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Katrina Michalak [00:00:12] This episode rewinds the clock back to the 1930s, when a young woman found herself moving to Phenix with her husband. Friends were made. Liquor was poured. Secrets were traded. Affairs blossomed. And then. Her life would never be the same. Who? This moment sets the scene for a mystery that still haunts Arizona to this day. The young woman is Wendy Ruth Judd, a name that rings familiar for many in the Phenix area. Maybe the first time you've heard of her was how I did. During our 2019 podcast episode when we covered the wicked crimes she committed. Maybe you haven't heard of her at all. Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast by The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. About Metro, Phenix and beyond. I'm producer Catrina McCulloch, and today we're revisiting one of our favorite episodes. The story of Wendy. Ruth. Chad. Let's dive into the different stories told over the years about what really happened the night of Wendy's crime, and the burning questions left that have kept the mystery unresolved. Heads up. Today's episode has graphic details of a violent crime. So listen, their discretion is advised. Former podcast producer and now East Valley reporter for the public, Maritza Dominguez shares the story.

Maritza Dominguez [00:02:11] Valley Bar is one of the most popular bars in downtown Phenix, in part because of its style as a speakeasy. You walk down a dark alley and there it is, a red neon sign leading you underground to Valley Bar. As you make your way in looking for a drink or just a good time, you'll see. Right above the bar hangs a white cloth with light shining on it. You can see shadows of figures like the trunk, a saw, and an arm rotating along the length of the bar. This art project tells this story of the infamous truck murderess when you, Ruth Judd. Now, to understand that story, we have to go back to the 1930s. Only 19 years after Arizona became a state. Phenix was relatively unknown. It was a city of just under 50,000 residents, not a major city like it is now.

Marshall Shore [00:03:01] Really kind of. That ten 12th Street would have been the farthest reaches of the city. It would have been a very small space compared to what it is now.

Maritza Dominguez [00:03:12] That's local historian Marshall Shaw. It was a place where people moved to the desert for their health. This is why Indiana native Wendy Ruth Judd found herself in Phenix, Arizona. She and her husband, Doctor William C Judd, moved around for his job when he couldn't find one here. He left to Los Angeles in 1931, but when he stayed behind because she had a job at the lowest Grinnell Memorial Clinic.

Jana Bommersbach [00:03:37] She was the receptionist in the in the office when they when you walked in, the first person you saw was when he was Judd.

Maritza Dominguez [00:03:43] This is Jana Boomer's book. A former Arizona Republic reporter and the author of a book titled The Trunk Murderess Winnie Ruth Judd. Here's how Jana described Winnie's personality as a young woman.

Jana Bommersbach [00:03:56] She had a very nice personality. She was. She was talkative. She was funny. She made friends easily. She was. I wouldn't say she was vivacious, but she could hold her own in conversations.

Maritza Dominguez [00:04:10] While at her job, she befriended two women, Agnes and Leroy, and later Hedvig Cami Samuelson. The women became close friends, including

living together for some time. All three women were close friends with a man named Jack Holleran, a prominent member in Phenix Society and someone who liked to party.

Marshall Shore [00:04:29] Their house was known as a good time house, so Jack would have out-of-town clients, would bring them to the house, and they would all have a fun time. In fact, they got a radio so they could have dance parties. And even though it was during prohibition, the booze did flow with their house.

Maritza Dominguez [00:04:47] It is considered common knowledge that Jack and Winnie were having a full blown affair at this time. The relationship between the four soon turned sour. Now this is where the story gets a little tricky. There are many different versions of what happened, but here are the facts. On October 16th, 1931, all three women, Anne, Sammy and Winnie, were shot and and Sammy died. But Winnie survived. Sammy's body was cut up to fit into trunks and and stuffed into another. How it happened. We'll get to that later. But it was Winnie who traveled to Los Angeles with the trunks of Anne and Sammy's corpses.

Jana Bommersbach [00:05:28] She gets to LA. One of the big trunk is dripping blood. They think it's contraband, dear. When he was. Judd disappears from the station. And doesn't come back to claim that the trunk and eventually the stink that stinking and flies are running around the trunk and eventually open the trunk and discover that inside there are parts of the body.

Maritza Dominguez [00:05:51] Because the trunks were in her name. L.A. police began searching for her all over town. An L.A. times newspaper article from October 21st, 1931 refers to it as, quote, the greatest police hunt when he turned herself in a few days later. Photos of her surrender show her wearing a dress, a large fur coat and her hair styled in finger waves. Once the story got out, it was reported all over the country.

Marshall Shore [00:06:18] Because it was telling headline papers across the country. And in a lot of ways, it was really the first time that people had heard of Phenix.

Maritza Dominguez [00:06:28] During my research, I saw headlines from Marilyn, Montana, Florida, you name it, and it became a sensation here in the state as well. People gave her all types of nicknames. The most popular were, quote, the Trunk Murderess or the Tiger Woman.

Jana Bommersbach [00:06:44] She got transported back to Phenix, and that was also a spectacle. When she got back to Phenix, there was a huge crowd waiting for her outside the courthouse, which is the antique courthouse downtown. There were lots of people waiting for her, just to see her and to get a look at the famous when jail.

Maritza Dominguez [00:07:00] Now, back in Arizona, her trial began in January of 1932. The state had their theory of what happened that night.

Charles Arnold [00:07:08] I said you. Went out there with this gun to kill these women because this one woman had rejected your love. Isn't that right? And I said you found them sound asleep, and you had a key to the door, so you went quietly in their door. They were sleeping here. While they were still asleep. When you shot them right through the. In the bed there.

Maritza Dominguez [00:07:34] This is Phenix, detective Charles Arnold, who investigated the crime firsthand in 1931. He said that in a later interview with Phenix TV station Ktar, the frenzy continued into the trial.

Jana Bommersbach [00:07:47] The galleries were filled every day when it came time for the trial, with people just standing in line for hours to get in for the few seats they had in the courtroom. The trial was an amazing trial. It was like this spectacular trial of the century kind of story, where they put people on again and again to say how, when Richard had alone done all of this stuff. They, they brought they brought in police officers who, who did their reports.

Maritza Dominguez [00:08:17] When he was charged, was only tried for and murder, not Sammys no one was ever tried for Sammys murder, even though she was the one found dismembered.

Jana Bommersbach [00:08:27] And attorneys later would say the reason she wasn't tried for that crime was because if they cut, if they did that, they'd have to explain how she could have cut up this body. And they couldn't explain that.

Maritza Dominguez [00:08:37] When he was found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. She was taken to Arizona State Prison in Florence, located in eastern Arizona, when his prosecutors, in the meantime, did what they could to try and get her an insanity hearing, hoping it might keep her from being executed. On April 6th, 1933, when he wrote a 19 page confession letter describing the gruesome details of that fateful night. The letter begins with her recalling her relationship with Jack and the women, and in Sammy. Marshall here summarizes how and when he started to pull apart.

Marshall Shore [00:09:12] Part of the reason for the murder or the reason for the murder, depending on which variation you want to believe, is the fact that Anne was playing Jack. Right in front of when he was. Judd was really playing up to him and then really telling her that she was only using him for his money and didn't care anything about it.

Maritza Dominguez [00:09:33] When he in the letter wrote, quote, it was not what Jack did, but the continual taunts made by and which drove me beside myself. I could not stand taunts. I just went crazy. She goes on to say that the taunts kept her awake at night. She started self-medicating to help her sleep.

Marshall Shore [00:09:53] But you also have a moment where when you regret is taking lots of a barbiturate. Luminol. So I think you also have drugs playing into it as well.

Maritza Dominguez [00:10:02] According to medical research, barbiturates during the 1920s to the mid 1950s were commonly used as sedatives and hypnotics. When he, in the letter said and taunts possessed her, her mind went wild. And so she grabbed the gun and knife. On that late October, Friday night, she headed to an in Sammys. But her nerves got to the better of her and she retreated, falling asleep for a few hours on their couch. When she woke, she remembered why she was there and according to the letter, she shot and in bed. She wrote that she never had intentions of hurting Sammy, but Sammy and her started to fight. Sammy was stabbed in the shoulder when he shot in the hand, and they fell to the ground as they fought. They both reached for the gun, but when he got to it first, Winnie in the letter says, quote, I finally got the gun and shot her. And in my wild state I really do not remember where in the head. In the letter, she said she alone dragged Ann's body into the trunk and then dismembered Sammy's body so that it would fit into the other

trunk. In the letter, she alone committed the murders and transportation of the bodies to L.A.. However, Jenna has a theory about this confession letter.

Jana Bommersbach [00:11:26] So she wrote that letter to to to get Jack to have her exonerated. It wasn't the truth. It wasn't what happened. It belies everything else that she told everybody else that happened in the entire case. But she wrote that letter in order to try to get herself exonerated.

Maritza Dominguez [00:11:43] On April 23rd, 1933, when he was handed her new sentence.

Jana Bommersbach [00:11:48] And at the last minute she was declared insane and sent to the insane asylum instead of being executed.

Maritza Dominguez [00:11:54] She was transported back to Phenix to spend the rest of her life in the state hospital. You'd think this is where Winnie story would end. Should spend the rest of her life in that hospital. But now.

Jana Bommersbach [00:12:05] What do you mean? She would end up escaping six times over in the years that she was in the state hospital, and she would be gone for various amounts of time.

Maritza Dominguez [00:12:14] Her escapes from the hospital were also largely covered by the media, and no one knew exactly how she escaped so many times. That is, until Winnie opened up to Janet about the truth. Decades later.

Jana Bommersbach [00:12:26] Someone in the hospital, a nurse, had given her a key to the front door of the state hospital, and that she had that key hidden in a very secure place, and she would use that key whenever she wanted to leave.

Maritza Dominguez [00:12:40] In 1962, she escaped and was gone for seven years until 1969, where she was found in California working for a wealthy family as a nanny and housekeeper under the name Marion Lane.

Jana Bommersbach [00:12:53] Her nephew had borrowed her car, and he had parked it somewhere where there was a crime, and in checking all the cars in the neighborhood, they came upon this car that was that was registered to a woman named Marion Lane.

Maritza Dominguez [00:13:06] And that name stuck out to one of the detectives. He recognized the name because it had been used at some point during Winnie's trial.

Jana Bommersbach [00:13:14] But had been forgotten all these years. Right. And they went looking and they found her, and they brought her back to Arizona.

Maritza Dominguez [00:13:21] When he was extradited back to Phenix. But before this happened, she gave her first ever TV interview to Phenix journalist Joe Patrick from Ktar in 1969. It took place at the Contra Costa County Jail in California. She gave a completely different story from the confession letter, or the theory police had back in the day, a theory closer to what Jana believes. So let's go back to that night before the murder, because it's important to know when he was introducing Jack Holleran to another woman. When Anne and Sammy found out, they weren't happy.

Jana Bommersbach [00:13:56] Well, they were all really angry at her because they saw Lucille as chiming in on their good deal. And their good deal was that holler would come by, bring liquor, bring food. We brought a Philco radio over, and he and his friends would come over to their house and they would party together.

Maritza Dominguez [00:14:12] And. And Sammy planned on telling Jack a rumor about Lucille, which angered Wendy. So, according to Jana, Whitney threatened to tell everyone that Ann and Sammy were lesbians.

Jana Bommersbach [00:14:22] So they were now going after totally after their entire livelihoods, her job, their reputations, their their relationship with Jack Holleran, who was like their sugar daddy to all of them. All of this stuff was now in this turmoil, as they just kept throwing these complaints against each other back and forth.

Maritza Dominguez [00:14:42] In this version of the story. They were all at and in Sammy's place. When the fight began between the three women, Sammy left the room and came back with a gun.

Jana Bommersbach [00:14:51] And pointed the gun at her and shot at her and hit her in the hand. Ruth picked up a knife that was laying on the table, which was like a butter knife, and she and Sammy started struggling over the gun, and she stabbed at Sammy with the knife while Sammy's trying to shoot her.

Maritza Dominguez [00:15:06] This is how the very own Winnie Ruth Judd described the scene in her interview from 1969.

Katrina Michalak [00:15:12] And came from behind. She got the ironing board from behind the.

Charles Arnold [00:15:18] Water heater and she came up behind me and hit me, which caused us both to fall in the doorway.

Maritza Dominguez [00:15:23] Now Ann and Wendy are on the floor wrestling for the gun. The gun goes off shooting, and to stop her from hitting Wendy with an ironing board. And then at some point, Sammy is also shot during the fight.

Charles Arnold [00:15:35] She was shot in bed like they say. It was in the doorway in the kitchen. It wasn't in the bedroom at all.

Maritza Dominguez [00:15:42] In the interview, she makes the case of self-defense when he said and knocked her unconscious. And when she came to, she found a very different scene.

Jana Bommersbach [00:15:51] And was also unconscious. And she said, I was laying between two dead bodies and she got up and she ran. And that was how she said that that scene had happened.

Maritza Dominguez [00:16:01] How the body was dismembered also is a completely different story. Instead of her alone cutting up the body, in the 1969 interview, she said she had help. Here's what Jana thought about that.

Jana Bommersbach [00:16:14] So whoever cut up that body knew the anatomy of a human being and knew how to dismember an entire human being. That was not when he was judged.

Maritza Dominguez [00:16:22] In this version, Jack Holleran promised to help. When you get to L.A., telling her.

Jana Bommersbach [00:16:27] I'm going to get you to LA, I'm going to get you some money to take the train to L.A.. We're going to have a guy there take the trunk. He'll throw it into the ocean. No one will ever know what happened. And we're going to cover this whole thing up. That's what she says happened.

Maritza Dominguez [00:16:39] But Jack never came. And she ran around town borrowing money because she didn't have enough left after paying all her bills. Jack's association with these women was scandalous for the time because he was a known, influential member of the community. His name was often in the papers even before the murder.

Jana Bommersbach [00:16:57] So he worked for the O'Malley's, and he had this lumber yard that he ran and under his own name. He was a member of the Phenix Country Club. He was a leader in the Community Chest, which was the organization that raised money for charity. He went to Saint Mary's Church. He was a big shot there. He was a he was a very prominent businessman and an apparently a very handsome, very charming, very lovable Irishman.

Maritza Dominguez [00:17:24] He was subpoenaed to testify during the trial, but he was never called by the prosecutors or the defense. However, some suspected Jack to be involved, and in 1933 he was almost tried as an accessory to the crime, but it went nowhere. Now back to 1969, after being discovered in California and taken back to Phenix when he was taken to the Arizona State Prison. And a new legal fight began. She fought to have her sentence commuted to time served. Eventually, she was pardoned by governor Jack Williams in 1971 and released from prison.

Jana Bommersbach [00:18:03] And so she went back to California, and she lived there for many years. That's where I found her. That's where I interviewed her when I. When I wrote my book. And I spent time with her over there at her place.

Maritza Dominguez [00:18:14] As an elderly woman. Said when she was a sociable person. And after spending so much time with her, they became friends.

Jana Bommersbach [00:18:22] Everybody who who met her really liked her. I mean, I knew her as a very jovial, very happy, very, outgoing, enduring woman. And, she would come to my Christmas parties every year and be the head of the party. Nobody knew who she was.

Maritza Dominguez [00:18:39] When he moved back to Phenix in the 1990s and lived out her final years in Arizona. She died in her sleep at the age of 93, in 1998. The murder happened in 1931, and here we are still talking through the details of what happened that night 88 years ago. So I asked Janna, why is everyone still so interested in this story?

Jana Bommersbach [00:19:02] People find it fascinating because we want justice. We want we want crimes to be solved, but we don't want scapegoats. We want real justice. And there was no real justice in when he was shot.

Maritza Dominguez [00:19:15] When his story still captures the interest of people in Arizona, and to this day, we're not sure which version of the story is accurate. Was it this lesbian affair gone wrong, like the state argued? Did Winnie kill Ann in her sleep and then transport the bodies without help, like she said in the 1930s? Or was it this self-defense, aided by Jack Holleran? Like she said in the 60s, we still don't know. But the fascination with the case remains. Marshall even takes people on a bus tour every October to all the hot spots during this chapter of Arizona history. This even includes the house where the murder happened that still stands in Phenix. I asked Marshall why her story still permeates into pop culture.

Marshall Shore [00:20:01] That's part of still the mystery of trying to figure out what really did happen. And we may never know what really did happen.

Katrina Michalak [00:20:21] Even though when you story permeates Arizona culture to this day, we still don't know what actually happened that night and we may never know. Thank you for listening to this episode of Valley 101, a podcast by The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. If you enjoyed this episode, share it with your friends. And if you haven't already, make sure you're subscribed. Don't forget to rate and review us and go ahead and give us five stars. Remember to submit your questions about Phenix and Arizona to Valley, 101 azcentral.com. Your question might be in our next episode. Follow us on Twitter and Instagram at ABC podcasts. This episode was written and produced by Maritza Domingues, Amanda Liberto, Kaylee Monahan and me. Katrina McCulloch provided additional production support. Kira Atchison provided production oversight. Music for this and all our shows comes from Universal Production Music. Valley 101 is an Arizona republic and is essential dcop production. Thanks for listening. We'll see you next week.