Lysol to disinfect her cell—Velma was always excessively neat—the razor blade, in fact, a knife. The suicide notes were apparently genuine.²⁴

Velma told reporters, from the *Commerce Farm Weekly*, that she was innocent:

I'm not a Christian. I have done things that a lot of

good mothers wouldn't do, but I firmly believe that God won't let an innocent person suffer for something they did not do. . . I am doing every thing I possibly can to get cleared. It cost plenty to get the children exhumed. I had to put up my house, sell my rings, and my people are spending all they have.

She explained that she had tried her best to be a good mother. She spent money on violin lessons for Junior, expression lessons for Dorthy, and tap dancing lessons for Billie Fae. "That was my only purpose in life," she cried, "to bring those girls up to be something."²⁵

Meanwhile, down the hall her fellow prisoner, Vester McCasland, would have none of it. He blamed Velma squarely for the deaths. "That woman is mean enough to do anything," he said. "She framed me on a liquor charge in order to get me sent to the 'pen,'" all in an effort to effect a divorce so that she could consort with Raymond Kelly.²⁶ Rumors swirled that she had already turned on Raymond as well.²⁷

The prosecutors, three courtroom veterans, first indicted Velma for Billy Fae's death, then reversed themselves and charged her instead with murdering Dorthy Leon. After several delays and a postponement, the trial began in earnest on Monday, April 27, 1936. Velma arrived in a "gay tailored suit bought especially for the occasion." She topped it off with a large blue hat with a large buckle at the front. Her skirt, "split in accordance with the fashion, revealed her shapely legs."²⁸ The prosecution offered the jury—twelve men, all cotton farmers—a two-pronged theory for the murders.

First, Velma had a lover, a wealthy Lone Oak cattleman named Jimmie R. Wallace. In the bluntest terms, the girls stood in the way of her relationship with Wallace, and their elimination, as Annie Cooper would testify, would leave her free to marry him.

Second, Velma had two life insurance policies worth \$551 on Dorthy with the American Life Insurance Company, a considerable sum during the Depression and equal to half a year's income for many cotton farmers. The insurance motive probably was the reason the prosecution dropped Billie Fae from the indictment and replaced her with Dorthy. In the end it did not really matter. In an extraordinary move, the trial judge, Charles Berry, a long-serving and experienced jurist, allowed in full testimony about Billy Fae's death.

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The defense, composed of an expensive cracker-jack team led by local attorneys Charles C. McKinney and G.C. Harris, insisted that 1) the flu medicine given to both Billie Fae and Dorthy Leon was a bismuth compound fatally contaminated with arsenic at a local drug store or 2) McCasland and Annie Cooper conspired to murder the girls for reasons unknown or 3) natural arsenic found in the ground at the girls' gravesite contaminated their remains during the removal process. G.C. Harris proved a particularly effective advocate. An iconic Texas lawyer, he was a man whose "down home manner . . . made him the literal embodiment of [a] dominating courtroom presence."²⁹

The parade of witnesses, from respectable physicians and pharmacists to Velma's friends from the world of prostitution and bootlegging, fascinated a gallery made up almost entirely of dirt-poor farm women who traveled through rain and mud and unseasonably hot weather to attend. It was standing room only in the small courtroom throughout the seven-day trial. Most of the women were elderly, revealing, a newspaper man said, "weather-tanned work-drawn faces and crude clothing [that] mark them as coming right off the farm. Many brought their lunches and stayed in the Hunt County courtroom from 7 a.m. until the 5:00 p.m. recess." One said, "It's seldom something like this happens around here and we just come in to see the show."

And what a show it was! Judge Berry admonished the audience that he would not stand for "foolishness," but during the trial he banged his gavel frequently, trying in vain to hush the crowd that insisted on discussing among themselves each witness's testimony. Berry banned one woman altogether for refusing to take her crying baby outside.³⁰

Dozens of witnesses testified to things like Velma's purchase of a popular rodent poison called "Rough-on-Rats," even though McCasland testified that he actually bought the packets and whether or not rats were present in the Patterson home. Newspapers dutifully recorded Velma's stylish daily outfits and commented on her carefully arranged brunette hair. She was described in terms more befitting a movie star than a desperate woman on trial for her life.

Annie Cooper and Vester McCasland testified about incriminating statements Velma allegedly made concerning her lover Wallace, her remarks that she soon would have enough money to repair her wrecked car, and her apparent callousness towards the dying girls. The star witness was Annie who, dressed in a fetching green lace-topped dress

and displaying a single finger curl at her forehead, testified that she was a divorcee who worked as Velma's maid. A volatile witness—she had, after all, just spent six weeks in the county jail—her “eyes frequently flash[ed] . . . [as] she bent forward in her chair and pointed her finger” at defense attorneys.³¹ Expert witnesses testified to the pros and cons of contaminated bismuth used as flu medicine and possible arsenic contamination at the gravesites during exhumation.

The most important witness, however, was the gray-haired, rotund Dr. Landon C. Moore, former cinema and race horse owner, distinguished Harvard graduate and Dallas City Chemist. For two solid hours he described, in long and often excruciating detail, his methods of examining little bits and pieces of stomach, liver and kidneys. His findings, he said, were irrefutable: the girls had been poisoned with several grains of arsenic each, mixed in with their bismuth-based flu medicine, and probably soup as well, and fed to them by their mother.³²

The defense countered as best they could with expert testimony of their own. They, too, reportedly had the bodies exhumed and examined, but the results were never announced or presented at trial. Harris tried his best to shift the blame on the pharmacist who prepared the bismuth solution or the nefarious team of McCasland and Annie Cooper. Friends, relatives, and beauty shop operators testified about Velma's fierce devotion to her children. The “sarcastic and belligerent” Cooper was recalled to the stand for cross examination and, defiant to the last, denied any sinister involvement in the girls' deaths. She testified that she took care of the dying children and that Velma was in bed with Jimmie Wallace the night Dorothy fell ill. Much was made of the fact that McCasland did not attend Dorothy's funeral, and Cooper suggested his non-appearance was the result of illness, although others testified that he was just too drunk to go.³³

On the last day of trial, a Saturday, May 2, 1936, Annie showed up in a “white dress, her hair carefully waved, her face smoothly powdered.” She didn't flinch when in summation defense attorney C.C. McKinney called McCasland “Annie Cooper's Man.”³⁴ Velma appeared bright and cheerful throughout the summations, kissing relatives and shaking hands with friends. A special visitor that last day was Captain Billy Arnold, a mostly deaf 100-year-old Greenville pioneer. Judge Berry let him sit at the court railing, commenting that “any man who has lived 100 years deserves some special consideration.” The spectators, who

had paid dearly for their own seats, applauded.³⁵

Prosecutor Pharr, summoning his full rhetorical powers, demanded the death penalty for Velma. Special Counsel James Benton Morgan, on loan from the State to help with the prosecution, blamed Velma's alleged murders on old-fashioned lust for Lone Oak cattleman Jimmie Wallace. Quoting from the *Song of Solomon*, Morgan declared that "a woman in the arms of her passionate lover is a slave."³⁶ A month before in the indictment, H.O. Norwood, second chair to DA Pharr, was more philosophical: "I don't know what was in her mind. We have just got to struggle and guess."³⁷ The jury, led by foreman Fletcher B. Bland, retired at 4:55 p.m. The one thing everyone had anticipated never occurred. Velma Patterson, to the gallery's disappointment, never took the stand in her own defense.

The jury deliberated until 3 p.m. the next day, and at 3:15 marched into the courtroom with their verdict in hand. District Attorney Pharr was absent, out of town visiting relatives. The other attorneys had to scramble to get to the courthouse on short notice and on a Sunday.³⁸

The jury's verdict?

Not Guilty.

The courtroom erupted. Velma "shouted with joy as the verdict was announced." She ran to the jury box and shook hands with each jury member and the judge. She "bubbled over with enthusiasm . . . smiling and speaking animatedly." Velma's mother, a "devout member of the Holiness faith turned the courtroom into a semblance of a camp meeting when she shouted for several minutes."³⁹ The trial was finally over.

One of the jury members, Bill Riddle, who farmed just north of Commerce, later told a newspaper reporter that the jury immediately rejected the testimony of lovers Vester McCasland and Annie Cooper, and that decision made the final verdict inevitable. Judge Riddle told the jury that if they believed McCasland's and Cooper's versions of events, they would have to convict Velma. If they did not, they would have to return a "not guilty" verdict. "So there was nothing to do," Riddle said, "but turn her loose because we couldn't believe those two." Landon Moore, however, came in for special derision. "He was just an old windjammer," Riddle snorted, adding:

The jury didn't care about how many times he'd been
across the ocean or how he was the grandson of one of

the few Democratic governors of Ohio. Why, he told himself how he ran a picture show at Cooper and about owning a race horse. I'd rather believe a home doctor anyway.

Pharr's closing argument "made us all tired," he said. "I didn't even listen to him because I had my mind made up after the first day."⁴⁰

However, Velma's troubles were not over. Sheriff Newton, smarting over her acquittal, slapped Velma with seven liquor violations to keep her in jail until District Attorney Pharr could charge her with Billie Fae's murder. Her total bail for the two crimes was \$8,800. Nine people came forward to post the amount, but Newton rejected them all. Velma's lawyers filed a mandamus petition and, three weeks after her trial, she was finally released.⁴¹ Her acquittal resulted in the political ruin of the sheriff, his deputy, and most of the elected prosecution staff—they were fired or voted out in the next election.

Velma was scheduled to be tried for Billie Fae's murder in November 1936, but the prosecution's ace witness, Dr. Moore, fell ill; the new political regime dragged its feet, and a second trial never took place. Two years later, State's Special Counsel Morgan was quoted as saying, "[I]f a jury wouldn't stick a woman on what we gave them the last time, there is no use trying." Newly-elected Sheriff Frank Wolfe thought the case "might as well be pushed back into some pigeonhole and forgotten."⁴²

Velma did her best to fade into obscurity. She left Commerce to live with her parents in Charleston, TX, Delta County. Then, a year and a half after her trial, on November 27, 1937, she married her fourth husband, Newton "Bud" Bates, a small, wiry former professional wrestler turned dairy farmer.⁴³ She married Bates in Paris, Texas, under the name "Marie," her middle name, perhaps to throw reporters off her trail. The couple settled down on a small Charleston farm, joined the East Delta Baptist Church across the road, and Velma spent the next fifty-six years living the very life she had worked so hard to escape: Velma Williams McCasland Kelly Patterson Bates—farmer's wife. The self-confessed non-Christian is buried in the East Delta Baptist Church graveyard.

Nevertheless, Hunt County did not give up. Long after the girls' deaths, the District Attorney announced in 1958 that he was indicting

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Velma anew, this time for murdering Billie Fae. The indictment eventually was dismissed “because evidence was not available [Chemist Landon had died in 1942] and the offence [sic] occurred more than twenty-two years ago.”⁴⁴

The verdict never answered the numerous questions the trial raised, such as if she did not do it, who did and why? Such questions created a mystery, an almost legendary quality around Velma Patterson, all of it negative.⁴⁵ But for an intense week in 1936, she was right where she apparently wanted to be—center stage—fighting for her life, unapologetic, a defiant woman thumbing her nose at social conformity.

Meanwhile, the victims of this story generated their own tangled narrative. There are *four* headstones marking Billie Fae and Dorthy Leon’s graves in Cumby’s Pleasant Grove Cemetery. Two sit at the back next to their step-father Willie Patterson’s marker, and two are in the Williams family plot at the front. Their names are spelled differently.⁴⁶ Even in death the girls could find no single resting place.

(Endnotes)

¹Peter Levine, “What Happened to Justice?” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 7 August 1936.

²Hopkins County (TX) Marriage Records, Book MA, Vo. 15, p. 211.

³*Greenville (TX) Evening Banner*, May 4, 1936. *The Dallas Morning News*, March 22, 1936.

⁴*Dallas Morning News*, March 22, 1936.

⁵*Evening Banner*, May 4, 1936.

⁶*Inquirer*, August 7, 1936.

⁷Clipping, *The Daily Journal* (Commerce, TX), June 1, 1932, Velma Patterson Vertical File [Patterson File], Commerce (TX) Public Library *Messenger*, January 19, 1933.

⁹Criminal Docket 508, Hunt County, Texas.

¹⁰See Bill O’Neal, “Bootlegging in Northeast Texas,” *ETHJ* 22 (Fall 1984): 13-20.

¹¹ Kathy Dunham, "Notes," typewritten, Patterson File.

¹² *Daily Journal*, August 20, 1935.

¹³ *Evening Banner*, May 4, 1936.

¹⁴ *Inquirer*, August 7, 1936.

¹⁵ *Daily Journal*, November 25, 1935.

¹⁶ *Morning News*, April 29, 1936.

¹⁷ *Morning News*, April 29, 1936.

¹⁸ *Morning News*, March 17, 1936.

¹⁹ *Daily Journal*, January 13, 1936.

²⁰ *Morning News*, March 12, 1936.

²¹ *Morning News*, March 12, 1936.

²² *Messenger*, April 28, 1936.

²³ *Morning News*, March 21, 1936.

²⁴ *Morning News*, March 21, 1936.

²⁵ Clipping, *Commerce Farm Weekly*, March 27, 1936, Patterson File.

²⁶ *Daily Journal*, April 14, 1936.

²⁷ *Daily Journal*, April 14, 1936.

²⁸ *Inquirer*, August 7, 1936.

²⁹ Jim Conrad, "Lawyers Dominated in Earlier Days" in "Blackland Memories," *Greenville Herald Banner*, December 2, 2002.

³⁰ *Daily Journal*, April 30, 1936.

³¹ *Evening Banner*, April 29, 1936.

³² *Morning News*, April 29, 1936.

³³ *Evening Banner*, May 4, 1936.

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³⁴ *Evening Banner*, May 4, 1936.

³⁵ *Evening Banner*, May 1, 1936.

³⁶ *Morning News*, May 3, 1936.

³⁷ Hunt County Criminal Record 38, p. 689.

³⁸ *Morning News*, May 3, 1936.

³⁹ *Evening Banner*, May 2, 1936; *Commerce Weekly Farm Journal*, May 8, 1936, Patterson File.

⁴⁰ *Farm Journal*, May 8, 1936, Patterson File.

⁴¹ *Morning News*, May 16, 18, 19, 23, 1936.

⁴² *Daily Journal*, November 9, 1938.

⁴³ Lamar County (TX) Marriage Records, Vol. 39, p. 412.

⁴⁴ *The Commerce (TX) Journal*, July 16, 1997, Patterson File.

⁴⁵ Dee Rinkes-Marshall, a former archival librarian at Texas A&M University-Commerce, conducted numerous interviews with area residents concerning the Patterson case and amassed a wealth of folklore about Velma Patterson.

⁴⁶ The various spellings of the girls' names on grave markers, newspapers, court records, and letters include Billy Faye, Billie Fay, Billy Fae, Billie Fae, Billy Fay and Dorothy Leon, Dorthy Leone, Dorthy Leon. I have used the spellings laid out in the official court indictments.