

The sordid tale of Fatty Arbuckle

This is the first of a two-part column.



By R. Marc Kantrowitz

He was a superstar in Hollywood, a household name making a million bucks a year when the average American brought home less than a grand. He was as famous as Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford.

All his fame and fortune though could not shield him from the unspeakable crime with which he was accused.

Word spread quickly. Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle had raped Virginia Rapp with a champagne bottle, rupturing vital organs that resulted in her untimely death. Or maybe she was killed while engaged in intercourse with Arbuckle and his 275-pound girth. Or maybe it was all made up by an ambitious prosecutor with an eye on the governor's mansion.

Few people today know of Arbuckle, much like few people 100 years from now will know of Tom Cruise, Eddie Murphy, Jon Stewart or Angelina Jolie. A century ago, however, Roscoe Fatty Arbuckle was the nation's biggest comedian, literally and figuratively.

Upon his return in 1909, he jumped into the newness of Hollywood and silent films, which he devoured. He did his own stunts, moving about nimbly, and became the funniest man in America — one of the Keystone Cops — influencing Chaplin, befriending Buster Keaton and helping discover Bob Hope.

If he did not create the now legendary pie-in-the-face routine, he certainly popularized it, as he did dressing in drag.

Shy and sensitive about his weight, he hated his moniker, and no one close to him ever called him Fatty. His manners, like his dress, were impeccable, and he was almost chaste-like with women. Like his father, though, when he drank he turned into a different, far less likeable person.

Hollywood was evolving, not all of it in a good way. Stories of wild parties, promiscuous behavior, and excessive alcohol and drugs abounded. Even worse to many, the decadent lifestyle was projected onto the screen.

Soon, temperance unions, women's groups and those in the clergy demanded an end to movies glorifying sex, drugs, adultery and divorce. The press gladly reported and exploited the stories of sin.

Film executives, mindful of the bottom line and fearful of governmental intrusion, took action, turning to the former chairman of the Republican Party, Will Hays. Lured from his position as postmaster general of the United States, Hays soon became the feared "movie czar," promising to police the perceived runaway industry.

Against that backdrop, Arbuckle, who was now also directing and writing movies, remained impervious. He threw parties and went to parties, where everyone drank copious amounts of alcohol despite the introduction of Prohibition and the increasing roar of disapproval from middle America.

Thus, it was probably without much thought that Arbuckle hopped into his grossly oversized car, which came with a bar and toilet, and drove with director-actor Lowell Sherman and cameraman Fred Fischbach to San Francisco's fashionable St. Francis Hotel. His estranged wife and fellow actor Minta Durfee, whom he had married in 1908, was not with him as he set out to spend the 1921 Labor Day weekend partying.

Three rooms in the stylish hotel were rented. Two rooms for the three men and the middle one for the party, which started and ran over the long weekend with people coming, drinking, eating and leaving, sometimes for a quick tryst.

On Monday, Virginia Rapp appeared with Maude Delmont, guests invited by Fischbach against the wishes of Arbuckle who knew of their horrid reputations.

Arbuckle's party was just beginning. It was one he would forever regret.

Next week: The trials of Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle



VIRGINIA RAPP

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ROSCOE 'FATTY' ARBUCKLE

Huge even at birth, reportedly weighing in at 16 pounds in 1887 in Kansas, the blond-headed and fair-skinned Arbuckle developed into one surprisingly agile child despite his great weight.

He also came to possess a magnificent singing voice. Moving to California with his abusive father, ill mother and four siblings, he dropped out of school in the second grade and hid out at the local theaters, enraptured by what he saw.

He was performing at age 8 — and getting paid for it. In short time he became the lead act, singing, dancing, juggling and mugging for an audience awed by his talent. How could such a large boy move so gracefully and be so funny? And that voice!

He toured the West Coast and then the Far East.

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