

KATE BENDER

The Benders' Bloody Inn



Dr. William York reined his horse toward the Bender Inn. It had been a long day on the Osage Road, and he was tired and hungry. He didn't think he could make it another five miles to the small town of Cherryvale. In retrospect, he should have pushed on in spite of his fatigue.

The doctor was traveling a lonely section of southeastern Kansas between Fort Scott and his home in Independence. Although little more than a cabin, the Bender Inn was a welcome sight. York hardly noticed the crudely painted sign that read GROCERIES above the rough-hewn door. Besides a meal, he knew he could get a bed for the night and a bit of grain for his horse.

Labette County, Kansas, in 1873 was still a dangerous place for a solitary man to travel. Osage Indian raids and outlaw attacks were not uncommon in this section of wild country. Besides visiting his brother in Fort Smith, York had also come looking for clues about a good friend and his daughter who had gone missing several months earlier. They were believed to have traveled this route.

At the inn, York didn't pay much attention to Ma or Pa Bender, who seemed unsociable and standoffish. Their son, Junior, appeared nice enough, although perhaps a simpleton. The doctor did, however, feast his eyes upon the hostess, the twenty-three-year-old Kate Bender. Her auburn hair and trim figure were a refreshing sight after a long day on the trail. Kate was not only pretty, she was also a charming conversationalist. Locally, she was known as a psychic, occasionally holding séances and lectures on spiritualism. The comely woman welcomed the travel-worn York into the inn, where a canvas screen separated the eating area from the kitchen and the sleeping cots.

Kate seated her guest with his back to the curtain and fed the hungry man while she talked to him about spiritualism and dazzled him with food, drink, and conversation. Perhaps she talked of free love, one of her tenets. At some point after the dinner, York leaned his head back against the canvas divider. Waiting behind the screen, Pa and Junior sprang into action, bashing the doctor's skull with a pair of heavy mallets. If the blows weren't enough to kill the doctor, Kate took care of that. She rushed forward with her knife and coldly slit York's throat from ear to ear. Next, she expertly rifled through York's pockets for anything of value. Within minutes, the blood was mopped up, the booty stashed, and the body unceremoniously dropped into the kitchen cellar. The Bloody Benders, as this infamous quartet of serial killers would later be called, had just bagged another victim.

The Benders would be known in history as some of the most nefarious mass murderers in the West. From 1872 to 1873, they operated out of what locals would later call "the Benders' Bloody Inn." Historians have never learned exactly how many victims (including children) met the mallet and knife at their malevolent hands. The bodies—and body parts—of at least twenty people were found on the Benders' property. Some have suggested the number of victims could be as high as forty.

The story of the Bender Inn has its roots in the post-Civil War period. Settlers complained that the Osage Indians, who had been given a portion of southeastern Kansas by treaty, should be moved so that whites could use the tribal land "the way God intended." Among the first wave of settlers was a cult of spiritualists who took up residence near the

Osage Trail (later called the Osage Road). The town of Cherryvale sprang up a few miles away. Among this group of cultists were John Bender and his son, John, Jr., and each settled a section of good prairie land. The Bender women arrived after the men had made the place habitable.

The spiritualists were strange, but they were industrious. They came to Sunday meetings and were deemed innocuous enough. After a while, two of the five families could not take prairie life and moved back to more settled areas. The Benders, though, seemed to prosper. They had an enviable garden and an excellent orchard with more than fifty trees. To help make ends meet, they also opened up an inn and grocery store for the travelers along the road. They offered meals, beds for the night, and a livery with grain for livestock. In the store they sold ammunition, powder and lead balls, canned goods, dried fruit, jerked meat, and tobacco, among other incidentals. It was said that if the inn had no guests in the evening, one could see the Benders out working in their beloved orchard. The ground around the trees was frequently harrowed and exceptionally well groomed.

John “Pa” Bender, the neighbors commented, was sometimes hard to understand, because of his German accent. He was thought to be in his late fifties. A large man for his day—at more than six feet tall—with black caterpillar eyebrows, he mostly kept to himself. His son, John, Jr., was a reasonably good-looking man in his twenties who was known to talk to himself as he walked or worked, and he was thought to be a little slow. But, like his father, he was a hard worker, and in those times hard work covered a multitude of sins.

Kate Bender was the only one of the four who was considered outgoing. She was affable and friendly, the sort of woman who was instantly liked by everyone. Still, she had ruffled the community with her revolutionary philosophies. She was considered by some at the time to be Satanic (“free love” in Christian small-town Kansas in the 1870s was a bit too avant-garde). But while her ideas offended some of the locals, her reputation as a looker, a hostess, and a psychic drew a number of interested customers. So did her hazel eyes and well-proportioned figure.

On occasion, Kate took her presentation on the road, visiting towns around Kansas. She was sometimes billed at lectures as a “Professor of

Prof. Miss KATIE BENDER

Can heal all sorts of Diseases; can cure Blindness, Fits, Deafness and all such diseases, also Deaf and Dumbness.

Residence, 14 miles East of Independence, on the road from Independence to Osage Mission one and one half miles South East of Norahead Station.

KATIE BENDER.

June 18, 1872.

Kate Bender used advertisements such as this one to promote her business. Calling herself a "professor," she traveled around Kansas to lecture to groups about psychic phenomenon and spiritual healing. KANSAS STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, TOPEKA.

the Supernatural." People who were interested in psychic phenomenon or who needed spiritual healing were said to seek her out. She professed to have the gift of "second sight," the ability to see into the future. She said she could communicate with spirits and could heal with herbs and charms. Kate was the perfect front woman for a confidence game.

Ma Bender also claimed to be a psychic medium, although it was said she wasn't as good as her daughter. A large woman in her early fifties, Ma was said to have a temper, and she kept her husband and son in line. She never seemed to be angry at Kate, however.

It doesn't appear that the other families in the spiritualist group knew anything about the extracurricular activities at the Bender Inn. And the family members, with Kate as the ringleader, took good care to cover their tracks.

The Benders largely targeted lonely souls who wouldn't be readily missed. After they were satisfied that the man was a good prospect, they would kill him and rob him. Travelers usually were safe from Bender malice if they were in a group or if there was another guest present. If a traveler had a local connection, if someone knew he was staying at the Bender Inn, or if the person was a regular, he would also be safe. Cattle buyers, investors, land speculators, and travelers did business cash-on-the-

barrelhead, making it difficult to trace their whereabouts—and making them ideal Bender marks. The Benders preferred victims on long sojourns. Such a person might not be missed for months, and the likelihood of authorities tracing the victim back to the southeastern Kansas plains, let alone the Bender Inn, were remote. Besides, violence and trouble on the Osage Road were not uncommon. There were natural hazards to be accounted for, including getting thrown or dragged by a horse, bitten by a snake, caught in a blizzard or tornado, or swept away in a flash flood, among other things. Folks simply vanished, and sometimes their remains were never found. There was also the possibility of an attack on a lonely stretch. More than one man was shot and killed for his horse or saddle, not to mention his poke of cash.

By 1873, however, the number of disappearances along the Osage Road had gotten so high that officials and local residents began paying attention. This region in southeastern Kansas had become one of the most dangerous places to travel in the West.

The proverbial pot came to a boil with the disappearance of William York in the spring of 1873. When the doctor didn't return, his wife and brothers (including one who lived in Independence and another, Colonel A. M. York, who lived in Fort Scott) used their considerable political influence to initiate an investigation.

Oddly enough, it was partly William York's own investigation that had drawn him down the road in the first place in March of 1873. In December of 1872 York's friend, George Loncher, had taken his seven-year-old daughter to visit relatives in Iowa while he sorted out his life after the death of his beloved wife. Loncher and his child never reached their destination and seemed to have vanished without a trace. York wanted to retrace their route and find out what had happened to them.

When William York himself vanished, his brother, Colonel York, personally led an investigation in early May of 1873 to find him. It didn't take long before he concluded that Cherryvale, near the Bender Inn, was the best place to begin.

It was common knowledge that the doctor had stopped at the Bender Inn for an early meal, then, according to the Benders, had continued on his way. The Benders were apparently the last people to see him alive.

Cherryvale residents, eager to help in any way they could, cooperated whole-heartedly with Colonel York. At a town meeting—attended by Pa Bender—most of the locals pledged to support the investigation. Nearly all the homesteaders were honest folk who were also worried about the dangers of the Osage Road—a road they, themselves, had to travel from time to time. Volunteers stepped forward to join a search party, which soon boasted more than fifty men. According to some accounts, even Kate Bender joined the effort, promising to consult the spirits to see if they could help find the missing man.

Colonel York and his party divided up to better search the area. By the time York and his men reached the Bender Inn, the Benders were gone. It appeared the family had not fled quickly but rather had taken the time to pack the items they wanted to bring with them.

Colonel York led a search of the deserted Bender home. What he and the others found was horrific. Finding the kitchen cellar nailed shut, the men pried the nails loose and opened the door. A horrible smell overtook them. Inside the cellar were globs of dried blood everywhere, and blood-soaked earth. The gore from eighteen months of gruesome work had made the cellar stench the stuff of nightmares.

York thought there might be bodies buried under the cabin floor. Expecting the worst, the men ripped up the floor to search for victims, literally taking the cabin apart piece by piece. The men spread out to search the entire property. In the orchard they noticed depressions in the ground and places where the soil was soft. They dug down and found human feet not far from the surface. Digging farther, they found the man that Colonel York had been looking for; his brother William was buried head first. They also found the bodies of William York's good friend, George Loncher, and his young daughter.

Consider the following report about the girl's condition in the *Kansas City Journal*, published in the summer of 1873, not long after the murders were discovered: "[She] was probably eight years of age and had long sunny hair. One arm was broken. The right knee had been wrenched from its socket and the leg doubled up under her body. Nothing like this sickening series of crimes had ever been recorded in the history of the country."



After bodies were discovered at the Bender farm and orchard in 1873, the property became a gruesome tourist attraction. The curious came from near and far to walk around the grave mounds and ponder the grisly murders. Visitors would sometimes take pieces of the cabin or other items as souvenirs of their visit to the Bender Inn.

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It is little wonder that the Bender farm was dubbed “Hell’s Acre” by the searchers who dug up the bodies. No man in his wildest imagination had expected anything so atrocious or revolting.

Some men used gate rods from the wagons to assist in searching for bodies. In places where the rod was easily pushed into the ground, they suspected a grave and often found a corpse.

After examining clothing and other personal effects, the searchers were able to positively identify seven bodies. Others were simply unrecognizable. In some graves they simply found dismembered body parts. Besides the Loncher girl, there was at least one other child. There was evidence that the Benders had buried one or more of the children alive.

As quickly as it was determined that the Benders were the murderers, the nineteenth-century version of an all-points bulletin went out for them; but the villains had a head start. Searchers at first were able to follow their wagon tracks. But the Bender family eventually caught a train and split up before the telegraph could disseminate the message for officials to apprehend them.

According to one account, a posse actually nabbed them and in righteous indignation savagely shot Ma, Pa, and Junior, then buried Kate upside down and alive.

We can safely assume that such a story, as much as it inspires a sense of justice, is just that—a story. While we can understand the possibility of such an event, the men surely would have brought the bodies back to Cherryvale had it really happened. They would have been local heroes. Besides, there was a considerable reward for the Benders—the governor of Kansas offered \$2,000, Colonel York offered \$1,000—and the posse would have wanted to cash in.

In the end, reporters and lawmen discovered that Ma Bender was really a confidence woman named Almira Meil Griffin, from New York. It's alleged, too, that she may have murdered a few of her former husbands. Her daughter Kate, it turned out, was Eliza Griffin. She, too, was a gifted confidence woman and thief involved in séances and supernatural scams. It is possible that she also dabbled in prostitution. Pa's real name was John Flickinger, and he was a native of Germany. He may have been married to Ma at one time, or perhaps he was just her partner in crime. Junior was a man named John Gebhardt, who may have been living with Kate (some feel they were married) at the inn.

When the band split up with the law on their heels, Ma and Pa went their separate ways. It was thought that Kate and Junior took off together. Rumors of Bender "sightings" occurred for a decade, but no trace of their whereabouts was ever discovered.

For all their homicidal activities, the "Bloody Benders" were thought to have netted about \$5,000 in cash and gold, along with saddles, horses, wagons and teams, and other items. The search for the murderers was intense, but there were few leads. Kate and the other Benders escaped their earthly judges. ⇨