

Whatever happened to Lawrence L. Lynch?

On Dec. 3, 1926, famed mystery author Agatha Christie disappeared from her home in Berkshire, England, and wasn't found for 10 days when she finally turned up at a health resort in Yorkshire. The mystery of her disappearance and subsequent emergence has never really been adequately explained.

Just like the famed British writer, Kendall County, too had a well-known female mystery writer with some nagging questions in her past.

Emily Medora Murdock was born in Oswego on January 16, 1853, the daughter of Charles L. and Emily A. (Holland) Murdock. Charles was a justice of the peace in Oswego Township and held other local elective offices.

The couple had one son, Emily's older brother, Alfred X., who was born Nov. 30, 1844. He enlisted in the 127th Illinois Infantry and was killed at the Battle of Ezra Church outside Atlanta, Ga. on July 28, 1864. Initially buried in Georgia where he fell, his body was subsequently brought back to Illinois and reburied in the Oswego Township Cemetery, where his parents had erected a memorial.

Here's where the mystery begins. Emily Murdock married Lawrence L. Lynch at Lincoln, Nebraska on Valentine's Day, Feb. 14, 1877. The couple then apparently traveled to Wyoming. According to a note in the April 19, 1877 *Kendall County Record*: "Mr. and Mrs. Lynch, a recently married couple and late of Cheyenne, Wyo., are now stopping at C.L. Murdock's, the bride's parents, she being the veritable Miss Emma Murdock."

The 1876 *Lakeside Directory of Chicago* lists Lawrence L. Lynch living at the Briggs House hotel. He is listed as the proprietor of Lynch & Company, a dramatic agency, which may explain the couple's extensive travels.

According to family tradition, Lynch died, leaving Emily a widow, but no evidence of his death has been found so far. Whether Lynch died or they divorced, in 1886 she stopped calling herself Emily Lynch and resumed her maiden name.

It is unknown why Emily began writing mystery novels, but there's little mystery about why she decided to use a male pen name. In the late 1870s and decades thereafter, it simply wasn't considered proper for women to write sensational literature such as detective and adventure novels. So she apparently decided to write her novels using the pen name of her husband, signing them (with some literary license) "Lawrence L. Lynch (of the secret service)."

She published her first novel, *Shadowed by Three*, in 1879, while she and Lynch were apparently still married, and published five more novels between then and 1886 when she stopped using Lynch as her own last name.

Emily remarried Dr. Abraham Van Deventer, himself a widower, on July 12, 1887 in Oswego. Dr. Van Deventer had been married to Melissa Snook for 20 years until her death in 1885.

After marrying Dr. Van Deventer, Emily seems to have taken a few years off from writing, not resuming her career as a novelist until she published *The Lost Witness; or, The Mystery of Leah Paget Laird* in 1890.

From 1890 until her death, she turned out 17 additional novels, the last, *A Blind Lead*, published in 1912, two years before her death.

In all, 24 titles by Emily Murdock Van Deventer have been discovered. The Little White School Museum in Oswego has copies of four of her novels including her first, *Shadowed by Three*, 1879, and reissued in 1885; along with *Madeline Paine: The Detective's Daughter*, 1883; *The Diamond Coterie*, 1884; *Out of a Labyrinth*, 1886; and *A Dead Man's Step*, 1893.

In order of publication, her books are: *Shadowed by Three*; *The Diamond Coterie*; *Madeline Payne: the Detective's Daughter*; *Dangerous Ground*, or *The Rival Detectives*; *Out of a Labyrinth*; *A Mountain Mystery*, or *The Outlaws of the Rockies*; *The Lost Witness*; or *The Mystery of Leah Paget Laird*; *Moina*, or *Against the Mighty*; *A Slender Clue*, or *The Mystery of Mardi Gras*; *The Romance of a Bomb Thrower*; *A Dead Man's Step*; *Against Odds: A Detective Story*; *No Proof*; *The Last Stroke: A Detective Story*; *The Unseen Hand*; *High Stakes*; *Under Fate's Wheel*; *The Woman Who Dared*; *The Danger Line*; *A Woman's Tragedy*, or *The Detective's Task*; *The Doverfields' Diamonds*; *Man and Master*; *A Sealed Verdict*; and *A Blind Lead*.

In 1902, the Van Deventers built a new home at the southeast corner of Washington and Madison streets in Oswego. The house was newly renovated and restored in 2002, and is now used as commercial office space. Emily Van Deventer was active in local Oswego civic affairs and was a founder of Oswego's 19th Century Club, established to

study the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. She used the World's Fair as the backdrop for her 1894 novel *Against Odds: A Detective Story*. The 19th Century Club remains active in the Oswego community.

Emily Medora Murdock Lynch Van Deventer died at her home in Oswego on May 3, 1914.

Interestingly enough, her obituary in the May 6, 1914 *Kendall County Record* does not mention Lawrence L. Lynch, her supposed first husband: "Mrs. Emma Murdock Van Deventer, wife of Dr. A.E. Van Deventer, died at her late home Sunday night. Some months ago, Mrs. V. suffered a paralytic stroke, but recovered sufficiently to be about again. About a week ago, she was overcome by another stroke, which after a few days proved fatal. Born in Oswego Jan. 16, 1853, she resided with her parents who were among Oswego's early settlers. Twenty-five years ago, she was married to Dr. A.E. Van Deventer, residing in Oswego till her death. In her girlhood days, a remarkable ability asserted itself and which soon came before the public in her many books sold extensively here and abroad. This she continued until unable to write on account of ill health. A husband is left to mourn her departure. Funeral services from Congregational church Wednesday; interment at Montgomery mausoleum."

Dr. Van Deventer followed Emily in death seven months later. Emily Murdock Van Deventer—and the real story of Lawrence L. Lynch—is buried in the mausoleum at Riverside Cemetery in Montgomery.

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