

# Henry Kellen Created El Paso Holocaust Museum

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In 1939, World War II began with Germany invading Poland. However, Jews in Germany had been restricted in many ways several years before. In 1934, Adolph Hitler had combined the offices of president and chancellor and had taken control of both state and military operations. In his quest to rid Germany of every Jew, Hitler would be responsible for a horrific event that some would later deny ever occurred: the Holocaust, as it became known, ended the lives of six million Jews and five million non-Jews. Some survived to tell the tale.

Hitler's target populations lived miserably in districts known as ghettos. According to the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* website, these ghettos were enclosed communities where Jews were sent to be separated from non-Jews during World War II. The Germans created thousands of ghettos across Europe; the first was established in Poland in 1939. While the Jews were being held in ghettos, Hitler and his army were planning the "final solution" to exterminate the Jewish population.

Camps were built for two purposes: forced labor and ultimately the extinction of the Jews. The first concentration camps that were established were in Germany after Hitler was appointed chancellor in 1933. More than 20,000 of these camps were established during the war.

Others that were sent to these camps were homosexuals, gypsies, Christians, the mentally and physically disabled, prisoners of war, political and religious dissidents and others whom Hitler considered as sub-human or non-Aryan. Millions would die from starvation, exhaustion, physical abuse and execution in camps.

Survivors of the camps had vivid memories of this event, but many maintained silence for years in order to try to find peace. Most suffered sleepless nights, nightmares and other physical and psychological manifestations caused by their unspeakable experiences.

Henry Kellen, founder of the El Paso Holocaust Museum and Study Center in El Paso, Texas, was one of the few who managed to escape from a camp and later migrate to America. Kellen, his wife and nephew were the only survivors in his family. His father, mother, sister, brother, uncles and cousins perished during the Holocaust.

Henry Kellen made it his moral obligation to let the world know about the Holocaust. He changed the hearts of El Pasoans and others through his experience and

determination to survive by educating us about some of the horrors that World War II produced in Europe.

According to the El Paso Holocaust Museum and Study Center, Kellen was born in Lodz, Poland, on July 5, 1915, as Heniek Kacenelenbogen. He had an older sister Sonia and brother Moniek. He received a mechanical and textile engineering degree from a French university in 1938. While he was in school, his family returned to Lithuania, where his parents had been born and where Kellen settled after graduation. Lithuania would be occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940 and overrun by the German Army in June 1941.

The Soviet Union began the destruction of normal Jewish life in Kovno (also known as Kaunas), the capital of Lithuania and the largest city, which had a highly intellectual Jewish community of 35,000 to 40,000, including one of Europe's leading yeshivas. Jewish culture had flourished in Kovno with many organizations, schools, businesses and 40 synagogues. The Soviets abolished most of these institutions, arresting many Jews and sending others to Siberia, according to the *U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum* site.

When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union, violating their non-aggression pact, Soviet forces fled Kovno and pro-German Lithuanians began attacking and killing Jews, whom they blamed for the Soviet invasion.

When the Nazis arrived in Kovno in June 1941, they greatly increased the restrictions limiting the freedom of Jews by forcing them to wear a yellow Star of David and to keep a 7 p.m. curfew. They were also prevented from attending their schools. The Germans began killing Jews in July 1941 in the forts that were built to defend the city. Kellen's father was picked up on the street and shot. Things would get much worse within a few weeks, however.

In August 1941, the Nazis created the Kovno Ghetto, where about 30,000 Jews were transported from their homes and packed into crude houses with dirt floors and no running water or electricity. The Kacenelenbogen family was sent here, including Henry's sister and



Henry Kellen talks about his experiences in a concentration camp in World War II. (Photo courtesy of the El Paso Times Archive)

nephew, who at that time were only visiting from Poland. It was in the ghetto that Henry Kellen married his wife Julia in 1941.

The entire family and other inmates became forced laborers. Everybody had a job. For example, Kellen's mother and sister made uniforms for German soldiers at a factory while the males, including Kellen, built an airport.

"There was no gas installation in our camp. People were just shot. Or they died from malnutrition or disease. Of 30,000 inmates ... only 2,500 survived," Kellen told Becky Powers in the *El Paso Times* article "Surviving the Holocaust."

According to Kellen, one day, posters were put up in the camp asking for male college graduates to assemble at a certain place one morning to select books from the city library. For some reason, Kellen decided not to attend. "My brother went and never came back. After the war we learned they were all taken out and shot," said Kellen in a video on the *El Paso Holocaust Museum* website.

On Oct. 28, 1941, Kellen and the rest of the camp were told to assemble at a certain point in the camp. About 10,000 people were selected, and the next day Kellen watched as they marched uphill. All day long Kellen heard machine guns. In this "selection," Kellen lost all of his cousins and uncles, as he explained in his interview with Powers.

In an *El Paso Times* article by Doug Pullen, Kellen explained that on March 27, 1944, the Nazis ordered all the children and the sick to be disposed of in the ghetto. He watched as German soldiers yanked babies from their mothers' arms and tossed them into a truck. Kellen's nephew, Jerry, was only eight years old, but because of malnutrition, he resembled a two-year-old child. Kellen's sister hid Jerry behind a large pillow.

This "Kinder-Action" (Children's Action) was one of the most brutal murders of hundreds of infants and



Train car display at the El Paso Holocaust Museum shows the way Holocaust victims were transported from camp to camp. (Photo by Isabel Hernandez)



children Kellen would see. His nephew survived, however. At this point, Kellen realized it was time to try to escape that horrendous place.

While Kellen planned for a way to escape, his main concern was to hide his nephew and keep him alive. Meanwhile, a fellow prisoner, Yerachmiel Siniuk, had lost his arm working as a slave laborer at the same camp. Now disabled and unable to work, Siniuk knew the Germans would soon kill him. According to the *Jewish Foundation for the Righteous* website, while working outside the ghetto, Yerachmiel's brother-in-law came upon a poor Lithuanian farmer, Andrius Urbonas, and begged him to hide Yerachmiel.

Urbonas agreed only if Yerachmiel was able to reach the farm, 10 miles away from the camp. Yerachmiel managed to escape and reached the farm where he was warmly welcomed by Andrius, his wife, Maria, his 20-year old daughter, Ona, and Juozas, his 14-year-old son.

The family made a place for Yerachmiel and fed him, even though they were extremely poor. When Yerachmiel returned to the ghetto, he came upon Kellen, whom he had known before the war. He then led Kellen, Julia and Jerry and another Jewish family of four to the Urbonas farm.

"Ona brought food each day to the now eight Jews in hiding. She also washed their clothes. Juozas and Andrius would bring them news from the front lines. At first the Jews hid in the barn, and then they moved to the house and were hidden in an earthen hole under a piece of furniture," according to the *Jewish Foundation for the Righteous* website. Kellen, his wife and nephew and the others remained with the Urbonas family until they were liberated by the Soviet army on July 31, 1944.

Even though Kellen, Julia and Jerry managed to escape and hide, most were not so fortunate. Kellen's mother and sister stayed at the camp and were later sent to another camp where they died of typhus and starvation, according to the article by Powers.

Eventually, Kellen returned to Kovno in search of his family, only to find that the camp had been burned down.

Everyone had been killed or sent elsewhere in order to hide evidence. A source indicates that Henry was able to find a letter from his sister that she had left for him at the camp. In the letter, his sister asked Kellen and Julia to watch over her son.

According to *The Jewish Voice*, newsletter for the Jewish Federation of El Paso, Henry Kellen was among the first Holocaust survivors to arrive in the United States on July 4, 1946, thanks to the work of Eleanor Roosevelt and President Harry Truman, who issued the first affidavits for displaced survivors. "El Paso was our destination because Julia had a sister, Olga Rosenberg, who arrived with her husband, Sam, to this country in 1929," Kellen told Grace B. Ellowitz. "While being a witness of the most shameful and tragic history of mankind, I never shared with anybody the tragic history of the Holocaust. The Holocaust to me and Julia was a nightmare."

Thus began a journey in a new country. Kellen and his small family now had a fresh start, a new life, all in another country. Even though things were tough emotionally, Kellen managed to move on and make his life as a Jewish citizen of El Paso. It was not easy to find a job, as he mentioned in *The Jewish Voice*. In fact, even his engineering diploma and the five European languages he spoke were of no use here in the Sun City. With the help of Emil Reisel, Kellen was able to establish himself.

Emil Reisel, a man who had foreseen Hitler's rise to power in the late 1930s, arrived in the United States in 1935 with his wife Regina. By 1945, he was living in El Paso operating a wholesale warehouse, according to the book *El Paso Holocaust Museum and Study Center: El Paso—The Wild West Welcomes Holocaust Survivors* by Dr. Mimi R. Gladstein and Sylvia D. Cohen. Holocaust survivors that arrived in El Paso were directed to Emil Reisel. "Reisel's main task was to find employment for the men among the refugees," stated Gladstein, Reisel's daughter.

In a personal interview with Isabel Hernandez, Gladstein stated that her father tried to help all Holocaust survivors. Most of the people he helped stayed in El Paso; the few that did not left mainly because they had made contact with family and decided to move with them. Gladstein also mentioned that she met Kellen when she was a young girl. Her father helped Kellen by offering him a job.

According to Gladstein and Cohen's book, Reisel gave Kellen "two sample cases, a car, and a sales route that sent him out to remote towns such as Lovington, New Mexico, and Safford, Arizona." Within some years, Kellen began to run his own business called the Hollywood Store for Men, a fashion store in downtown El Paso.

In the interview with Hernandez, Gladstein said that at the age of 14, she had begun to work for Kellen. Even though her father and Kellen had different businesses and had gone different ways, the two families remained good friends.

Gladstein said that she knew Kellen's nephew, and they both attended El Paso High School, being about the same age. She added that Jerry was a "very sweet guy and smart, too." He graduated in the top ten of his class, according to Gladstein, and he later attended San Diego University. Tragically, after surviving the Holocaust, he

unexpectedly died in his sleep of a brain condition at the age of 27.

Gladstein recounted that her mother Regina was asked to help the women Holocaust survivors who came to El Paso without the slightest idea of how to function in America, such as how to buy groceries. Meanwhile, Gladstein and her sister were often asked to teach



Henry Kellen opens up about the Holocaust. (Photo courtesy of the El Paso Times Archive)

survivors how to read and write English. Gladstein said the irony of her life is that from teaching others English at such a young age, she became an English professor at the University of Texas at El Paso.

The death of Emil Reisel took a toll on his family and on all of those who had received help from him. He had lived a very prosperous life, always wanting to help others. Gladstein added that upon her father's death, the Kellen family was always there for Regina by accompanying her in her sorrow as well as attempting to lift up her spirits. The couple often visited Regina and took her out for lunch, always keeping an eye on her. Thus began a close relationship between the three individuals.

As great friends as they were, Gladstein noted that it was difficult for Kellen to talk about his past. El Paso had yet to discover the entire story of Kellen as a survivor of the Holocaust.

"For 33 years no one wanted to know what Henry Kellen had to tell them," wrote *El Paso Times* writer Craig Phelon in a 1979 article. Some people began to believe that the Holocaust was all a lie. In fact, such denials in the form of pamphlets and books began occurring in the 1960s. In the mid-1970s, the number of these publications greatly increased. Two such examples were *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century: The Case against the Presumed Extermination of European Jewry* in 1976 by Arthur Butz and David Irving's *Hitler's War* in 1977. These denials broke Kellen's silence.

He made it his duty to speak up, to let the world know, to educate everyone that this tragic event did happen and he was living proof of it. According to Phelon, Kellen's story was not told publicly until he was interviewed for an *El Paso Times* story about the 1978 television series entitled *Holocaust*.

Holocaust survivors Benjamin Kandel, Z. Anthony Kruszewski and Henry Kellen each had a different story to tell the *Times*. The survivors had witnessed many atrocities during the Holocaust, even though they lived in different parts of Eastern Europe.

Kellen revealed in this article how he and the rest of the residents of Kaunas, Lithuania, were treated by the German soldiers who had invaded their home. "They told us we had 48 hours to bring everything of value from our houses ... They were going to search the houses after



The Tree of Life sculpture in the museum asks visitors to "Remember the Children." (Photo by Isabel Hernandez)

continued on page 10



continued from page 9

48 hours and if they found anything of value, the whole family would be shot.” One of Kellen’s neighbors was shot for forgetting one silver spoon in his house.

Most of the experiences Kellen described are gruesome and graphic; however, he made it his obligation to inform the younger generations that the Holocaust was an event that happened and must not be repeated.

Kellen and his wife had suffered from the Holocaust but also suffered remembering it. Another tragedy was the passing of their nephew. Even though they did not have any children of their own, they raised Jerry as their son. Gladstein mentioned in her interview that the Kellens had adopted a troubled child named Shaul Yannai from Israel. Kellen raised him and led him to attend the University of Texas at Austin. Shaul was later deported back to Israel, where he lives with his wife.

In 1983, Kellen retired from his business, the same year his wife Julia died. According to Gladstein and Cohen, Kellen asked the El Paso Jewish Federation for space in the Jewish Community Center to display some of the books and personal effects related to the Holocaust that he had collected. Soon his collection spilled over from one wall of the conference room to other areas of the room. Word got out and the numbers of visitors grew as Kellen began inviting schools, churches and the military to learn about the Holocaust. Thus, the first Holocaust museum was born in 1984.

Kellen decided he would search for more evidence of the Holocaust. In 1989, he flew to Poland to find memorabilia from the camps in Europe. Most of the camps were burned down by the Germans in order to erase all evidence, but “the most notorious camps, Auschwitz and Maidanek, survived,” he told Ellowitz. Kellen returned with “important memorabilia.”

Little by little, Kellen’s collection grew and the room gained more visitors each time he added something. By coincidence, as Kellen mentioned to Ellowitz, he came upon a Torah that was hidden by a Polish farmer. Apparently, a Jewish family in Warsaw asked the farmer to take care of it while they were in the camps, but they never went back for it. The same Torah is currently at the El Paso Holocaust Museum.

Such were the contributions Kellen was given that helped him in the creation of his first museum, which lasted for about 10 years. In those years, Kellen was surprised to have so many visitors in the limited space. People had to sit on the floor and on the conference table.

Needing clerical help, Kellen called upon Sylvia Deener Cohen, the senior adult director at the Jewish Community Center. Cohen and Kellen had known each other before since both of them had worked at Emil Reisel’s Rio Grande Sales Company, according to the book *El Paso Holocaust Museum and Study Center*. “By the time the El Paso Museum and Holocaust Center moved from its single conference room into a freestanding building in 1994, Sylvia Cohen had become its executive director.”

In the spring of 1994, the second museum was opened thanks to the generous donation of Mr. and Mrs. Louis Rosenbaum. Located at 401 Wallenberg Street, next door to the Jewish Community Center, this museum had a variety of daily visitors and grew quickly.

In an *El Paso Times* article titled “Holocaust Museum Continues to Expand,” Erika Witzke wrote that there was “additional audio expansion to the gassing area and oven-sight displays, replicas of the ‘showers’ and ovens in which millions of ‘undesirables’ were exterminated.” The museum even had a model of a train car used to transport camp prisoners from one place to another. And now it had realistic sound effects. Among the items Kellen had collected in his two trips to Poland were children’s shoes, human hair and shower heads.

The museum also contained many donated items from El Paso Holocaust survivors such as photos, clothing and



Julia and Henry Kellen walk on a Berlin street in 1946. (Photo courtesy of the El Paso Holocaust Museum and Study Center)

the Torah that had been preserved by the farmer. Over 4,000 students visited the museum in the first year it opened, according to Witzke. By the end of 2001, more than 25,000 students were visiting the museum annually and there was still a waiting list. The new museum had its share of volunteers, some of whom were Holocaust survivors, and others who were recruited by Cohen to be docents of the museum.

An interesting feature of the second El Paso Holocaust Museum was that it was designed to resemble a bunker. An image of the museum is shown in the book by Gladstein and Cohen. Another unique characteristic of the original building was that there was a small outdoor garden of cypress trees in honor of the Righteous Among the Nations, referring to a title bestowed by the state of Israel on non-Jews who rescued or helped Jews survive during the Holocaust, despite the danger to their own lives.

In her interview with Hernandez, Gladstein explained that she had joined the Jewish Community Committee in order to help Kellen, who wanted to place the Urbonas family in the Righteous Among the Nations. Gladstein and her sister put together the extensive documentation necessary to have the family registered in the Righteous Among the Nations.

As Kellen became more involved with the museum, he was asked to make presentations at several schools. According to an article in the March 2008 issue of *The Jewish Voice*, Kellen made presentations at Cochise College in Douglas, Ariz., New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, Western University in Silver City and also at the University of Texas at El Paso. “I was even invited once to be a guest speaker of Remembrance Day to the Jewish Community of Albuquerque,” added Kellen.

Even though he was doing great things with the museum, Kellen still had sleepless nights. “My mind was constantly occupied with the question which has no answer, ‘How [did] the perpetrators murder one and a half million precious Jewish children? Our children who might have been the future of the Jewish people ...’” Kellen said to Ellowitz. A question that indeed did not have an answer and at times caused him to question God in a way resulted in being one of his motivations to educate the public, especially children.

The museum was a remarkable place for local El Pasoans and out-of-towners to visit. But seven years after its opening the second museum burned down. “An electrical fire ... wiped out 80 percent of the collection, forcing the collection to go mobile, traveling to area schools and institutions,” wrote Pullen.

It was not the time to give up, though. Kellen and supporters of the museum made it their ultimate goal to raise funds for another museum. Thanks to the efforts put forth by the community of El Paso and Henry Kellen’s determination, a new 5,000-square foot Holocaust Museum was built and opened on Jan. 27, 2008, in downtown El Paso. With its new location at 715 North Oregon Street, the museum was ready to bring in more visitors than ever.

Many of the displays were damaged or destroyed in the aforementioned fire, so a new museum had to be designed. However, there are a few items that survived the fire and can be seen at the present museum. The museum’s purpose is to teach the “Lessons of the Holocaust.” The museum’s tour is “a continuing effort to combat intolerance, hatred, inhumanity and indifference, the malevolent attitudes that made the horrors of the Holocaust possible,” according to Gladstein and Cohen.

With a new building and 4,100-square feet of exhibit space, the museum has a modern twist to its designs. The new galleries, videos and exhibits were developed by Mireles Creative, Inc., directed by Victor Mireles, the lead designer of the museum. Topics of permanent exhibits range from “Life in Europe Before the Nazis” to “Kristallnacht” to “Life in the Ghettos,” to “Transportation by Railcars to Camps” to “Liberation by Allied Forces,” and several others. All materials in the museum’s galleries are in both English and Spanish.

In addition to exhibit space, the building consists of staff offices, a gift shop, a more spacious and welcoming entryway and space for future exhibits. Unfortunately, there is not enough space on the property for the garden the second museum had. However, a mural honors the Righteous Among the Nations. It includes pictures and brief descriptions of experiences from people of many countries against a background of cypress trees.

Kellen said in an article that the main purpose for creating the museum was to commemorate his family and the rest who were not as fortunate as he to have survived the Holocaust. He also wanted to fight the claims that the Holocaust never occurred.

Kellen was indeed a very fortunate man to have survived the Holocaust and to have had the privilege to teach others about his story and the historic catastrophe. Another auspicious event for Kellen was to have found the Urbonas family. He described in an *El Paso Times* article how he had for years been looking for the Urbonas family to thank them. According to the *Jewish Foundation for the Righteous* website, Andrius Urbonas and his wife died in 1973. Juozas died in 2009. However, Kellen was able to meet with Ona, along with fellow survivor Yerachmiel Siniuk. Later, Kellen also met a granddaughter of the couple who saved him, Virginia, who married El Pasoan Barry Mann.

Survivors of the Holocaust were liberated by Allied military troops. These “Liberators” were the soldiers who freed those in the concentration camps and they are honored as well with a mural in the El Paso Holocaust Museum. According to Gladstein and Cohen, the Museum’s first president, Albert Schwartz, former mayor Peter de Wetter and local artist Ernesto Martinez were local Liberators and are commemorated on a museum wall.

The final gallery includes a sanctuary and an area for meditation. This includes the Tree of Life sculpture, a photomontage of Anne Frank and memorial plaques. The memorial plaques contain words of wisdom from

continued on page 14



*Kellen continued from page 10*

Martin Luther King Jr., Albert Einstein, Elie Wiesel and Nicholas Winton.

The museum that now stands with pride on the corner of Oregon and Yandell Streets has daily visitors, from local students to tourists to soldiers and serious researchers of the Holocaust. As the museum continues to grow, changes and updates are always in progress.

In 2009, Mayor John Cook of El Paso awarded Kellen the Conquistador Award, the city's highest achievement award, an honor given only to those who have made great contributions and dedications to the city.

Kellen outlived two wives, Julia, who died more than 30 years ago and Regina Reisel Kellen, who died almost six years ago on Sept. 18, 2008. After Julia's death, Regina Reisel was there for Kellen, just as he was there for her when her husband, Emil Reisel, passed away. They eventually married. Gladstein, his stepdaughter, said in the interview with Hernandez, "Henry Kellen was a wonderful husband. He took great care of her; they had great times together."

The El Paso Holocaust Museum and Study Center has made an impact on the El Paso community. It has presented many programs and events that have drawn thousands of visitors to further educate them on the Holocaust. Activities such as "The Memory Project," a multimedia art installation at the museum, have presented the historic event from many different perspectives. The museum held its sixth annual summer camp for children June 16-20, 2014. "Tales of Courage" was the theme for the educational camp created for children ages 8 to 12. The museum's Tour de Tolerance, now in its eighth year, offers bicycle races as well as a 5K walk/run. The museum also sponsors a book club and hosted an educators' conference on "Teaching the Holocaust" in May. Admission to the museum and parking are free, but donations are encouraged. It is open Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Saturday and Sunday from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. and closed Mondays.

As one of only 13 freestanding Holocaust Museums in our country, the El Paso Holocaust Museum and Study Center continues to expand to further educate the public. Said Gladstein: "El Paso is very fortunate that a man of Henry's vision and commitment has brought into being this historical treasure for our community. The museum's key mission is to preach against prejudice and discrimination."

In the final gallery hang tablets with words of wisdom. One of them is inscribed with Elie Wiesel's teaching: "Not to remember means to side with the executioners against its victims; Not to remember means to kill the victims a second time; Not to remember means to become an accomplice of the enemy. On the other hand, to remember means to feel compassion for the victims of all persecutions."

Henry Kellen died on July 3, 2014, two days short of his 99th birthday as this article was being written. He had remained active in the museum he founded, participating in making decisions about its activities. He was remembered at a reception at the museum, attended by many who loved and respected this man who was determined that our world know the truth about the Holocaust and set about making it a reality. He is survived by his two stepdaughters, Mimi Gladstein and Holli Berry, his adopted son Shaul Yannai and an immeasurable legacy of compassion, education and activism. ☆

*Fuller continued from page 12*

Records, a Del-Fi label, and the song hit Billboard's Top 10 music chart soon after its release.

In 1965, the group recorded their first album entitled *KRLA King of the Wheels*. Poehler wrote, "1966 finally saw the release of a solid Bobby Fuller Four album" called *I Fought the Law*. Del-Fi picked the best songs they thought the group had recorded, and the result was a bombshell with back-to-back songs that surprised and pleased fans and Keane.

According to writer, rock music historian and former *Spin* magazine editor, Legs McNeil, Nancy Sinatra and Sally Field were often seen at the Bobby Fuller Four's concerts. The band was even in a movie in 1966 called the *Ghost in the Invisible Bikini* according to the *Handbook of Texas Online*.

The success and new music was such a gold mine that Bob Keane booked six weeks of concerts for the band. Not everything went smoothly, however. Poehler quoted Randy Fuller who said, "It was a roller coaster ride . . . one minute we'd be playing a really great show where everyone loved us and loved our music, and the next show would be a total disaster."

Despite the recognition and popularity being achieved by the young El Pasoans, the tour set up by Bob Keane was not the most pleasant. According to road manager Rick Stone, Bobby had thoughts of breaking up the band to launch a solo career. After the tour, the band flew back to their apartments in Los Angeles. On July 10, 1966, the Bobby Fuller Four played what would be their last show together, a gig at Casy Kasem's teen dance show.

On July 18, 1966, the band was to have a meeting, but Bobby never showed up. Dan Epstein wrote in liner notes for the CD entitled *The Bobby Fuller Four: Never To Be Forgotten* that his brother Randy recalled that Bobby had received a phone call around one or two in the morning. "He still had on his lounging clothes. Always a sharp dresser, Bobby would simply not have headed out without sprucing himself up a bit."

Nobody knew where the young singer went or whom he had gone to see. The only thing the band and his mother Loraine knew was that Bobby was not home.

About 5 p.m. on July 18, Loraine went outside to collect the mail and saw something peculiar. She spotted the vehicle Bobby had used when he left at 3 a.m. When she approached the car, she found her son dead lying across the seat. "Gasoline was boiling up and out of an open 2.5 gallon can in the front seat. A gas hose was nearby. She knew he was dead," wrote McNeil.

Bobby's death shocked everyone, not just his mother. In spite of such a tragedy, the family and the public demanded an answer, a person accountable for the situation.

Los Angeles Police concluded that Fuller had committed suicide by asphyxiation. However, close friends and family knew Bobby too well to believe it was suicide.

Fuller's body was in full rigor mortis, indicating he had been dead for hours. However, no one had seen the car until it was discovered by Fuller's mother. The official autopsy report read, "deceased, found lying face down in front seat of car—a gas can, 1/3 full, windows rolled up and doors shut, not locked—keys in ignition." Strangely, Fuller's skin, hair and clothes were all drenched in gasoline. The body had excessive bruising on the chest and shoulders and the right index finger was broken. Yet the Los Angeles police report read "no evidence of foul play."

Bobby Fuller was buried in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Hollywood Hills on July 22, 1966. He was only 23.

There are different theories of Fuller's cause of death. The theory of alleged murder arose when "a Hollywood police officer had, for some inconceivable

reason, destroyed crucial evidence at the scene such as the gasoline canister" stated Jeremy Simmons in *The Encyclopedia of Dead Rockstars*. Brother Randy Fuller also said that the police did not check the crime scene for fingerprints.

Another theory regarding Fuller's death involves the drug LSD. In the 1960s, many people experimented with the popular drug. The theory is that Fuller had gone to a nearby LSD party and had fallen. Bob Keane told music critic Dan Epstein that someone might have wanted to cover up Fuller's death so "they poured gasoline down his throat, saturated his hair, and made it look like suicide."

Dalton Powell, original drummer of Fuller's band, said in an article in the *El Paso Times* that the young singer "really didn't use drugs. He got high on his music." Road manager Rick Stone agreed and said, "Bobby was pretty damn straight. Two beers were too much for him."

There were yet other theories regarding Bobby Fuller's death. According to Epstein, "thugs" were sent to kill Fuller by a mobster who was an investor in Bob Keane's label. The mobster would benefit from life insurance the label had on Fuller and with the singer planning to disband the group, the only way to receive the money was having Fuller killed.

The next theory involves a mysterious woman named Melody. It is said that Melody was dating a low-level gangster and had a side thing going on with Bobby Fuller. According to this theory, her boyfriend found out that she and Fuller were more than friends and sent people to kill Fuller.

Although the cause of death was later changed to "accidental," questions immediately arise. Why would someone just experiencing breakout success accidentally swallow gasoline and beat himself up? How could he have driven home by himself in his condition? Why would he commit suicide when he had planned a meeting to meet with his band the next day? And on and on.

George Reynoso, El Paso music store owner and a Bobby Fuller Four memorabilia collector, seemed genuinely distraught when speaking about Fuller's death. "His death was an incredible loss of talent that barely scratched the surface of what he could have become," stated Reynoso in an interview.

Bobby Fuller will always be remembered thanks to people like Reynoso. An exhibit was held in 2008 at the El Paso Museum of History featuring belongings of local musicians including the Bobby Fuller Four. In addition, Randy Fuller performed at the Border Legends III concert in 2010 in memory of his brother. Bobby has been inducted into the Rockabilly Hall of Fame and the West Texas Music Hall of Fame.

The Bobby Fuller Four's version of "I Fought the Law" has been covered by the Clash, the British punk rock band, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers and numerous others. Ironically, if Fuller's version had never been recorded or had not become popular, the song might never have been discovered in the Crickets' recordings. Fuller's song "Let Her Dance" is played at the end of the movie *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. Another one of Bobby Fuller's songs called "A New Shade of Blue" was used in the 1999 movie *Boys Don't Cry* featuring Hilary Swank. Several albums of Fuller's music have been released over the years following his death and are available in various forms, including vinyl, at Amazon and other sites.

Whether Bobby Fuller's death was suicide, murder or an accident, no one probably will ever know since the case is sealed under California law. His mother Loraine died not knowing what really happened to her son, while his brother Randy has lived for nearly 50 years wondering about the death of his younger brother. 🎸