

Case Study: Dorothea Puente

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Who is Dorothea Puente?

Dorothea Puente is a serial killer in California who killed nine people in Sacramento in the 1980s. She was born on January 9, 1929, and had a troubled past as her parents died when she was a child (Goldfarb, 2021). Her name used to be Dorothea Gray before her name changed after she married Roberto Puente in 1968. She married several people and tense relationships resulted in separation from her husband or divorce. She ran as a prostitute when she moved to Sacramento, which led to her arrest for sex crimes in 1961 (Kuz, 2009), and forgery on checks in San Bernardino in 1948. Mental illness hospitalized Puente because she was drinking and gambling.

In 1970, she opened her boarding house at F Street after her divorce from her husband, and spent money on political campaigns and donations, and provided aid for homelessness, alcoholism, cared for the elderly, and set up Social Security checks (Goldfarb, 2021; Kuz, 2009). She helped the community until her downfall, when she signed her name on the tenants' benefit checks and not only was Puente arrested, but the police seized her boarding house in 1978 (Goldfarb, 2021). She worked as an in-home caregiver after her arrest and dressed as an elderly woman to drug three women with tranquilizers and steal valuables in the early 1980s, she was arrested in 1982 for thefts and released in 1985 for good behavior although psychiatrists said she was schizophrenic before her release (Kuz, 2009).

The boarding house was the main factor of elder abuse by Puente by killing tenants and stealing Social Security checks in the 1980s (McNelly & Cook, 2007). In 1982, Ruth Monroe moved to Puente's house and police ruled his death as a drug overdose, but it was a suicide. Then, in 1985, Puente hired Ismael Florez to build a box with items, but it resulted in a body

found inside a box near a riverbank (Goldfarb, 2021). She hired more people to bury their bodies using boxes as Puente used sleeping pills and Dalmane to drug tenants and suffocate them before burying them in the backyard (Goldfarb, 2021). She collected benefit checks from her victims (McNeely & Cook, 2007) so the social workers and police could not find them (Kuz, 2009). More bodies were found in the backyard of her boarding house in 1988 after her tenants went missing, and Puente asked the police to dig for the bodies on November 11. While they dug the ground, she fled to Los Angeles. She was arrested on November 16 and sentenced to life in prison without parole in 1993 (Goldfarb, 2021).

At the time of her arrest in 1988, she was in Los Angeles when police tracked her down by a man who recognized her on TV at the bar (Goldfarb, 2021). Out of nine people murdered by Puente, the state court charged her with nine murders but convicted only three victims. The other six victims were deadlocked because of a lengthy deliberation period (Goldfarb, 2021). She was sentenced to life in prison, and even though she stated she was innocent she did not kill people (Goldfarb, 2021; Kuz, 2009), and remained in prison until she died on March 27, 2011 (Goldfarb, 2021).

Source #1: Biography: Dorothea Puente, The 'Death House Landlady' Of 1980s California

Dorothea Puente was called the “Death House Landlady” because she killed elderly and disabled people inside her boarding house (Goldfarb, 2021). Goldfarb (2021) wrote that article about her life, including details about her nine victims, the methods she used to kill them, and how she took her victims’ Social Security benefits. Her biography was detailed as Goldfarb (2021) explained about her early life, and how she survived when Puente was orphaned and became a prostitute despite her arrests and breakups in her relationship with her husband. Her life as a prostitute was a path to events that led to the murders of nine elderly and disabled people

in the 1980s. Goldfarb (2021) added more details about the boarding house she used for donations and helped tenants and homeless people find shelter and provide food, helped people with alcoholism and drug addiction, and set up Social Security checks. He highlighted that the most important section of Dorothea Puente's life happened in the 1980s when she lost her original boarding house for signing her name on tenants' benefit checks (Goldfarb, 2021). Then, she took care of her boarding house by drugging tenants and stealing their checks and money, and these thefts caused her to be in jail until 1985 when she was diagnosed as schizophrenic. Puente hired people to bury their bodies in her backyard. She killed people by drugging them and then suffocating them, and burying their bodies so she could get someone's benefit checks. In 1988, Puente asked the police to dig her backyard, and she fled to Los Angeles and was arrested, claiming that she had not killed someone and "used to be a good person" (Goldfarb, 2021). She was convicted of three murders and sentenced to life in prison (Goldfarb, 2021) and died in 2011.

The case study connects Dorothea Puente's biography in detailed information because Goldfarb (2021) wrote the entire article in All That's Interesting to attract readers about her life. She put most of Dorothea Puente's life into the article that included important information like the methods Puente used to kill people, how her life used to help homeless people and the disabled in the 1970s to murders in the 1980s and the theft of Social Security checks (Goldfarb, 2021). The killings are important because she avoided detection by killing homeless people using drugs and burying them in the backyard, which remained unsolved until 1988 after she was arrested. These convictions made by multiple witnesses in Sacramento pleaded that she was convicted of three murders instead of nine because of the deadlocked jury and the judge did not have enough time to look at the other six murders. A life sentence is enough for her convictions.

Source #2: Newspaper article about Puente's prison interview and a full biography: The Life and Deaths of Dorothea Puente

As Kuz (2009) visited the Central California Women's Facility at that time Dorothea Puente was alive, he showed what her life in prison looked like. He changed the topic of the next section to highlight the boarding house and the bodies found in her backyard (Kuz, 2009). She drugged tenants at her boarding house, collected Social Security checks from the dead to get money, highlighted her escape, and planned to go to Mexico. She was arrested in Los Angeles and convicted of three murders out of nine, she was sentenced to life without parole (Kuz, 2009). He wrote Puente a letter and then visited the state prison in Chowchilla for an interview, she said she was innocent, but her appeals expired in 2008 (Kuz, 2009). Kuz (2009) talked to Puente about her prison experience. Then, Kuz (2009) wrote her biography and researched her. Her life started with her parents who died in 1937-38 and left her orphaned until she married other people in the 1940s until the 1970s because of separations, divorces, and relationship changes (Kuz, 2009). She opened her boarding house to help homeless people, drug addicts, and alcoholics, and instead, drugged tenants and stole Social Security checks. In the 1980s, she killed tenants in her house using drugs, suffocated them, and hired workers to bury them in her backyard. Kuz (2009) referenced tools used by Puente like the shovel for the police to dig bodies out of her backyard. After she went to prison, Vicary evaluated her mental health and the serial killer case, which came out as an antisocial personality disorder as Kuz (2009) recalled her trial and life.

When Kuz's article (2009) compared to Goldfarb's (2021), the biography had more information about Puente's life and the convictions that she faced. The interview of Puente inside the prison was exclusive to Kuz (2009) when he visited her after he received a letter from her. Kuz (2009) wrote a full biography after interviewing Dorothea Puente in prison. It connects to

the case study because Kuz (2009) used various resources to make a biography of her, including interviews with Puente's psychiatrist in prison and how her sentence cannot be changed. She ran out of appeals (Kuz, 2009). Kuz (2009) wrote a letter to Puente in 2008, 20 years after bodies were found in her boarding house in Sacramento, and she replied to him. The letter and the interview can be used for the case study referencing her prison life and connected these to her biography. This article was published when Puente was still alive, she lived in the prison until she died in 2011 from natural causes.

Source #3: Peer-reviewed article for "Notes on Newspaper Accounts of Male Elder Abuse"

Elder abuse was published in the media which included insurance frauds and elder abuse from articles that detailed its events (McNelly & Cook, 2007). Reviews of newspaper articles about abuse showed up, including Dorothea Puente. A five-page report was published in a book about elder abuse and neglect by various researchers, including R. L. McNeely, Ph.D., J.D. and Philip W. Cook, B.S. (2007). They wrote reports from newspaper resources that were related to elder abuse or neglect which led to murder. Dorothea Puente was listed under "non-relative caregivers" because she was orphaned as a child in the late 1930s and the 1940s along with several relationship problems until the 1970s (McNelly & Cook, 2007). She killed tenants using drugs and suffocated them in the boarding house in the 1980s and buried their bodies in her backyard, so Puente avoided detection by law enforcement until 1988. She collected money from the victim's Social Security checks and proved that "women cannot be as dangerous, or as lethal, as males" (McNelly & Cook, 2007).

When McNelly and Cook (2007) reviewed articles from several people who committed elder abuse and murder, most people who killed elderly people were women. Dorothea Puente is considered a crime for murdering elderly people and hiring people to bury people in the

backyard of her boarding house. An in-home caregiver is a person who takes care of people inside a home, like Puente, who took care of the elderly and people who sought help for drugs, alcoholics, and disabilities. McNeely and Cook (2007) thought Puente was responsible for all nine murders even though she was innocent, and drugs were found on all the corpses. Compared to Puente's biographies written by Kuz (2009) and Goldfarb (2021), McNelly and Cook (2007) classified her nine murders as an act of elder abuse of non-relative caregivers in her boarding house.

Conclusion

Dorothea Puente was a serial killer in the Sacramento area, and bodies were found in the backyard of her boarding house. At the beginning of her life, her parents died before she was an adult, and faced an arrest for fraud when she was 19. She searched for a foster home until she married several people, including Roberto Puente. She worked as a prostitute in Sacramento in the 1950s, where she drank alcohol and engaged in sexual activity, which led to mental illness and arrest that led up to the events in the 1980s. Her boarding house was used to help people with shelter, provide aid for people with disabilities and people who struggle with drugs, and alcoholics, and set up Social Security checks for them (Kuz, 2009).

Goldfarb (2001) called her victims "shadow people" because none of her relatives were killed, and the boarding house housed elderly people (Goldfarb, 2021; McNelly & Cook, 2007). When she drugged people in the 1980s, Ruth Monroe died by suicide from a drug overdose because of Puente's actions (Goldfarb, 2021) and the bodies found by Sacramento police were drug overdoses and strangulation by Puente (Goldfarb, 2021). Their bodies were buried to avoid detection by police and continued claiming victims' Social Security checks, which led to her arrest in 1982, but she served three out of five years in prison, released by being mentally ill

(Kuz, 2009). One of the bodies was dismembered as there were missing body parts and some of the corpses were mummified (Kuz, 2009; McNelly & Cook, 2007). Puente mixed prescription drugs into the victims' food or drink, like Dalmane, and suffocated them, which were the drugs found on their corpses (Goldfarb, 2021; Kuz, 2009). With the drugs prescribed by doctors, the boarding house is unlicensed as tenants were ignored after Puente was released from prison in 1985 (Kuz, 2009).

These crimes committed by Puente can be prevented but she used to work as a prostitute and provided help to people with disabilities in her boarding house and some of the people murdered by Puente took drugs that led to their deaths. She planned to escape to Las Vegas or Mexico in 1988 (Kuz, 2009), but she was arrested in Los Angeles after bodies were dug up by police. Some witnesses heard about the serial killer case as Puente pleaded innocence, and psychiatrist William Vicary checked Puente for mental illness (Kuz, 2009). After she was sentenced to life in prison without parole, Kuz (2009) visited her after he sent her a letter and met with her about how tenants lie for Puente at her boarding house for treatment of people with disabilities.

The significance of the case study is to analyze Puente's biography by Michael Kuz (2009) and Kara Goldfarb (2021), they added details about her early life and how Puente's job as a prostitute became a serial killer in the 1980s. With mental illness intensifying, her boarding house benefited people in Sacramento in the 1970s and Puente killed elderly people in the 1980s without clues from corpses until 1988. R. L. McNelly and Philip W. Cook (2007) described these murders as an act of elder abuse because she killed people whom she did not know. The case study showed why she was released in 1985 and committed murders in her boarding house.

References

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