ON A SUMMER NIGHT IN 1993, A STUNNING ACT
PUT MANASSAS ON FRONT PAGES AROUND THE
WORLD, PROVIDED MATERIAL FOR LATE-NIGHT
COMEDIANS ACROSS THE COUNTRY—AND HELPED
CHANGE THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION ABOUT
SEXUAL ASSAULT AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE. IN AN
ORAL HISTORY WITH LORENA, JOHN, AND OTHERS
INVOLVED WITH THEIR CASE, MARISA M. KASHINO
REVISITS THE EXTRAORDINARY DOMESTIC DRAMA.
I couldn’t go anywhere without hearing somebody talking about me.”

On June 22, 1993, most Americans thought of Manassas as a day trip to the Civil War battlefields. But on June 23, it attracted a level of attention not seen since Lincoln was in the White House: Early that morning, a 24-year-old manicurist named Lorena Bobbitt pulled back the covers on her sleeping husband, sliced his penis clean off with a kitchen knife, and launched a full-tilt tabloid spectacle unlike anything Washington (or the world) had ever witnessed.

Before that fateful event, the couple had lived in a shabby apartment near a part of town called Manassas Park. John Wayne Bobbitt was a 26-year-old Marine turned warehouse worker. Lorena was an Ecuadorian immigrant whose English wasn’t great. Nearly overnight, they became global celebrities. And Manassas was their blindingly spotlighted stage.

Lorena’s criminal trial was broadcast into America’s living rooms on Court TV, hooking the nation on courtroom dramas six months before O.J. Simpson climbed into his white Bronco. More significant, her ghastly act—committed, she testified, because her husband had beaten and sexually assaulted her throughout the marriage—kick-started a national conversation about gender and power that presaged controversies that continue to swirl today.

On June 23, 1993, Lorena Gallo (formerly Lorena Bobbitt): “I went straight from high school to marriage, and I never dated in between. I was naive about many things.”

John: “We fought, me and Lorena, yeah. But it was not to where it was battery.”

Lorena: “He was very strong, and I was between 93 and 95 pounds then. I basically surrendered myself. Like, okay, as a survival instinct, I wanted just to surrender my body, my mind, to get it over with. As a Catholic, I didn’t believe in divorce. I really believed that when he said sorry, he meant it.”

Around 3 a.m. on June 23, 1993, Lorena woke up when John returned from clubbing with a friend. Lorena Gallo: “I went straight from high school to marriage, and I never dated in between. I was naive about many things.”

“ON JUNE 22, 1993, MOST AMERICANS THOUGHT OF MANASSAS AS A DAY TRIP TO THE CIVIL WAR BATTLEFIELDS. BUT ON JUNE 23, IT ATTRACTED A LEVEL OF ATTENTION NOT SEEN SINCE LINCOLN WAS IN THE WHITE HOUSE: EARLY THAT MORNING, A 24-YEAR-OLD MANICURIST NAMED LORENA BOBBITT PULLED BACK THE COVERS ON HER SLEEPING HUSBAND, SLICED HIS PENIS CLEAN OFF WITH A KITCHEN KNIFE, AND LAUNCHED A FULL-TILT TABLOID SPECTACLE UNLIKE ANYTHING WASHINGTON (OR THE WORLD) HAD EVER WITNESSED.”

“We were skeptical about whether the surgery was going to take.”

Blair Howard, Lorena’s defense attorney: “What she told me was he kind of slides into bed to help himself to what he wanted. When he gets through, he just falls over and starts snoring. She says he got up and went into the kitchen. She says, ‘I saw a knife on the counter,’ and she says, ‘The thought came in my mind I’m going to make sure he never does this to me or any other woman ever again.’ She picks up the knife, goes back into the bedroom, and the rest is history.”

John: “Obviously, you’re in pain right away. You wake up instantaneously. I was confused. I didn’t know where I was. I’m trying to gather myself, put my pants on, apply pressure.”

Lorena: “I remember going to the car, and I see that in one hand was the knife and in the other hand was his organ. His penis. I tossed it, and it went somewhere while I was driving. In my mind, I was going to work, I was going to go and do nails. That’s how crazy, or insane, the whole situation was.”

After finding the nail salon closed, Lorena drove to the home of her boss, Jan—
John: “I said, ‘That’s not where I’m cut.’ I said, ‘That’s not where I’m cut.’ I said, ‘That’s not where I’m cut.’ I said, ‘That’s not where I’m cut.’”

“During the trials, the Manassas courthouse was mobbed with demonstrators, well-wishers, tootchka vendors, and, of course, the press.”

“I got a call around 3:30 or 4 in the morning. I wasn’t actually on call that night, but the hospital in Manassas is smaller, and at the time I don’t think they had anybody particularly skilled in microsurgery. I said, ‘Do you have the part?’ They said no, so I said, ‘Is there any point in me coming down?’ They said, ‘Don’t worry, she told me where she threw it.’”

Jim Sehn, a urologist who operated with Berman: “Lorena had taken the male member in her car down a side street, just down Route 28 in Manassas. She tossed it out the window, and the organ landed in a grass field out in front of the 7-Eleven. The police brought it into the 7-Eleven. Believe it or not, they put it in a hot-dog bag on ice.”

Lorena: “I had John’s penile stump tourniqueted. He’d lost about a third of his blood volume.”

Berman: “The surgery took 9½ hours. What you’re doing is reconnecting the major artery and veins and nerves under the microscope. If we were doing it again, I’m sure it’d be a lot quicker. But we wanted to be extra careful. Microsurgeries are either successful or not. You have to be extra, extra careful with it.”

Carlos Sanchez, then a reporter for the Washington Post: “I am the first person who interviewed Lorena Bobbitt. It happened the morning of the incident. She’d been through hell, you could tell. She almost appeared to be in a state of shock. Her response to my question was, ‘He raped me. He raped me.’ I always felt that it was a very sincere response. She said it from the get-go, very convincingly. Others believed she had kind of staged it and made that up.”

Lorena: “You know, I might’ve said things I didn’t mean to say. Again, I was still learning English, and I tried to connect the words together, and you know, it was just a mess. I was trying to explain myself that there is no good when a man and woman have non-consensual sex. There was no translator at all, and that’s a very important point. Now that I look back at these things, I’m like, ‘Oh, my God, a translator would’ve been nice.’”

Berman: “The doctors immediately made themselves available to us, which was fantastic. That was the way things went in that particular case. Everybody seemed available, and they spoke pretty freely. It was new ground in terms of crime and the ability to say ‘penis’ in the press.”

Kim Gandy, then executive vice president of the National Organization for Women: “Very, very quickly, the story focused on him and his loss, so to speak—not on what he had done or why Lorena had acted. We were understandably upset that the focus of the news stories was misplaced.”

Lorena was charged with “malicious wounding”—John was charged with “marital sexual assault”—but not with rape. At that time in Virginia, a spouse could be charged with rape only if the couple was living apart or the victim was seriously injured. John’s trial was scheduled for a November trial date. It was probably
I thought the word would get around the hospital and it’d be forgotten in a day or two.”

The most intense three months I’ve ever had. I was hearing from people from Bangkok to Berlin. They asked if I was going to move it out of Manassas because of the jury pool. I said, “Where am I going to move it? They’ve heard of this in the Amazon.”

Roger Snyder, then community-development director for Manassas: “My job was to embellish the image of Manassas, and I took great umbrage that my job was made more difficult by the laughter echoing around the world.”

Tricia Davis, then director of Historic Manassas: “Of all the things Manassas was known for, now it’s Mrs. Bobbitt.”

Sanchez: “When there’s an allegation of a sex crime, it’s the practice of most papers that you don’t name the victim. We learned almost immediately that both John and Lorena had hired publicists. When the editors heard that, they said, ‘Okay, we’re free to use her name.’ I know that we really angered her [first] attorney. His vow at that moment was that the Post would never again get an interview. ‘That’s how Kim Masters ended up scooping her own paper.’

Kim Masters, journalist: “I was at the Washington Post, but I had just made a deal with Vanity Fair to do three stories a year. The theory was there wouldn’t be a lot of conflict. But I did not anticipate that the first thing Vanity Fair would ask me to do was Lorena Bobbitt.”

“I think the Post was very squeamish about the subject matter, the nature of the crime. I went to my editor at the time. I said, ‘Vanity Fair wants me to go for this Lorena Bobbitt story,’ and he said, ‘Okay.’”

Snyder: “We proudly did the reattachment of the hand. We did the reattachment of Humpty Dumpty was put back together again.”

Prince William County Circuit Court judge who presided over John’s trial: “I couldn’t go anywhere without hearing somebody talking about me. It was like being a fly on the wall, like being invisible.”

LeRoy Millette Jr., the Prince William County Circuit Court judge who presided over John’s trial: “My goal was to keep the courtroom as calm as possible. To minimize the commotion, I established a rule that once you sat down in the courtroom, you couldn’t leave, then come back in.”

John’s trial began on November 8, 1993. By then, late-night comedians had feasted on the material for months. Still, the amount of media that parachuted into Manassas took people aback.

John Masters’ book was published in Time magazine. The media saturation peaked with Lorena’s trial, televised live on Court TV.
“The Oscar Mayer Wienermobile Showed Up.”

Howard, Lorena’s lawyer: “My secretary said, ‘We’ve had some calls over the last couple of days from a lady who speaks with a little bit of an accent, and she insists that she wants to speak to you, but she won’t identify herself.’ Finally, the voice on the other end identifies herself to me: ‘I’m Lorena. Perhaps you have heard about my case.’”

The Oscar Mayer Wienermobile showed up."

**The Unusual Charge—Marital Sexual Assault—was Difficult to Prove.**

Milibette: “It was sort of a he-said/she-said, and even if you believed her, there were going to be some things you had doubts about.”

The jury deliberated four hours before returning a verdict of not guilty.

Ebert: “I was disappointed but wasn’t surprised.”

Murphy: “Gay Talese and the New Yorker threw a dinner for us at a shopping-center restaurant, an Italian restaurant.”

Windy Shepley-Collat, T-shirt vendor: “We lived like a mile from where the event happened. I said, ‘Well, there’s nothing here for a souvenir except those ornaments they sell down at the train station. What if we sold T-shirts?’ One day, I was in the store and thought, Manassas. A cut above the rest. I thought, ‘That’s awesome,’ and I went with it.”

Lorena’s trial was scheduled for January 10, 1994. In the months before, John went into hiding.

John: “A friend of mine has a cattle ranch. I went there and did some cowboy stuff.”

Murphy: “I got this call from John’s publicists. They said he’s doing great, wrangling cattle, blah, blah, blah. But they got that John was thinking of going into cattle, blah, blah, blah. But they got that John was thinking of going into cattle, livestock, blah, blah, blah.”

John: “I went to trial.”

Sanchez of the Post: “John’s trial was real—kind of a dress rehearsal. Lorena’s was by far the much larger trial. I remember, too, it was bitterly cold and that didn’t matter. There were just crowds of people.”

Ebert: “You had people demonstrating—the women’s rights, men’s rights, the Latino bunch.”

Sanchez: “Hispanic taxi drivers volunteered to take people out there who didn’t have rides, to support their fellow Latina.”

Ebert: “We had snipers on top of the courthouse.”

Gandy of NOW: “This was a huge opportunity. Huge. Because nobody was talking about domestic violence then. It was the silent killer of women. It was a chance to refocus people on what was really at stake here and why she and who was she and why she was being protected by the laws of Virginia.”

Mable, the court clerk: “My staff was in charge of leasing a large room in a building across the street for journalists and television feeds from all over the world. That was the nerve center of the get out of the word on the case.”

Shepley-Collat, the T-shirt vendor: “[My friend] and I were the only two out there for the first trial because it was $500 for a peddler’s license. For Lorena’s trial, there were at least 20 other people out there. Some were selling T-shirts; some were selling chocolate candy pens. Some of it was just gross.

“I thought we should do hourshours, too, and they should say: ‘Don’t cut me short.’”

Manassas, Virginia. We earned $24,000.”

Snyder, the Manassas community development director: “Believing out of the corner of his eye—a bear, maybe? He had seen some scat. But before he could turn his head, a black animal bounding toward him out of the woods. ‘Damnedest thing,’ he’d said. ‘I need to keep that promise,’ he said.”

“Later, he says, ‘Mr. Ebert?’ I say, ‘What?’”

Ebert: “The case was doomed from the start. He was out to defend her.”

Murphy, John’s lawyer: “It was absolute—It was never going to be—He was upset about not winning a guilty verdict in John’s case.”

Mable: “If I wanted to lose a case, I couldn’t try it. It’s like I told the jury—two wrongs don’t make a right.”

Lorena’s legal team presented a type of temporariness-insanity defense called “irresistible impulse.”

Howard, Lorena’s attorney: “In order to prevail, you have to have a major medical disorder. The psychiatrist evaluated Lorena as suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder. In other words, because she had just been forcibly assaulted and was reliving all the other attacks and that trauma had occurred, she went in and saw that knife and all she could think was: ‘I’ve got to eliminate the problem.’”

Ebert: “I never thought she was crazy, or legally crazy. Certainly emotionally. Certainly had some mental difficulty, as most defendants do.”

Mable, the court clerk: “After Lorena testified, the mail came from everywhere. The mailman said, ‘What am I supposed to do with all this mail?’”

“My name is Bob McDowell,” he yelled back.

Darnuck track had beaten him after all.

**Continued from Page 75**

Robert Nelson (omahogmail.com) is a writer and editor in Pearbelle.
THESE PEOPLE MAKING FUN, THEY SEEMED TO MISS EVERYTHING.”

right on my desk, and I’ll take it to Lorena or John.’

“Of course, I couldn’t read the letters, but I could read the postcards. The ones I read heavily favored Lorena. Words of encouragement. Prayers. That sort of thing. I’ll never forget there was one addressed to John Wayne Bobbitt that said, ‘You sorry blankety-blank, it’s too bad that a dog didn’t find your penis and carry it off before they found it and reattached it.’”

After more than six hours of deliberation, the jury returned its verdict.

Lorena: “This woman came with a card, and she look at me and she smiled. At that moment, I thought she was just kind of like telling me it was going to be all right. Then when she read ‘not guilty,’ that’s all I understood. Not guilty.”

John: “I couldn’t believe that the system failed, that everything got so screwed up, so misinterpreted. That all the facts and details weren’t brought out.”

Howard: “I was very happy for her. It was the first time I could remember seeing that girl smile.”

Lorena: “But then they were taking me to a side door, these officers, and I’m like, ‘If it’s okay, why don’t I just go out the front door? What does this mean?’ I was exhausted. I wanted just to go home and fall asleep. They took me directly to the hospital.”

Under state law, anyone acquitted by reason of insanity must be placed under psychiatric evaluation, so Lorena spent the next 45 days at a hospital in Petersburg, Virginia.

Lorena: “It wasn’t like the Holiday Inn, but at least I was away from the media. I had boxes full of letters. Because we didn’t have the World Wide Web. Can you imagine? I can’t imagine handling it with social media.”

Gandy of NOW: “I remember being asked multiple times, ‘Is she a hero?’ She’s a survivor. She’s someone who was being abused and did what she felt she needed to do to save herself.”

John and Lorena finalized their divorce in 1995.

Berman, the plastic surgeon: “John ended up going out to Vegas and did a bunch of porn films.”

Sehn, the urologist: “The first film was called John Wayne Bobbitt Uncut. You may have heard of it. I think it was the most successful porn film ever made.”

John: “I said, ‘Why not tell the whole story in an adult-rated version?’ It was a lot of fun.”

Berman: “I couldn’t not see it since it’s my handiwork. Unfortunately, it was terrible. It showed that everything worked well, but it was pretty classless.”

John: “Another reason why I did it is I knew Lorena would be pissed off.”

Berman: “Then somewhere along there, he had a penile augmentation.”

John: “It was kind of successful. Over time, it was too big. I’d go on a date. Girls were saying, ‘No way.’”

Berman: “He didn’t ask my advice before doing the porn movie. He certainly didn’t ask me before doing the penile augmentation. Had he asked me, I would have told him it was insane.”

John: “I had to go see Dr. Berman again last year, and he had to do a reduction. It’s fine now. Back to normal.”

John Bobbitt says he’s currently living with a girlfriend in Las Vegas, where he works in construction. In 1994, he was convicted in two separate cases of battering his then fiancée, Kristina Elliott. In 2003, he was convicted of abusing his third wife, Joanna Ferrell.

While John chased the spotlight, Lorena sought quiet.

Lorena: “I stayed in the community. Everywhere I go, I will be recognized, so might as well stay. I knew the area, and I knew my friends are in the area.

“I went back to school for general studies. That’s how I met David. We’re not married, but that’s my longtime partner. It’s been 18 or 20 years since we’ve been together. We have a daughter together. He’s a great guy.”

Lorena now goes by her maiden name, Gallo. After her trial, she worked as a legal secretary, then became a real-estate agent. In 2007, she started an organization focused on domestic-violence prevention. She speaks on the topic, such as at a recent law-school symposium in Tennessee, and volunteers with women’s shelters.

Lorena: “David was the one who said, ‘Let’s do this if you really want to.’ The Lorena Gallo Foundation—it’s advocacy, education, community outreach, and support.”

Gandy, now president of the National Network to End Domestic Violence: “With three women a day being murdered in domestic violence, the horrible stories are quite endless. Most of them don’t ever make anything beyond their local media, even the really horrifying ones.”

Lorena: “We’re not going to change the world in one week. Look what happened to me. It’s been 25 years, and it’s still not perfect. We haven’t reached equality, women’s equality. There’s a lot more work for me to do, for all of the advocates to do.”

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