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The True Story Behind The Legend of Anna's Ghost

Posted by [thebridge](#) on [October 16, 2015](#) in [2015 Issues](#), [Features](#), [News & Features](#), [October 15 – November 4, 2015](#)

by Michelle Singer

MONTPELIER — It was dawn. A light rain fell. A lone woman in a black dress and Mackintosh walked up College Street toward Main Street. As neighbors stirred in their homes, the morning air suddenly echoed with the sound of gunshot. Witnesses saw a woman walk back down College Street and recognized her as Mildred Brewster.

She turned down East Liberty Street and approached the home of C. E. Bugbee. She waited on the porch for 10 minutes before she knocked on the door. Anna Wheeler, Mildred's rival for the love and, some say, hand of John "Jack" Wheeler, opened the door. It was 7 a.m. on May 29, 1897 and the most sensational murder in Central Vermont would take place within the next hour.

If you ask someone at the Vermont College of Fine Arts about their resident ghost, Anna, they might tell you she was a beautiful young woman that was murdered by Mildred right there in College Hall. You will hear the words 'jealous,' 'lover' and 'tower.' You might hear the version in which Mildred pushes Anna down the stairs of the tower or the one that claims she was murdered outside the building and the tower was the last thing she saw before she died.

That's what I heard this past summer when I became the program assistant for the MFA in Writing program at the college and found out that my office was called "Anna's Hangout," complete with an access door to the very tower she is said to haunt. I wasn't there a week before a student came by with a letter written to Anna. I tacked the sealed envelope onto the bulletin board next to the tower door and started to wonder.

Anna the ghost has been at Vermont College of Fine Arts, formerly Vermont College, Montpelier Seminary and many other incarnations, for as long as the program director of the writing program and my boss, Louise Crowley, can remember, and she's been with the program for 35 years. "There have always been stories about Anna," she told me. "The stories go way back, but the way people describe Anna is always the same — she's not malicious. She is a presence, maybe mischievous, but not threatening."

The more I asked about Anna, the more stories I heard of doors closing suddenly, items mysteriously relocating, pictures falling off walls in unison and glass breaking. One story



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involved furniture inexplicably moving to block the door of an empty and locked office. It's even rumored that when a ghost team was brought in, they could not claim there wasn't activity.

Anna is such an acknowledged presence that last year the college set up a pop-up café in the building and called it Café Anna in her honor. Consider the quote by F. Scott Fitzgerald that you will find on the wall of the fourth floor: "Draw up your chair close to the edge of the precipice and I'll tell you a story." It's no surprise that Anna has continued to find a home at College Hall: She is among people who appreciate a good story. And it is a riveting story.

On that drizzling Saturday morning in 1897, Anna, born Carrie Anna Wheeler in East Montpelier, was a 17-year-old woman who had plans to meet her fiancé, Jack Wheeler (no relation, I looked them up on ancestry.com), to catch the 8:30 a.m. train to Barre for the Decoration Day festivities. Jack was by all accounts a handsome 22-year-old stonemason working in the Fraser & Broadfoot granite sheds. According to newspaper reports of the time, Anna was living on East Liberty Street where she was employed for domestic work in the home of her cousins, the Bugbees.

Mildred, born Lena Merilla Brewster in Huntington, Vermont, was 20 years old when she climbed up Clay Hill that morning to practice firing the gun she had bought the week before at G.J. Reynolds & Son in Barre. She had been working as a seamstress for Ledden & Campbell, among other odd jobs, and boarding at a home on Barre Street, but had lost her job just weeks before. The testimony of Clarence Bugbee tells us that she walked to his home and stood on the porch for ten minutes before she knocked on the door.

The two women spent forty-five minutes in conversation at the house, during which Mildred was heard to say, "Jack Wheeler can't be engaged to us both; we will have to let him decide." They were seen walking together in conversation under one umbrella down College Street, past what was then the Montpelier Seminary and is now College Hall, toward Jack's home on Sibley Avenue.

Shortly after they turned onto a dirt by-way that cut across the fields to Sibley Avenue, in view of Jack's house, Mildred shot Anna and then herself. She used a 32 caliber revolver and shot both herself and Anna in the head, just below the ear. Witnesses saw the crime from their front porches and were soon at the scene, including Jack. The two unconscious bodies were taken to his home before the police and doctor arrived. They were soon moved to Heaton Hospital.

Anna died at 1:30 p.m. that day; Mildred did not. She was conscious by the end of the day when she asked if Anna had died and was told, "Yes." They were not able to get the bullet out of Mildred's head until January, yet she lived. Anna's body was taken back to her home in East Montpelier where her funeral was held just days later, with crowds of people in attendance.

From this point in the story, the "Montpelier Tragedy" was the stuff of sensational journalism and made it as far as the New York Times and even internationally. By the time Mildred went to trial almost a year later at the Washington County Courthouse in Montpelier, it was standing room only. Her trial dragged out for over a month and included hundreds of testimonies.

Mildred's father, a wealthy man, had hired skilled lawyers who were able to successfully plead insanity, citing numerous suicidal and mentally ill relatives as well as testimonies about her erratic behavior. It has been called a pioneering use of that defense. Mildred, not to be outdone apparently even in death, is said to haunt the Montpelier courthouse to this day.



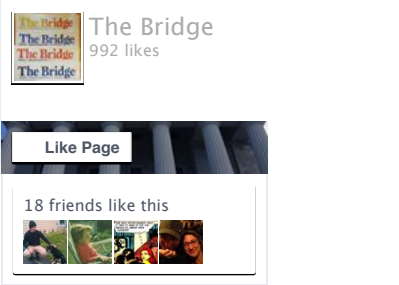
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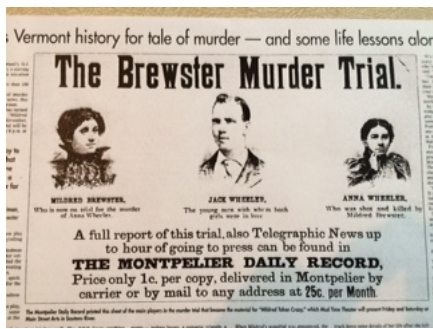
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Mildred then, soon deteriorated. Just after the murder, Jack told reporters that he had never given any attention to Mildred and Mrs. Goodenough backed up his story. However, he is said to have retracted that statement in court where he admitted that they had been intimate. Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, in her 1983 novel “The Madness of a Seduced Woman,” inspired and based on this story, describes a pregnancy and home abortion that there appears to be testimonial evidence to support. A synopsis of this maudlin plot can be found in “Vintage Vermont Villainies, True Tales of Murder & Mystery from the 19th and 20th Centuries” by John Stark Bellmay II.

It was a headline story, a famous trial and conviction that was reenacted at the courthouse 100 years later, the inspiration for a play by Vermont playwrights called “Mildred Taken Crazy,” and is now a ghost legend. Yet when you sift through the gossip and the drama, what you really have is two women, and a tragedy.

It's twilight. I've come up the stairs from my office into Anna's tower, passing walls covered with names and messages from students and ghost seekers before me. It's October and the leaves are at peak. Camel's Hump is silhouetted against a clear sky with only wisps for clouds. It's quiet. Looking south past *The Bridge* offices in Stone Hall, I can see down the hill toward Sibley, now full of trees and buildings, to somewhere very near where Anna and Mildred once lay together on the ground.

I'm not scared, sharing this space with Anna. The sky, deepening and beautiful, makes me realize that if Anna haunts this tower, she's smart. It is what I would wish for her and all those like her — her view from the windows, facing all four directions, is nothing but beautiful and peaceful. The hills get darker, and the sky more dramatic, and it continues to be ... quiet.

Epilogue:

Anna Wheeler is buried in the Cutler Cemetery in Montpelier with her parents, Luther Wheeler and Temperance Gallison, and her grandparents. She also had many brothers and sisters.

Her small gravestone simply says:

C. Anna

Dau. of

L.S. & T.G. Wheeler

1880-1897.


Mildred Brewster spent the next decade after her trial at the Waterbury State Asylum for the Insane (Waterbury State Hospital), where staff gave conflicting reports about her sanity. She was released in 1908 for a short time into the custody of a childhood friend but she was returned just a few weeks later. She spent another eight years there before being released again, this time into the custody of a nurse who had cared for her and now lived in Washington State. Mildred received a sheriff escort across the country to the Seattle area where she lived the rest of her life until she died at age 65. She never married.

Jack Wheeler has left no trace that I have been able to follow past his time in Montpelier.

As I dug deeper into newspaper stories, court reports and speculations, the story expanded into much more than a simple case of jealousy. During the summer of 1896, one year before the murder and failed suicide, Mildred boarded at the home of John F. Goodenough at the same time as Jack. Their time together, apparently good enough for

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Originally from Canada, he came to Vermont in 1893 with a brother and sister and his mother joined them just months before the shooting. I haven't been able to discover where he went after, but I plan to keep looking.

Michelle A.L. Singer, like Anna, calls East Montpelier home. She would like to thank everyone who helped her dig for Anna, Mildred and Jack's story: Louise Crowley, Sarah Madru, Ann Cardinal, Bill Cameron and the staff at VCFA who shared their Anna stories, Pauline Coburn, Elliot Morse, Brian Phillips and the Vermont Historical Society — a fantastic resource.

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