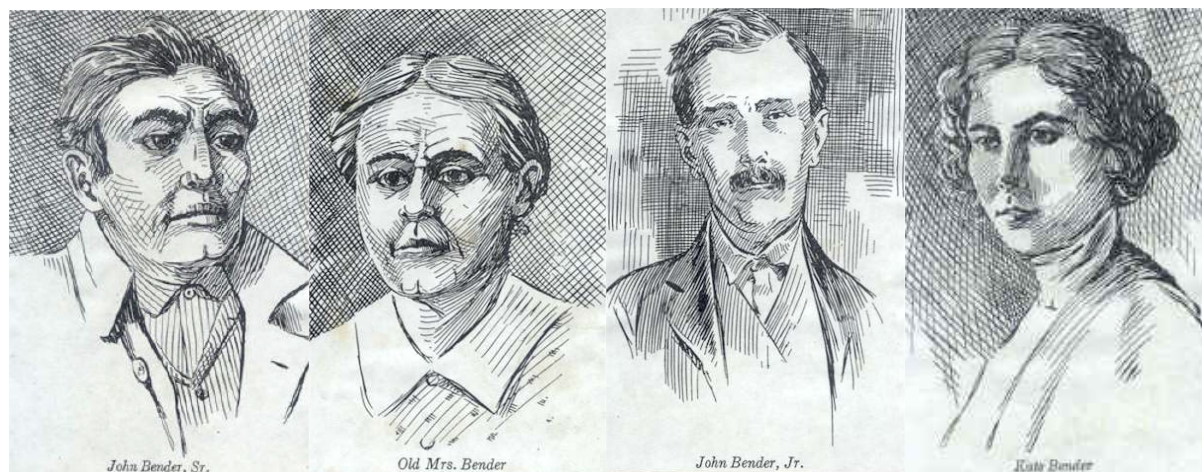


The Bloody Benders

Kansas

ca. 1870-1873



John Bender, Sr.; Kate Bender, Sr.; John Bender, Jr.; Kate Bender, Jr.

Sketches from the 1913 book *The Benders in Kansas* by John Townner James

The members of the “Bender family” were not named Bender, and with the exception of the two women, were not related. Like the story of Patty Cannon (related on page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**), theirs is shrouded by myth and conjecture. The victims of their unique and fatal brand of hospitality on the isolated, windswept Kansas prairie number at least eight, but a precise count is impossible. Their ultimate fates after fleeing Kansas are not known.

Encouraging European settlement of land west of the Mississippi River was the impetus behind the Homestead Act of 1862, which allowed any U.S. citizen over the age of twenty-one to move onto a parcel of land, improve it, and own it after five years. Although westward expansion was delayed by the Civil War, the Homestead Act and treaties resettling Native American tribes opened the way for rivers of settlers to stream across the Great Plains.

In October 1870, two German immigrants arrived in southeastern Kansas, along the Osage Trail which led from Fort Scott to Cherryvale and Independence. They called themselves John Bender, Sr. and Jr. The elder John was stooped, broad, and short-limbed, spoke little English and communicated largely in grunts. The younger John was more gregarious and spoke in fluent, if accented, English. In the land office in

Humboldt, they registered adjoining claims. Pa Bender's 160 acres strategically faced the Osage Trail. Their nearest neighbor was three-quarters of a mile away.

One hundred yards off the trail, the two men built a one-room house measuring sixteen by twenty-four feet with a nine-foot ceiling. Below the house they dug a seven-foot-square cellar with a huge sandstone slab as its floor. A trapdoor led from the cellar to the house's one room, which was divided in half by a wagon canvas. They dug a well and erected a rough stable.

Sometime in the winter of 1870-71, the women arrived, both calling themselves Kate. The elder Kate, Ma, was as homely and taciturn as her reputed husband. But young Kate, slender, with auburn hair and a flirtatious manner, turned heads.

With a diligence that was missing from most of their endeavors, the Benders began cultivating an orchard. Young Kate hung a sign reading "GROCERIES" above the door of the house her "father" built, and the Bender Inn was open for business.

Unlike their misanthropic parents, the young Benders attended Sunday school, and Kate worked for a time at the new Cherryvale Hotel. Kate also claimed a gift as a healer, and printed up handbills that read:

Prof. Miss Katie Bender

Can heal all sorts of Diseases; can cure Blindness, Fits, Deafness, and all such diseases, also Deaf and Dumbness.

Residence, 14 miles East of Independence, on the road from Independence to Osage Mission one and one half miles South East of Norahead Station.

It was easy for lone travelers to vanish in the empty expanses of the Kansas prairie. Towns were few and far between, and communication between isolated populations was difficult and sporadic. Before the need for driver's licenses and Social Security cards, people did not carry identification. Beginning in the spring of 1871, Labette County, particularly that stretch of the Osage Trail near the Bender Inn, started experiencing more than its share of disappearances. In May 1871, the body of a man named Jones was discovered in Drum Creek. His head had been bashed and his throat cut. Suspicion fell on the owner of the claim where Jones's body was found, but the level of proof never rose above suspicion.

Travelers would stop at the Bender Inn for refreshment and perhaps a night's sleep. The family lived in the rear of the home, behind the canvas partition, and served their guests in the front. In addition to offering a welcome respite, young Kate became known for performing bizarre séances in which she muttered gibberish and waved weapons. One woman, dissatisfied with Kate's healing powers, demanded the return of the sidesaddle she had given Kate as payment. She claimed the Benders then threatened her and chased her across the prairie. But seeing as how Kate appeared a God-fearing young woman, active in Sunday School, such stories were not given much credence.

In February 1872, a blizzard socked southeastern Kansas. After the thaw, the bodies of two men were found, but their deaths had nothing to do with the weather. Like Jones in Drum Creek, their heads had been bashed and their throats cut. A year later, when suspicions swirled around the Benders, a neighbor claimed to have seen Pa Bender driving the men's wagon during the snowstorm.

In the fall of 1872, a bachelor named Johnny Boyle set out on foot from Osage Mission with \$1,900 (about \$35,500 today), planning to purchase some land. He never returned, and he never bought any land.

Henry McKenzie must have been a disappointment to the Benders. A 29-year-old Civil War veteran, McKenzie had walked to Kansas from Indiana. On November 6 or 7, he set out to visit his sister in Independence. Although he was nattily dressed in a chinchilla coat, he carried only 40 cents. Ben Brown also didn't have much money – \$36 – but he did have a finely matched pair of sorrel horses. William F. McCrotty, who also lived near Osage Mission, followed in Johnny Boyle's footsteps. McCrotty disappeared after leaving home with \$2,600 in his pocket.

George Loncher, along with his wife and daughter, had settled a claim near Independence. After the death of his wife, in the early spring of 1873, Loncher prepared to take his young daughter (whose exact age is unclear) to stay with her grandparents in Iowa. He purchased a team of horses and a wagon from the local doctor, William York, and set off north.

Eventually, the anxious grandparents sent word back to Kansas that Loncher and his daughter had never made it to Iowa. By now there were too many mysterious disappearances to chalk them all up as coincidence. Dr. York heard that a wagon and

horses and been found abandoned near Fort Scott, the horses nearly dead from starvation. A man's and girl's clothing were found in the wagon, which Dr. York identified as the one he had sold to George Loncher.

On Friday, March 28, 1873, the Lawrence (Kansas) *Tribune* reported, "[Dr. York] returned to Ft. Scott, attended to his business, and on Sunday left for home. Since that time nothing has been seen or heard from him." Riding a valuable horse and carrying between \$700 and \$900, Dr. York made a tempting target. Perhaps he was seeking clues to the Loncher disappearance, and not just refreshment, when he stopped at the Bender Inn. Regardless, the Benders made an egregious error going after a prestigious member of the community.

William York's brother, Colonel Alexander York, recruited a dozen men to search the area around Cherryvale. The only help they got at the Bender Inn was Kate's offer to conduct a séance. In April, a community meeting was held at the local schoolhouse, with approximately 75 men attending. They resolved to search every farmstead in the vicinity.

Led by Leroy Dick, the elected township officer, a search party descended on the Bender property. They found the livestock abandoned, dead or nearly so. The crude house was empty, except for a few miscellaneous items strewn about, including three hammers, a knife, a clock, and a German Bible. Leroy Dick called for reinforcements, and hundreds turned out with picks and shovels.

A vile odor emanated from the cellar. The men used sledgehammers to break up the limestone slab that served as the cellar floor. They did not find the corpses they expected; the odor came from blood soaked into the dirt.

In the orchard, they spotted a rectangular depression in the hard soil. Dr. William York, head bashed and throat slashed, was the first body uncovered. The next day, they uncovered the corpses of Henry McKenzie, W. F. McCrotty, Ben Brown, George Loncher and his daughter, and an unidentified man. Johnny Boyle had been stuffed down the well. Some accounts also list a man by the name of John Greary and an unidentified woman.

Speculation was that the Benders would seat their guests in the front of the house with their backs to the canvas partition, making it easy to take a hammer to their skulls

and a knife to their throats. They would then drag the body through the trap door to the cellar, until it could be buried in the orchard. All of the victims were stripped to their underwear, not to mention of their cash, horses, and any other valuables they happened to possess.

Once local newspapers publicized the macabre discoveries, curiosity-seekers and souvenir hunters converged on the Bender Inn, stripping it of wallboards and shingles, even pulling stones out of the well. Kansas Governor Thomas A. Osborn offered a \$500 reward for the apprehension of each of the Benders or \$2,000 total, to which Col. Alexander York added another \$1,000. During the frantic search for the fearsome foursome, several of their acquaintances were falsely arrested.

A ticket clerk at the train station in Thayer, where the Benders' abandoned wagon had been found, told of selling tickets to Humboldt to four people matching the Benders' descriptions. From Humboldt, they could have gone south through Indian Territory and on to Texas. Or they could have gone north to Kansas City and from there to points east.

The Benders' true identities were finally unmasked. John Bender, Sr., was actually John Flickinger. John Bender, Jr., was named John Gebhardt. Ma Bender was Almira Meik Griffith, and Kate Bender was Eliza Griffith, the fifth of Ma's twelve children. Some claimed that John Gebhardt and Eliza Griffith were lovers even as they posed as siblings, and that Eliza "Kate" disposed of any inconvenient children that may have come from their union. Some also claimed that Ma killed at least a couple of her dozen husbands, along with a couple of children who threatened to expose her. The reliability of these rumors is questionable.

Stories of the ultimate fate of the Bloody Benders are as numerous and as credible as Elvis sightings. The only sure thing is that the reward for their capture was never claimed. A couple of posses claimed to have killed all four and disposed of their bodies. John Gebhardt may have disappeared into outlaw territory west of Texas, whence lawmen did not return, and died there. Eliza "Kate" may have accompanied him, or she may have gone to Michigan with her mother. In 1884, John "Pa Bender" Flickinger committed suicide in Lake Michigan.

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A few Bender artifacts, including a knife and three hammers, can be seen in Kansas museums. An historical marker along Highway 160, a mile from the site of the Bender Inn, tells their story. Those and the ghosts of the Kansas prairie are all that remain of the mysterious Bloody Benders.