

Abortion News in the Late 1920s: A New York City Case Study

By Marvin Olasky

► During the past two decades a growing number of historians have used medical records, court documents, and other resources to recapture the history of abortion in America.¹ Several researchers, not finding much press debate about abortion during the years from 1900 to 1955, have labeled that period the "silent era" of abortion history, citing a scarcity of references in the *New York Times Index* and the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* as proof of that assertion.²

The use of those two indexes is understandable. Of all the nation's newspapers, only the *New York Times* has been consistently indexed for those years, and to crank reels of microfilm in search of occasional stories in other newspapers wears both eye and spirit. But journalism historians more aware of the historical variation among newspapers need to examine the record. Generalizations about abortion's invisibility in the press are not true, at least in New York City.

A look at the New York press shows that while the *Times* may have been "passive" during the 1920s, the city's "sensational" newspapers often wrote stinging exposes of illegal abortion practices.

This article is based primarily on reading of three of New York's newspapers—the *Daily News*, the *Journal*, and the *American*—from 1925 to 1930, the mid-

point of the supposed "silent era."³ Since those newspapers extensively covered local crime, the hypothesis was that they would not ignore those abortion operations which led to deaths of mothers involved, and the consequent need to quietly dispose of bodies.

One month's worth of issues for each newspaper each year was chosen at random: April, 1925; July, 1926; November, 1927; September, 1928; January, 1929; and March 1930. Coverage in the three newspapers was compared to coverage in the *New York Times*, and issues of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* were used for background information. Typical stories are summarized below, and a conclusion gives the overall picture.

The Bodies of Babies

The first indication in the study that the "silent era" designation is incorrect came in reading coverage in 1925 of the arrest of Henry L. Mottard, alias Dr. H. L. Green. The *New York Journal* played the story at the top of its front page, with pictures and text emphasizing the search of Mottard's farm on Long Island "for surgical instruments and bodies of infants."⁴ As Mottard confessed to crimes, the *Journal* expressed horror and amazement: "The blandness with which Mottard uttered his remarkable professions leads the authorities to believe that he has been a veritable Moloch in his destruction of infants' lives."⁵

The *Journal* also connected abortion with "pagan ritual" when it described Mottard's farm as a "temple where women came in considerable numbers to sacrifice."⁶ It emphasized Mottard's wealth by captioning a photograph of the interior of Mottard's house, "One of the Luxurious Rooms in Mottard's Home."⁷ According to the *Journal*, the house was

► The author is an associate professor in the Department of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin. Additional information on abortion coverage may be found in his book *The Press and Abortion* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1988).

¹ The most useful works are James Mohr, *Abortion in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Germain Grisez, *Abortion: The Myths, the Realities and the Arguments* (New York: Corpus Books, 1970); and Joseph Dellapenna, "The History of Abortion: Technology, Morality, and Law," *University of Pittsburgh Law Review* 40:359-428 (Spring 1979).

² See, for example, Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

³ The *Daily News* was owned by Joseph Mediil Patterson, the *Journal* and the *American* by William Randolph Hearst.

⁴ *New York Journal*, April 10, 1925, p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2. Moloch was the Ammonite god mentioned fifteen times in the Old Testament, in passages such as "Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Moloch" (*Leviticus* 18:21).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

"lavishly furnished and has especially handsome furniture in the music room.

Hunting trophies adorn the walls and two skulls rest on tables at the entrance to the front door." Mottard's chicken farm had "more than 1,700 hens of varied fine breeds."⁸ The *Journal* described Mottard's "fully equipped operating room," complete with "countless photographs of pretty women—some of them known on the stage—who ventured to inscribe their pictures with various terms of affection, such as to 'our dear benefactor and friend.'"⁹ Coverage in the other two sampled newspapers was comparable.

A Torso Murder

In July, 1926, the three sensational newspapers also reported a major abortion story, one that began when police found a body cut into pieces and packed into two boxes. "The packing was done by a trained surgeon," the *New York Journal* noted on its first day of coverage, and cited police belief that the boxes were dropped accidentally while being sent to medical students for research.¹⁰ The next day, however, a front page headline "Clue to Slain Girl in Box," attracted attention to four photographs and a story emphasizing death following "an illegal operation."¹¹ The three newspapers carried graphic descriptions of the body cut into eight pieces and put in the box, along with a "blood-soaked bundle containing a tablecloth, several towels and female apparel." The legs of the corpse still had stockings on them.¹²

Stories continued the following day with identification of the "pretty 18 year old victim of the box tragedy" as Edith Green, whose fiance confessed that he had taken her "to Doctor Walsh's office for an operation to forestall approaching motherhood."¹³ One headline read, "Vital Organs Found in a Raid on the House of

Physician Accused in Girl's Murder."¹⁴ Follow-up stories including pictures of Edith Green with the caption, "Death Ends Smile,"¹⁵ and the arrest of a second physician, under the front page headline "Arrest Here in Torso Murder."¹⁶ The *New York Times* covered the death very briefly—on page 26.¹⁷

In September, 1928, the three newspapers reported a major scandal that had its origins in San Francisco two decades before. Robert Thompson, a San Francisco abortionist, was convicted of murder in 1910 and sentenced to 20 years in San Quentin Prison, but he received parole after nine years and moved to Boston. There he once more opened an abortion business, this time under the alias "Stanton A. Hudson." In August, 1922, he was arrested on the charge of procuring an abortion, but was discharged. In December 1922, he was sentenced to three months in jail for violating the state medical practice act. He was freed in February 1923, only to be rearrested on a charge of advising and prescribing instruments to procure abortion.

Thompson, avoiding conviction on the last charge, moved to New York City and became known to the city's reporters. In September 1927, Thompson—using the alias "Robert Malcolm"—was charged with attempted abortion and possession of narcotics, but the case was dismissed by a local magistrate, with Thompson boasting that "he could beat any police case because he had the pull."¹⁸ Evidently, that was provocation enough for the *New York Daily News* and one of that tabloid's aggressive reporters, John O'Donnell. Angered at Thompson's ability to continue in practice despite his long police record, O'Donnell spent months in developing sources in the city board of health. In September 1928, he reported that 30 physicians were sending patients to Thompson "in return for generous commissions," and private hospitals

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *New York Journal*, July 13, 1926, p. 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, July 14, 1926, p. 1.

¹² For example, see the *New York Journal*, July 14, 1926, p. 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, July 15, 1926, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, July 16, 1926, p. 1.

¹⁵ *New York American*, July 16, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, July 20, p. 2.

¹⁷ *New York Times*, July 14, 1926, p. 26.

¹⁸ *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 92, No. 7 (Feb. 16, 1929), p. 579.

were supplying narcotics and drugs for Thompson's operations.¹⁹

Police, pushed by public opinion and the board of health, eventually raided Thompson's office. But the raid was botched, with the *Daily News* charging "that policewomen had been bribed by Thompson to destroy evidence of the clinic's criminal operations and had assisted the quack doctor in spiriting away his semi-conscious women patients."²⁰ The policewomen actually helped key witnesses into taxicabs, according to the *Daily News*, which quoted Thompson's nurse as saying, "My God, some of these women are too sick to be moved," but then rushing them out anyway.²¹

Lack of evidence allowed Thompson to be tried only on practicing medicine without a license, which he had lost after his California sentencing, but the *Daily News* made the most of it. O'Donnell, referring to a woman who had died during one of Thompson's abortion operations in San Francisco, wrote that "The ghost of little Eva Swan, whose carefully dissected body was found 18 years ago rose to face the head of Manhattan's criminal surgery ring yesterday."²²

O'Donnell was not silent, but attacked the practice and described how Thompson "laughed at the law . . . cursed and swore at newspapermen."²³ O'Donnell noted

that Thompson "often boasted he couldn't be prosecuted because 'What I know about the girl friends of some officials will burn them up.'" The *Daily News* played the story like a fictional serial, asking in italics at the end of one story, "Has the law sprung its trap sufficiently well to hold 'Dr.' Thompson this time, or will he again laugh at it? Read newest developments in THE NEWS tomorrow."²⁴

Conclusions

Some examples of abortion coverage are given, but there were many more. During the six months examined the three New York newspapers each ran 24 to 30 abortion stories, an average of four or five per month. While this was far from the level of coverage that a major agenda item—such as coverage of local government—received, it also was a long way from silence on the issue.

The coverage was critical of the character of abortionists. Although these three newspapers did not explicitly couch abortion coverage in an editorial format, they consistently linked abortion to horrible consequences. The moralizing was more subtle than that of the 16th and 17th century newsbooks and ballads, yet these sampled sensational newspapers seemed to be sending a message that abortionists were immoral liars whose practice was filled with greed, fraud and abuse of women.

¹⁹ *New York Daily News*, Sept. 7, 1928, p. 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Sept. 8, 1928.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Sept. 27 and 28, 1928.

²² *Ibid.*, Oct. 2, 1928.

²³ *Ibid.*, Sept. 5, 1928.

²⁴ *Ibid.* Thompson eventually received a one-year prison sentence.

Boycott of Horror Programs Grows

The National Coalition on Television Violence reports that a national campaign against what it calls TV's two most violent programs, "Friday the 13th" and "Freddy's Nightmare" has caused some cancellations by stations and sponsors. The coalition reported in late October of 1989 that seven markets have cancelled one or both of these programs and 24 national advertisers have cancelled sponsorship. Also, Matchbox Toys has stopped production of the Freddy Krueger doll. The two hour-long programs are shown weekly. They are sold to individual stations through syndication and are not network programs. Both are spinoffs of popular teenage slasher-horror films.

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