

# Who Killed Barry Crane?

In 1985, the Detroit native's body was found at his California townhouse. Despite the discovery of new DNA evidence no one has pinned down who killed the man known as the Babe Ruth of bridge and why.



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**O**n July 4, 1985, Barry Crane's team advanced to the finals of the Pasadena Regional. At the age of 57, the Detroit native was the world's best bridge player. His team had one more day to polish off another win. Before he left that evening, Crane was seen making a phone call.

The next morning, he didn't show up. Later that afternoon, his housekeeper found his brutally bludgeoned naked body wrapped in bed sheets in the garage of his Studio City, Calif., townhouse with a trail of blood leading back to his bedroom.

Almost every weekend Crane went somewhere to play bridge. But in his day job, he was a top producer in network TV. His housekeeper's grisly find could have fit a Crane-produced crime drama — but unlike an episode of the detective show *Mannix*, his murderer was never brought to justice.

On the day he died, Crane had 35,138 master points, how competitive bridge success is tallied — 11,000 more than anyone else. He was the game's Babe Ruth and had a magnetic presence. Groupies followed him from city to city to watch him play.

In two of his worlds, Crane was a superstar. Yet as a gay man in the early 1980s, he inhabited a third, separate, more secretive world.

They called him the Detroit Demon in the bridge world, at a time when the game was fashionable and Charles Goren was a household name. (Today, it's slouching into senility; the average age of a member of the American Contract Bridge League is 71.)

Bridge requires a sharp memory, card-reading acumen, and compatibility. In a typical three-hour session, your partner will misjudge, guess wrong, and betray tactical agreements. Voices in your head will want you to murder your partner, but not literally.

"His killer was not a bridge player," says Peter Rank, one of Crane's regular partners and the retiring general counsel for the ACBL. But no one has pinned down who killed him or why.

### **Making His Mark**

Born Barry Cohen in 1927 in Detroit, he dropped out after a year at the University of Michigan. At a young age, he married twice and had two children, but both unions ended in divorce.

Crane's father, Lou, owned a chain of movie theaters. In 1954 his son changed his last name then moved to Hollywood — while continuing his rise to the top echelon of bridge players.

He gained a reputation as a master technician who transformed the game by pioneering aggressive bidding strategies. From 1968 until six years after his death, he led the world in master point rankings. Today, the award Crane won six times as player with the year's most master points is named after him.

Crane was obsessed with bridge wins, once famously playing one match in New York City in the morning and another in Los Angeles that evening.

An elderly Ann Arbor woman was among the many kibitzers who followed him to tournaments. Marty Hirschman, a current top Detroit area player, played on Crane's team at the Motor City Regional in 1984 and wondered if he actually paid kibitzers to sit at his table. Their presence helped him cast a spell.

Crane often recklessly courted disaster by bidding weak hands. "He was way out in front in 'opening light,'" says Hirschman, a style that has since become popular. That aggressive bidding was a psychological weapon he employed ruthlessly.

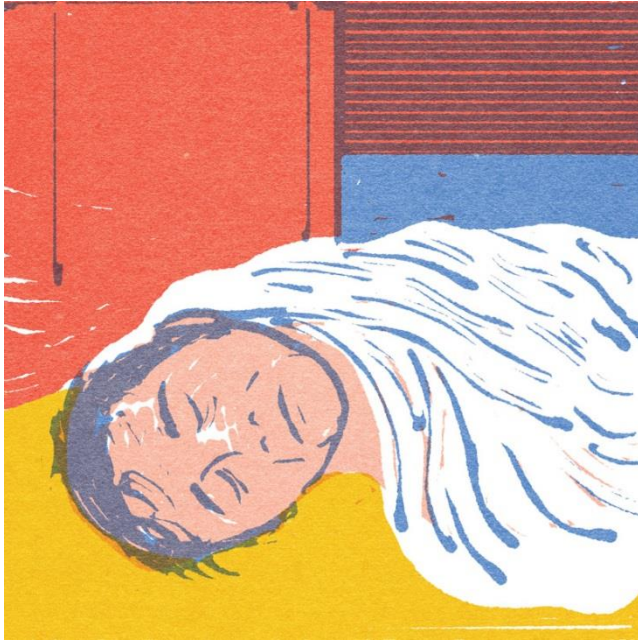
To uncooperative partners, he could be cruel. He was "known as a partner killer," says Kerri Sanborn, a successful regular partner. "You had to follow his rules." She was a relative newcomer when she joined Crane's team in 1969. And it didn't take long before "he started yelling at me." But from then on, they got along "because I didn't make the same mistakes twice." In 1978 Crane and Sanborn won the world mixed pairs tournament in New Orleans. "Playing with him was like a magic carpet ride," she says.

In Hollywood, Crane worked his magic too, producing episodes of three popular early 1970s shows: *Mannix*, *Mission: Impossible*, and *The Magician*. He directed episodes of *Dallas*, *Wonder Woman*, *Hawaii Five-O*, *CHiPs*, *Mission: Impossible*, and *The Streets of San Francisco*. He had his finger on the pulse of the popular culture, his shows dependable moneymakers.

As for his third orbit, though his contemporaries in bridge and in Hollywood knew he was gay, he wasn't vocally so. There were still sodomy laws and police harassment.

### **Unsolved Mystery**

At his home, the police found no sign of forced entry. The bedroom was a bloody mess — the murder had clearly taken place there and the murderer dragged his victim through the house to the garage. But the house was not ransacked. Crane's wallet and Cadillac El Dorado were missing, but the next day both were recovered in a park 60 miles outside of town.



Police took statements from 100 people — but made no arrests. The motive was murky, though it had all the signs of a lovers' quarrel. As years dragged on with no break in the case, the unsolved homicide became a subject of intense speculation. Noting the phone call that many witnessed, Rank believes Crane met someone that night he already knew. "Barry didn't pick up people" and was a cautious man who "kept his doors locked," Rank told me.

Other theories hung awkwardly. Crane sometimes played gin rummy; some speculated he'd lost a bundle but thought he was cheated and threatened to go to the police, so Las Vegas mobsters

rubbed him out.

Another source of speculation centered on Crane's imminent plans to disinherit his children. Both Rank and Sanborn confirm that Crane had an appointment with his business manager scheduled a day or two after his murder to discuss changing his will. They say he'd long been estranged from his children.

The late Bill Melander, a Michigan physician who played against Crane in his Detroit days and treated his aging mother, told me he'd learned that Crane's son owed money to Las Vegas gamblers. When they found out about the will, he believed, they killed him before he could disinherit his son.

Crane's son, Ben, a professor at Ithaca College, has followed in his father's footsteps by writing, producing, and directing plays and documentaries. (He spurned efforts to be interviewed, saying: "the matter is too painful.")

LAPD detective Thomas Townsend, who's been with the case since it started, pooh-poohs all this speculation. He says Crane's murder is periodically re-evaluated. In recent years all the evidence has been scrutinized again "with new forensic techniques, new procedures, and new equipment."

Rank and Sanborn insist that the police have zeroed in on the killer. Rank says he's been told that new DNA matches a Crane friend who is an aging convicted drug dealer in prison for a sentence he won't outlive. "They have their man," Rank says.

While confirming there is new DNA evidence, Townsend says Rank is mistaken and that no suspect is in custody. "Nobody's been ID'd as Mr. Crane's murderer," he says.

Conscious of Crane's legacy and name on the ACBL's most prestigious trophy, Rank says, "we don't need to dig up old dirt" that "might damage Barry's reputation." Townsend says much the same.

Crane's death still hangs in the air, an unanswered mystery worthy of its Hollywood setting.