



Starvation Heights: A True Story of Murder and Malice in the Woods of the Pacific Northwest

Written by Gregg Olsen

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A True Story of Murder and Malice in the Woods of the

By Gregg Olsen

Starvation Heights Address

In 1911 two wealthy British heiresses, Claire and Dora Williamson, came to a sanatorium in the forests of the Pacific Northwest to undergo the revolutionary "fasting treatment" of Dr. Linda Burfield Hazzard. It was supposed to be a holiday for the two sisters. But within a month of arriving at what the locals called Starvation Heights, the women were emaciated shadows of their former selves, waiting for death. They were not the first victims of Linda Hazzard, a quack doctor of extraordinary evil and greed who would stop at nothing short of murder to achieve her ambitions. As their jewelry disappeared and forged bank drafts began transferring their wealth to Hazzard's accounts, Dora Williamson sent a last desperate plea to a friend in Australia, begging her to save them from the brutal treatments and lonely isolation of Starvation Heights.

Starvation Heights Olalla Address

In this true story—a haunting saga of medical murder set in an era of steamships and gaslights—Gregg Olsen reveals one of the most unusual and disturbing criminal cases in American history.

Gregg Olsen's account of the exposure and trial of early-twentieth-century Seattle "healer" Linda Burfield Hazzard chiefly interested me because of the striking similarity between Hazzard's ideas about health and some ideas that are current among first-world health faddists--indeed they may never have really gone away. Hazzard, who was yet another played-down, Minnesota-grown serial killer (Carl Panzram didn't hail from Lake Wobegon, evidently), was a proponent of "the fasting cure." People's bodies, Dr. Hazzard proposed, were full of "poisons" that came from overeating and especially the consumption of meat. The fasting cure, which included daily enemas and bodily manipulation (terrific blows to the head, back, and stomach), would purify the body and prepare it for the establishment of perfect health. Substitute the word "toxin" for "poison" and and you basically have the same pseudo-scientific premise as anyone who ever advised a credulous public to go on a seven-day juice fast, submit to Roling, or endure high colonic.

Until WWII many people had a healthy distrust of what we would consider conventional medicine. Traditional/herbal medicine was familiar and more affordable, as were a slew of less creditable remedies like patent medicines, faith cures, and general quackery. Many of Dr. Hazzard's patients claimed that their lives were saved by her methods. A significant number didn't live to attest to the value of the cure, and strangely enough Dr. Hazzard ended up in possession of their belongings and sometimes their estates. When a pair of wealthy (and perfectly healthy) English sisters fell into her clutches in 1910, the reality of what was going on at her health institute--locally called "Starvation Heights"--became an international sensation.

Olsen, who is a New York Times bestselling author, got hold of a great story. But as a frequent reader of true crime, I was sadly disappointed. Firstly, although Olsen dwells lovingly on the little foibles and refinements of the two main victims, he spends almost no time on Dr. Hazzard's motives, her psychology, or even her life history. I have heard crime investigators talk about wanting to focus more on the victims of serial killers than on the killers themselves (which would add to the notoriety they presumably seek), but this doesn't necessarily make for a good book. What was Hazzard like as a girl and a young woman? What was her family history? What made her decide to go into medicine at a time when female doctors were shunned and ridiculed? Why the fasting cure? Surely if she just wanted to kill patients and take their money there were more rapid methods: most of her victims lingered for as

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many as 50 days. Olsen just tells us (again and again) that she was brash, outspoken, possessed of manly physical strength and a loud voice, and that she dominated her henpecked husband. She was a wicked virago and unnatural woman. How is this any different from the way that men of her own time viewed her? Hazzard often claimed to be suffering the martyrdom of a woman in a man's world. Regardless of her own hideous acts, this was certainly the case. Hazzard was as much on trial for being a "woman doctor" and for violating Edwardian ideals of womanhood as she was for her actual crimes. And what about all the people living near Starvation Heights who lauded Hazzard as a pillar of the community even as they witnessed the parade of cadaverous patients dragging themselves around Hazzard's property and the nearby roads? Italicized mini-accounts from Hazzard's neighbors stuck in anyhow seem like a clumsy attempt to inject the social history that is lacking.

Finally I felt that Olsen's enterprise was undermined by what I can only call bad writing. The tortured syntax of many of his sentences was a tedious distraction without adding any poetry to the telling. I was particularly underwhelmed by a description of newspaper reporters mobbing Hazzard outside the courthouse, "like flies to a dog's old bone." A lot of it wouldn't have gotten past even the most jaded of Comp 101 instructors. I can only imagine the game struggles and sad defeat of the copyeditor on this project. Yes, I say it, as one who should be in fear and trembling to criticize a successful and well-known author--the writing was pretty darn bad. The contrast with the well-written, exhaustively researched book I started reading immediately after finishing *Starvation Heights* (*The Last Lincoln Conspirator: John Surratt's Flight from the Gallows*, by Andrew C. A. Jampoler) was particularly dramatic and damning. Greggs is a NYT bestselling author; Jampoler is a sales and marketing executive for the international aerodynamics industry. I never associated marketing executives with deathless prose before, but I am starting to associate deathless prose with the NYT bestseller list less and less every day.

As always I would love to see what an Erik Larsen or a David Schecter would have done with this historical crime spree. I feel sure they would have made some connection to the way our own society flirts with the idea of abandoning Western medicine for alternative healthcare. As someone who walks a fine line between rejecting and embracing conventional medicine I found this story a timely reminder to know what you're getting into--with doctors and with "natural" cures. Just because something is natural doesn't mean it's not dangerous, and the promoters of alternative cures may be in it for more than just the public good, as Dr. Hazzard's victims learned to their sorrow. ...more

Starvation Heights House Address

The first half of this book was amazing; equal parts gripping, terrifying, and heart-wrenching. The writing brought both the setting and the characters vividly to life for me. I was RIGHT THERE with these two poor sisters. Only two true crime books have disturbed me to the point of giving me nightmares, and this was one of them. This is not only an historical account of the murders committed by "doctor" Hazzard, but also an interesting study on the dangers of good people, such as the Williamson sisters, believing preposterous things, and why we need to speak out against medical quackery and pseudo-science. The second half of the book (investigation and trial) was rather bland and sometimes pretty repetitive, and I found myself just wanting to get to the end of it already. If the last half had been as engrossing as the first, this would have been a 5-star book in my opinion. I highly recommend this book, especially to those who are interested in true crime and/or the sham of fasting for better health. ...more

In 1910, two wealthy young Englishwomen, called Miss Claire and Miss Dorothea Williamson, travelling in America, saw an advertisement in a Seattle daily newspaper and wrote off for a book titled, "Fasting for the Cure of Disease." Although wealthy, the two sisters were orphaned and without any definite sense of purpose. In other words, they had both too much money and too much time on their hands. They had taken health cures before, but were afraid that relatives would mock them if they suggested they were interested in the work of Dr Linda Hazzard; who had plans to open a sanatorium in Olalla, Washington State. Her belief was that almost every ailment were caused by dietary factors and could be cured by fasting. With both Claire and Dora having a feeling that they were unwell and no sense of well-being, the two hugged the idea of a new cure as a delicious secret between them. Letters were exchanged and Dr Hazzard declared they would be perfect for the cure. Without letting their relatives know, Miss Clare and Miss Williamson set off to visit Dr Hazzard. Her clinic was not yet ready, but it would soon be known by locals as "Starvation Heights."

This is an excellent historical true crime book. The beginning deals with the case of the Williamson sisters; which I have to say, unfolds like a thriller. As the two sisters head off, full of naïve optimism, you just wish you could do something to stop them. This is also a story of great bravery when the girls former nurse, believing something is wrong, goes against all the instincts of a servant of that time to take matters into her own hands and travels halfway around the world to discover what is going on.

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When the authorities become involved, Linda Hazzard has to defend her methods in a court case.

The author really does a wonderful job of telling this story with great detail. There will always be the gullible and the naïve and there will always be those who intend to exploit them. Even now, Dr Hazzard's methods are shocking and, the beginning of the book, is often quite upsetting. However, there were those who defended her staunchly. She was, it has to be said, a woman who seems more suited to this, modern age, than the early 1900's. You can almost imagine her setting up a web page and drawing even more people into her net than she managed with newspaper advertisements. She was seen by many as loud and bossy. When she divorced, she left her two children with her mother and went off to follow her dream of having her own clinic. Viewed with suspicion, her lack of "normal" female delicacy saw her viewed askance, and possibly this lack of femininity went against her. However, read this fascinating book and make up your own mind about her guilt. I have never read anything by this author before, but I was very impressed. If you enjoy true crime, then this is certainly an excellent read.

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Starvation Heights Sanitarium Olalla Address

Starvation Heights™ is as much about the general human capacity for self-delusion as it is about a particularly spectacular and charismatic lunatic criminal. It will be easy, I suspect, for most of us to wonder at the credulity and gullibility of people, especially young women, in reading about this amazing true crime story which occurred at the turn of the century (1910). Deadly health cures were being touted as fabulously effective by so-called "scientists"™ and "doctors"™, most of whom did not even have a high school diploma. Unfortunately, there were no shortage of willing victims any more than there were lawyers willing to prosecute or police officers wanting to do arrests.

As usual in such cases where victims hold some responsibility for their fleeing and/or destruction, even if not anything near as much responsibility for it all as their beloved villainous crook, courts are reluctant to spend much time and especially money prosecuting these bad guys even today unless evidence is overwhelming and dead bodies are piling up. Sham health cures and fake doctors who lure in hypochondriacs and "beautiful people"™ wannabes are low on the list for those pursuing criminal action against lawbreakers, especially in poor counties or states. Purveyors of illegal, dangerous and unproven weight-loss schemes for improving health and beauty easily would overwhelm every court in the world if prosecutors vigorously pursued convictions. Advertised health-improvement claims from "legitimate"™ spas, meditation centers, health resorts and fat farms of today do not raise from most people hardly a passing doubt despite their obvious hokum. So, looking back at a time where social media consisted of newspapers only, and education was either shallow or nonexistent, think of how much easier it would be to convince customers of the health benefits of unproven practices when knowledge was spread by mostly gossip and rumor, ads and fads.

Sisters Dorothea and Claire Williamson were orphaned while young, but in 1910 they were in their mid-thirties. Unmarried, wealthy, having gone to the best finishing schools in Europe and England, they were traveling first across Canada to Vancouver, British Columbia, and then down to the United States and Seattle, Washington. Although they had relatives, money and property all over the world, they yet were naive and trusting, especially Claire. Their journey was ostensibly about visiting relatives, but they were also very much interested in improving their digestive health by visiting popular health institutes for the upper classes which were all the rage at the time. (For an excellent satirical, but well-researched, fictional novel about the 1900s™ fad of "healthy"™ cleansing of one's™ digestive tract in America, read T. C. Boyle's™ The Road to Wellville.)

The sisters had already stopped at several famous and small sanitariums, institutions and "hospitals"™ that promised to cure many kinds of aches, pains and nebulous, scientifically

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described, diseases which haunted the bored and inactive moneyed classes. At the turn of the century, most of the health institutes of the time cured their patients of excess money through the most recent fad of expensive treatments of cleansing diets and enemas. Women of wealth often went to these digestive health and diet clinics for such "diseases" as occasional discomforts of the uterus, diagnosed by mercenary fake and real medical doctors.

One such "doctor" was at work in Seattle. "Dr." Linda Burfield Hazzard advertised in the local Seattle newspaper about her institution in Olalla, Washington, and offered her book, *Fasting for the Cure of Disease*. She was well-respected, politically and socially powerful with highly-placed supporters and deep pockets. Under her care, people often fasted for over 30 days and more. Her treatments involved "meals" of "fresh" tomato and asparagus juice, with gallons of hot water enemas which lasted hours. Her patients were apparently so grateful to her for curing all of their bodily cares, they sometimes signed over all of their worldly goods to her (view spoiler)[shortly before they disappeared forever, leaving her institute feet first, carried out by the Hazzards' favorite discreet local funeral director, perhaps, or their bodies may have been cut up and the flesh boiled away in kitchen pots. (hide spoiler)]

Many of those who survived truly were grateful to Linda, utterly convinced that having been reduced to 60 pounds helped their health improve.

It took awhile, but reporters, witnesses and detective work eventually revealed Linda and her husband, the handsome Sam, were not exactly what they claimed. Who were they, really?

Did Dora and Claire survive? Read the book. It is fascinating, and all true.

The author Gregg Olsen, an investigative reporter, wrote the book in the style of a fact-based fiction novel. It sometimes led him into creating assumed but logical scenes. I get it - he wanted to humanize the victims of the Hazzards. While the story is backed up with research, actual documents and newspaper reports of the time, and he does really try to keep to the story as told by witnesses, I felt sometimes he wandered too much into fictional territory. Nonetheless, what an incredible true crime! ...more

The first third of the book was interesting. But the entire was difficult to read. It's choppy and in a rather archaic style, IMHO. It's occurring during the first decade of the 20th Century near Seattle.

There is much repetition and the entire core of the belief system, diet theory, fasting regime that was proposed by Mrs. Hazzard in her estate /spa placement could have been described and eye witness reports included too, within half these number of pages.

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The court cases, the letters of witness, the sisters' letters to each other- those first level source materials were better than the non-fiction "connection" to all of this in one progressive tale.

Even now, many people do practice medicine under other aspects of specialty treatments described as diet, mud baths, sweat or colonic regimes or supplemental additions -all of these- without a license. Not all of them get caught.

These particular sanitarium surrounds and the physical nature of the place even today does sound creepy. Very creepy. But the telling of this nasty woman and her entire story (she was exiled by law to leave and went to New Zealand and yet ultimately returned to the same estate)- didn't hold together well in execution. ...more

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Starvation Heights Olalla Wa Address

Well, that was certainly a grim read! What a God-awful way for those people to die.

Well written and very well researched. The author brought the location and the people to life for me.

It was certainly different than any other true crime books I've read and I liked it a lot.

October 2014

From time to time, and for no particular reason, I find myself thinking of Starvation Heights and the notorious Linda Hazzard, and because the story has stayed with me I've increased my rating from 3 stars to 4 stars

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A far cry from the sensational stuff on the shelves today, this book of true crime is based in solid research and the writing is excellent.

Here's the story: Set in 1911, two sisters, Claire and Dora Williamson, were firm believers in alternative medical treatments and had the reputation among family and friends as being "faddists," or latching on to all types of non-medical therapeutical cures. While vacationing in Canada that year, they came across some information relating to a "fasting cure" A far cry from the sensational stuff on the shelves today, this book of true crime is based in solid research and the writing is excellent.

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never graduated from medical school but had a license as an osteopath in the state of Washington. Her ad promised a cure in the woods of Washington state in a restful sanitarium, and this captured the imagination of the sisters who decided to go for the cure. Neither of them was really sick but they figured they'd get a few treatments to improve their overall general health. Very bad mistake.

Even now there are people that believe in this "fasting cure." If you pull up Linda Burfield Hazzard's name on the internet, her methods are still being touted, even though there were a number of deaths among the people in her care who had undertaken the fasting cure.

I HIGHLY recommend this book. The author has done such a great job here and frankly I'm a bit surprised that this book is not more well known. ...more