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“Scandal and Censure: A Reinvestigation of the Socio-Political Forces Surrounding the Disappearance of Aimee Semple McPherson”¹

Margaret English de Alminana, Ph.D.

Abstract

This paper sets the oft-told narrative of McPherson’s disappearance and alleged sexual misconduct into important aspects of the historical context of her era. Although the accusations against the evangelist were widely embraced by the Pentecostal community—and although they continue to exhibit a shaping effect upon her legacy and legend—this paper uses primary historical research to reexamine these events through the lens of emerging, powerful cultural forces, including entrenched female biases common in the post-Victorian era, the ascendance of the American mob, the public’s rejection of prohibition and revulsion against the Women’s Temperance Union and recent Suffragist gains, and the desire of the religious establishment to censure McPherson for casting off role assignment proclivities. This paper will revisit the story and provide a theory that offers compelling, unexplored evidence that connects these events in McPherson’s life with the rowdy and colorfully distinctive characteristics of her time.

Introduction

On May 18, 1926, three years before the U.S. Stock Market crashed, another more personal crash was headed the evangelist’s way. Aimee Semple McPherson and trusted personal secretary, Emma Schaffer, went to Venice beach to swim. McPherson loved the beach and planned to prepare a sermon there between invigorating dips in the cold surf. But as Schaffer read her Bible and the evangelist splashed in the surf, she failed to notice that McPherson had disappeared.

McPherson’s ministry was riding the crest of a seemingly unstoppable wave of public support. She returned from a trip to Europe for much needed rest to the arms of city opened wide in a welcoming embrace. When her train arrived at Sante Fe station just east of downtown Los Angeles, twelve thousand cheering people were gathered to greet her return.² The mayor and a superior court judge presented an official welcome, and the crowds paraded behind her to Angeles Temple, decked in patriotic colors and thousands of fresh flowers.³ McPherson’s ministry magazine, *The Bridal Call*, heralded the event with the headline: “Los Angeles Greets Aimee Semple McPherson...the One Who Paved Woman’s Way into the Pulpit.”⁴

Using her notoriety to sociopolitical advantage, McPherson dove deeply into currents of controversy washing across the nation. She blasted forces of modernism, higher criticism, and evolution with ever increasing zeal from both her pulpit and expansive radio program. “We rise up against those who seek to destroy our faith. We say ‘No! You did not found this country. It is not evolution and modernism and higher criticism that has made our country what it is.’”⁵

¹ The information in this article is taken from Margaret English de Alminana, “A Biographical Survey of 20th Century Female Pentecostal Leadership and an Incipient Egalitarian Struggle,” (PhD diss., Glyndŵr University, U.K., 2011): 137-229, and was presented at the 45th Annual Meeting of the Society of Pentecostal Studies, 2016.

² Matthew A. Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 90.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴ “Los Angeles Greets Aimee Semple McPherson,” *Bridal Call Foursquare 10* (June 1926): pp. 18-19; Matthew A. Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 91.

⁵ Aimee Semple McPherson, “God’s Attitude toward America—America’s Attitude Toward God,” *Bridal Call Foursquare 9* (March 1926): p. 6; “Crusaders in Anti-Narcotic Parade,” *Bridal Call 7* (August 1923): p. 16; Matthew A. Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 91.

Venice Beach was the site of the evangelist's recent advent into the local political and religious battle. Sister Aimee had used her substantial clout with the public to try and block dancing and gambling on Sundays by opposing a ballot measure submitted by local politicians. Local businesses and politicians sought permission to circumvent the city's Blue Laws.⁶ McPherson shook her radio audience when she declared that she would rather see her own daughter dead than in a Venice dance hall.⁷ The ballot initiative failed, but McPherson's splash into the corrupt and complicated power structures of Prohibition's speakeasies and mob-connected entertainment world would create repercussions, at least in the McPherson ministry's perspective, that would ripple throughout the final narrative of her life and ministry career.

The ballot initiative failed on May 16, 1926, the dance halls on Lick Peer reopened the next Sunday in Venice, and the following Tuesday when McPherson and Schaffer visited the beach, the evangelist disappeared.⁸ Police launched a search, questioning hotel staff and beachgoers, but no one saw her leave. It was strongly suspected early on that she had been caught in one of the ever-present undertows and had drowned. That evening at Angelus Temple, Minnie Kennedy preached the sermon in Aimee's stead as newsboys outside proclaimed the evening edition's headlines: "Aimee McPherson believed drowned." As the service concluded, a somber Kennedy announced: "Sister is with Jesus."⁹

The scope of the Tuesday evening crowds receiving the news was stunning, even when compared to the present day introduction of mega-churches. McPherson had prepared a slide-show of her recent trip to the Holy Land, a technological novelty in the mid-twenties. The Monday evening service filled the Temple hours before the service, and McPherson welcomed six-thousand who were left outside waiting into a second service that finished at 9:30 PM. When crowds continued to press in, McPherson invited them back for another service on the Tuesday of her disappearance.¹⁰

Repeating services was not unusual. In fact, that Sunday evening's sermon, *The Scarlet Thread*, had required McPherson to clear the Temple three times between repeated services.¹¹ Kennedy not only made the announcement to a capacity crowd, but she spoke into the radio microphone that carried her voice throughout the city. She reported the facts: Sister and her secretary had left for Venice Beach at noon, and while the "strong swimmer" vigorously ventured out into the 50 degree surf, she disappeared. No one saw her get out of the water or leave the beach, and she was presumed by authorities to have drowned. "Sister is gone," said Kennedy. "We know she is with Jesus."¹²

Although much would be asserted regarding this response, it was uncovered later that Kennedy, who had accompanied her daughter to Los Angeles as her business manager, went to the City Council secretly, and in a private meeting requested permission to bury McPherson's

⁶ Blue Laws were local codes common in American culture throughout the 20th century that restricted merchants from conducting business on Sundays out of respect for the 4th Commandment.

⁷ Matthew A. Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, p. 92.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 93.

¹⁰ Edith L. Blumhofer, *Aimee Semple McPherson, Everybody's Sister* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 281-282.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 282.

¹² Ibid.

body outside of the church beneath her favorite stained glass window, suggesting that she very much believed her daughter to have died.¹³

Venice Beach

In aggressively challenging the amusement industry at Venice Beach, McPherson may have slapped a hornet's nest. The Southern Californian beach communities were strongholds for the Mob during Prohibition. "During the years that Prohibition was in effect, (1920-1933) Canadian liquor was smuggled into Venice from off-shore rumrunners by high-powered motorboats that docked beneath the pier in the dead of night. Mobster Tony Cornero ran the operation."¹⁴ He also ran rum from Mexico to an underworld made thirsty by Prohibition.¹⁵ In the beach resort town, "underground tunnels provided access for smugglers who delivered to "speakeasy" bars in the basements of the Venice business district. Newspapers recount gun battles between police and rumrunners along the beach near the Ocean Park Pier.¹⁶ Prohibition, effectively a nationwide lockdown on the sale and transportation of alcoholic beverages, had been the crowning achievement of the era's Women's Christian Temperance Union, which was largely comprised of religious women not unlike McPherson. It had proven a boon for the Mafia, which went to war against government enforcers fueled by the nation's religious sentiments. The moral authority of the WCTU during the time was unparalleled. Although Prohibition had the unexpected consequence of empowering the Mob's efforts to supply alcohol to its less 'sanctified' citizenry, its door of opportunity was tenuous at best. The illegal effort might be curtailed at any time should the moral majority apply sufficient political pressure against those willing to look the other way instead of fully enforcing the laws. McPherson had the clout to stir up a demand for greater enforcement, which certainly would have been seen as a threat to the illegal operation.

Cornero's illegal machine did not stop at Lick Pier and Venice Beach. He proved himself to be a ruthless and powerful outlaw who blazed a trail for the mob during Prohibition in Las Vegas as well and was attributed with the creation of combination hotels, gambling casinos, night clubs, and speakeasies, which introduced the prototype for casino resorts.¹⁷ He also circumvented law enforcement by setting up floating casinos off Southern California's coast, another forerunner to gambling cruise ships. Cornero was considered one of 100 most influential shapers of Las Vegas history by the *Las Vegas Review Journal*.¹⁸ Some credit him with its invention: "If any one hoodlum can take claim for inventing Las Vegas, it was Tony Cornero."¹⁹

Was Cornero capable of taking down a beloved female evangelist? His record suggests the affirmative. "At age 16, Tony pleaded guilty to robbery, did ten months in reform school, and then moved to southern California where he racked up another ten arrests in ten years, including three for bootlegging and three for attempted murder."²⁰

¹³ Thomas Lately, *The Vanishing Evangelist, The Aimee Semple McPherson Kidnapping Affair*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1959), pp. 26-27.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Stanton, "Gambling, Bingo and Prohibition," April 1998, websource: <http://www.westland.net/venicehistory/articles/gambling.htm>.

¹⁵ John William Tuohy, "Stardust In Your Eyes, Tony Cornero and the Stardust Hotel," Rick Porello's American Mafia.com (2000).

¹⁶ Jeffrey Stanton.

¹⁷ Alan Balboni, "Tony Cornero, More Sinner than Saint," *The Las Vegas Review Journal*, websource: www.1st100.com/part1/cornero.html.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ John William Tuohy, "Stardust In Your Eyes, Tony Cornero and the Stardust Hotel," Rick Porello's American Mafia.com (2000).

²⁰ Ibid.

The Search for Sister

The ocean floor was dragged for the body, airplanes searched from the skies, while thousands combed the beaches, but to no avail. A vigil of thousands of devoted followers singing hymns, praying and weeping lasted for 32 days on the beach.²¹

Hope that she was still alive abounded. District Attorney Asa Keyes was informed that Aimee had been kidnapped by two men who were holding her for \$25,000 in ransom. Minnie Kennedy posted a \$25,000 reward for McPherson's return, dead or alive.²² On the eve of a 12-hour memorial service at the Angelus Temple, the ministry received a second ransom note, but this time demanding \$500,000, signed by "The Avengers." Kennedy tossed it aside with the flood of crank letters she had received.²³ On June 20th, Kennedy ascended the pulpit next to an empty pulpit chair turned into an altar of flowers that looked up at a photo of the evangelist. She addressed 6,000 mourners in the auditorium and 14,000 more lined up in the streets through a specially prepared loudspeaker.²⁴

Despite the grim conclusions drawn by the family, so many rumors of sightings and false leads abounded that the coroner refused to issue a death certificate. On a single day McPherson was rumored to have been seen in sixteen different places around the county.²⁵ Private detectives and an army of hungry news reporters combed through every possibility, titillating their readers with a cache of headlines. Amongst the leads was the ransom note that the Temple had turned over to police with hundreds of other letters and notes.²⁶

Keyes announced that he would open a case into the disappearance. According to Blumhofer, he may have been reacting out of pressure from the Los Angeles *Times* that already had begun speculating whether Kenneth Ormiston, its former employee turned Temple radio engineer, who had recently disappeared as well, might be connected to the disaster.²⁷ In the midst of the hubbub, Ormiston appeared at the Temple headquarters on May 27 and announced he was fully prepared to cooperate with police and clear the evangelist's name. Authorities were satisfied that he had no news regarding McPherson's whereabouts.²⁸ "With the Los Angeles newspapers, District Attorney Asa Keyes, and the public wondering what had become of him, Ormiston showed up in late May in Los Angeles, where he met with Kennedy and the police. The district attorney cleared him of any wrongdoing, whereupon the engineer promptly disappeared again, evading Keyes and the press for the next six months."²⁹

Three days following the memorial service, McPherson reappeared.

A Survey of the Controversy

McPherson told her story, claiming that while swimming she was called out of the water by a man who told her his infant child was dying, that he had contacted the Temple and learned that she was at the beach. He begged her to come to the car to pray for the child, an extremely

²¹ Daniel Mark Epstein, *Sister Aimee, The Life of Aimee Semple McPherson*, (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), p. 294.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 245.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Edith L. Blumhofer, *Aimee Semple McPherson, Everybody's Sister* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), p. 285.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

²⁹ Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 97.

common scenario for the evangelist. When she bent into the car to reach towards a woman holding a bundle that appeared to be the child, McPherson claims that her mouth was covered with a chemical agent, possibly chloroform, and she was shoved into the car as she lost consciousness.

Many times I had stepped into ambulances or automobiles which drove up in front of our house, so the invitation to enter the vehicle did not strike me as strange or suspicious. However, as I stepped inside, the man gave me a little shove, a push from behind. Down I went onto the floor of the car...Immediately the bundle of robes the woman had been cradling as a baby came down upon me. Something wet and sticky was pressed roughly to my mouth. I struggled weakly for a moment, then lapsed into unconsciousness.³⁰

According to McPherson, she was taken first to an apartment and then out to the desert where she was bound for ransom. When her captors left her alone tied with cords resembling cotton batting, she rolled off of her metal bed and cut the restraints on the sharp metal of an opened can, crawled out a window, and escaped into the desert. She wandered through the desert for several hours, and saw lights in a small Mexican village. Arriving there she collapsed at the front door of a Latino couple who brought her in, gave her water, and contacted the authorities.

The San Francisco Bulletin ran a front-page story proclaiming: Aimee Found, Kidnapping Told:

Douglas Ariz., June 23 (AP) – Aimee Semple McPherson, missing Los Angeles evangelist, quivering with exhaustion, with her hair shorn, bedraggled and covered with mud, staggered into Agua Prieta, across the border from Douglas, today, was picked up in a semi-conscious state and brought to a hospital here by James Anderson, an American. ... Positive identification of the missing evangelist was made by Mrs. Minnie Kennedy, her mother, in a telephone conversation with William F. McCafferty, editor of the Douglas Dispatch, who, as a newspaperman, had known Mrs. McPherson in Denver during the course of her meetings there several years ago.³¹

Immediately, a furor arose challenging the evangelist's story. In fact, as McPherson's mother and children entered the hospital room where she was being treated following the ordeal, they were not permitted to see her at first. Rather, they were forced to wait for Captain of Detectives, Herman Cline, and Deputy District Attorney, Joe Ryan, to interview her, purporting to be in the process of gathering information in order to pursue the kidnappers. Their motives may have been somewhat less noble, however. The Los Angeles Herald ran a story on the same day that she surfaced announcing: "With the party were Captain of Detectives Herman Cline and Deputy District Attorney Joe Ryan who will investigate Ms. McPherson's story for the purpose of determining whether she was actually kidnapped."³²

A protracted court case ensued, the longest litigation of its kind in Los Angeles District Court, resulting in the filing of 42 volumes of transcripts with more than 3,500 pages of testimony. McPherson was kidnapped on May 18, 1926, and the court agreed to dismiss the case on January 10, 1927. By today's standards, the hearings appear to fall far from the professional standards expected of such judiciary proceedings. Tedious volumes record hearings with

³⁰ *Aimee, The Life Story of Aimee Semple McPherson*, (Los Angeles, CA: Foursquare Publications, 1979), p. 148.

³¹ "Aimee Found, Kidnaping [sic] Told," *The Bulletin*, (San Francisco, June 23, 1926), p. 1.

³² Raymond L. Cox, *The Verdict is In, After fifty years...answers about the kidnapping of Aimee Semple McPherson*, (Los Angeles, CA: Research Publishers, 1983), p. 81.

laborious testimony regarding whether McPherson wore hair pieces, what type of corset she used, and other endless investigation into her underclothing, her bathing suits, and similar tabloid fodder used by gossip reporters to feed a nation at its trough while profits soared.

District Attorney Asa Keyes led the charge against her in court. In the religious arena, radio evangelist Robert Shuler, pastor of nearby Trinity Methodist Church, who in part built a ministry on a campaign of ceaseless vitriol against the evangelist, found a wider audience for his assaults in the national attention created by the scandal. He charged the police not to let the matter rest following McPherson's grand jury acquittal. In the cast of characters involved in the Hollywood saga, Keyes, and self-appointed McPherson nemesis, "Fighting Bob" Shuler, played leading roles. Shuler's regular radio rants targeted more than McPherson, however. His broadcasts also included controversial attacks on Catholics, African Americans, and Jews. Shuler acquired a wide following from 1926-1932 as he thundered support for the Klu Klux Klan and shot poisonous verbal accusations against McPherson and other prominent evangelists, including Billy Sunday.³³ His broadcast license eventually was revoked by the Federal Radio Commission.³⁴

District Attorney Asa Keyes, on the other hand, was later committed to San Quentin Penitentiary for alleged wrong doing on his part in other unrelated cases.³⁵ In fact, illumination to Keyes character might come from one of his staunchest defenders, author Lately Thomas, who said that at the outset of the event he was "smarting under the rebuke of California's Governor Richardson who rapped the Los Angeles official for convicting innocent defendants." Richardson was quoted as saying, "This is the sixth pardon I have given men convicted in Los Angeles County and later declared innocent by the district attorney."³⁶

Impossible?

Much of the furor right from the start was based on an underlying assumption that pastor and evangelist McPherson, with no hint of scandal in a relatively untarnished record, was concocting a wild story to cover up something—something sexual perhaps. An abortion was the first charge until she produced medical records of a hysterectomy. Soon the charges imagined an affair with Ormiston. But was her unvarying account of the details surrounding her abduction just a wild story she created to hide a lurid sexual rendezvous with her crippled radioman? Or, was the spectacle nothing more than a tabloid invention of a creative press and an over-ambitious prosecutor dropped like meat into a piranhas' tank to pacify a bored and gossip hungry nation?

Nearly every account presupposes that McPherson's account of events seemed far-fetched. However, a previous plot to kidnap McPherson and others had been thwarted. "A year earlier, police had uncovered a scheme to kidnap McPherson along with other Hollywood stars, including Mary Pickford. Later that year, the wealthy Angeleno Virginia Lee Cookson

³³ Bob Shuler Hooted by Taft Crowd: Los Angeles Pastor Defends Klan; Compares Order to Masons." Los Angeles Times. 1922-07-01; Alma Whitaker (1923-10-01). "Dr. Bob Shuler Lauds Ku Klux: Says Country is Poisoned With Putrid Judges; Lambasts Newspapers, Jews and Catholics; Asks Magazine Subscriptions After Tirade in Church." Los Angeles Times.

³⁴ "Shuler's Radio Time Canceled: Copies of Minister's Talks Requested by F.C.C. for Examination," *Los Angeles Times*, (1943-01-29).

³⁵ Aimee Semple McPherson, *The Personal Testimony of Aimee Semple McPherson*, eds. Dr. Leita Mae Steward, cons. Dr. Rolf K. McPherson, Dr. Raymond Cox, (Los Angeles: CA: the Heritage Department of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, 1998), p. 67.

³⁶ Raymond L. Cox, *The Verdict is In, After fifty years... answers about the kidnapping of Aimee Semple McPherson*, (Los Angeles, CA: Research Publishers, 1983), p. 81; Thomas Lately, *The Vanishing Evangelist, The Aimee Semple McPherson Kidnapping Affair*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1959), p. 28.

disappeared from her ranch, only to stumble into a Calexico police station a month later with a tale of her kidnapping and harrowing escape.³⁷

Kidnappings, by the mob and others, had reached a crescendo during the Prohibition era during which time underworld crime found a national role. “For reasons long debated amongst historians and sociologists, ransom kidnappings entered its heyday at the close of World War I and the onset of the Jazz Age. . . . certainly Prohibition and the explosion of organized crime it engendered played a significant role in the emergence of kidnapping as a means of influencing events and, theoretically at least, acquiring a fat pile of money—fast.”³⁸

By 1936, following the kidnapping and murder of the infant son of Charles Lindbergh and an unrecovered ransom payment of \$50,000, the *San Francisco Chronicle* editorialized about the situation. “Kidnapping for ransom in the United States has grown to the proportions of an epidemic. Reports of men, women, and children seized and carried off for ransom come in so fast that they have become almost routine.”³⁹ In fact, kidnappings increasingly had become such a national criminal pastime that Congress responded by enacting the Lindbergh Act. “The Lindbergh Act is a federal law (48 Stat. 781) that makes it a crime to kidnap—for ransom, reward, or otherwise—and transport a victim from one state to another or to a foreign country, except in the case of a minor abducted by his or her parent.”⁴⁰

Curiously, during this mounting wave of abductions it was not unusual for the public to respond to the accounts from female victims with greater skepticism than to those of males and children. Details surrounding the widely publicized abduction of Virginia Lee Cookson in 1925 were met with similar skepticism by the press as were McPherson’s. Interestingly, much like McPherson, Cookson was a female who pushed the boundaries of post-Victorian gender role assignment. The male-dominated press referred to this Texas rancher’s daughter as a “farmerette” and “rancherette” because she owned and managed a ranch near Santa Ana, California, while her husband, Walter, —her sixth—lived and worked in Los Angeles.⁴¹ Cookson challenged the Modjeska Ranch Company, from whom she had purchased a tract of land she planned to subdivide and sell for profit. When the company decided to shut off the waterline to her property, she confronted its employees with a shotgun and halted the procedure. Her subsequent arrest was followed by a lawsuit that she won.⁴²

Four months later she disappeared. Previous to the widely scorned kidnapping she communicated to friends and family that she had been followed and feared for her life.⁴³ Her story of abduction and escape parallels McPherson’s at several points. Upon her disappearance, she was considered dead and the nearby Orange Park Lake was dragged twice for her body.⁴⁴

Cookson emerged in the same general vicinity in Mexico as McPherson. “Unbeknownst to dedicated lawmen searching relentlessly for the missing woman, Virginia was very much alive. . . . Unharmful, but hysterical at times, Virginia turned up in Calexico and, according to the *Times*, “told police as weird and fantastical a tale as they have every heard in their police

³⁷ Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 100.

³⁸ James R. Smith and W. Lane Rogers, *The California Snatch Racket, Kidnappings During the Prohibition and Depression Eras*, (Fresno, CA: Linden Publishing, 2010), p. xv.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

⁴⁰ Lindbergh Act, websource: <http://law.jrank.org/pages/8300/Lindbergh-Act.html#ixzz0sdXx465A>.

⁴¹ James R. Smith and W. Lane Rogers, *The California Snatch Racket*, p. 136.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

experience.”⁴⁵ They referred to a story of a white slave and opium den located across the Mexican border. Although she was never charged with attempting to stage her own disappearance, the newspapers heaped scorn upon what they considered were impossible details surrounding her story.

Yet, such tales of abductions near the Mexican border were increasingly common during this era, a fact that has changed very little through time. In fact, kidnappings for ransom near the Mexican border continue to be a constant source of fear and friction between the U.S. and Mexico. Today,

Mexico has one of the highest kidnapping rates in the world, with dozens of U.S. citizens among the victims. Officially, an average of 70 people is abducted each month, although private security firms say the real figure is 10 times higher. Kidnappers demand anywhere from a few hundred dollars to millions of dollars in ransom, in what has become an important source of income for the organized crime mafias.⁴⁶

Stories of misadventures with kidnappers—such as those reported by Cookson and McPherson—increasingly were emerging from females who brushed up against organized crime, and especially celebrated women whose life choices challenged gender assignment sensibilities. It is quite possible that these women were hysterical liars who made up wild stories about their own abductions. But it is also possible that their disregard for stereotypical female roles angered some enough to want to teach them a lesson and put them back in their place.

Newspaper Accounts

To an exaggerated extent, the historical account of the McPherson abduction was created with newspaper articles, an unreliable and often hyperbolic repository of information during the era. Often competing newspapers rehearsed completely variant details of the same story.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, most historical accounts recorded surrounding the events and editorial conclusions of the McPherson saga were formed largely by the vagaries of a rowdy, biased and impassioned, male-dominated popular press.

Newspapers poured resources into the story, hiring private detectives and pursuing obscure angles of the case in a furious race to unravel the puzzle. For nearly six months, papers and magazines provided a steady diet of sensational reports that offered mystery women, shady men, planted evidence, disguises, pseudonyms, gangsters, trysts, suspicious deaths, key witnesses who changed accounts, and stories of the destruction of key evidence.⁴⁸

While it is very possible that McPherson concocted a flamboyant story to cover an alleged affair with her radio producer, it is equally possible that she was the target of strongly biased yellow-journalism, a gossip-starved public, and the punitive social forces of conformity, which she flagrantly assaulted by way of her unabashed success as a solo female leader.

Compelling details supported her story, facts she could not have been manufactured. During police briefings, she mentioned that she had been threatened by her captors with being handed over to a man name “Felipe” if she refused to comply. Shortly after the evangelist’s return, federal agents confirmed that Felipe was an actual person who ran a “white slave traffic

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁴⁶ Marion Lloyd, “To live or die in Mexico,” *Global Post*, 1/14/2009, websource: <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/mexico/090113/live-or-die-mexico>.

⁴⁷ James R. Smith and W. Lane Rogers, *The California Snatch Racket, Kidnappings During the Prohibition and Depression Eras*, (Fresno, CA: Linden Publishing, 2010), p. viii.

⁴⁸ Edith L. Blumhofer, *Aimee Semple McPherson, Everybody’s Sister* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), p. 295.

ring” out of Mexico City.⁴⁹ Although many newspapers alleged that McPherson showed no signs of having undergone the ordeal she reported, such reports had changed as the developing news coverage took on a life of its own, eventually conflicting with original accounts. “The initial newspaper reports stated...that she had ‘marks of torture’ on her fingers, bruises on her wrists and ankles where she had been bound, cigar burns, and blisters on her feet.”⁵⁰

A key contention of her detractors was that she could not have endured a day in the heat of the desert without showing more signs of exhaustion. She had collapsed at the door of her Latino rescuers, and was given two glasses of water and taken to the hospital, from where it was remarked that she did not gulp down enormous amounts water, but instead she asked for lemon-aid. Her shoes were scuffed and covered with dust,⁵¹ but it was later reported that they were not scuffed enough, and her clothing—instantly confiscated by detectives—did not reveal the large rings of perspiration expected from one who spent the day walking in the desert. In short, every detail of her story was picked through with meticulous skepticism, and every possible doubt was raised with impeccable scrutiny.

It may well have been that the exaggerated details demanded and already written in caricature depictions by the press did not meet expectations against cold realities of genuine fact. To the charge that her clothing had not been covered with the expected stains of perspiration, it might be noted that she said he was held in a shack in the desert for weeks, and already her body would have acclimated to the heat and lack of water. Though a man’s body detoxes by perspiring, a woman’s body does much less so. Hiking experts warn that desert hiking can be deceptive for many because perspiration will tend to evaporate very quickly, and those who are in good physical shape tend to perspire less.

Hiking in the desert can be deceiving. With the dry heat, your sweat evaporates quite rapidly and you may feel relatively comfortable despite the fact you’re rapidly losing water through sweating.⁵² A body that is in shape will sweat less, a huge benefit in an arid environment.⁵³

These inspectors looked for the expected symptoms of a weak and somewhat sedentary post-Victorian woman, not those of an exceptional, physical powerhouse of a woman. McPherson was no ordinary female, but a former farm-girl who trekked through China and survived a plague that killed her husband, a woman who hoisted tents and built stools with hammer and planks like a man, who then washed up in a basin behind the tent and preached until midnight, not leaving without praying for each and every need. This was a woman who conducted several services on Sundays to overflow crowds, and then again on Sunday nights, who did the same during multiple services throughout the week, who taught, prayed and built with greater stamina than most strong men. She was an astonishingly strong, extraordinary woman, but still a woman no less, and like other women would not tend to detoxify by perspiring as would a man. Yet men, through their own limited perspective and biased opinions,

⁴⁹ Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 100.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁵¹ Thomas Lately, *The Vanishing Evangelist, The Aimee Semple McPherson Kidnapping Affair*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1959), pp. 58-59.

⁵² Kristie Leong, M.D., “How to Take a Hike in the Desert” *eHow.com*, http://www.ehow.com/how_4445233_hike-desert.html#ixzz0tyDi728Y.

⁵³ Karen Berger, “Desert Hiking Tips and Techniques: How to Hike and Backpack in Desert and Dryland Environments,” *Suite101.com*, http://wilderness-backpacking.suite101.com/article.cfm/desert_hiking_tips_and_techniques#ixzz0tyFbGG77.

disregarded everything she said, seeking instead to ferret out any wild bit of gossip from any attacker, rather than to understand the details of her account.

Charges Dismissed

Following long and grueling hearings, it was determined that the star witness against the evangelist was not credible, and the charges against her were dropped. The ministry issued the following statement following the ordeal:

Aimee Semple McPherson was kidnapped on May 18, 1926. Following her escape from her captors, Asa Keyes, Los Angeles District Attorney, instigated hearings to try to discredit her testimony. Although he subpoenaed a very large number of witnesses to testify at the preliminary hearing, not one could be found to substantiate his theory, and all were discredited. This became the longest litigation of its kind in the history of the Los Angeles courts, filling 42 volumes of transcript. Keyes finally acknowledged that his star witness against the evangelist had changed her story so often that she ceased to be a credible witness. It appears from the statement of Keyes that this “star witness” and her attorney had “cooked up” the plot to blackmail Sister. Also, investigation revealed she had been committed to a Utah insane asylum for ungovernable lying. Keyes therefore could not disprove Sister McPherson’s testimony and so he promptly asked for the dismissal of the case against her. The court agreed and dismissed the case on January 10, 1927.⁵⁴

Conclusion

From a legal standpoint, Aimee Semple McPherson stood fully vindicated by the District Attorney’s dismissal of all charges against her.⁵⁵ Former Indiana 58th Circuit Court Judge, the Honorable Jacob Denny, declared that McPherson had been vindicated by the proceedings. “The vindication of Mrs. McPherson could not be more complete if it had been determined by a jury after hearing all the evidence and resulting in an absolute acquittal.” He pointed to the enormity of investigation amassed against her, that for “more than half a year the entire resource of the State of California was devoted to the unearthing of evidence against Mrs. McPherson.... This tribunal themselves determined that there was not sufficient evidence against the defendant even to justify placing her on trial before an unprejudiced jury.”⁵⁶

Despite the legal vindication, McPherson’s name and reputation were never fully cleared. The skepticism that the storm of controversy created against her continues to mark her legacy, but without evidence to indict her, one might suspect that there was much more brewing in this storm than has been fully understood or acknowledged.

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⁵⁴ Aimee Semple McPherson, *The Personal Testimony of Aimee Semple McPherson*, eds. Dr. Leita Mae Steward, cons. Dr. Rolf K. McPherson, Dr. Raymond Cox, (Los Angeles: CA: the Heritage Department of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, 1998), pp. 64-65.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

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