

## OPINION

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# Thaw ices White

By R. Marc Kantrowitz



## LAW 'n HISTORY

So scandalous was the trial that the House of Representatives passed a resolution calling for President Teddy Roosevelt to ban the postal service from delivering newspapers that carried accounts of its lurid testimony.

After all, it wasn't every day that the loony son of a multi-millionaire fatally blasted a world renowned socialite in front of a large partying crowd.

And all over a woman.

Born in 1853, the victim, Stanford White, was the most prominent architect of his day. He designed some of New York City's, and America's, more notable structures, including the Washington Square Arch and the second version of Madison Square Garden — the very building in which he was killed.

He also helped design the Boston Public Library and Trinity Church.

A noted connoisseur of the beautiful and stylish, he took leisurely trips to Europe, searching for antiques and art for both himself and

*Judge R. Marc Kantrowitz sits on the Appeals Court. The above column is based, in large part, on "Stanley: The Gilded Life of Stanford White" by Paul Baker. Ben Piper assisted in the research of the article. Kantrowitz can be contacted at rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net.*

his many wealthy clients. His eye for beauty extended far beyond inanimate objects, however.

Though married and a father, he led an active bachelor's life in Manhattan. Upset that clubs closed at a certain late hour, he and his cronies founded one that never shut its doors.

Many of the women White was taken with were newly arrived in New York, searching for careers on Broadway. The well-connected White often paid for their lodgings and introduced them to the many producers and directors he knew. He often befriended the girls' mothers, who often found him so charming that they never expected any illicit behavior.

One such dalliance involved the very young and beguiling Evelyn Nesbit, who started modeling to help provide for her family after the death of her father. As her photos circulated, demand for her modeling grew.

Soon she was in the chorus of a Broadway show and in the bedroom of Stanford White. She was 16; he was 47.

As Nesbit was orbiting White's social universe, she collided with Harry Thaw. Mad Harry was the exceedingly wealthy and wild son of steel and railroad magnate William Thaw. His beatings of hotel workers and taxi cab drivers paled in comparison to his brutal violence toward young prostitutes. Money bought their silence.

He met, courted and beat Nesbit. Years later she explained why she married him: He was the only really rich guy to ask her.

They wed in 1905. Despite winning her hand, Thaw's paranoia, perhaps fueled in part by alcohol and drugs, grew, especially toward her former lover, Stanford White. He hired detectives to follow White day and night and forbade the mere mention of his name.

The evening of Monday, June 25, 1906, was a warm one, in the mid 70s.

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Despite it being early in the week, Thaw and Nesbit were hitting the night spots of the city. Soon they found themselves at the rooftop theater at Madison Square Garden, ironically a building White designed and in which he owned an apartment.

A large crowd gathered to view "Mam'zelle Champagne," a musical revue. As the vocalist launched into "I Could Love a Thousand Girls," Thaw nonchalantly wandered over to White's table, took out a pistol and fired three shots.

The ensuing chaos matched that of the trial, which started in January and ended in April. The masses clamored to attend the proceedings. So infamous was the matter that jury selection took more than a week with over 300 potential jurors examined.

Thaw's defense was that he was temporarily driven mad due to White "ruining" his wife.

Nesbit was called as a defense witness to highlight what so blindly enraged her husband. She didn't disappoint with her titillating tales. She told of the much older White plying her with drink and then deflowering her in his opulent apartment, the room filled with mirrors and colorful lights, designed for seduction; of his red velvet swing on which Nesbit, as well as other barely



clad young women, leisurely swung.

The prosecution countered with its own experts. The jury could not reach a verdict. A second trial started the following January. The defense made a tactical decision to abandon its temporary insanity defense, opting for one in which they conceded that Thaw was still mentally infirm.

# over swinging girl

It worked. Thaw was found not guilty by reason of insanity.

## Epilogue

Committed to an asylum, Thaw schemed to get out. Finally, on Aug. 17, 1913, he escaped. Captured, he unsuccessfully fought rendition, the battle going all the way to the Supreme Court.

In 1915, Thaw was finally given his freedom. Two years later, he savagely beat a young boy, for which he did another seven years in an asylum.

When he died in 1947, he left a pittance to Nesbit. Perhaps he was angry that she divorced him. Or perhaps it was due to Nesbit becoming pregnant during his imprisonment.

To make ends meet, Nesbit earned \$50,000 serving as a consultant on the 1955 movie "The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing." Near the end of her life in 1967, she summed up the trials as ones in which she testified to save a husband she didn't love for killing the man she did. 