

May/December romance, mysterious death raises suspicion



Sam McMullin

By Kathy Jordan

Part 1

The honeymoon was over for newlywed Sam McMullin and Mazie Lightfoot, when Sam died at the couple's home the morning of Nov. 15, 1946. The McMullins had been married only six weeks prior to his death.

But just beginning was one of Mesa County's most sensational murder trials, in which the new Mrs. McMullin, 54, and her longtime former beau, Roy Maxson, were accused of killing McMullin, 80.

Sam was a prominent lawyer in Grand Junction and a former Mesa County district attorney. He and Judge William A. Marsh had formed the Home Loan and Investment Co. in 1897 and the Mutual Savings and Building association in 1904.

Mazie, who was a seamstress at the time of their marriage, reportedly had something of a reputation around town. But that didn't seem to bother Sam, who apparently was infatuated with her.

On Oct. 1, 1946, Sam and Mazie eloped to Aztec, N.M. Howard, one of Sam's sons, accompanied them.

When the wedding announcement appeared in the Oct. 2, 1946, edition of The Daily Sentinel, Roy, an Orchard Mesa rancher, who had been dating Mazie since 1940, was shocked and surprised. He thought Mazie was planning to marry him.

The marriage was also a surprise to the "high society" set in Grand Junction. There had been a great deal of gossip among them as they wondered how Mazie had been able to get close to Sam. One story was that she had convinced Sam, whose first wife had died in 1942, to give her bridge lessons, after which things moved quickly.

Sam had written a pre-nuptial agreement which Mazie signed just before their marriage. After the marriage Sam had the agreement rewritten so that Mazie would receive \$500 in cash, \$75 a month through their wedded life, and a 1946 Nash touring car.

After the wedding they returned to Grand Junction, where they lived in Sam's house at 627 Grand Avenue.

Sam and Mazie appeared happy, but there was trouble brewing at 627 Grand Ave.

It was no secret that Roy and Mazie had been dating for years. There were reports that when Mazie was planning the elopement with Sam she told Roy that she was going to Salt Lake City to find an apartment for her daughter.

So when Sam and Howard started receiving anonymous letters, (19 in all) the natural assumption was that Roy was sending them.

One letter received by Howard called Mazie a "... loose woman, who has no love for your father...who would do your father no good."

But the letters didn't appear to faze the relationship between Sam and Mazie. In fact, Sam was giving Mazie gifts.

On the morning of Nov. 15, Sam apparently started his day with a shot of whiskey, and not long after he told Mrs. Jenny Wiley, the housekeeper, that he didn't feel well. He asked her for a cup of coffee, but, after a few sips, said he couldn't drink anymore and knew he needed help. Sam first phoned Howard, who lived a couple of doors away, and then called Dr. Heman Bull. But Sam was dead when they arrived 10 minutes later. Mrs. Wiley said his death was peaceful.

In The Daily Sentinel story about Sam's death, the reporter wrote: "Samuel G. McMullin, 80 years of age, a resident of Grand Junction for the past 57 years and prominent in the practice of law in this city and over the slope for 53 years prior to his retirement Jan. 1, 1944, passed away unexpectedly at 7:40 this morning (Nov. 15, 1946) following a heart attack suffered ten minutes earlier."

On Nov. 18 after a large Masonic funeral, Sam was buried in the Masonic Cemetery on Orchard Mesa.

After Sam died his son, Howard, and his new wife, the former Emily Strauss, had moved into Sam's house, and things appeared peaceful again at 627 Grand Ave.

However events came to a boil on New Year's Day 1947. Howard thought a toast was in order and asked the housekeeper to fix a hot buttered rum to celebrate the occasion. For some reason, Emily and Howard weren't pleased with the taste and decided instead to celebrate with a drink of whiskey which Mrs. Wiley poured. But the whiskey also had a strange taste. When Howard and Emily became ill, Mrs. Wiley phoned Dr. Herman Graves.

Among Howard, Emily, Dr. Graves and Police Chief Joe Keith, a decision was made to send the whiskey bottle to a chemist in Denver for analysis. The chemist found strychnine in the bottle.

Keith told Howard and Emily that they should go ahead on their belated honeymoon and he would start his investigation.

And what a can of worms the investigation opened!

Next Week: The rest of the story.

(Ed. Note: Most of the information contained here came from memoirs presented to the Mesa County Historical Society by the late Charles Traylor, the Grand Junction lawyer who was Mazie's attorney, The Daily Sentinel, and information compiled by Dave and Victoria Canaday.)