

Belle Beach: Suicide?

"Belle Beach was a suicide." "Though she had been called the greatest equestrienne of her era — maybe of all time — she killed herself." "Nobody knew why, but when she was about 50 years old, she took her own life."

For 81 years, the few people who knew who she was have made these statements in various ways, but I found only one published confirmation. In his book *Good Old Summer Days*, which Houghton Mifflin brought out in 1952, Richmond Barrett said blatantly, "When she committed suicide, the papers devoted a few scant lines, at the bottom of the page, to her obituary."

Actually, *The New York Times* and several smaller newspapers reporting her death, reviewed her prominence at some length, and the magazine *Rider and Driver* gave her almost two pages. None of these sources hinted at suicide, though, which left us wondering for decades. If stories of Belle Beach's death were true, just when and where and by what means? How did one of the most admirable, mysterious and tragic lives in horse world history end?

"Get the death certificate," more experienced researchers urged. "It will tell all." Well, it doesn't, exactly. Here's what probably is non-debatable on that document: Belle Beach, occupation listed just as "teacher", died in her home at 315 Middle Neck Road, North Hempstead, Great Neck LI, at 9 p.m. on the night of January 8, 1926. The attending physician, Everett C. Jessup, wrote that the cause of death was "new growth, abdominal," and listed as contributing cause of death, cachexia. This word, unfamiliar to most of us, simply means the wasting that goes with cancer or other serious or chronic disease; it causes progressive loss of physical strength and functions. The certificate also tells us that no surgery or autopsy was performed, and that Miss Beach's body was sent to a crematorium at Fresh Pond, Roslyn LI, and then buried on January 10, 1926.

A few items on the certificate do raise questions. Signatures are there for two "confirmants," apparently the term of the time for witnesses. They, the undertaker, and someone authorized "to transport" had signed too, but all these dated their

signatures January 9, though the doctor's was January 8. This may only mean that not all necessary arrangements were completed before midnight of the 8th, but a few other odd details from the death certificate include: in a dim and different handwriting than Jessup's, a little notation indicates that an MD (unidentified) had recorded his own diagnosis of cancer in September of 1925, with the comment that probable seat was the right ovary. Was this added to establish that Miss Beach rejected surgery at that time?

Then, the attending doctor, in spaces showing how long he had been treating Miss Beach, listed only the day of her death. This seems odd with such a severe condition. Does it maybe mean that she had seen no doctor since September, but had chosen to let nature take its course, with minimal fuss and with acceptance of the inevitable? Or does it mean nothing more than that her usual doctor was unavailable that night?

At this point we enter a quagmire of possibilities and recognize that we are becoming actors in television detective dramas. We realize that we have no right to do this. Knowing what really happened on the night of January 8, 1926, can probably never be, and is none of our business. Belle Beach's death had nothing to do with her life achievements and what they stood for. But having taken that lofty stance, we still cannot let the issue go completely. If we could remove from her memory the stigma of suicide — a stigma in her time, but not so much in ours — shouldn't we do that?

We might like to assume that Jessup was somebody from Belle Beach's past, who understood her situation and would have sympathized with her desire to lay her body down with privacy and grace, someone who understood and accepted the hopelessness of her situation. Or maybe Jessup was a long-time admirer of her achievements, her character and her dignity and understood what it meant that automobiles were destroying her means of livelihood. Or maybe he was a Kervorkien counterpart, and her using him signaled to all that her departure was deliberate. This is only speculation.

According to the editor of *Rider and Driver*, Belle Beach in the new year of 1926, lacked financial or human resources to handle another surgery and long, difficult convalescence. He set forth at some length the facts of life for all whose income was tied to horses. Their skills and experience were rapidly becoming obsolete. If Belle Beach truly was

a suicide, she probably had some company among other horse professionals.

The editor pointed out that the coming of cars was erasing not just the demand for riding teachers and professional exhibitors of horses, but everything related to use of horses. Even the writing that Belle Beach may have counted on for support in her later life failed her. She had probably already discovered that despite her great expertise in the field, her former prominence and popularity, the markets for her work were drying up.

Rider and Driver's editor freely discussed Belle Beach's situation and all but said that suicide would have been a good solution. He said that though her death came much sooner than expected, that probably was a mercy, maybe sparing her much suffering, because "her trouble was rumored to be malignant." At one point, in acknowledging the 1922 loss of the mother with whom Miss Beach had been very close, he pictured her "struggling bravely on alone, though crippled by arthritis and poverty." Arthritis in hips and back, apparently stemming from constant riding, has ended many a horse-centered career.

R&D shared one statement which poignantly sets forth Miss Beach's situation; a carefully unnamed woman who was prepared to take responsibility for Belle's ashes told the editor that in thanking her for a Christmas gift, Miss Beach had written, "God takes care of the brave, but Oh, Dearest. It is so hard to be brave when one is alone!" The friend's reaction was "This is so bitterly true. It is hard to be alone, this I know; but to also be sick and poor! That is unspeakable!"

Possible confirmation of some of the above could be drawn from what Miss Beach reportedly told friends who ran into her somewhere a few days or weeks earlier and were appalled at how she looked. She assured them that she was feeling fine and had been offered a good new teaching niche, but her doctor forbade her undertaking it just then. She was, nevertheless, well provided for the winter, she said. It somehow came into the conversation that she did have a tumor, but she said that her doctor had told her surgery was "not imperative." In the mild manners of her day, this probably constituted a strong equivalent to "Back off!"

Now, as to how the suicide was managed, if there indeed was one:

One resource person who read this manuscript mentioned that it was not uncommon in earlier times for a physician to provide pain-killers for

patients in hopeless and severely painful conditions to self-administer. His instructions could be "take as needed, but not more than x in x hours, or it could kill you." This resource person also said that it was much easier then than now, for a doctor to just omit from a death certificate any details revealing suicide by violent means, anything that might embarrass anyone. Maybe all involved were colluding with Jessup on this point. My resource person said that suicide was so harshly viewed by the public then that a doctor would avoid mentioning it if he could, to protect himself from questions and possible court testimony. Maybe in many cases like this one everyone united in silence to protect the memory of a noted individual.

So we must accept that contents of Belle Beach's death certificate do not prove that she did or did not kill herself. While there is no mention of any damage to her body, as some means of suicide would leave, we know that women — according to most authorities — tend to exit neatly. Miss Beach was probably ideally situated for just that, she undoubtedly was on morphine and simply overdosing could produce what has sometimes been described as "a nice

death". The patient, we're told, would in most cases just go to sleep and then, usually, expire.

From the time of the War Between the States, morphine was usually administered by injection, but we don't know whether or not oral forms then became hard to find. Advancing cachexia would render a person too weak and uncoordinated for self-injection, so departure could be planned to take place before that stage was reached. If anyone had a doctor's permission to manage her own pain relief, surely Belle Beach would have been so entrusted. Her long and varied equine experience probably included injecting horses, so she was unlikely to be queasy about doing it for herself.

We established earlier that Belle Beach would have had plenty of reason for wanting to escape her life, quite apart from despair about a hopeless and painful health situation. Along with uncountable other horse world professionals, she was facing the bleakest of career probabilities. But see also was, apparently, truly and pitifully alone, all her wealthy former employers and her close relatives dead except for one nephew, the only child of her estranged and probably deceased sister, Mary Frances Trombley. The editor of *Rider and Driver*, our fullest source of data about Belle Beach's death, said that this young man and Miss Beach were "not on terms". What census records we could find leave Robert Trombley's age in 1926 uncertain.

Several writers have repeated that some friends — those who encountered her on the street when she was obviously dangerously ill — were filled with remorse for having let Miss Beach fade from their lives as her fortunes declined. The depth and degree of their friendship may be debatable, but we're told that they immediately went to her doctor and arranged for her to enter a hospital the next day for surgery, presumably at their expense.

It has often been reiterated that Belle Beach was a proud and private person, so would she have accepted such intrusion and such presumptuous management of her affairs? *Rider and Driver* and other old magazines mentioned that several years previously "a purse was got up" for Miss Beach when she was ill. Another time, a women's horse show was held to benefit her mother, Emily Sperry Beach, when that lady needed help. Possibly these events had been so humiliating to Miss Beach that she could not let such happen again. Naturally, a few writers have said that her death on the night of the day she

met her friends was no coincidence.

Nobody has mentioned another possibility: the report of her suicide could have grown just from discussions of her friends, who felt that her avoidance of the surgery they offered was in itself suicidal. Would-be benefactors sometimes react bitterly when prevented from fulfilling a noble and conscience-soothing role they have created for themselves.

R&D's editor expressed great regret that "Miss Belle Beach, that gallant little soul," had faced her end alone. He said that had her plight been known, a great many admirers and former associates would have rushed to her side. He had no doubt that memorial services for her would be held all over the country and that somewhere an impressive memorial would be erected. He ended his remembrance with the words "Belle Beach will not be forgotten."

She almost was, however; we found only two people who had any memory of her in life, and we found no accounts of either memorial services or monuments in her honor. We can only hope that our little exercise in nostalgia will prolong her memory enough to inspire somebody, someday, to do more. Maybe a writer who has unlimited time and money to travel for research will see the need for a scholarly book about Belle Beach, and the epoch of horse world history that she epitomized and closed.

She was called an example to all women for the dignity with which she lived a difficult life and carved out a new role for her gender. If we knew for sure that her death was self-choreographed, perhaps it could be looked on as another example of pioneering that will help persuade society to grant us dignified control over our own end. But everything else aside, Belle Beach must be remembered for what she accomplished despite great challenges, and for the grace with which she accepted an unjust lot in life and overcame it gloriously. As acknowledged before — and then blithely ignored for the sake of curiosity and human interest — the details of her death are truly none of our business, since we cannot remove the stigma that suicide held and that may have tarnished her memory in her own time.

Belle Beach's major mystery is still intact. So are many smaller ones, like where she went to college and where her "papers" are. MoGho's artist, Adele Graham commented, "I picture her dashing off on some magnificent horse, laughing back over her shoulder and calling out, 'Catch me if you can!'"



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