**DOROTHEA PUENTE AND THE BOARDING HOUSE OF DEATH**

Dorothea Puente’s story is so strange and sensational that it sounds like a movie plot. A friendly little old lady living in a nice house in a quiet neighborhood takes in boarders that turn up dead in the yard or the basement. In fact, it is the plot of the classic American movie and stage play, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, in which a man discovers that his kindly elderly aunts are murdering tenants and burying their bodies in the basement.

*Arsenic and Old Lace* is a comedy, but Dorothea Puente’s case was more like a horror movie. In fact, it was far more frightening than most horror movies. Unlike movie serial killers, Puente targeted helpless people, such as the elderly and the mentally handicapped, for death. Worse, her motive was very simple and despicable; she killed the helpless in order to steal their welfare and social security checks.

Tenants would move into Dorothea Puente’s boarding house in Sacramento, but they would never move out. Yet their checks would still arrive in the mail and find their way into Dorothea’s bank account. What’s worse was that Dorothea used the welfare money intended to help the poor to pay for such luxuries as face-lifts and $110 bottles of perfume.

**A Lifelong Criminal**

Residents of F Street in Sacramento knew Dorothea Puente as a kindly old woman who ran a rooming house and fed stray cats. What they didn’t realize was that Dorothea was a professional criminal with a lifelong history of fraud and possibly murder.

Dorothea grew up poor during the Depression in Redlands, California. Her parents, who were migrant farm workers, both died when she was a girl, so she ended up in an orphanage. She ran away at 16 and married a GI returning from World War II, then had two children. By the late 1940s Dorothea had turned to check fraud and landed in jail.

After serving jail time for fraud, Dorothea turned to a more loathsome racket; preying on the elderly and disabled. She became a nurse’s aide and a boarding home operator not to help the elderly and disabled, but because they were easier to steal from.

**The Boarding House of Death Opens**

By 1981 Dorothea Puente had been living in a 16-room Victorian mansion at 2100 F Street in Sacramento for years. She supported herself by forging benefit checks stolen from older men she met in bars. When an arrest ended that racket, Puente began taking in boarders.

One of Puente’s first boarders was her business partner, Ruth Munroe, who moved into the house in the spring of 1982. Munroe soon died of a drug overdose and left Puente an inheritance that included $6,000 in cash. The coroner ruled the death a suicide even though Puente had just been arrested for drugging an elderly man and looting his home.

Puente went to state prison for three years after police discovered that activity. At the time of her arrest, a judge ordered Puente to stay away from the elderly and government checks issued to others. She obviously ignored the judge’s recommendations.

**The Best Care the System Can Offer**

Puente resumed her killing spree almost as soon as she got out of prison. She had been writing to a 77-year-old man named Everson Gillmouth. Gillmouth told his sister that he was going to Sacramento to marry Puente. Instead of marriage, Puente murdered Gillmouth and dumped his body next to the Sacramento River in a homemade coffin. Gillmouth was killed as soon as he had made Puente a signatory on his checking account. That enabled her to steal his pension payments. Gillmouth’s body would not be identified until three years later, when Puente was caught.

Despite her criminal record, Puente was able to start talking social workers into placing elderly, disabled, and drug-addicted patients into her home as tenants. A social worker said Puente provided the best care the system could offer. In reality, Puente was murdering the tenants and burying them in her backyard.

What’s worse is that the stench from the rotting corpses was so bad that the neighbors had to close their windows. Puente tried to cover up the smell with lime, but it got worse. Yet nobody realized that anything was wrong, even though there were now seven corpses buried in her yard.

**Caught by Accident**

Puente was finally caught when police detective John Cabrera paid her a visit. Cabrera was looking for Burt Montoya, a developmentally disabled schizophrenic, who had been reported missing by his social worker. Cabrera and his colleagues didn’t notice anything unusual inside, but they saw that the garden had been dug up.

Guided more by his instincts than anything else, Cabrera started digging in the garden. He soon uncovered a human corpse. The house was now a crime scene, and the next day a team of forensic anthropologists was digging up the garden. They eventually found seven corpses in the yard of the house, which was just two blocks from the California governor’s mansion.

Incredibly, police left Puente free to watch the scene and then go to a nearby hotel for coffee. Instead of going to the hotel, Puente fled to Los Angeles, where she was arrested at a fleabag hotel near that city’s skid row. She was already reportedly targeting men in bars for theft when she was arrested in LA. A man Dorothea met in a bar tipped police off to her location after seeing her face on TV.

**Cooking with a Serial Killer**

Dorothea Puente was sentenced to life in prison without possibility of parole. She stayed in California prisons until her death from natural causes in 2011 when she was 82. The murderous caregiver received better care in prison than she had provided for the elderly.

Puente also became an author while she was in prison; in 2004 her pen pal, Shane Bugbee, published a book he called *Cooking with a Serial Killer*. The book contained 50 recipes that Puente had sent to Bugbee from her prison cell. It isn’t clear if the book contained Puente’s recipes for poison or not.