

# The trials of Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle

*This is the second of a two-part column. Part 1 appeared in last week's issue.*

By R. Marc Kantrowitz

When Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle left the party to use the bathroom in his suite, he discovered a highly intoxicated Virginia Rapp, whom he knew to be an actress and part-time prostitute, vomiting in the toilet.

Rapp was placed on the bed, from which she promptly rolled off. Screaming in pain, she vomited on herself. Hoping to provide some relief, Arbuckle put ice on her burning body.

Hearing the screams, Maude Delmont entered and saw Arbuckle placing ice on Rapp's stomach and thigh. They discussed Rapp's condition and agreed she was merely drunk. At some point, though, Rapp shouted that she was hurt and dying.

Zey Prevon and Alice Blake rushed in. Delmont ordered that the bathtub be filled with cold water for Rapp, who was fading in and out of consciousness, rambling and feverish.

Rapp then blurted out the hook that the prosecution would use to impale Arbuckle. Looking at him, she screamed: "Stay away from me! I don't want you near me. What did he do to me, Maudie? Roscoe did this to me."

At the time, little sense could be made of her ramblings. The cool bath seemed to soothe Rapp, who was moved to another room. Arbuckle, meanwhile, called the hotel manager and doctor who, upon ex-

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amining the now calmer patient, diagnosed her as having had too much to drink.

The party, with the loud Rapp now subdued, resumed its intensity. Arbuckle left to run an errand.

Over the next few days, two physicians, including the doctor to the well-to-do, Melville Rumwell, and nurses examined Rapp, determining her problems to be related either to her bladder, vile bootleg liquor, venereal disease, a kidney

## LAW 'N HISTORY

problem or a severe infection.

Rapp herself opined that it was due to excessive intercourse with a boyfriend. There were no marks or bruises, no signs of violence or rape.

Rapp grew sicker. One nurse, incensed over the lack of medical testing, quit when Delmont refused to call Dr. Rumwell. When Rumwell finally checked Rapp, he ordered her hospitalized.

It was too late, though. She died on Friday. The cause: peritonitis, an acute infection caused by the rupture of her bladder.

Despite not securing authority from the coroner's office, Rumwell conducted an autopsy, removing (and later destroying) vital organs in the process.

With the death of Rapp, Maude Delmont lashed out, spurring out a tale of Arbuckle dragging Rapp into his room and raping her. Every newspaper, with William Randolph Hearst out front, reported the incendiary allegations, which only grew in sensationalism.

Ice on the stomach became a

champagne (or coke) bottle jammed inside the victim. Others reported that it was Arbuckle's great weight that caused the fatal injuries.

Soon, the local district attorney, Matthew Brady, with eyes on the governorship, jumped in and, in short order, had sworn affidavits from Delmont, Zey Prevon and Alice Blake, all charging that Arbuckle had caused the death of Virginia Rapp.

And with that, America's most famous star was charged with murder and imprisoned.

Many weaknesses in the case quickly surfaced, resulting in the murder charge being reduced to manslaughter, notwithstanding the protestations of the angry prosecutor.

Every time star witness Delmont told her story, it changed dramatically. But what didn't change was her lengthy rap sheet, consisting of fraud, extortion, bigamy and racketeering. Known as a blackmailer, she arranged for certain individuals to be caught in compromising positions and then testified, often falsely, against them in court.

The victim, too, had a soiled background. Born out of wedlock in 1894, Rapp grew into a fetching and ambitious young lady who lived life to the left of the fast lane. She reportedly had five abortions by the time she was 16. Engaged at 17 to a 40-year-old, she gave birth to a baby girl. After her fiancée left her, she ditched the baby and eventually relocated to California where fame awaited her.

Arbuckle's first two trials ended in hung juries.

In the first, the main holdout juror, who refused to participate in the deliberations, later said she never would have considered acquitting the defendant.

In the second trial, in which Arbuckle's attorneys were so confident

# The trials of Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle

Continued from page 38

of victory that they barely put on a defense, the jury again deadlocked.

In the third trial, the defense went all out. It demonstrated that evidence had been planted and witnesses pressured to lie. Arbuckle testified on his own behalf.

At no point during any of the trials did Delmont testify. She was, in the words of Arbuckle's attorney, "the complaining witness who never witnessed."

The jury, which was out for less than 10 minutes, not only rendered a verdict but, surprisingly, a statement as well:

"Acquittal is not enough for Roscoe Arbuckle. We feel that a

great injustice has been done to him. ... [T]here was not the slightest proof adduced to connect him in any way with the commission of a crime. ... We wish him success and hope that the American people will take the judgement of fourteen men and women that Roscoe Arbuckle is entirely innocent and free from all blame."

## Epilogue

America and Will Hays, the former postmaster general of the United States who went on to become "movie czar," were not so forgiving. Shortly after his acquittal, Arbuckle was banned from the movies and blacklisted. He was also charged fed-

erally with a liquor law violation.

Over the years he found some work using a pseudonym and working behind the scenes.

As for Rapp's cause of death, some believe it was due to a botched abortion, performed some time prior to the party by Dr. Rumwell (which explains why he improperly performed the autopsy and destroyed the evidence).

A dozen years after Arbuckle's court troubles, the sun of his career finally started to re-emerge when Warner Brothers signed him, at the age of 46, to a movie contract. He reportedly exclaimed that it was the happiest day of his life.

That night he died in his sleep. **MMA**