*“Buxom Barbara Graham is a woman of many sides, most of them lurid.*

*“Name it and Barbara seems to have done it….The record runs from charges of escape from reform school through prostitution, perjury, narcotics and bad checks.*

*“Barbara Wood Kielhammer Puchelle Newman Graham may become the third women legally executed in California.”[[1]](#endnote-1)*

When readers of the San Francisco *Chronicle* scanned these words under the headline “Femme Fatale, Story of a Girl Who May Die for Killing,” it was September 1953 and thirty-year-old Graham was fighting for her life four hundred miles away in a Los Angeles courtroom. Prosecutors claimed that Graham and two co-defendants—Emmett Perkins and John Santo—had brutally murdered an elderly Burbank widow during a robbery. No physical evidence connected the defendants to the crime, only the testimony of a third man who turned state’s evidence in exchange for immunity, and wire-tapped jailhouse conversations between Graham and a policeman who had offered himself as an alibi. She, of course, had no idea he was an undercover officer.

The trial had been sensational, featuring death threats, a publicity-hungry judge, allegations of illegal wiretapping and Graham’s testimony that she had been tricked into confessing to a crime she had not committed. But Graham represented the main reason the trial had captured attention throughout California and beyond. She was beautiful and sexy, making her the kind of subject that entranced journalists, novelists and filmmakers who specialized in “bad women.” She had, in fact, been a prostitute, perjurer, drug addict and forger—not exactly a traditional female resume in the 1950s.

But did she deserve to die for her crime, if indeed she had committed it? And if so why? These questions sit at the heart of the Barbara Graham story, which has continued to elicit attention and debate decades after her trial, conviction and—spoiler alert here—execution in San Quentin’s gas chamber. What was it about Graham that led jurors to condemn her? Dozens of women had stood trial in California for murder, yet all the others save two who clearly were guilty, had been acquitted or given lesser sentences. Just four years before Graham, for example, Betty Ferreri stood trial in the same Los Angeles courtroom, charged with hacking her husband to death with a meat cleaver. Ferreri admitted the slaying, but claimed spousal abuse had made her do it. Jurors acquitted her.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Ferreri had what could be considered—at least for jurors--extenuating circumstances; she claimed to be a battered wife. Before her arrest and trial she had lived a traditional life. And she did not remotely resemble beautiful and deadly female protagonists in the wildly popular hard-boiled novels of the era. Many of these were set in Los Angeles, including *The Big Sleep* and *Farewell My Lovely*, by Raymond Chandlerand *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity*, by James M. Cain.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Graham’s trial came toward the end of the era of hard-boiled novel and she could easily be constructed to resemble any number of fictional diabolical dames. Moreover, such a characterization provided a variety of opportunities for major players in her case. Powerful men used Graham as a not-so-subtle warning to other potential miscreants. Journalists used her trial to showcase their writing and reporting skills. Some journalists undoubtedly hoped that Graham’s trial might catapult them onto a bigger stage—writing best-selling novels or penning movie scripts perhaps. Sixty years after the fact questions remain about Graham’s guilt or innocence. What seems clear, however, is that sensational coverage of her trial essentially sealed her fate. At least one journalist acknowledged this fact in the months and years following her conviction. By then, however, it was too late.[[4]](#endnote-4)

A Femme Fatale on Trial

Graham’s status as a “femme fatale”—as noted in the San Francisco *Chronicle* article--emerged just after her May 1953 arrest. Police had discovered the body of sixty-five-year-old Mable Monahan lying in the hallway of her Burbank home, with a pillow case over her head. The perpetrators had been looking for a safe containing $100,000 in cash. Few journalists paid any attention to Graham’s male co-defendants, though both had lengthy arrest records involving violence. Graham knew both men because she had worked as a “shill” in a gambling den owned by one of them. None of her previous arrests had involved violent crimes.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The first news photos set the stage. One, shot from a low angle, showed her sitting, legs crossed, wearing a tight-fitting jacket and skirt. The cutline referred to her as a “shapely blonde.” Another provided a close-up of Graham wearing the same jacket, with its top two buttons undone, looking toward the camera, her dark eyes fringed with thick lashes. The accompanying story referred to her as a “twenty-eight-year-old redhead.” In reality, Graham’s hair was light brown.[[6]](#endnote-6)

By the time the trial started three months later, headline writers had taken to calling Graham “The Ice Blonde” and “Bloody Babs.” Journalists competed for the most colorful and dramatic descriptions. According to one account, she dressed “like a showgirl.” And she “glared malevolently” at prosecution witnesses, including Sam Sirianni, the undercover officer who secretly wire tapped her in Los Angeles County Jail. And she sat “casually smoking” at the counsel table. In her own defense, Graham seems justified in her anger, since Sirianni had tricked her into confessing to murder. Additionally, Sirianni’s tapes were too muffled for jurors to hear, so the judge allowed jurors to read transcripts prepared by the prosecution.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Journalists saved their strongest ammunition for Graham’s testimony. One reporter described her “lolling back and displaying her buxom figure in a new blue blouse.” Another noted that when she crossed her left hand over “a shapely thigh” there “was no wedding ring on the third finger.” And a third noted that she might become “the most beautiful defendant claimed by the gas chamber.” Though they were predisposed toward sensational and slanted coverage, journalists must have wondered at Graham’s inability to try to counter their destructive narrative. Instead, she played into the stereotypes—and into the prosecution’s hands--by dressing provocatively, smoking and cavalierly revealing her nontraditional sex life and her past crimes. In one exchange with her attorney, she admitted shoplifting and forging checks. “Were those checks written on accounts that you had in banks?” Jack Hardy asked at one point. “I didn’t have a bank account,” Graham replied. “In other words you wrote fictional checks?” “Yes.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

Graham became combative under cross-examination by prosecutor J. Miller Leavy, who homed in on her jailhouse relationship with another inmate, Donna Prow. The two women had written notes to each other, some of a sexual nature. Journalists reveled in testimony about the woman Graham called “sweet candy pants.” “Did you write these notes?” Leavy asked Graham, as he proffered a sheaf of papers. “It appears that I did,” she replied coldly. Prow, in fact, had been the person who set up Graham to be wiretapped by offering to procure the alibi witness, since Graham had insisted she could not remember where she had been on the night in question. For her efforts, prosecutors released Prow five months before her scheduled parole date. Journalists did not write about this arrangement, however. Nor did they raise any questions about police or prosecutorial conduct in wiretapping Graham.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Several days after the San Francisco *Chronicle* story appeared, jurors condemned Graham, Perkins and Santo to die. Following sentencing, the trio headed to prison to await the ultimate punishment. Few people—journalists or otherwise—cared about Perkins and Santo, but, as the most glamorous death row inmate in America, Graham remained a sought-after news subject. With no courtroom theatrics and the prospect of an actual execution, however, writers drifted away from the “femme fatale” angle and toward a more sympathetic depiction of the doomed woman.

From Predatory to Pathetic

The transition began as Graham prepared to depart Los Angeles, when photographers captured her tearfully hugging her 20-month-old son Tommy goodbye. Over the next few months, Graham re-emerged with a sad back story: an illegitimate and abused child, a woman unlucky in love and in life, and a mother who desperately longed for her three young sons. After a prison visit, Bernice Freeman of the San Francisco *Chronicle* reported Graham’s declaration that her mother Hortense had “hated and resented me from the day I was born in an Oakland slum.” Stuart Palmer, a reporter for the Hearst newspaper syndicate, described her vagabond childhood in a variety of foster homes, public and private institutions. One “caretaker” had punished six-year-old Graham by forcing her to hold a raw onion to her eyes. Sympathetic writers now framed her poor life choices, including four marriages and a lengthy rap sheet, as pathetic, rather than pathological. It would be impossible to overstate the role that her good looks played in this transformation. If her beauty had led journalists to frame her as a femme fatale during the trial, it also led several of them to become smitten with her afterward and to determine that Graham deserved pity, rather than censure.[[10]](#endnote-10)

By late 1954, both Freeman and Palmer determined that jurors had wrongly convicted Graham. Bernice Freeman changed her mind after interviewing John True, who confessed to participating in the robbery/murder and had gained immunity from prosecution. She found True—contrary to his name—to be a liar. Stuart Palmer, whose two-part series on Graham carried her by-line, wrote to Los Angeles authorities, seeking a lie detector test for Graham, who he deemed “not exactly guilty as charged.” Though both Freeman and Palmer hoped their stories might lead authorities to reexamine Graham’s case, neither blamed the media for her predicament.[[11]](#endnote-11)

That task fell to Edward S. Montgomery of the San Francisco *Examiner.* During the trial, Montgomery had joined his colleagues in tarring Graham as “the hop head, the gun-moll, the ice blonde, the brazen femme fatale.” A year later, he had reconsidered. This change of heart came after Montgomery read John True’s confession and concluded, like Freeman, that True had lied in court about Graham’s involvement. He blamed journalists—including himself--for so easily falling into the trap laid by prosecutors, and for leaning so heavily on dangerous stereotypes. “Here were the sparks, once kindled, that mushroomed into the all encompassing flames of public prejudice and bias,” he wrote. Graham’s appellate attorney agreed with this characterization and cited “adverse newspaper coverage,” along with “entrapment, coerced admissions and illegal search and seizure” in his automatic death penalty appeal.[[12]](#endnote-12)

By early 1955, Montgomery was obsessed with what he deemed a miscarriage of justice and essentially became an ex-officio member of Graham’s legal team. He tirelessly wrote letters and lobbied state officials. He asked Attorney General Edmund G. Brown Sr. to order a lie detector test. Brown, planning a run for governor, reluctantly declined. Montgomery also met with Governor Goodwin Knight’s clemency secretary. And, convinced that Graham’s co-defendants had fingered her because they believed jurors would not sentence a woman to death—particularly a young mother--Montgomery begged Emmett Perkins to exonerate her. Perkins ignored the request and, on June 3, 1955, with her appeals denied and following several tortuous delays, Barbara Graham died in the gas chamber. Perkins and Santo followed several hours later.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Eleven journalists covered her execution. They offered a subdued appraisal of her final moments. “She died with great dignity at 11:42 a.m.,” Gale Cook of the San Francisco *Examiner* wrote. “Barbara achieved a strange beauty in her last moments. Her soft brown hair was perfectly in place. Her face was an ivory cameo.” Gene Blake of the Los Angeles *Times* offered gruesome details of her death. “Her breathing became labored and she tilted her head back slightly,” but then she began gasping for air. “Again and again she gasped, until her head pitched forward for the last time.” It had taken her eight minutes to die. Even though journalists seemed repulsed by the execution, most soon moved on to other stories. Not Edward Montgomery, however. He aimed to reconstruct Graham’s image on a permanent basis, and on a national scale.[[14]](#endnote-14)

I Want to Live!

In early 1956 Montgomery contacted Walter Wanger, a well-respected Hollywood producer, with a proposal for a film about Barbara Graham. Wanger was immediately interested; he met with Montgomery and offered him $10,000 to write an outline and to do extensive leg work during the film’s production. Montgomery’s obsession with Graham’s innocence proved contagious and Wanger announced his intention to make an anti-death penalty film. His decision cannot be attributed solely to his sense of justice, however. An abolition movement was making headway both in California and nationwide in the 1950s and Wanger undoubtedly recognized that ongoing debates over capital punishment could heighten the impact of his film, which came to be called *I Want to Live!*  At Wanger’s urging, Susan Hayward signed for the title role.[[15]](#endnote-15)

If Barbara Graham had been a one-dimensional villain during her trial, In *I Want to Live!* Wanger gave that role to the police and prosecutors. The film depicted authorities targeting Graham for the gas chamber from the moment of her arrest, but did not really proffer reasons for their antipathy. The film did not flinch from depicting her sordid lifestyle, but suggested that extenuating circumstances played a significant role in her life choices. This included her choice of friends, who, according to the film, led her down the path toward destruction. At one point she agreed to perjure herself to keep an acquaintance out of prison, leading him to declare: “One thing about you Bonnie (Graham’s nickname), you’ll do anything for a friend.” The film version of Graham was an essentially moral person who masked her sadness and deep loneliness with reckless behavior and sarcastic bravado. When police questioned her about the murder, for example, she offers a sullen riposte: “Julius Caesar was murdered and I didn’t know him either.”

The film’s relentless emphasis on Graham’s innocence gave her execution added poignancy and horror. Filmmakers may have taken liberty with some “facts” of the case, including the circumstances surrounding Graham’s arrest and murder charges, but they did not need to dramatize or fictionalize the execution, which took up the last forty minutes of the movie. The doomed woman arrived at San Quentin to a shrieking mob of reporters, all seeking a pithy quote or two. As she settled into a holding cell for her last night, she pulled on a pair of red pajamas. Bitterly reflecting on how journalists had treated her during her trial, she declared that writers “always call them scarlet when I wear them.”

As San Quentin personnel prepared for death—pouring sulfuric acid into a beaker and wrapping egg-sized pellets in cheesecloth—Graham and the female nurse assigned to her talked through the night about their children. Meanwhile, Ed Montgomery, played by actor Simon Oakland, desperately tried to save her life. The courts issued two last-minute stays. After the second, Graham wailed, “why do they torture me?” Finally, she went to her death and the film ended with silence. Reviews for I Want to Live! were almost uniformly ecstatic even though critics recognized the film’s political intent. Abolitionist writers including Arthur Miller and Albert Camus sent Wanger letters of congratulation and Susan Hayward, on her fifth nomination, won a best actress Oscar.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Police and prosecutors in Los Angeles had a decidedly different response, however, charging filmmakers with whitewashing Graham. Deputy District Attorney J. Miller Leavy plotted revenge. For the rest of his life, Leavy tried to reframe the debate and turn Graham back into a villain. He promoted plans for his own movie, hired a writer to provide his side of the story and publicly claimed that Graham had confessed to murder. None of his efforts succeeded. But neither did those of Walter Wanger and Ed Montgomery. Graham’s guilt or innocence continued to be debated into the early 1960s, when she finally began to fade from view. But this ambiguity served abolitionists well, since it enabled them to chip away at support for the death penalty until they could home in on a winning strategy. That occurred in the mid-1960s with a focus on constitutional issues. In 1972 the California Supreme Court, and then the United States Supreme Court declared capital punishment to be cruel and unusual punishment. States had to re-write statutes to conform to new guidelines.[[17]](#endnote-17)

The abolitionists did not have long to celebrate. By the end of the 1970s, nearly forty states again had the death penalty. Since 1978, more than 1,200 men have been executed and twelve women. California has executed thirteen men, but no women. In fact, only one woman—Elizabeth Duncan—has been executed since Barbara Graham. Duncan went to her death in 1962. Barbara Graham has been dead nearly sixty years and it would be naïve to ascribe California’s reluctance to executed women solely to Graham. But her story remains an instructive tale, illuminating the media’s power to shape public perception and the power of narrative to shape public attitudes. Americans may proclaim themselves tough on crime, but they also believe in redemption. And they are suckers for good stories.

1. “Monahan Case Femme Fatale, Story of a Girl Who May Die for Killing, San Francisco *Chronicle*, Sept.20, 1953, p. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Information on Ferreri is in Gordon Bakken and Brenda Farrington, *Women Who Kill Men*, pp. 152. The book focuses on female killers in California and argues that by appearing virtuous and traditional, women have escaped the ultimate punishment. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Geoffrey O’Brien discusses diabolical dames in *Hardboiled America: Lurid Paperbacks and the Masters of Noir*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. K.A. Cuordileone focuses on the post-World War II culture of conformity in *Manhood in American Political Culture in the Cold War*. The author argues that authoritarian figures were able to stifle nonconformity via an unrelenting effort to instill fear of homosexuals and “bad women.” Such non-traditional individuals could be constructed as tools of the communists. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Mable Monahan was murdered at her Burbank home on March 9, 1953, but her gardener did not discover her body until two days later. Journalists always referred to her as an elderly and slightly disabled women, but Monahan led a colorful life. She had been a vaudeville performer and what one acquaintance referred to as “a mean poker player.” Her daughter Iris had been married to Las Vegas gambler Luthor Scherer and the Scherers had lived in Monahan’s home before their divorce. Informants told police that Scherer had left a safe containing $100,000 in the home and the perpetrators had been looking for the safe. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. “Girl, Two Men Seized,” Los Angeles *Times*, May 5, 1953, p. 1; “Trap Nets Three Suspects,” Los Angeles *Examiner*, May 5, 1953, p. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Trial information comes from the Los Angeles *Times*; the Los Angeles *Examiner*; the Los Angeles *Evening Herald and Express*; the San Francisco *Examiner*; and the San Francisco *Chronicle*. Additional information is in the San Quentin Execution file for Barbara Graham, California Department of Corrections, California State Archives, Sacramento, California; Tabor Rawson, *I Want to Live! The Anatomy of a Murder;* and Bill Walker, *The Barbara Graham Story.* [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. “Graham Girl on Stand has Unhappiest Day of Her Life, Los Angeles *Examiner*, Sept. 1, 1953, p. 1; “Blonde Answers Grilling in Low-Pitched Voice,” Los Angeles *Examiner*, Sept. 2, 1953; “Barbara Graham Flares Up at Trial,” Los Angeles *Times*, September 3, 1953. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Donna Prow was serving jail time for vehicular manslaughter when police approached her helping authorities trap Graham into admitting involvement in the murder. As Graham explained it, she confessed because the undercover informant refused to help her unless she did so. Prow served only seven months of her year-long sentence after helping police. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. “Press Besieges Barbara Graham,” Los Angeles *Times*, September 25, 1953, p. 1; “Mrs. Graham Off to Corona, Guilt Denied,” Los Angeles *Times* ; October 15, 1953; p. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Stuart Palmer, letter to California Corrections Department head Richard McGee, November 16, 1953; a Los Angeles *Times* story also discussed a letter Palmer also wrote to Los Angeles County District Attorney Ernest Roll, “Roll Denies Lie Test for Barbara,” March 16, 1954; and Bernice Freeman Davis disputed Graham’s guilt in her book, *The Desperate and the Damned*. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Edward Montgomery quote is in Tabor Rawson, *I Want to Live, Anatomy of a Murder*, p. 118. Montgomery’s change of heart came after he unearthed serious discrepancies between the confession of prosecution witness John True and True’s court testimony. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Letter from Montgomery to Emmett Perkins was revealed during his testimony before the California Assembly interim Committee on Criminal Procedures, March 21, 1960. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Gale Cook, “Santo Murder Trio Executed; Delays Torture Barbara,” San Francisco *Examiner*, June 4, 1955. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Information on the making of I Want to Live! and Ed Montgomery’s role in it is included in the Walter Wanger Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society. The collection also includes several letters from Barbara Graham to her appellate attorney Al Matthews. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *I Want to Live!*, United Artists, 1958. The film was directed by Robert Wise, written by Nelson Giddings, produced by Walter Wanger and starred Susan Hayward as Barbara Graham. Ed Montgomery helped Hayward prepare for her role as Graham. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Deputy district attorney J. Miller Leavy hired Hearst writer Bill Walker to write magazine articles and a book taking the prosecution’s point of view. The book, *The Case of Barbara Graham,* was published in 1961. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)