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THE GIRL WITH THE AGATE EYES: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MATTIE HOWARD

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Abstract

This thesis studies the life of Martha Alice “Mattie” Howard, a forgotten figure in both the early 20th-century criminal underworld and the evangelical circuit of 1930s and 1940s America. Straddling the line between social deviant and moral exemplar, Mattie’s story is one of constant reinvention and narrative building. When she was accused of murder in Kansas City, Missouri, the local and, eventually, national press painted her as a nearly supernatural force for evil. Nearly twenty years later, Mattie published an autobiography in which she directly attacked the narratives of the newspapers and sought to portray herself as an inherently moral and good woman who had been falsely persecuted. Coupling this narrative shift alongside her conversion to evangelical Christianity and new career as a traveling minister, her reinvention as a woman of God was taken at face value and the direr accusations against her were conveniently forgotten. A study of Mattie’s life sheds light on several different types of history, from gender to criminal to religious, and provides a unique portrait of a woman who appeared on both sides of the respectability divide

Introduction:
“From Shadows into Light”

In 1970 Donna Scheibe, a reporter for *The Los Angeles Times*, interviewed local evangelical minister Martha Alice Howard, referred to in the article by her nickname Mattie Howard. The occasion for this feature was Mattie’s 75th birthday, but it also gave the elderly preacher a chance to reflect on her 38 years of ministry. Mattie recalled how “right living... carried my mother and my 11 brothers and sisters and me through poverty and sorrow,” and how she “was a good Catholic [for] 29 years” until she “left the church disillusioned.” She recalled that while was in a deep personal depression, “a radio broadcast from a Denver [evangelical] church” invited her to attend services. This “suddenly moved [her] to pray in the manner of its congregation and to testify aloud to her past and her hopes for the future.” Another minister, after hearing of her moving speech, invited her to preach to his congregation, beginning her long career as an evangelist. Mattie had spent nearly the next four decades preaching “in tents, in missions, and small town churches.”¹

This was not the first time that Mattie interacted with the press; rather, this was the culmination of over fifty years of interaction between them. From 1918 until 19212, she was referred to by newspapermen as “the Queen of the Kansas City Underworld.” She was suspected of leading a gang of bootleggers, safecrackers, and gun-thugs, with the singular mission of getting enough money to bribe her lover’s way out of prison. In June 1918 she was arrested under suspicion of murdering jeweler “Diamond Joe” Morino. Kansas City newspapers, perhaps

¹ Donna Scheibe, “Evangelist, 75, Recalls Many Years of Traveling Ministry,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 15 January 1970.

because she was a “youthful and attractive” woman, ran article after article detailing almost every detail of her trial, supporting the prosecution’s efforts to put her behind bars. Faced with a case that mostly rested on circumstantial evidence, the prosecutors shifted the courtroom discussion away from the crime itself and more to Mattie specifically. She was proclaimed “the most dangerous woman” in Kansas City by their lead attorney, who thundered further that it was his mission to see her safely behind bars.² He would successfully gain a conviction, which was upheld by the Missouri State Supreme Court on appeal. However, Mattie was nowhere to be found; a months-long international manhunt followed until she was caught in Memphis, Tennessee, and sent to the Missouri State Penitentiary.

By that point, Mattie’s case had grown from a point of local interest to one of national fame. Newspapers from San Francisco, California, to Atlanta, Georgia, carried articles discussing the more salacious aspects of the case, often exaggerating details to point out Mattie’s criminality. Even the way she was described was affected by this exaggeration. A mere description of her eyes as being “agate blue” grew into her being labeled “the Girl with the Agate Eyes,” whose gaze “strangely gleaming under her shock of yellow hair, exuded her baleful influence.”³ However, after her final arrest and with her safely behind bars, the newspapers would seemingly quickly lose interest in Mattie.

After serving eight years of her prison sentence, Mattie was released early for good behavior. Two years after gaining her freedom, she would reappear in the national spotlight—this time for very different reasons. As she mentioned in her 1970 interview, she stood up in a Denver-area church and embraced evangelicalism. Shortly afterwards, she began her career as a

² “Tragedy Details Unfold,” *The Kansas City Times*, 18 July 1918.

³ “The Girl With the Agate Eyes,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 April 1921.

traveling evangelist crisscrossing the nation and preaching to large crowds. Much of her appeal as a minister rested on the idea of her being a reformed gangster which presented her with a dilemma. Mattie had long insisted that she was innocent of any wrongdoing while in Kansas City and that she had been wrongfully convicted. However, if she strongly emphasized her own innocence, she risked potentially losing what set her apart from other ministers.

To this end, Mattie shifted her criminal exploits away from Kansas City to the badlands of Prohibition-era Chicago. In her 1938 autobiography, which marked the most concrete form her story took, she had been on the sidelines of criminal behavior in Kansas City but had never actually committed any crimes. However, after her release from prison she was unable to find a job or acceptance due to her status as an ex-convict. Society's rejection, therefore, was what drove her to agree to join a criminal enterprise in Chicago. She claimed to have been involved in gun battles with the police, in running confidence schemes, and even rubbing shoulders with Al Capone and John Dillinger before her better nature took back control and she got out of the life. Linking her criminality to famous criminals ensured that she would always have throngs of visitors who were, perhaps, just as eager to hear stories of gang violence as they were to hear scripture. Although Mattie maintained this version of her story for decades, by 1970 she had evidently engaged once again in revision. Perhaps it was no longer as appealing in the era of law and order politics to openly discuss one's past criminal behavior?

Mattie's life was one of constant reinvention and narrative building. Her decades-long turn in the public eye allows for a unique examination of how individual narratives can be shaped and twisted to make new meanings, and how successful these efforts can be. Mattie, for example, almost single-handedly changed the way the press viewed her life through interviews, autobiography, and her own sermons. The overwhelmingly negative coverage that had followed

her in the 1920s was obliterated, transforming her into an exemplar who could warn young men and women to avoid “the primrose path” that led to sin and destruction. This effort was so successful that by her 1970 interview with Scheibe she no longer saw the need to mention the criminal past that had attracted thousands to her sermons decades before.

This thesis relies on the history of female criminality. The modern incarnation of this field has its origins in the 1991 text “The Vanishing Female: The Decline of Women in the Criminal Process, 1687-1912” by Malcolm M. Feeley and Deborah L. Little. Feeley and Little viewed a general decline in women being charged with and convicted of crime after the turn of the 19th century and contended that this was due to industrialization removed chances for women to engage in criminal behaviors by creating new demands on their time.⁴ However, this thesis has been challenged by the more recent writings of scholars such as Manon van der Heijden. Van der Haijden argued in 2017 that gender stereotyping, rather than industrialization, was one of the main causes for the “relatively low prosecution rates of female criminality” by the early 1900s.⁵ However, this did not mean that all women were free from the law’s attention. Historian Jeffrey S. Adler, in studying murders committed by women in turn of the 20th century Chicago, concluded that if “the homicide was particularly grisly or the killer challenged established social mores” then the likelihood of conviction increased.⁶

In this thesis, I build upon the stereotype thesis presented by van der Haijden and Adler’s study of Chicago homicides to examine how, in this case, a woman was convicted of murder in a

⁴ Malcolm M. Feeley and Deborah L. Little, “The Vanishing Female: The Decline of Women in the Criminal Process, 1687-1912,” *Law and Society Review* 25, no. 4 (1991): 722.

⁵ Manon van der Heijden, “Future Research on Women and Crime,” *Crime, History, and Societies* 2, no. 2 (2017): 123.

⁶ Jeffrey S. Adler, “‘I Loved Joe, but I Had to Shoot Him:’ Homicide by Women in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago,” *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 92 (Spring-Summer 2002): 885-886.

time when women were rarely even charged with capital crimes. In examining the available details of Mattie's case, I demonstrate that the prosecution utilized contemporary female stereotypes to shift perceptions of Mattie away from the established bounds of womanhood, moving her out of a "protected" category. This shows that, in Mattie's case at least, those involved in the trial were well-aware of the stereotypes that made convicting women of capital crimes difficult. In addition, in this thesis I contend that the perception of Mattie in the press was key to her conviction. By amplifying details of her behavior that were socially deviant and openly engaging in speculation and sensationalization, the press successfully cemented the image of Mattie as "the Girl with the Agate Eyes," a femme fatale who was more than willing to use her sexuality to bend young men to her will.

In addition, I contend that Mattie was acutely aware of her deviant perception. From the moment of her conversion, she sought to counteract it by tying herself back to the stereotypes of female behavior that she had been accused of contravening. Mattie's autobiography relied on careful usage of tropes to paint herself in a sympathetic light. Further, Mattie used these narrative aids to assert her innocence and challenge the press's record. Portraying herself as inherently moral and placing the blame for her missteps on outside actors, Mattie reclaimed her status as a woman and self-created an identity that was readily accepted by observers.

This thesis is divided into two chapters structured by chronology. Chapter One covers Mattie's childhood and adolescence in Denver, her move to Kansas City, her suspected criminal career, and her arrest, trial, and conviction. Section One of this chapter discusses the way Mattie's autobiography dealt with her early life by crafting an image of innocence. She wrote out her marriage, for example, in order to avoid having to admit that she had abandoned her husband in order to follow a convicted gangster to Kansas City. This section concludes with Mattie's

arrest for Joe Morino's murder, which she claimed came as a complete surprise. Section Two follows by discussing how reporters discussed Mattie during the trial. The newspapers linked Mattie to a vicious gang of highwaymen, as well as portraying her as a gang leader in her own right. This section concludes with her conviction, leading into Section Three, which discusses the ways that Mattie engaged with the newspaper reports. I demonstrate that Mattie's autobiography was written with the stories of this time period in mind and sought to dismiss them in order to preserve her innocence narrative.

Chapter Two tracks Mattie's life from her time in the Missouri State Penitentiary until her death in 1984. This long stretch of time covers not only her entire career as a traveling minister but also her fictionalized life in the Chicago gangland. By covering an extended chronological period, I am able to demonstrate the evolution of Mattie's self-creation. Section One of this chapter discusses Mattie's time in prison, especially how she dealt with it in her autobiography. On the surface Mattie's prison narrative sought to expose the injustices of the 1920s American prison system, as well as present some ideas for reform. However, it also served she also sought to use it as a testament to her own morality, juxtaposing her righteous behavior with the brutality that surrounded her. Section Two follows her narrative post-release, where she claimed that society's rejection drove her to a life of crime in Chicago. I highlight the temporal implausibility in her narrative, while also demonstrating how she needed to tie herself to the life of a gangster in order to maintain her unique appeal as a minister. This section concludes with Mattie's conversion to evangelicalism, which segues into Section Three. The final section discusses Mattie's career as an evangelist, demonstrating the ways that she utilized her constructed narrative to her advantage.

The forward to Mattie’s autobiography claimed that “very few individuals have gone through the vast array of intensely dramatic experiences that have been crowded into the life of this one woman.”⁷ I would be hard-pressed to disagree with that statement. In examining the story of Mattie Howard, this thesis will touch on a “vast array” of topics, from racialized perceptions of lesbian sexuality to the societal expectations of early 20th century female emotionality to the evangelical usage of radio ministries. Mattie’s personal narrative and the multitude of newspaper articles written about her present a unique story in American women’s history that sheds light on early 20th century female criminality, the usage of gender stereotyping, and the success of personal fictionalization.

⁷ Mattie Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard (To and from Prison): True Story of the Regeneration of An Ex-Convict And Gangster Woman* (Self-Published: Denver, 1937), i.

Chapter One:

“So-Called Queen of the Underworld”

In 1937, Mattie Howard, then an itinerant Christian minister, was putting the finishing touches on her spiritual autobiography. This, in and of itself, was not unusual. Authors writing about their religious conversion had long been a part of the Christian tradition.⁸ Parts of Mattie’s work, however, were more unusual. Almost forty percent of the text dealt with her eight-year stint in the Missouri State Penitentiary where, she claimed, she had been imprisoned for a murder she did not commit.⁹ What she left out of her writing was that between 1918 and 1921 she had been termed by the press and police as the “queen” of the Kansas City underworld, been suspected of organizing her own gang of criminals, and had been linked to the deaths of at least ten fellow gangsters. She was also the subject of an international manhunt.¹⁰ Over a decade before infamous lawbreakers Bonnie Parker and Ma Barker made headlines, Mattie Howard had achieved national notoriety as a female criminal.

Mattie Howard’s life fits firmly into the study of female criminality. Modern scholarship into this topic began with the landmark work by Malcolm M. Feeley and Deborah L. Little, which claimed that, at the beginning of the 19th century, there was a sharp decrease in both the prosecution of and conviction of female criminals.¹¹ They argued that this was due to a shift in women’s roles during industrialization, which removed opportunities for them to commit

⁸ Stuart Sim, “Spiritual Autobiography,” in *The Literary Encyclopedia*, ed. Jennifer Brady, Daniel Cook, Neil Forsyth, Claire Preston, J.A. Roe, Virginia Mason Vaughan, <https://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=1377>.

⁹ Mattie Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard (To and from Prison): True Story of the Regeneration of An Ex-Convict And Gangster Woman* (Self-Published: Denver, 1937), 101-221.

¹⁰ See “Fate Deals Seventh Hand,” *The Kansas City Star*, 20 May 1920; “Agate Eyed Girl Has Disappeared,” *The Kansas City Kansan*, 26 May 1921; “The Girl With the Agate Eyes,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 April 1921; and “Mattie Howard In Canada,” *The Kansas City Star*, 2 June 1921.

¹¹ Feeley and Little, “The Vanishing Female: The Decline of Women in the Criminal Process, 1687-1912,” 722.

crimes.¹² Feeley and Little claimed that as industrial economies became the norm, “women were excluded from much of developing industry.” Instead, societal pressures moved women out of the public sphere into the domestic sphere, removing many opportunities to carry out criminal offenses.¹³ This article reinvigorated study into female criminality. In 2017, Manion van der Heijden, in “Future Research on Women and Crime,” agreed that there was a reduction in female criminality over time, but that this process began closer to the beginning of the 20th century. Van der Heijden contested Feeley and Little’s focus on industrialization and attributed this change in criminality to a combination of factors, but most especially the gender stereotype that women did not commit crime. Stereotyping, van der Haijden claimed, “resulted in some periods in women constituting a relatively low proportion of participants in crime, and in relatively low prosecution rates of female criminality.”¹⁴ While many contemporary historians of female criminality focus on this stereotyping, there has been a noticeable gap in the literature when it comes to studies of women who were actually convicted. In what circumstances did this stereotyping fail?

Mattie’s criminal career, arrest, and conviction took place during a time of intense gender stereotyping in criminal justice. As an example, a Chicago prosecutor lamented in 1912 that “twelve men simply cannot be brought to believe... that a woman is guilty of the gravest crime in the calendar... the defendant need not be beautiful; if she merely appears feminine on the stand she is safe.”¹⁵ Examining the example of Chicago more closely, author Laura James demonstrated that “from 1908 to 1919 in Chicago alone, twenty-five women in a row were acquitted of murder.”¹⁶ While Mattie’s trial for murder took place in Kansas City and not

¹² Feeley and Little, “The Vanishing Female,” 719.

¹³ Feeley and Little, “The Vanishing Female,” 743.

¹⁴ van der Heijden, “Future Research on Women and Crime,” 123.

¹⁵ Laura James, *The Love Pirate and the Bandit’s Son: Murder, Sin, and Scandal in the Shadow of Jesse James* (New York: Sterling, 2007), 144.

¹⁶ James, *The Love Pirate and the Bandit’s Son*, 145.

Chicago, this is illustrative of how the American legal environment treated women accused of even the most serious crimes. It also makes Mattie's conviction stand out as unusual. Why was she found guilty, when so many other women accused of the same crime escaped legal repercussions? The prosecutors at her trial provided their own answer as they successfully shifted public perception of Mattie away from the image of female respectability, and instead tied her closely to negative female stereotypes. As she wrote her memoirs, Mattie sought to counter this narrative and provide her own explanation for this. This also served as her attempt to actively reshape the public's perception of her away from a criminal to that of a woman of god. In doing so, she took liberties with the truth to improve her image to her audience of conservative Christians.

Section One: The Story According to Mattie

The first section of this chapter will focus on the history of Mattie's life prior to her arrest, trial, and conviction, mainly utilizing Mattie's own autobiography. The autobiography serves as an important source for a variety of reasons. First, it is the only complete record of Mattie's early life. Second, it reflects the carefully-crafted narrative that Mattie presented to her readers. It is important to note that this narrative is an example of self-invention. Some parts of it were verifiable truth, while other parts of it were outright fabrications. Whenever a major fabrication was presented by Mattie, this section will do its best to present the facts behind her fictionalization.

Mattie Howard was born on 11 November 1895 in Preston, Idaho, to Charles and Martha Howard.¹⁷ Her father was an itinerant railroad worker, and thus her family's early history was dominated by movement. Her parents, both originally from California, had met and married in Montana.¹⁸ Their eldest son, Oliver, had been born in Oregon in 1890; their next child Samuel followed three years later when the family was in Washington.¹⁹ Mattie shared her given name, Martha, with her mother.²⁰ However, from a young age her family referred to her as "Mattie" and she would be known by this nickname for almost her entire life.²¹

Nine months after she was born, the Howard family moved once again. Their destination was Denver, Colorado. This was the final major move that they made as a cohesive family unit, and Mattie recalled that they "were destined to settle more or less permanently" there.²² This permanence was likely because her father left the railroad business to find more settled work. His occupation in the 1900 U.S. Census was listed as a "house carpenter."²³ How much financial support Charles Howard gave his family through his new position is unclear. Mattie later claimed that he was "neglectful in providing for his increasing brood," given to "drinking" and

¹⁷ Genealogical record for Martha Alice "Mattie" Howard, FamilySearch.

<https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/details/GSQJ-LCY>; Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 13.

¹⁸ C.R. Howard and Mattie M. Keenan, "Montana, County Marriages, 1865-1950," 4 July 1887.

<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HT-DZ17-JN4?i=63&cc=1609797>

¹⁹ Genealogical record for Oliver P Howard, FamilySearch. <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/details/LD5G-CK9>; Genealogical record for Samuel James Howard, FamilySearch.

<https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/details/LVVX-YNV>.

²⁰ The FamilySearch database lists the name of Mattie Alice Howard's mother as Margaret Elizabeth "Mattie" Keenan. However, this seems erroneous, as an 1870 U.S. Census entry cited on her genealogical record gives her name as "Martha," while the rest of the works cited on her record use the name "Mattie," which is a diminutive nickname of Martha, not of Margaret. Additionally, Mattie refers to her mother as "Martha" in her own memoir. See genealogical record, Margaret Elizabeth "Mattie" Keenan."

²¹ U.S. Census Bureau, "ED 46, Precinct 8, Denver City Ward Six, Arapahoe County, Colorado, 1900 U.S. Census," accessed 9/29/2021. <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HT-6SL3-FS5?i=23&cc=1325221&personaUrl=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AM311-3F4>.

²² Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 15.

²³ U.S. Census Bureau, "ED 46, Precinct 8, Denver City Ward Six, Arapahoe County, Colorado, 1900 U.S. Census," accessed 9/29/2021. <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HT-6SL3-FS5?i=23&cc=1325221&personaUrl=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AM311-3F4>.

“[consorting] with other women.”²⁴ Additionally she said that her father was given to bouts of occasional abandonment, only returning to impregnate his wife at regular intervals. Eventually he left the family to fend for themselves entirely.²⁵

While this story is certainly tragic, it also marks one of the earliest instances in Mattie’s personal narrative where she may have imagined a different past for herself. Mattie might have exaggerated this aspect of her childhood to play to the sympathies of her readers. In fact, the 1910 census lists Martha Howard as “widowed”; Mattie’s mother told census takers that her father passed away rather than walked away.²⁶ Mattie might not have been the only Howard interested in fabricating the past. Mattie’s mother might have claimed widowhood to avoid the embarrassment and shame associated with abandonment. A search of the Colorado State Archives did not turn up any death record for Mattie’s father, and no gravestones matching his vital details seem to be in any Colorado graveyards.²⁷ One of the Martha Howards was lying.

Whether she was abandoned or widowed, Martha, Mattie’s mother, would prove an enterprising individual more than willing to find work for herself. After performing small sewing, cleaning, and laundry jobs for her neighbors, she found work with the Pulman Company around 1907 “sorting, mending, and distributing towels and linen, and placing them in the sleeping coaches for the use of passengers.”²⁸ This provided enough income for the family to find some sense of stability after the disappearance of their traditional breadwinner. In the 1910

²⁴ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 15, 26.

²⁵ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 42.

²⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, “ED 63, Denver Ward 4, Denver, Colorado, 1910 U.S. Census,” accessed 9/29/2021.

<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9RJF->

²⁷

²⁸ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 29.

census, Martha was marked as the head of household. By then, she had brought her two eldest sons into her laundry business.²⁹

Despite Mattie's mother's efforts to provide her with some small luxuries, especially around Christmastime, Mattie recalled her childhood as one of poverty. Reflecting on this period, she wrote how she "often complained to her mother about their circumstances and their humble home."³⁰ In her early teens, however, she would find a means of escape through the nickelodeon theaters. "The attractions of the amusement world were beckoning to this young miss who had enjoyed few pleasures and who had borne the drudgery of housework during her existence thus far," Mattie explained.³¹ By highlighting the attraction presented to her by film, Mattie created an image of herself as an individual who aspired for wealth and status. This, in turn, laid the groundwork for the influence cinema would have in her narrative as a driving force for her leaving home.

Like many young working class women of her time, Mattie participated in the emerging American leisure culture through the movie theater. Forty percent of working-class attendees of nickelodeons were women by 1910. When compared to female attendance of more traditional stage-shows, this was a dramatic increase.³² Movie producers were not ignorant of the demographics of their audience. It was for young, poor women like Mattie that "movie manufacturers and exhibitors played up the glamour, sensations, and romance of motion pictures," according to historian Kathy Peiss.³³ These films "[linked] personal freedom with the

²⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, "ED 63, Denver Ward 4, Denver, Colorado, 1910 U.S. Census," accessed 9/29/2021. <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9RJF->

³⁰ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 32.

³¹ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 39.

³² Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 148.

³³ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 148.

culture of consumption and heterosociality,” glorifying “the young woman capable of navigating her way through urban territory and sexual pitfalls, and who found pleasure in men’s company and commercial amusements.”³⁴

The glamour, sexual freedom, and decadence portrayed in the movies not only contrasted sharply with Mattie’s indigent circumstances, but also with the deeply religious environment of her mother’s household. In her memoir, Mattie would detail and exaggerate her mother’s religious devotion; Mattie transformed her devoted Catholic mother into a closeted evangelical Protestant who regularly took her daughter to revival meetings. Here Mattie took artistic license with her mother’s religion, likely to appeal to her audience of evangelical Protestants who were suspicious of Catholicism. By claiming that her mother received “more of the real spirit of Christ” and “found genuine food for her soul” at these meetings, as opposed to finding meaning in the “empty eloquence” and “mechanical repetition” of Catholic rites, Mattie reinforced her belief in and support of evangelical doctrine to her readers.³⁵ She would continue to criticize Catholicism throughout her book, claiming that the religion’s practices held no spiritual power when compared to those of fundamentalist Christianity.³⁶

While Mattie rewrote her mother as a “real” and “genuine” Christian, she also said that her mother did seek to use religion to “protect” Mattie from more “worldly” influences. The most dangerous of these influences were the young men who formed her older brothers’ friend group. These friends “generally behaved boisterously and used offensive language.” Afraid of the effect “living in an atmosphere of this type” would have on her daughter, Martha withdrew the 14-year old Mattie and her younger sister from public school and sent them “to a convent to

³⁴ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 158.

³⁵ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 35-36.

³⁶ See Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 289.

remove them from this undesirable state of affairs.”³⁷ The convent school had a strong impact on Mattie. The nuns, instead of focusing on regular education, encouraged her to engage with crafts that she enjoyed. They also provided her with a rudimentary musical education, helping train her singing voice in the convent’s choir. Mattie would claim that her time there instilled in her “an intense desire to become a nun,” something she speculates would have happened “had not an interruption occurred.”³⁸ By mentioning this, Mattie introduced a concept that she would fall back on time and again in her narrative. She was inherently innocent; it was always outside influences that drove her away from the pathway of spiritual service.

A brief yet severe illness required Mattie to leave the convent school to tend to her mother.³⁹ A subsequent series of accidents and illnesses in the Howard family kept Mattie from returning to the convent. Mattie only chose to go into detail on one of these incidents, that of her mother’s final pregnancy in 1909. Mattie would recall being alone with her mother when labor began, and after being unable to locate the local doctor, she “hastened back to her mother and took care of her the best she knew how during the process of childbirth.”⁴⁰ The timing of this incident is intriguing. Where was Charles Howard, the implied father of the child, in 1909? Is this pregnancy a product of his last conjugal visit or he is already gone or dead? An infant child does not show up in the Howard household in the 1910 U.S. Census, raising the question of what happened to the baby.⁴¹ One possibility is that Martha had this child with another man and subsequently gave the child away. Another possibility is that this pregnancy was Charles’ last act as head of household, and the infant passed away in spite of Mattie’s ministrations. While the

³⁷ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 33.

³⁸ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 33-34.

³⁹ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 34-35.

⁴⁰ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 38.

⁴¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “ED 63, Denver Ward 4, Denver, Colorado, 1910 U.S. Census,” accessed 9/29/2021. <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9RJF->

issue of paternity is unclear, it seems more likely that, no matter who the father was, the baby died rather than being given away. Mattie noted that her mother lost half of her children during infancy.⁴²

With mounting responsibilities at home and a desire to escape that life through cheap entertainment, Mattie soon ended both her formal schooling and, for the time being at least, her church attendance.⁴³ By this point, Mattie was sixteen years old. In her memoirs, she described herself as “a beautiful girl, [with] a well-formed figure, large expressive eyes... dark eyelashes... and last, but not least, a wealth of gleaming golden hair.” According to her, this beauty would go on to earn her a place in advertisements for a “popular brand of tooth powder,” as well as victory “in a beauty contest in which five hundred blondes competed.” Supposedly, winning this contest came with a \$500 prize or a trip to Europe. Perhaps in an attempt to emulate the lifestyle of the stars that she watched in the nickelodeons, Mattie elected for the European trip. Her mother, on the other hand, forbade her from leaving—likely for practical reasons. The family needed the \$500 and Mattie’s labor was too valuable to lose, even for a limited time.⁴⁴ At least that is how Mattie Howard told the story decades later.

While it is possible that these events actually occurred, there is not much evidence to support it. Mattie maintained that “an account” of the beauty contest appeared in the “Denver Times,” the archives of that paper are not readily accessible to researchers which makes it difficult to confirm this.⁴⁵ Other newspapers in Colorado that are more widely available do not mention a contest such as this taking place, or Mattie’s name in conjunction with the victory.

⁴² Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 26.

⁴³ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 39.

⁴⁴ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 39-40.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

This contest would have been big news because the prize was immense compared to those offered at beauty contests taking place in the state at the same time. For example, a 1911 beauty contest in Erie, Colorado with twenty-five contestants offered as its first prize “\$3 in gold.”⁴⁶ It seems like some Colorado newspaper would mentioned a contest with the drastically higher reward of \$500. This beauty contest was important to Mattie’s story of herself. In it, she took another step down what she would later term the “primrose path.”⁴⁷ Young Mattie embraced worldly things, such as her beauty, to the detriment of her spirituality. She selected the more “selfish” prize for winning the beauty contest; only she could go to Europe, while she could have shared the money with her family. This stands out as an uncharacteristically unflattering portrayal of herself. Perhaps she sought to warn young female Christians reading her work to use their talents and beauty to assist their families, as opposed to using them for personal gain.

Perhaps encouraged by her mother who sought more family income or out of a desire for more personal freedom and spending money, Mattie found employment at the Austin Candy Company after her European trip. While it was less glamorous than pursuing a career in modeling, Mattie soon came into her own at this new job. As a child, she had described herself as having few friends. However, she soon developed a closer friendship with three of her female coworkers. Together, the four would go to shows and dance halls together.⁴⁸ While Mattie was already a patron of the nickelodeon, this experience would introduce her to dancing. Historian of leisure Kathy Peiss wrote that “of all the amusements that bedazzled the single working woman [dancing] proved to be her greatest passion.” Dancing “offered a novel kind of social space” for women like Mattie, a place where they were encouraged to speak with and engage in relatively

⁴⁶ “Twenty Five Erie Maids Are Beauties,” *The Greeley Tribune*, 12 October 1911.

⁴⁷ Eddie Meisburger, “‘Avoid That Primrose Path’ Warns One Who Traveled It,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, 16 June 1942.

⁴⁸ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 42.

close contact with young men.⁴⁹ The dance halls also “[reinforced] emergent values and ‘modern’ attitudes toward leisure, sexuality, and personal fulfillment,” cultural values that the nickelodeons were already cultivating in Mattie.⁵⁰

Mattie’s increased participation in leisure activities also increased tensions at home. Her mother, already not entirely pleased with Mattie’s attendance at the nickelodeon theaters, grew increasingly frustrated “on account of [her] new interests.” Martha “bitterly opposed... public dance halls,” as she “feared her daughter might go wrong by becoming too worldly.”⁵¹ This opposition reflected anxieties over the what Peiss termed “ a lurid connection between working girls’ recreation and vice.”⁵² As a deeply religious woman, Martha Howard’s concerns were similar to the attitudes of several anti-dance ministers, such as the Reverend John Roach Straton. Ministers like Straton aggressively used the term “vice” to describe dancing in a conscious effort to link it with “images of immorality, prostitution, and promiscuity.”⁵³ Historian Timothy J. Gilfoyle also outlines the opposition offered by another New York City clergyman, who lamented how dance halls and other places of leisure “[encouraged] any advance, ‘no matter how vile it was.’”⁵⁴ Mattie echoed these sentiments. By portraying this section of her life as a cautionary tale, Mattie implied that dancing was yet another practice that pulled her down the “primrose path.”

⁴⁹ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 88.

⁵⁰ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 90. These fears also contributed to contemporary literature on female delinquency, with the pursuit of urban leisure considered a “stepping stone” to more deleterious crimes. See Ruth M. Alexander, *The Girl Problem: Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

⁵¹ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 42-43.

⁵² Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 98.

⁵³ Ralph G. Giordano, *Satan in the Dance Hall: Rev. John Roach Straton, Social Dancing, and Morality in 1920s New York City* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 192.

⁵⁴ Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 298

In spite of this maternal concern, Mattie was undeterred. As she would write, “outside pleasures” were a “welcome relief” from the “crowded, humble quarters at home, and the constant confusion caused by the houseful of sisters and brothers.” If anything, Martha’s continued pressure on Mattie to end (or at least moderate) her attendance at outside leisure functions may have driven her further away. Mattie would recall telling “her [mother] many an untruth as to where she spent some of her evenings.”⁵⁵

Despite having established a group of female friends at the Austin Candy Company, Mattie left within a year after she “decided to learn the nursing profession.” She felt that she had many of the attributes needed to be a nurse, and initially enjoyed her time at the Denver County Hospital. Having already developed a rebellious streak that “resented being bossed,” however, she soon came into conflict with the physician assigned to oversee her duties.⁵⁶ After an incident in which she reportedly flung the contents of a bedpan at him, she was dismissed and forced to find work “in another field.”⁵⁷

While the company she worked for went unnamed, it seems to have been one that presented opportunities for heterosocial interaction. Soon after beginning work in this other field, Mattie made the acquaintance with “a very nice young man.” Never giving him a name in her autobiography, Mattie claimed that the two were engaged shortly after meeting, and her fiancé even “rented an apartment over the one in which her mother lived, with the idea that he and Mattie would live there temporarily after their marriage.”⁵⁸ This, Mattie stressed, did not come to pass. “One evening... when he became especially ardent, [she] repulsed him and fled from his

⁵⁵ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 42.

⁵⁶ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 43-44.

⁵⁷ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 44.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

presence, having suddenly awakened to the fact that she did not really care for him.” Soon afterwards, “she vanished,” taking refuge in “a Jewish sanitarium on the outskirts of the city, [obtaining employment] there under an assumed name.”⁵⁹ This “Jewish sanitarium” was likely the National Jewish Hospital for Treatment of Consumptives, which had been founded in Denver in 1899. Eventually, she encountered one of her brothers, who “severely upbraided” Mattie “for having caused their mother months of anguish.” Chastened, Mattie gave up her charade and returned home, but “spurned” her “would-be husband... flatly refusing to have anything more to do with him.” Soon afterwards, he attempted “unsuccessfully to end his life.”⁶⁰ This anecdote set Mattie up as virginal, willing to take strong measures to preserve her sexual purity. Later incidents in her autobiography would call back to this.⁶¹

Mattie recalled attending a film starring Mary Pickford shortly after this incident. In the film, Pickford played “a young girl, dissatisfied at home, who packed her belongings and left for a big city, where she immediately made acquaintances and had much good fortune befall her.”⁶² Mattie believed that this fictional narrative, fate, or Mary Pickford herself was speaking to her. She decided to emulate her big-screen idol and strike out on her own. Her first destination was hardly a big city—Limon, Colorado, which had just over 500 residents at the time.⁶³ After finding a job and living there for “about six weeks,” she “decided to resign and return to Denver... bedecked in new clothes.” Though she felt proud of the material reward she gained from her brief spell of independence, Mattie’s “brothers taunted her about not having courage to remain away very long.” Mattie departed for the city of Pueblo, Colorado determined to prove

⁵⁹ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 44-45.

⁶⁰ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 46.

⁶¹ See Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 204.

⁶² Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 47.

⁶³ U.S. Census Bureau, *Supplement For Colorado: Population, Agriculture, Manufactures, Mines and Quarries* (U.S. Census: Washington, 1910), 586.

them wrong. Once again, however, she did not stay very long and returned to Denver, only to “[find] her home life unbearable.” This is what drove her to move to Kansas City, Missouri. There, she would experience what she called her “subsequent downfall through the mesh of circumstances in which she became inveigled.”⁶⁴ Mattie’s description of events depicts her as a young woman who fought to uphold her virtue from a man who tried to force himself on her, as coded behind the statement “he became especially ardent.” By doing this, she was able to reinforce the idea that she was innately virtuous.

Mattie purposefully links herself to tropes present throughout early-20th century media. The story of a young woman going to the city to seek her fortune was not only borne out in the unnamed Mary Pickford movie. Her audience could have found it any number of places in American popular culture of the time. The film *Morning Glory* from 1933, for example, told the story of an aspiring performer from a small town played by Katherine Hepburn who moved to New York City to pursue her acting career and found fortune.⁶⁵ Four years later, Hepburn would star in another film dealing with a similar topic, *Stage Door*, which focused on a group of young aspiring actresses living together in a New York apartment as they sought their big break.⁶⁶ These two films were among many others showcasing similar story beats. By utilizing these tropes, Mattie was presenting her life’s narrative as if it was a Hollywood production. She was the beautiful young protagonist, leaving a miserable and oppressive home life and making her way to the city to find her destiny.

Fitting into pop cultural narratives and conservative Christian ones, Mattie portrays her decision to travel to Kansas City as a life-altering mistake. She was lured away from the embrace

⁶⁴ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 48-49.

⁶⁵ *Morning Glory*, directed by Lowell Sherman (RKO Radio Pictures, 1933).

⁶⁶ *Stage Door*, directed by Gregory La Cava (RKO Radio Pictures, 1937).

of home and family by the siren call of the silver screen. Her particular siren was America's sweetheart, Mary Pickford. Mattie reinforced this in her narrative, writing that "it has frequently been said that all motion pictures featuring Mary Pickford were clean and absolutely fit for anyone to see, which is not disputed. Nevertheless," Mattie continued, "it was a picture play acted by that much lauded star which induced Mattie to leave her home town and start out in the world at a much too early age, far away from her mother's jurisdiction."⁶⁷ This served as a warning to her audience. Even the most innocuous of Hollywood influences could induce young women to break from the wise guidance of their parents and begin walking down the path of temptation.

By crafting her narrative in this way, Mattie had to obscure certain facts in her youth. Perhaps the most notable amongst them was the omission of her marriage. The nameless "nice young man" who Mattie was engaged to in her memoir was actually an individual by the name of Frank John Vanders.⁶⁸ Their engagement was never broken but rather they were married on 2 November 1912, just a few days shy of Mattie's 17th birthday.⁶⁹ By cutting this vital plot point, Mattie maintained her Hollywood-esque narrative, which relied on her being an inexperienced young girl moving to the big city. Additionally, it preserved her personal integrity for her audience of conservative Christians. In fact, she later abandoned her husband for another man.

His name was Albert C. Pagel, Jr. A New York native, Albert had joined the United States Army in 1908, rising to the rank of sergeant with F Company, 5th Cavalry Regiment.⁷⁰ He

⁶⁷ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 47.

⁶⁸ A few newspaper reports from the time identified him as "Frank J. *Landers*," but the marriage record, as well as textual evidence from those more closely involved with the case, supports the name of "Vanders."

⁶⁹ "Colorado Statewide Marriage Index, 1853-2006: Vanders, Frank John."
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GB2J-HFD?i=1475&cc=1932434> .

⁷⁰ U.S. Army, "United States Registers of Enlistments in the U.S. Army: 1798-1914, 130-131, 1909-1913, L-Q," accessed 10/1/2021. <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-L1DD-HYX?from=lynx1UIV7&i=608>; and

first became acquainted with Mattie's brother, Oliver Robert Howard, who had left the family laundry business and entered military service in 1912.⁷¹ Stationed on the U.S.-Mexican border together, Albert and Oliver became fast friends.⁷² Friendship with Albert also happened to include participation in an ad-hoc gang that he ran, comprised of a few other select members of F Company.

After two years service on the border, in April 1914 the 5th Cavalry moved to Walsenburg, Colorado, to put down labor unrest in the city's coal mines.⁷³ While on this assignment, Albert accompanied Oliver on a visit to his sister and her husband. Mattie seemed taken by the sergeant, even as she approached her second wedding anniversary. In December, Oliver approached Albert with a plan to rob the Walsenburg post office. Oliver had been on mail detail there and saw the clerk handle registered envelopes filled with cash from the First National Bank of Pueblo. That cash was supposed to be delivered to the First National Bank of Walsenburg. That day, Oliver observed the clerk tuck the envelopes in his drawer, rather than the safe, as was the usual policy.⁷⁴ In the drawer, the money was an easy steal. Albert, Oliver, and a few other men from F Company raided the post office on the night of 1 December 1914 and made away with \$15,000.⁷⁵

U.S. Army, "United States Registers of Enlistments in the U.S. Army: 1798-1914, 130-131, 1909-1913, L-Q," accessed 10/1/2021. <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:333S7-L1DD-HYX?from=lynx1UIV7&i=608>.

⁷¹ "Muster Roll of Troop F of the 5th Regiment of Cavalry, Army of the United States from the 31st day of December, 1913 (date of last bimonthly muster), to the 28th day of February, 1914," 3.

⁷² William H. Boudreau, "5th Cavalry Regiment," 1st Cavalry Division Association, accessed 1 October 2021. <https://1cda.org/history/history-5cav/>.

⁷³ United Press, "Six Troops of U.S. Cavalry Ordered to Colorado Coal Fields—Strikers Capture Mine After Killing Mine Guards—Wilson Issues Ultimatum," *Hanford Sentinel*, 30 April 1914.

⁷⁴ "Oliver Howard to Make Confession," *The Spanish American*, 19 December 1914; "Three Troopers Plead Guilty to Postoffice Loot," *The Leavenworth Times*, 20 March 1915.

⁷⁵ "Trooper Arrested for Postoffice Robbery," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 2 December 1914.

Oliver had made one mistake that would prove the makeshift gang's downfall. Upon seeing the cash, he had remarked to the clerk that "If a man had that much money he sure wouldn't have to work any more." The clerk, recalling this statement, told the police his suspicions about the soldier.⁷⁶ The lawmen made a thorough search of the barracks where Oliver was billeted. Lifting his bunk, they found \$4,800 stashed there.⁷⁷ Proving himself anything but a hardened criminal, Oliver immediately turned on his co-conspirators, leading to the arrest of Albert and another member of F Company, Samuel F. Mortimore.⁷⁸ The three were tried and sentenced in March 1915; Oliver would receive three and a half years for his role in planning the robbery, while Albert and Samuel received two and a half years.⁷⁹

Albert's prison sentence, served at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, did not deter Mattie. After his early release from the stockade for good behavior in 1916, Mattie left her husband and joined Albert in Kansas City, Missouri. She did not arrive in the city a young single woman driven by a desire to emulate her favorite star of the silver screen. She arrived in Kansas City a married woman who had left her husband in favor of pursuing a relationship with a convicted criminal. She confirmed as much in a 1918 interview where she admitted to reporters that she used her maiden name while living in Kansas City because "she had left her husband" and "she did not wish him to know where she was."⁸⁰ By 1937, when she wrote her memoir, her marriage and her early relationship with Albert had no place in her story about herself.

⁷⁶ "Three Troopers Plead Guilty to Postoffice Loot," *The Leavenworth Times*, 20 March 1915.

⁷⁷ "Federal Cavalrymen Held For Robbery," *Albuquerque Journal*, 9 December 1914.

⁷⁸ "Postoffice Robbers Make a Clean Breast," *The Santa Fe New Mexican*, 9 December 1914.

⁷⁹ "Three Troopers Plead Guilty to Postoffice Loot," *The Leavenworth Times*, 20 March 1915; another three troopers had been arrested for the crime, but had been acquitted.

⁸⁰ "Hold Woman As Slayer," *The Topeka Daily Capital*, 19 June 1918; "Woman Lured Man To Death Is Charge," *The Des Moines Evening Tribune*, 19 June 1918.

Mattie could not have picked a better time to come to Kansas City than 1916. In 1900, the city hosted the Democratic National Convention—“an interesting choice considering that the city did not have enough hotel rooms to accommodate all of the conventioners,” according to historian Kory Paul Gallagher. The delegates “satirized [the city’s] wild west, cattle-town origins, lampooned its official tolerance of vice and rowdiness, and cited its escalating crime rates as evidence of urban depravity.” Seemingly stung by delegates’ vision of their city, the city elites undertook a massive effort at urban development, winning praise for their “parks and boulevard system” that “remapped the city and beautified its neighborhoods.”⁸¹ The explosive growth of Kansas City made this reconstruction possible. In the first two decades of the 20th century, its population grew from 163,752 to 324,410. This boom brought with it an increase of wealth; by 1917, banks in the city facilitated billions of dollars worth of transactions. This flow of capital allowed new businesses and industries to grow quickly. Kansas City was a boomtown once again.⁸²

Many of these new industries were also uniquely positioned to employ women, as historian Jeremiah D. Laurent details in his MA thesis “Great Expectations.” Laurent highlights how Kansas City’s important place as a centralized railroad hub created “unique job opportunities” for women compared to other Midwest cities.⁸³ The Hallmark Card Company moved their headquarters to Kansas City in 1910, hiring women to work to make their now-famed greeting cards. Weaker Midwestern unions drew the garment industry away from the northeastern United States, providing Midwestern women opportunities to work on the factory

⁸¹ Kory Paul Gallagher, “Creating an Imperial City: Kansas City in the 1920s,” (M.A. Thesis, University of Missouri, Kansas City, 2011), 1-3.

⁸² Gallagher, “Creating an Imperial City,” 4.

⁸³ Jeremiah D. Laurent, “Great Expectations: Women’s Help Wanted Ads in Kansas City, 1920-1936,” M.A. Thesis (University of Missouri, Kansas City: 2014),

floor. Even nontraditional employment opportunities for women, such as secretarial work, were also seeking new, explicitly female hires. Many of these companies took out newspaper wanted ads specifically targeting women.⁸⁴

Though the employment opportunities for Mattie were plentiful, Kansas City also provided ample opportunities for Albert. Though the city fathers had done much to beautify their city and improve its economy in the years following the 1900 Democratic National Convention, Kansas City had done very little to change its “official tolerance of vice and rowdiness.”⁸⁵ This was not an accident. Under the control of the Pendergrast family political machine, Kansas City openly flouted state and federal law, and turned a blind eye to local crime. It was publically known as an “open city,” where citizens and visitors could escape from the more moralistic laws of the late Progressive era.⁸⁶ Historian William A. Reddig, reflecting on this period, wrote that Kansas City was “a city of open gambling and prostitution, bribes and voting fraud, gang wars and criminal sanctuary.”⁸⁷

Kansas City’s unique combination of professional opportunities for women and professional crime allowed Mattie to perform legal work and allowed Albert a relatively safe place to engage in light illegal activity. Outside her legal work, Mattie played the role of a gun moll. “To be a gun moll... meant linking one’s fortunes to a gang through partnership with a male bandit,” according to historian Clair Bond Potter. Molls played valuable supporting roles to their male lovers, first by providing income through more regular employment in between

⁸⁴ Laurent, “Great Expectations,” 13-14.

⁸⁵ Gallagher, “Creating an Imperial City,” 1.

⁸⁶ See Diane Mutti Burke, Jason Roe, and John Herron, *Wide-Open Town: Kansas City in the Pendergast Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018); William M. Reddig, *Tom’s Town: Kansas City and the Pendergast Legend* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986); and Gallagher, “Creating an Imperial City,” 149-150.

⁸⁷ Reddig, *Tom’s Town*, 11.

criminal actions. Mattie, for example, worked both in retail and as a telephone operator.⁸⁸ Molls were “integral to the success of their gangs.”⁸⁹ In addition to providing money, they played key organizational roles in the group, creating “multiple kin and fictive kin relationships” via “serial relationships” of varying degrees of romantic intensity. They acted as the “glue” that kept extended “gang families” together, leading to greater cohesion and general success.⁹⁰ Many, like Mattie, were not officially married to their gangsters but often left previous marriages for the gang.⁹¹

In her autobiography, Mattie moves herself away from the role of gun moll. Instead, she depicted herself as an unwitting object of a criminal’s romantic attentions. This, once again, ties in with narratives that her audience would have been familiar with from Hollywood. *The Red-Haired Alibi* from 1932, for example, depicted a young woman moving to New York City and finding employment with a charming man and gradually realizing that he was a violent gangster.⁹² *Red-Haired Alibi*’s narrative shares many similarities with how Mattie’s memoirs approach her relationship with Albert. Mattie shifted their time of meeting away from Colorado in 1914 to Kansas City in 1916.⁹³ Referring to him as “George,” an alias that he occasionally used, she depicts “George” as a handsome man of somewhat dubious character. He was taken in by Mattie’s beauty and pursues a relationship with her. After lavishing her with “expensive gifts” and introducing her to “worldly amusement centers,” George wore down her initial reluctance

⁸⁸ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 51.

⁸⁹ Clair Bond Potter, “I’ll go the limit and Then Some: Gun Molls, Desire, and Danger in the 1930s,” *Feminist Studies* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 43.

⁹⁰ Potter, “I’ll go the limit and Then Some,” 49.

⁹¹ Potter, “I’ll go the limit and Then Some,” 49-50.

⁹² *The Red-Haired Alibi*, directed by Christy Cabanne (Tower Productions, 1937).

⁹³ Examples of instances where Albert Pagle used the George Moore alias include “This Time Women With Agate Blue Eyes Fails To Have Luck With Her,” *The Springfield Leader*, 8 June 1919 and “Mattie At His Death Bed,” *The Kansas City Star*, 12 March 1920.

and Mattie began to see him romantically.⁹⁴ While he was initially able to keep his criminal lifestyle from her, George eventually flees from the law which ends the charade. Mattie was concerned with what happened to her lover after he did not reach out to her for several weeks. Mattie then followed his escape route and discovered him imprisoned in Springfield, Missouri.⁹⁵

Wanting to save him from prison, Mattie organized his defense. That “organization” had a legal and extralegal side to it. She wrote that she hired a lawyer, and also agreed “to act as intermediary between her lover and his friends.” This is the first time in her autobiography where she interacted with the criminal underworld directly, outside of her relationship with George. Even with this, however, Mattie sought to maintain her own innocence. She wrote that made no criminal plans herself; she was merely acting as a messenger. She was only pushed into common cause with criminals in the interest of saving her lover from prison.⁹⁶ In spite of her efforts, George was found guilty and sent to prison. In her memoir, Mattie explained that, after his conviction, she was informed that he could “obtain a premature release through payment of a certain sum of money.” Mattie was excited by this prospect; in her memoirs, she writes that “[she] did not think of this procedure as graft or bribery... all that mattered to her was to have George back with her as soon as possible.”⁹⁷

Mattie wrote that after George’s imprisonment she felt that her time at Kansas City had reached its end. “The bright lights of Kansas City and other places where she had sojourned and enjoyed a gay, care-free life... no longer appealed to her.”⁹⁸ Determined to return to her mother, Mattie spent some time purchasing gifts to bring back with her, much as she had after her

⁹⁴ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 53.

⁹⁵ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 62-63.

⁹⁶ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 64-65.

⁹⁷ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 68-69.

⁹⁸ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 67.

previous stays away from home. While purchasing a signet ring as a gift for her brother, she made the acquaintance of jewelry dealer “Diamond Joe” Morino. The next day, she attempted to buy lunch with a check but was denied due to store policy. Morino, who had entered the same restaurant, intervened. Claiming that he knew that Mattie’s checks were good, Morino paid for Mattie’s lunch. Grateful, she wrote the jeweler a second check and then went home.⁹⁹

Home, by this point, had shifted from Denver to Raton, New Mexico, where her mother had moved. Mattie told her readers that at this point she had determined to “remain home indefinitely,” and had decided “be very agreeable to all the family, desiring to win their favor as much as possible.”¹⁰⁰ However, her efforts to turn over a new leaf would prove short-lived. Morino had been murdered back in Kansas City, and witnesses reported seeing a beautiful blond woman leaving the premises. When the check she had written him was found in his pocket, Kansas City police immediately notified the authorities in Raton.¹⁰¹ Mattie recalled that she “was entirely innocent of the seriousness of her arrest”; she thought that she was being taken in to discuss her relationship with George. She only learned of the charges that she faced five days later, when a police sergeant handed her a telegram bearing the words “HOLD MATTIE HOWARD WANTED FOR FIRST DEGREE MURDER.”¹⁰² By depicting her arrest in this way, Mattie added another layer to her claim of innocence. Rather than merely not committing the crime, she was completely ignorant of the fact that Morino had been murdered.

The narrative of Mattie’s early life was carefully constructed to avoid the appearance of impropriety. She depicted herself as a beautiful, virtuous young woman who was slowly pulled

⁹⁹ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 68.

¹⁰⁰ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 69.

¹⁰¹ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 69-70.

¹⁰² Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 73.

away from her faithful mother by the lure of the dance hall and cinema. She was ignorant of her Kansas City boyfriend's criminal activity until he was arrested. By smoothing out the wrinkles of her history, such as her abandoning her husband for a known criminal, Mattie laid the groundwork for a story of persecution. Her memoirs also provided a counter-narrative to the claims of newspapermen who covered her arrest and trial who viewed Mattie as anything but innocent.

Section Two: The Truth According to the Papers

The newspapers did not view Mattie charitably. While she portrayed herself as an innocent girl led into association with a bad crowd by the promises of popular culture and the deceptions of her gangster boyfriend, the newspapers saw a scheming black widow who was a capable organizer of criminal affairs. None of the newspapers mused that Mattie could have been innocent of the murder of Joe Morino; from the beginning they were more than willing to mark her as guilty. Key to their narrative was Mattie's relationship with Albert Pagel, which they used as a springboard to craft a narrative tracking her supposed transformation from a gangster's girlfriend to a singularly driven criminal mastermind. Just as Mattie engaged in self-invention in her 1937 memoir, the papers from 1918 to 1922 engaged in character invention of their own.

When Mattie claimed that her fictionalized boyfriend "George" was arrested, she was referring to an actual arrest her actual partner, Albert Pagel, experienced. After only a year or so in Kansas City with Albert, he was arrested for highway robbery in May 1917.¹⁰³ Mattie was

¹⁰³ "Brown Still At Large," *The Evening Star*, 14 May 1917.

distraught after his arrest, but her actual approach after he went to prison differed from how she recalled it. In her memoirs, Mattie maintained that she was determined to go home, Kansas City holding no more attraction for her after her lover was behind bars. This was a narrative invention by the Mattie Howard of 1937. The Mattie Howard of 1917 seemed determined to get Albert out of jail by any means necessary. At least, that was how it was written of in the newspapers.

Newspapers pointed to Albert's arrest as an essential turning point in Mattie's life. *The Atlanta Constitution* in 1921 claimed that after Albert's arrest "Mattie Howard was without money in Kansas City, but she was striving with all her amazing cunning to effect Pagel's release."¹⁰⁴ A year later, a reporter for *The Ogden Standard* wrote that after his arrest Mattie "was desperate, furious, terrible... she would have, she must have this man freed, and she shortly determined upon shocking expedients."¹⁰⁵ On this point, Mattie and the newspapers agreed. In Mattie's 1937 narrative, she admitted that "all that mattered to her was to have George back with her as soon as possible."¹⁰⁶

A deeper look at the way that the newspapermen explored this narrative strongly demonstrates the negative perception the papers had of her. Reporters used words to describe Mattie that were meant to evoke an emotional response from their readers. Phrases like "amazing cunning" and "desperate, furious, terrible" conjured the image of a vengeful, criminal mastermind. When one wrote that "She would have, she must have this man freed," they implied that Mattie was infatuated with Albert to the point of obsession. This terminology heightened the

¹⁰⁴ "The Girl With the Agate Eyes," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 27 March 1921.

¹⁰⁵ "The 'Girl with the Agate Eyes,'" *The Ogden Standard*, 5 February 1922.

¹⁰⁶ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 68-69.

threat posed by Mattie Howard, transforming her from a mere gangster's girlfriend to someone more than capable of carrying out "shocking expedients."

Using Mattie's desire to see Albert out of prison, the newspapers used a mixture of police reports and speculation to depict her rising to power in the Kansas City underworld. Focused on her goal of liberating Albert, Mattie reached out to several criminal associates of his to garner assistance. This work went beyond merely passing messages, as she claimed in her autobiography. Instead, Mattie integrated herself into the criminal underworld, gaining the money necessary to facilitate Albert's release from prison. First, she joined up with the Lewis-Jones gang and then she created a criminal organization of her own.

The Lewis-Jones gang had originally centered on gang leader Frank Lewis and his brothers. They were a band of rough and tumble criminals from the Cherokee Outlet of Oklahoma. By 1916, however, Frank Lewis was the only brother free from imprisonment. Forced to look beyond his siblings to rebuild his organization, Lewis found a ready ally in Dale Jones, a Missouri native who became Lewis's right-hand man. Jones had a slight build, "quiet manners and refined appearance," and was quick with his gun, according to popular historian Jeffrey King.¹⁰⁷ Because of his physique, Jones was able to disguise himself as a woman on more than one occasion to avoid police detection.¹⁰⁸ Together, the two rebuilt the organization. By fall of 1917, the two once again had a functioning gang with a violent reputation.

The gang welcomed Mattie into the group, though how she met them is unknown. The Lewis-Jones might have accepted her quickly because she pursued a sexual relationship with

¹⁰⁷ Jeffrey S. King, *Kill-Crazy Gang: The Crimes of the Lewis-Jones Gang* (Denver: Frank Manley Publishing Company, 2013), 83.

¹⁰⁸ "Fugitive Posed as a Girl," *Kansas City Star*, 18 April 1914; "Dale Jones, Murder Suspect, Real Ba'ad Man," *The Buffalo Times*, 15 December 1918.

Dale Jones.¹⁰⁹ While this infidelity may seem incongruous with her commitment to Albert, the ability to pursue “serial relationships” was a key tool in a gun moll’s repertoire, according to historian Clair Bond Potter. Those serial romances were central to a gang’s fictive kin relationships. Through multiple romantic involvements, molls joined disparate gang members together into a near-familial criminal organization.¹¹⁰ This sexual freedom, however, ran counter to societal expectations of women in the late-Progressive Era. Historian Christina Simmons explains that the expectation of the era was that women would keep themselves sexually pure before marriage, and then after marriage would give “her husband her sexual fidelity.”¹¹¹ Even couples that participated in premarital sex often stressed “that they were not promiscuous,” highlighting their commitment to a monogamous relationship.¹¹² Mattie’s sexual behavior, therefore, made ready fodder for newspaper reporters seeking to amplify her deviance.

Mattie got involved with Dale Jones right when his gang was reaching the apex of its power and influence. From 1917 to 1918, the gang carried out raids that were more ambitious than those that they had previously attempted. After a failed prison break attempt at the Missouri State Penitentiary aimed at restoring the four imprisoned Lewis brothers, in December 1917 the gang struck far from its traditional base in Kansas and Missouri. They took \$9,000 from a bank in Los Angeles.¹¹³ The next year, they orchestrated a series of bank robberies in Kansas, Missouri, and Colorado.¹¹⁴ These raids were profitable, and through Mattie’s relationship with

¹⁰⁹ “Test for a Woman’s Luck,” *The Kansas City Star*, 23 October 1919; “Try to Kill Howard Alibi,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, 25 October 1919; “The Mystery of Mattie Howard’s ‘Smile of Death’ and the Ten Men Who Saw it and Died,” *The Indianapolis Star*, 17 September 1922.

¹¹⁰ Potter, “I’ll go the limit and Then Some,”

¹¹¹ Christina Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern: Women’s Sexuality from the Progressive Era to World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

¹¹² Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern*, 125.

¹¹³ King, *Kill-Crazy Gang*, 93-94. While the raid on the Missouri State Penitentiary was officially launched in an effort to rescue the Lewis brothers, a potentially unstated objective may have been to rescue Albert, as he was held in the same institution.

¹¹⁴ King, *Kill-Crazy Gang*, 95.

Dale Jones she likely benefitted from the heists. While she was fulfilling the role of a gun moll for Dale Jones, it does not seem like she was an active participant in the gang's activities. She was not named in any reports on the attacks carried out by the Lewis-Jones outfit in this period, nor is any woman with her description mentioned.

While the association with the Lewis-Jones gang may have been profitable, it did not turn enough profit to pay the bribe that would free Albert. Acting on her own volition, Mattie reached out to other Kansas City criminals who were not members of the Lewis-Jones outfit. Perhaps building on Albert's previous underworld connections, Mattie was able to form a loose association of at least eight men who specialized in activities from bootlegging to safecracking.¹¹⁵ Whether these men considered themselves as part of a cohesive gang under Mattie's leadership or acted more as individual "contractors" is unclear. Later press labelled them as "Mattie Howard [men]" and considered them part of her criminal organization, but this may have been in an effort to further sensationalize their activities.¹¹⁶ A female gang leader, especially one overseeing the activities of men, was almost unheard of in the 1910s. By making her into a formal gang leader, the papers depicted Mattie as a serious threat to the established social and gender order. However, Mattie was the one individual linking these men and their activities together. This implies that she held at least an ad-hoc position of authority over them. Even this sets Mattie apart from other female criminals of her era.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ "Mattie Howard is in Toils Again on Charge of Robbery," *The Springfield Leader*, 23 July 1919; "Fate Deals Seventh Hand," *The Kansas City Star*, 20 May 1920; "Attorney Obtains Stanton's Record in Local Courts," *The Springfield Leader*, 18 January 1922.

¹¹⁶ "Fate Deals Seventh Hand," *The Kansas City Star*, 20 May 1920 and "Attorney Obtains Stanton's Record in Local Courts," *The Springfield Leader*, 18 January 1922.

¹¹⁷ An effort to track down other female leaders of gangs in this era turned up few result, even for those who exercised more informal authority. While there was an all-female gang of thieves operating in London, United Kingdom, during this time, most examples of female criminal leadership in mixed-gender organizations appear later in the 1920s and, more especially, the 1930s.

Mattie's name and description did not initially appear in newspapers associated with the crimes of her criminal associates. This would not occur until she crossed the line from gun moll and behind-the-scenes organizer to an active participant in May 1918. Earlier that month, Mattie visited the store of local pawnbroker "Diamond Joe" Morino, as she recounted in her memoir. Unlike her own written recollections, however, theirs was not a congenial interaction. Mattie attempted to purchase a \$140 diamond hat pin, opting to pay in installments.¹¹⁸ She wrote a check for \$100 to Morino, but this check bounced.¹¹⁹ The jeweler sensed an opportunity in this.

Throughout the month of May, Morino pressured Mattie to rendezvous with him to "work off the debt" she owed him.¹²⁰ Arranging this assignation was made difficult by Morino's particularly "home-loving wife," who rarely gave him an opportunity to be alone. Eventually, however, he managed to find a time to slip away. On 22 May 1918, alongside Mattie, the jeweler visited the Touraine Apartments, a hotel where questions were rarely asked. He paid for a room for the week, and Mattie signed the hotel's register as "B. Stanley and wife," claiming that the two were visiting Kansas City from Detroit.¹²¹ Their meeting was delayed one more night, as Morino was obligated to take his wife to the theater, but on 24 May 1918, "Diamond Joe" finally arrived at the hotel room.¹²² He had the bounced check from Mattie in his pocket; he had asked his clerk for it shortly before leaving his shop for the day.¹²³

Mattie soon joined Morino, entering the hotel alongside another woman. What excitement the jeweler may have experienced was soon turned to shock, as the second woman

¹¹⁸ In her memoirs, Mattie claimed to be purchasing a signet ring as a gift for her brother. This contrasts with the historic record, and was a likely invention by Mattie to reinforce her own naturally generous and virtuous nature. See Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 68.

¹¹⁹ "Mystery of Agate Eyes," *The Kansas City Star*, 6 June 1919.

¹²⁰ James, *The Love Pirate and the Bandit's Son*, 142.

¹²¹ "A Writ in Morino Case," *The Kansas City Star*, 24 June 1918.

¹²² "Know Murder Women," *The Kansas City Star*, 27 May 1918.

¹²³ "Blocking a Howard Alibi," *The Kansas City Star*, 22 October 1919.

soon revealed herself to be none other than Dale Jones wearing women's clothes.¹²⁴ Another man named Sam Taylor entered through the room's window via the fire escape. Sam was one of the so-called "Mattie Howard men," a bootlegger from Oklahoma who had worked with her before.¹²⁵ Together, the three tied Morino to the bedpost and removed several expensive pieces of jewelry he was wearing.

It seems likely that the three planned to extort money from "Diamond Joe," perhaps out of revenge for his treatment of Mattie. However, at some time during the night, Morino managed to work his way free of his bonds and attempted to flee the room. Mattie, acting quickly, pursued and hit him in the head with a club before he could reach the door. The pawnbroker collapsed to the ground, badly injured. As the extortion spiraled out of control, Morino became a greater liability to the three than a potential resource. They murdered "Diamond Joe" with another strong blow to the skull.¹²⁶ The criminals then fled down the fire escape, into the alley, and caught a cab away from the scene of the crime.¹²⁷

The criminal trio scattered, fleeing the city. Mattie and Sam left Kansas City together, going to her mother's residence in Raton, New Mexico. Once there, Mattie and Sam tried to lay low until things blew over. Evidence, however, would soon point the police in her direction. In their haste, the three had forgotten to take Mattie's bounced check off of Morino's body. From the check, the Kansas City police department had the name "Mattie Howard." Employees of Morino's pawnshop recalled a young blonde woman visiting the store and writing a bad check. This matched the description of the woman who had checked into the Touraine Apartments

¹²⁴ "Dale Jones, Murder Suspect, Real Ba'ad Man," *The Buffalo Times*, 15 December 1918.

¹²⁵ "Alleged Killer from Kansas City is Arrested Here," *The Leavenworth Times*, 5 September 1918.

¹²⁶ King, *Kill-Crazy Gang*, 100.

¹²⁷ "Taylor Case to Jury," *The Kansas City Star*, 19 May 1920.

alongside Morino. With both the bad check and the description of who wrote it, the police now had a solid lead.¹²⁸ On 17 June 1918, authorities in Raton, New Mexico arrested Mattie Howard and Sam Taylor and transferred them to the jail in Trinidad, Colorado.¹²⁹ Mattie had been going by the name of “Mrs. Frank J. Vanders” while in Raton in order to avoid suspicion. She quickly admitted going by Mattie Howard in Kansas City, and confirmed that Vanders was seeking a divorce. A few days later, she was charged with murder and extradited to Kansas City.¹³⁰ Police released Sam Taylor as there was no concrete evidence yet linking him to the crime. This narrative differed from Mattie’s depiction of a young innocent girl hauled from her mother’s home.

Mattie hired for her defense Jesse James, Jr., son of the famed western outlaw. James, at first, launched a vigorous counterattack against the state’s case. He successfully quashed an effort to take Mattie’s fingerprints. Fingerprints were still not widely accepted as an important part of criminal science. Additionally, he fought off an attempt by the prosecution to have Mattie write “B. Stanley and wife,” in order to compare her handwriting with that in the hotel register.¹³¹ He also managed to get Mattie out on a \$10,000 bond. Of course, the bond required that she did not skip town. However, she almost immediately fled again with a yet -to-be-charged Sam Taylor. This escape was short lived, as police in Leavenworth, Kansas, arrested the two on 4 September 1918, and sent them back to Kansas City.¹³² Despite breaking her bond,

¹²⁸ “Mystery of Agate Eyes,” *The Kansas City Star*, 6 June 1919.

¹²⁹ “Trinidad Police Hold Suspect in K.C. Murder Case,” *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, 19 June 1918.

¹³⁰ “Hold Woman As Slayer,” *The Topeka Daily Capital*, 19 June 1918 and “Woman Lured Man to Death Is Charge,” *Des Moines Tribune*, 19 June 1918.

¹³¹ “A Writ in Morino Case,” *The Kansas City Star*, 24 June 1918.

¹³² “Alleged Killer From Kansas City is Arrested Here,” *The Leavenworth Times*, 5 September 1918.

James was once again able to keep her out of jail and on the streets. James's skillful delays also ensured that Mattie's trial would not begin until late-September 1919.

As Mattie awaited the beginning of her trial, the Lewis-Jones gang collapsed. Twenty days after her arrest in Leavenworth, the Lewis-Jones gang's main enforcer, Roscoe Lancaster, died in an extended shootout with the Denver police. Frank Lewis died a few weeks later on 17 October in a Topeka, Kansas holding cell, done in by a combination of old wounds and the rampaging Spanish influenza pandemic.¹³³ Even Mattie's lover and accomplice in the Morino murder, Dale Jones, was not safe. In November 1918, police in California gunned him down.¹³⁴ With three core members eliminated, the gang collapsed. Things were equally bad for Mattie's own band. In fall of 1918, one of Mattie Howard's associates, "Dude" Richardson, was taken into custody after wounding a police officer.¹³⁵ Another associate, J.A. Stanton, barely avoided charges after being arrested for burglary in July 1919, forcing him to lay low to avoid further scrutiny.¹³⁶ Just a few days later, police arrested Mattie herself alongside safecracker Tony Cruye for attempting to rob a Kansas City hotel.¹³⁷ This was the second time that she had been directly implicated in a crime. While she was able to avoid charges in this incident, Cruye was not as lucky. On 24 August 1919, while out on bail, he was killed by a gambler he was trying to rob.¹³⁸

Initially, press interest in Mattie's case was relatively muted. In 1918, a few articles detailed her arrest and initial arraignment, but press attention grew in the summer of 1919. On 6 June 1919, a month before she was arrested alongside Cruye, *The Kansas City Star* published the

¹³³ King, *Kill-Crazy Gang*, 135.

¹³⁴ "Dale Jones, Murder Suspect, Real Ba'ad Man," *The Buffalo Times*, 15 December 1918.

¹³⁵ "Fate Deals Seventh Hand," *The Kansas City Star*, 20 May 1920.

¹³⁶ "Attorney Obtains Stanton's Record in Local Courts," *Springfield Leader and Press*, 18 January 1922.

¹³⁷ "Mattie Howard is in Toils Again on Charge of Robbery," *The Springfield Leader*, 23 July 1919.

¹³⁸ "'Victim' Kills Tony Cruye," 25 August 1919.

full-page article “A Mystery of Agate Eyes.” In many respects, the article was emblematic of how the press would deal with Mattie as a criminal. The *Star* reporter described her murder of Morino as being “staged with all the concomitants of a scenario plot and as pregnant with mystery and suggestive clues (sic) as a Katherine Green detective story.” The story suggested the crime was premeditated and a product of a keen criminal mind. The article also focused intently on her physical appearance, saying that she was “a quiet appearing blond, whose most noticeable feature was her eyes, escribed as agate blue, with a cool, steady, fascinating fixity of expression that immediately focused the attention of anyone to whom she might be talking.”¹³⁹ This was the first time that a newspaper mentioned Mattie’s eyes; it would not be the last.

Mattie’s increased presence in the news, combined with her second arrest and Cruye’s subsequent death, could not have made her lawyer very happy; this all happened very close to the start of her trial in September 1919. However, not all hope was lost. Initial testimony from a few witnesses claimed that Mattie was not near the scene of the crime at the time of the murder.¹⁴⁰ Additionally, her gender had caused a division among “experts” on criminal science. Some wondered if a woman had the strength to deliver the blows like those that had killed “Diamond Joe” Morino.¹⁴¹ However, it does not seem as if her defense effectively exploited these points, and the press had little interest in repeating them.

Questions of whether Mattie, as a woman, could commit such a crime would soon come to dominate the courtroom proceedings, trumping even witness testimony. A focus on gender should have helped the defense. A Chicago prosecutor observed that “twelve men simply cannot be brought to believe... that a woman is guilty of the gravest crime in the calendar... the

¹³⁹ “Mystery of Agate Eyes,” *The Kansas City Star*, 6 June 1919.

¹⁴⁰ “Mattie Howard Denies She Murdered Morino,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, 24 October 1919.

¹⁴¹ “Alleged Killer From Kansas City is Arrested Here,” *The Leavenworth Times*, 5 September 1918.

defendant need not be beautiful; if she merely appears feminine on the stand she is safe.” Such a claim reflects the power of gender stereotypes around crime at the time.¹⁴² Historian Jeffrey S. Adler, in his study on female criminality Chicago in this period, sheds light on how these stereotypes were usually to the defense’s advantage. By “[playing] on male jurors’ sense of chivalry and their inclination to protect weak, fragile women,” defense attorneys in Chicago were able to portray women “as sympathetic defendants who deserved legal protection.” This led to a surprisingly low conviction rate for female murderers; only 16% of women accused of murder in Chicago between 1875 and 1920 were convicted. This frustrated several observers, including local journalists. When asked to explain how women seemed to be able to get away with murder, one Chicago reporter quipped “she must have killed a man.”¹⁴³

The likelihood of conviction increased if “the homicide was particularly grisly or the killer challenged established social mores,” according to Adler.¹⁴⁴ For example, in 1914, Chicago State’s Attorney Maclay Hoyne opined that “when a woman does become a criminal, she sinks lower and goes further in brutality and cruelty than the other sex.”¹⁴⁵ The stereotype of woman as gentle, weak caretaker was what provided an accused murderess with protection in her trial. If a prosecutor portrayed the woman as transgressing this social role, she suddenly became a more dangerous threat to society than male criminals.

This would be the route of attack for the prosecution as it made its case for her guilt. Countering the argument that she was not present at the scene of the crime, the state claimed that the crime scene was made notable by “‘woman’s touches’ which characterized it throughout.”

¹⁴² James, *The Love Pirate and the Bandit’s Son*, 144.

¹⁴³ Adler, “‘I Loved Joe, but I Had to Shoot Him,’” 885-886.

¹⁴⁴ Adler, “‘I Loved Joe, but I Had to Shoot Him,’” 886.

¹⁴⁵ Adler, “‘I Loved Joe, but I Had to Shoot Him,’” 867.

One of these was “a blood stained lap mat” that supported the head of the slain Morino, which the porter at the Touraine Apartment’s testified that he had found. Additionally, an effort was made to portray Mattie as a woman who would kill again. A visiting Florida businessman was called to testify that Mattie had flirted with him at a restaurant, urging him to call her room at the Touraine Apartments—the same room where Morino was later found dead. The state insinuated that Mattie had been trying to lure another victim, as the businessman was wearing a large and expensive looking diamond ring when he had encountered Mattie.¹⁴⁶

By now, newspapers outside Missouri reported on the trial of Mattie Howard and the press reports largely echoed the state’s claims. Articles on the trial honed in on Mattie’s gender transgression. For example, *The Lincoln Journal Star*, from Nebraska, highlighted that Mattie dressed ostentatiously and wore \$2.50 gold coins as earrings alongside other equally loud pieces of jewelry.¹⁴⁷ This contrasted sharply with the prevailing styles for women’s clothing at the time, which, influenced by the only recently concluded First World War, was focused on simplicity.¹⁴⁸ By bringing attention to Mattie’s clothing, the press sought to reinforce to their readers that she was a woman who was not part of mainstream society.

Mattie’s behavior at the trial was also of particular interest to the press. At first, that interest resulted in just brief line in an otherwise unremarkable report on Mattie’s initial courtroom appearance in July 1918. According to a reporter for *The Kansas City Times*, upon observing Morino’s widow sobbing uncontrollably in the first row of spectators, Mattie’s

¹⁴⁶ “Blocking a Howard Alibi,” *The Kansas City Star*, 22 October 1919.

¹⁴⁷ “Try to Kill Howard Alibi,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, 25 October 1919.

¹⁴⁸ “War Time Fashion,” Digital History 511: Theory & Practice, Central Connecticut State University. Accessed 21 December 2021. <https://library.ccsu.edu/dighistFall16/exhibits/show/women-and-dress--women-s-contr/war-time-fashion>

response was to “yawn indifferently.”¹⁴⁹ During her actual trial, reporters expanded on their portrayals of her as detached and uncaring. “Mattie Howard, the inscrutable, sits composed and quiet. Her strikingly cold blue eyes gaze out over the courtroom without revealing a vestige of emotion,” wrote *The Kansas City Star* on 23 October 1919.¹⁵⁰ A reporter for *The Springfield News-Leader* claimed that Mattie was “stoically indifferent during the entire trial, never exhibiting the slightest emotion.”¹⁵¹ The only time that the press noted that Mattie exhibited emotion during the trial was when Eamon de Valera, President of the rebel Republic of Ireland, visited the Kansas City courthouse and interrupted the trial. After he gave a brief speech, Mattie made her way to him and tightly gripped his hand with a warm expression. *The Kansas City Star* reported that she said “Glad to meet you, Mr. President... You’re the first President I ever met. So glad you came!” De Valera responded with a weak smile, “then slowly withdrew his hand” before offering it to the prosecutor.¹⁵²

By focusing on Mattie’s behavior at the trial, the press was used gendered understandings of emotions in order to reinforce their depiction of Mattie. As historians Damien Boquet and Didier Lett wrote in their article “Emotions and the Concept of Gender,” in the American culture of the 1910s display of emotion was viewed as a feminine trait. Society, therefore, expected “women [to] display greater sensitivity than men.”¹⁵³ Mattie’s indifference to the proceedings, especially when facing charges as dire as homicide, demonstrated that she deserved neither the jury’s mercy or the public’s pity. The press juxtaposed Mattie’s indifferent yawning and the sobs of Morino’s widow in order to support their characterization of Mattie. Even her brief expression

¹⁴⁹ “Tragedy Details Unfold,” *The Kansas City Times*, 18 July 1918.

¹⁵⁰ “Test for a Woman’s Luck,” *The Kansas City Star*, 23 October 1919.

¹⁵¹ “Mattie Howard Given Sentence,” *The Springfield News-Leader*, 26 October 1919.

¹⁵² “Halt a Trial for Valera,” *The Kansas City Star*, 25 October 1919.

¹⁵³ Damien Boquet and Didier Lett, “Emotions and the Concept of Gender,” *Clio. Women, Gender, History* 47 (2018): 6.

of emotion at meeting de Valera seemed to reinforce this notion. Rather than being moved by the tears of a widow, she was driven to action only by the prospect of meeting someone famous.

The prosecution utilized the press's depiction of Mattie as emotionless and uncaring to reinforce their case against her in their closing arguments. Deputy Prosecutor Edward J. Curtin proclaimed that "the heart of Mattie Howard is as cold as the stone on Joe Morino's grave," a harsh statement that lined up closely with Mattie's perceived indifference during trial proceedings.¹⁵⁴ Both newspapers and the prosecution used Mattie's loud clothing and cool behavior as a means to portray her as outside accepted social norms. By hooking their prosecution to the reporters' narratives, the prosecution sought to make the trial less about the specifics of the Morino murder and more a referendum on Mattie's womanhood. This strategy proved an effective counter to any efforts by the defense to portray Mattie as a "weak, fragile woman" in order to appeal to the male jury's sense of chivalry.¹⁵⁵

With their claim that Mattie was a damaged, unsympathetic woman, the state was attempting to overcome the weaknesses of their own case. Again, several witnesses placed Mattie elsewhere at the time of the murder. Others expressed uncertainty over whether she was the blonde woman they had seen at the scene of the crime.¹⁵⁶ Additionally, no fingerprints had been found on the blackjack that had delivered the killing blow to Morino. "The evidence was hardly overwhelming... the prosecutor was asking the jury to make quite a few inferences from scant evidence," according to historian Laura James.¹⁵⁷ However, the prosecution was able to make the trial less about the particulars of the Morino case and more about Mattie as a threat to

¹⁵⁴ "Mattie Howard Is Broken," *The Kansas City Star*, 13 March 1920.

¹⁵⁵ "Mattie Howard Given Sentence," *The Springfield News-Leader*, 26 October 1919.

¹⁵⁶ "Mattie Howard Denies She Murdered Morino," *Lincoln Journal Star*, 24 October 1919.

¹⁵⁷ James, *The Love Pirate*, 146.

society. This effort was lauded by newspapers like the *Lincoln Journal Star*, which hoped that the state would be able to “send this woman of devious paths to the penitentiary.”¹⁵⁸

To the surprise of nearly every observer, the state succeeded in doing just that. Mattie Howard was found guilty of murder of the second degree on 25 October 1919. She received a sentence of twelve years imprisonment.¹⁵⁹ Although her lawyer had been unsuccessful in defending her, Jesse James, Jr. was able to keep Mattie out of prison by making a formal request for a new trial in December 1919. This was likely a nerve-wracking time for Mattie. However, there was a silver lining. It seems Mattie had somehow managed to cobble together enough money to secure Albert’s release from prison in early 1920.¹⁶⁰

Their reunion would prove short lived, however. On 9 March 1920, Albert and three other men attempted to rob the South Side Bank in Kansas City. A gunfight broke out when the bank clerk drew a pistol from his desk and opened fire on the thieves. When the smoke cleared, the clerk was dead and Albert was mortally wounded.¹⁶¹ Albert escaped, but his comrades abandoned him in a nearby house. The police found him a few hours later and moved him to a local hospital. An anxious Mattie phoned a few times to check on his status before finally being allowed to visit him on 10 March.¹⁶² Seeing her standing in the doorway, the dying Albert asked her to enter his room to “rub his forehead.” Hospital staff refused to let Mattie draw closer. She was firmly escorted away from the room to a bench located at the hospital’s main entrance. A short while later, a nurse arrived and flatly informed her that Albert had died. Allowed back into

¹⁵⁸ “Try to Kill Howard Alibi,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, 25 October 1919.

¹⁵⁹ “Mattie Howard Given Sentence,” *The Springfield News-Leader*, 26 October 1919.

¹⁶⁰ “Mattie Howard is Broken,” *The Kansas City Star*, 13 March 1920.

¹⁶¹ King, *Kill-Crazy Gang*, 143-144.

¹⁶² “Believe Howard Woman Had Part in Bank Robbery,” *The Springfield Leader*, 13 March 1920.

the room to view the corpse of her lover, Mattie threw her arms around Albert, crying and calling his name. Shortly afterwards, she began preparing his funeral.¹⁶³

The press discussed this tragic episode of Mattie's life with near glee. In an article titled "Mattie Howard is Broken," *The Kansas City Star* opened with "the glint of defiance is gone from those agate eyes... Mattie Howard is a broken, desolate woman." The article described Mattie's behavior at Albert's deathbed in detail while using terms such as "hysterical." The death of her beloved might have been a reasonable time for hysterics but the *Star* interpreted her love for Albert as a sort of obsession. For him, the article claimed, "she had denounced the conventions of society and she loved Pagel with the ferocity of some jungle creature." Moreover, the *Star* article suggested that Albert's death was Mattie's fault; her promiscuous behavior lured men to ruin. "Each of the many men who have enlisted under the crimson banner of this agate-eyed Circe of the underworld has felt the presence of violent death, or heard prison gates close behind him... Mattie Howard shed no tears for any of them." She had only loved Albert, the article concluded, "and her heat will be buried in his grave."¹⁶⁴

In one of Mattie's darkest moments, the *Star* took the opportunity to reinforce to its readers that she was a deviant, dangerous woman. While her perceived lack of emotion had hampered her during her trial, she was now viewed as going to the opposite extreme. Then-current conceptions of female behavior viewed hysteria and over-emotion in poor light, just as it viewed lack of emotion similarly negatively.¹⁶⁵ Women in early 1900s America were expected

¹⁶³ "One Admits, 1 Dies," *The Kansas City Star*, 13 March 1920.

¹⁶⁴ "Mattie Howard is Broken," *The Kansas City Star*, 13 March 1920.

¹⁶⁵ See Carroll Smith-Rosenburg, "The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in 19th-Century America," *Social Research* 39 (Winter 1972).

by society to walk a fine line between the two. Because Mattie was unable to stick to this narrow definition of acceptable emotionality she was penalized.

Section Three: Mattie and the Press in Conversation

Mattie's memoirs recalled Albert's death in detail, which was unusual because she mostly avoided specifics when discussing her time in Kansas City. Mattie's narrative was not always at odds with the papers' reports, but she heightened the incident's tragedy. She claimed Albert did not carry out the robbery that led to his death. When he was confronted by police wrongfully accusing him of participating in the crime, Albert tried to flee and was shot in the back, according to Mattie. She also placed herself at his bedside when he died, where she had one last tender moment with him. "Promise me you will always be a good girl" were his last words to her before he passed.¹⁶⁶ This rewrite reinforced Mattie's claim to innocence and morality. Albert knew she had always been "a good girl." The rewrite also acted as simple wish fulfillment. Mattie was not able to be at Albert's side when he died in real life, but she was able to be there in her own invented history.

In the accounts of Albert's passing, Mattie and the newspapermen fundamentally disagree about the character of Mattie Howard. The newspapers in 1920 doggedly portrayed Mattie as a threat to Kansas City society. In 1937, Mattie needed to make herself appear palatable as a minister to a conservative Christian audience. She could not afford to appear as a cold, calculating murderess. She countered the newspaper narratives not only in her claim of

¹⁶⁶ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 92.

non-involvement in Morino's murder and her reframing of Albert's death, but also in her description of her courtroom behavior. Mattie claimed that she "really felt like weeping" during the trial process, but was obedient to her "lawyer's instructions to act cool and to display no emotion." The lawyer even provided her with small snacks to chew on "in order to appear nonchalant." Therefore, according to Mattie, her indifference was not her fault, but rather the fault of her lawyer's faulty advice. In fact, Mattie wrote, her ability to maintain this veneer of coolness was a demonstration of "her strong willpower." This shifted her behavior from psychopathy to an example of moral fortitude. She was able to maintain the façade in the face of "the humiliating ordeal of the gaping crowds."¹⁶⁷

While these examples shed light on the competition between the narrative presented by the press in the 1920s and Mattie's 1937 memoirs, the split becomes more evident when dealing with events that took place after Albert's death. His death took place as hearings for a potential new trial were underway. The prosecutors, just as they had in the trial the previous fall, moved the case beyond the particulars of the Morino murder and focused on the threat Mattie presented to society. Expanding on their previous arguments, the prosecution argued that she was too dangerous to be granted a new trial. Deputy Prosecutor Curtin placed Mattie definitively in the role of gang leader, claiming that "most of the safe robberies in this vicinity" were undertaken at Mattie's direction. Curtin also made Mattie an active participant in these activities. He maintained that she "can creak a safe as neatly as anyone" and insisted that she often accompanied her underlings disguised as a man.¹⁶⁸ In his closing arguments, Curtin pointed his finger at Mattie and thundered "There sits one of the most dangerous women in this community!

¹⁶⁷ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 83.

¹⁶⁸ "One Admits, 1 Dies," *The Kansas City Star*, 13 March 1920.

Every man she ever associated with either is dead, in the penitentiary, or awaiting trial for some crime... I'm going to do my best to rid the community of such a woman!"¹⁶⁹ This argument proved as effective in March 1920 as it had in October 1919. The request for a new trial was denied. Judge Ralph H. Latshaw tersely informed Mattie that "Twelve men better than I have decided on your guilt."

The case was not over, however. Her lawyer appealed the case to the Missouri State Supreme Court, which agreed to take it. Because of this appeal, Mattie was able to avoid jail once again, enjoying temporary freedom on a \$10,000 bond.¹⁷⁰ Mattie's lawyer agreed to act as her bondsman, but then strangely seemed to have lost interest in the case. In the record of *State v. Howard*, the Missouri State Supreme Court stated simply that "no brief has been filed here in behalf of appellant." Without this paperwork, the Supreme Court was forced to "carefully read the brief of [the state], as well as the 690-page record, to ascertain whether any reversible error was committed against the appellant during the progress of the trial."¹⁷¹ There seems to be no explanation for why Jesse James, Jr., did little more than the bare minimum during the appeals process.

Mattie, however, offered her own explanation seventeen years later. Already blaming her lawyer for her behavior at trial, she was more than happy to also accuse him of malpractice. Her appeal "meant more fees for the crafty lawyer." "[M]any lawyers intentionally prolong cases... in order to obtain every cent possible from a client who can furnish money," explained Mattie. This lasted until the money ran out, when the lawyer was more than happy to let the client go to

¹⁶⁹ "Mattie Howard in Tears," *The Kansas City Star*, 19 March 1920.

¹⁷⁰ "Mattie Howard in Tears," *The Kansas City Star*, 19 March 1920.

¹⁷¹ "State v. Howard," *The Southwestern Reporter* 231 (July-August 1921): 256.

prison. Her autobiography claimed that Jesse James, Jr., was this kind of lawyer.¹⁷² Thus Mattie shifted the guilt associated with her trial. Her behavior at trial was not her fault; rather it was the fault of her “crafty lawyer.” Portrayals of lawyers in the 1930s were overwhelmingly negative, allowing Mattie to tap into public mistrust of that profession to lend credence to her claim.¹⁷³

Whether it was done through purposeful manipulation or for some other unknown reason, by failing to file a brief Jesse James, Jr. had all but guaranteed the outcome of the case. On 26 May 1921, the Missouri State Supreme Court upheld the lower court’s decision and mandated that Mattie be finally sent to prison.¹⁷⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, when the police went to collect her, she was nowhere to be found. Having withdrawn from public life after Albert’s funeral, she had not been present during the Supreme Court’s deliberations. One paper claimed that she had sent letters and religious literature to the Kansas City police from her mother’s house in Raton, New Mexico in March 1921, but when authorities arrived to search the premises she was not there either.¹⁷⁵ A New Mexico detective, reviewing the letters she had supposedly sent, instead discovered that the letters had originated from post offices near the Great Lakes, rather than from New Mexico.¹⁷⁶ Mattie was on the run again.

When Jesse James, Jr. learned of this, he and fellow bondsmen Lester C. Talbott immediately went to a local Kansas City bank. At that bank, Mattie had assured them, was a safety deposit box containing her jewelry which was her security on her bond. Upon opening the box the bondsmen were shocked to discover that the valuables had been replaced with “chunks

¹⁷² Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 89.

¹⁷³ See Martin Gang, “The Screen Image of the Lawyer,” *American Bar Association Journal* 48 (November 1962).

¹⁷⁴ *State v. Howard*, *The Southwestern Reporter* 231 (July-August 1921): 256.

¹⁷⁵ “The Girl With the Agate Eyes,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 April 1921.

¹⁷⁶ “Mattie Howard In Canada,” *The Kansas City Star*, 2 June 1921.

of coals, washers, and sticks.”¹⁷⁷ Enraged, the two issued a bounty notice which duplicated the narrative that had been put forth by the prosecutors and by the press. The notice proclaimed that Mattie would “be found with bank robbers, post office robbers, and smugglers”; she “often goes out on the job dressed as a man and may now be disguised as such.” The notice went on to warn prospective bounty hunters that she was “a leader and planner of the most dangerous type” who “would not hesitate to commit murder at any time.” They offered a 500 dollar reward for information leading to her capture.¹⁷⁸

In spite of the hefty reward, the bounty notice did not result in an immediate arrest. By mid-June 1921, Judge Latshaw decided that Mattie had officially skipped bail and ordered Talbot and James to ensure the bond was paid back in full.¹⁷⁹ James, showing himself to be an able lawyer when he needed to be, successfully delayed a hearing on the bond collection until January 1922.¹⁸⁰ This gave him and Talbot some breathing room before they had to pay back the \$10,000 bond. They could only hope that Mattie would be captured before then. They were joined in this hope by the Kansas City Police Department, which had been embarrassed by Mattie’s escape. When spreading word on the bounty offered by her bondsmen, Chief of Detectives I.B. Walston reportedly uttered that he wanted “her dead or alive.”¹⁸¹

The press, meanwhile, descended into a frenzy of speculation. Shortly after her disappearance, *The Kansas City Kansan* claimed that “the uncrowned queen of the underworld” had fled the city in January 1921 “for Tia Juana (sic),” though authorities were quick to dismiss

¹⁷⁷ “Mattie Howard In Canada,” *The Kansas City Star*, 2 June 1921.

¹⁷⁸ “Bounty Notice for Mattie Howard,” as quoted in King, *Kill-Crazy Gang*, 89.

¹⁷⁹ “Howard Mandate Here,” *The Kansas City Star*, 15 June 1921.

¹⁸⁰ “A Mattie Howard Delay,” *The Kansas City Star*, 29 September 1921.

¹⁸¹ “\$500 Reward Offered for Woman ‘Crook,’” *The Evening Sun*, 22 October 1921.

the claim.¹⁸² *The Kansas City Star* joined in this speculation on 2 June 1921 after hearing reports that police in Winnipeg, Canada, had reportedly arrested a woman identified as Mattie Howard on fraud charges.¹⁸³ *The Star* was disappointed, however, when the Canadian authorities sent a photograph of the woman to Kansas City four days later. A cursory examination revealed “not even a slight resemblance in the features” between the arrested woman and Mattie. Instead, it turned out to be the similarly named “Mamie Howard,” a local Kansas City prostitute.¹⁸⁴ The press had either seen the last name and gotten overexcited, or perhaps a Canadian officer had made a typo. Throughout the summer, Mattie remained on the loose. By October, authorities feared that she was trying to escape overseas. Police in Baltimore, Maryland, were urged to watch the harbor in case she tried to board a boat.¹⁸⁵

As Mattie recalled it in her autobiography, however, for most of 1921 she was blissfully unaware of the manhunt. Instead, she claimed that she received permission to leave Kansas City for Raton to visit a sick sister there. Her lawyer was supposed to inform her when it was time for her to appear in court again, but, according to Mattie, “she never heard from him.” With no information from Jesse James, Jr. forthcoming, she feared her case was lost and that she would be sent to prison if she returned. Fleeing Raton, she traveled to Mexico where she met up with “some old acquaintances” from the Kansas City underworld. While there, Mattie “frequented familiar cabarets and night clubs,” becoming “the life of the party.” This was the first time in Mattie’s memoirs that she admitted to embracing aspects of the criminal lifestyle, such as drinking to excess, pick-pocketing, and running small confidence schemes. By shifting the

¹⁸² “Agate Eyed Girl Has Disappeared,” *The Kansas City Kansan*, 26 May 1921.

¹⁸³ “Mattie Howard In Canada,” *The Kansas City Star*, 2 June 1921.

¹⁸⁴ “Is Not Mattie Howard,” *The Kansas City Star*, 6 June 1921.

¹⁸⁵ “\$500 Reward Offered for Woman ‘Crook,’” *The Evening Sun*, 22 October 1921.

narrative in this way, she framed criminal activity as a last-resort, something she had been driven to by persecution in Kansas City.¹⁸⁶

Mattie claimed that by November, several of her criminal acquaintances had convinced her to go back to Kansas City after they learned of the Supreme Court's decision. They reasoned, "she had been tried for her fist offense and [maybe] she could obtain a parole, pardon, or perhaps a new trial if she obeyed the law" by leaving Mexico and returning. While it seems unlikely that criminals, themselves on the run in a foreign country, would offer such advice, Mattie claimed to take their words to heart. She said she was trying to return to Kansas City, when she passed through Memphis, Tennessee. There she "knew a certain man who would buy all the rings and jewelry she possessed."¹⁸⁷ Upon arriving there on 15 November, she spoke with the man. Claiming that he didn't have the money to facilitate the transaction, he left his store to get the cash, leaving her in his basement. Instead of getting money, however, he notified the police, who soon came and arrested Mattie. Surrendering to the authorities without a fight, Mattie was held in Memphis before being transferred to the Missouri State Penitentiary to start her sentence.¹⁸⁸

This was Mattie's 1937 accounting of events but it disagreed with Mattie's 1921 narrative, offered shortly after her arrest. Speaking to Lester C. Talbot, one of her bondsmen, Mattie did not mention Mexico. Instead, the only location prior to Memphis that she did discuss was Cleveland, Ohio. While in Cleveland she had made the acquaintance of an "old gentleman" who had connections to horse racing. She met up with him in Memphis, where he was on business, and he escorted her to meet a friend of hers. Her friend's husband, who ran a drug

¹⁸⁶ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 97-98.

¹⁸⁷ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 98.

¹⁸⁸ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 99.

store, contacted the police and turned Mattie in for the reward, while also convincing a friend on the police force to rob her elderly escort.¹⁸⁹

If this was a lie, Mattie in 1937 determined that this was no longer the right lie. In the version recorded in her memoirs, Mattie could have stayed in Mexico and remained safe from arrest. Instead, she made the decision to do the right thing, albeit encouraged by gangsters also in exile. She merely happened to be caught on her way to turn herself in. Mattie's 1921 narrative didn't share the decision to return to Kansas City; she was simply caught while still on the lamb and couldn't get away in time. The 1937 version of events, therefore, reinforced Mattie's claim to inherent goodness while also adding a feeling of tragedy. She was so close to doing the right thing, but was unable to do so because she was betrayed by an unsavory character.

In addition to the two accounts offered by Mattie, reports of Mattie's arrest also made the newspapers. The *Concordia Blade-Empire* wrote that she was "calm, seeming almost amused" upon being arrested. Mattie reportedly said she was "going back to Kansas City without a struggle," just as she maintained in her contemporary testimony and her 1937 autobiography. Additionally, the *Blade-Empire* agreed that Mattie's capture was the result of an acquaintance's betrayal, writing that "a man... proved the undoing of the woman." A name or occupation for this man was not given in the report, though there seemed to be a sense of smug satisfaction that a man had captured a suspected black widow. A week after her arrest, the newspapers recounted that she was sent to the Missouri State Penitentiary, where "she laughed and sang as she was led away" into the prison gates.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ "Mattie Howard's Statement (To the Police)," RH MS 1010, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.

¹⁹⁰ "Laughed and Sang As She Was Led Away for 12-Year Prison Term," *The Provo Post*, 30 June 1922. See also "Woman Gangster Sent to Prison," *The Hancock Democrat*, 31 August 1922, "The Bloody Trail of 'The Girl With

The newspapers were not done with Mattie just yet. In December 1921, the *Kansas City Kansan* reported that Mattie had informed prison officials she was pregnant. The *Kansan* was concerned, as this would have immediately resulted in her parole. “No child [had] been born in the penitentiary,” and it was unlikely that the prison would break that tradition. The warden ordered the prison doctor to examine her closely “to ascertain the truth of her statement.” Other officials, however, were seemingly not as concerned. Speaking to the *Springfield Daily Leader*, unnamed employees at the prison maintained that “women prisoners invariably claim they are ill when they are first received at the penitentiary.” They felt that Mattie, like so many others, was simply trying to get out of work detail.¹⁹¹ Mattie’s autobiography, of course, does not mention this. The Mattie of her autobiography was never physically intimate with anyone; she maintaining a near virginal status in the book. A pregnancy claim would have been out of step with the sexual politics of the 1937 narrative. According to the newspapers, it soon became evident that Mattie was not pregnant and that she would serve out her sentence. With this threat to civilized society safely locked away, newspapers lost interest. The case was closed.

Before her final arrest, Mattie had moved from a regional obsession to a national sensation. Months before she caused a nationwide manhunt, newspapers in Atlanta, Georgia, and San Francisco, California, published seemingly syndicated articles on her escapades.¹⁹² While the regional newspapers had engaged in initial narrative building, these national reports would go a step further. Dedicating two whole pages to Mattie’s story, the articles in Georgia and California highlighted the most salacious aspects of the case. They added fictional details to

the Agate Eyes,” *The Arkansas Gazette*, 5 February 1922, “Woman Gangster Sent To Prison,” *The Raymond Review*, 20 July 1922, and “Woman Gangster Sent to Prison,” *The St. Bernard Voice*, 29 July 1922.

¹⁹¹ “Motherhood May Be Reason For Parole of Noted Prisoner,” *The Springfield Daily Leader*, 16 December 1921.

¹⁹² See “The Girl With the Agate Eyes,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 April 1921; “The Girl With the Agate Eyes,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 27 March 1921.

heighten the sensationalism of the case, such as claiming that Joe Morino's mangled body had been discovered dangling from a chandelier rather than merely found on the floor with head trauma.¹⁹³ Additionally, these articles had a visual element, with photographs of Mattie and Albert, as well as illustrations.

The illustration used in the Georgia and California papers stands out in particular. Taking up the top portions of both pages dedicated to the story, the image begins on the top-left with a depiction of two beautiful female eyes. Two lines emanate from them, which are meant to depict a sort of vision. Between the two lines (i.e., within the vision) are smaller illustrations depicting Albert's last robbery, the exploits of Dale Jones, the last stand of Lewis-Jones' gang enforcer Roscoe Lancaster, the crime scene of the Morino murder, and even the 1914 post-office robbery committed by Mattie's brother. The photograph was more than a picture; it was an argument for Mattie's guilt. This is reinforced in the text of the articles, which placed Mattie firmly in the role of Queen of the Kansas City underworld. Even the Lewis-Jones gang, according to the papers, were little more than pawns of Mattie.¹⁹⁴ Her eyes were ascribed near mystical powers in the opening paragraphs of the Georgia and California articles. "Eleven men, one woman, came under the uncanny spell of Mattie Howard's agate eye... Mattie Howard, eyes strangely gleaming under her shock of yellow hair, exuded her baleful influence..."¹⁹⁵

By 1922, there were similar reports in Utah, New York, Indiana, Louisiana, and Arkansas, in addition to additional articles in Nebraska and states adjacent to Missouri. While

¹⁹³ See "The Girl With the Agate Eyes," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 April 1921; "The Girl With the Agate Eyes," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 27 March 1921.

¹⁹⁴ "The Girl With the Agate Eyes," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 April 1921; "The Girl With the Agate Eyes," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 27 March 1921.

¹⁹⁵ "The Girl With the Agate Eyes," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 April 1921; "The Girl With the Agate Eyes," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 27 March 1921.

almost all of these articles had at least one illustration of Mattie, most were merely columns instead of special features like the Georgia and California articles had been.¹⁹⁶ Some, however, equaled those two in scope. Run in both *The Indianapolis Star* and *The Buffalo Times*, a two-page spread on Mattie's case included photographs of each man thought to have died as a result of her direction. This same article included a detailed illustration that would not have been of place in a mystery novel. The upper-right corner of the second page was dominated by a fanciful image of Mattie wearing a mask that highlighted her shining eyes, depicted as having cat-like pupils. These same eyes were described in the article as being "coldly hypnotic orbs," with Mattie herself compared to a "vampire."¹⁹⁷

These articles were emblematic of how descriptions of Mattie evolved. Initial reports in 1918 describing her as "youthful and attractive" had mutated over four years of newspaper coverage. *The Ogden Standard-Examiner* in 1922 wrote that Mattie was "brilliantly blonde, with a clear fair skin" and that she "attracted attention wherever she went."¹⁹⁸ The Indiana and New York syndicated articles described her smiles as a "sudden curve of scarlet lips" that contained "mystery" and "witchery."¹⁹⁹ This increasing focus on Mattie's body helped the press demonstrate her criminality. She was using her attractiveness to lure men into committing crimes on her behalf; or, as the *Standard-Examiner* termed it, she was "a siren of the social deeps, a criminal Helen."²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ See "Woman Gangster Sent to Prison," in *The Wasatch Wave*, 21 July 1922; *The Raymond Review* 20 July 1922; *The St. Bernard Voice*, 29 July 1922; *The Hancock Democrat*, 31 August 1922; and *The Ceresco Courier*, 20 July 1922.

¹⁹⁷ "The Mystery of Mattie Howard's 'Smile of Death' and the Ten Me Who Saw it and Died," *The Indianapolis Star*, 17 September 1922, and *The Buffalo Times*, 17 September 1922.

¹⁹⁸ "The 'Girl With the Agate Eyes,'" *The Ogden Standard-Examiner*, 5 February 1922

¹⁹⁹ "The Mystery of Mattie Howard's 'Smile of Death' and the Ten Me Who Saw it and Died," *The Indianapolis Star*, 17 September 1922, and *The Buffalo Times*, 17 September 1922.

²⁰⁰ "The 'Girl With the Agate Eyes,'" *The Ogden Standard-Examiner*, 5 February 1922

Her 1937 autobiography was written with these articles in mind. It is no small wonder, then, that when she was writing her memoirs she worked hard to position herself as respectable, virginal, and moral. In countering this narrative so aggressively, Mattie risked the characteristics that set her apart from fellow itinerant ministers. She was famous as a former gangster woman, someone who had run with dangerous men and committed serious crimes before converting to Christianity. This was her major selling point; by claiming that she had been entirely innocent her whole life Mattie risked losing part of her attraction as a preacher. She was now confronted with the question of how would she resolve this dilemma.

Both the newspapers of 1917-1922 and Mattie Howard in her 1937 book engaged in narrative building. The reporters, motivated by a desire to sell papers, used facts of the case reported by police and Mattie's own behavior at trial to craft a narrative depicting her as a murderous woman who used her physical charms to lure gangsters to do her bidding. This narrative was taken up by the prosecution in Mattie's murder trial, allowing them to counter existing bias against convicting female defendants and convince the jury of her guilt. This also demonstrates a key exception to the trend of early 20th century women not being found guilty of capital crimes. Almost 20 years after the murder of Joe Morino, Mattie sought to directly counter these prevailing stories by portraying herself as an inherently moral young woman who was wrongfully accused and convicted. By utilizing tropes that would have been familiar to her audience, Mattie built upon 1930s popular culture to depict herself as a starry-eyed young woman who was caught up by the worldliness of the big city, yet managed to retain her internal moral compass.

Chapter Two:
“From Prison to Pulpit”

The dilemma of presenting herself as enticingly deviant, while simultaneously as a moral exemplar, loomed over Mattie as she continued to work on her memoirs. However, she was given a unique blessing as she approached her post-Kansas City career. Between 1921 and her religious conversion in 1933, newspaper articles discussing her career and exploits were relatively few in number and did not have national reach. The popular narrative ended in 1921, with her maniacally laughing as the prison gates closed behind her. This meant that Mattie no longer faced a narrative that countered her own, allowing her to embark on a journey of self-creation. While she freely rewrote history to suit her narrative since the beginning of her autobiography, she had been inhibited by the multitude of articles discussing her criminal career. Even if she was able to rewrite details about events, she was still tethered to a timeline of exiting dates and times. Now, she could fully embrace fiction as a tool to overcome her dilemma. This allowed her to portray herself as a model prisoner, an ex-convict unfairly rejected by civilized society, a desperate gun moll terrorizing the Prohibition-era Chicago gangland, and as a governess and penitent sinner who embraced the light of the Gospel.

Her embrace of fiction to create her desired narrative reflected the autobiographical nature of her work. According to scholar Timothy Dow Adams in his monograph *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*, “lying in autobiography is not just something that happens inevitably; rather, it is a highly strategic decision.”²⁰¹ It is Mattie’s strategy, as she delved into

²⁰¹ Timothy Dow Adams, *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), x

complete self-invention, that provides valuable insights. By utilizing popular narratives of the late-1930s, especially those that dealt with criminality and the prison experience, Mattie was able to successfully carve out a niche for herself and her ministry. This story would enable her to support herself as a traveling preacher for decades to come. Additionally, examining the later narratives of Mattie's memoirs sheds light not only on how she wanted others to see her, but how she saw herself. As Timothy Adams explains, "autobiography is the story of an attempt to reconcile one's life with one's self..."²⁰² Mattie was resolving the dilemma of being a godly woman and a convicted murderer not only for her audience, but for herself.

Section One: Mattie's Prison Narrative

As the doors of the Missouri State Penitentiary closed on Mattie Howard, she faced a twelve-year prison sentence. She recalled that as they closed she felt a wave of uneasiness and loneliness wash over her. The prospect of that she would actually serve time did not seem to have settled in until that point. She would write that her first thought was to fear that "maybe I'll die in here and never get out."²⁰³ Immediately Mattie was threatened by the prison's matron, who Mattie referred to as Miss Brown. Miss Brown referred to Mattie as an "eel" and claimed that the prison staff would "take that spirit out of you." Mattie quickly replaced her trepidation with indignation. "You'll not make me do anything but die," she claimed she responded. This began a years-long feud between Mattie and the prison matron.²⁰⁴

²⁰² Adams, *Telling Lies*, ix.

²⁰³ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 105.

²⁰⁴ Howard, *Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 107.

Much of the early portion of Mattie's prison narrative focused on the horrors of the American prison system. The matron and other prison officials had near total control over the lives of the inmates they supervised. Officials, Mattie claimed, often targeted those who they particularly disliked. As an example, she wrote that prisoners were not allowed to speak to one another at night, but the guard on duty usually ignored conversations until someone she had a grudge against spoke up.²⁰⁵ Additionally, Mattie's clothing and bedding was insufficient to keep her warm in the drafty and dark nights in her cell.²⁰⁶ Clothing was a particular sore spot for her. Having developed a love and appreciation for fashion during her time in Kansas City, Mattie recalled the horror at not being allowed to wear her own clothes. Instead, she was forced to wear a "blue chambray dress" that did not fit properly. One silver lining, however, was that the blue of the dress "brought out the blue in her eyes, and set off to advantage her golden hair."²⁰⁷

Additionally, Mattie wrote about the abuses of the prison labor system. Women at the Missouri State Penitentiary, according to her autobiography, were expected to sew "twenty-two dozen shirts a day." While it is not clear whether this was the quota set for all women prisoners, Mattie's narrative implies that this was the expectation for each individual inmate, regardless of ability or mental capacity. She lamented seeing "girls faint from exhaustion in the workshop [who] were roughly revived, compelled to resume their tasks immediately, and prodded to accomplish their usual proportion of work."²⁰⁸ For this intensive labor, the inmates were to receive a dollar a month. However, Mattie claimed that this was not usually the case, and their

²⁰⁵ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 115.

²⁰⁶ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 116.

²⁰⁷ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 109-110.

²⁰⁸ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 120.

wages amounted to an occasional 75 cents, often given at random. “It amounted practically to working without pay,” she wrote.²⁰⁹

Mattie believed that the prison labor system was not only bad for the prisoners who were forced to work in it, but that it was bad for the country as a whole. The timing of her memoirs’ publication gave these claims added weight. While the nation had been undergoing a slow recovery during much of the 1930s, in 1937 a steep recession shook the confidence of many that there would be a real end to the economic hardship. Mattie wrote that the prison labor system was actually exacerbating unemployment, something that would have been on the forefront of her readers’ minds in 1937.²¹⁰ The manufacture of cheap prison-made products discouraged corporations and employers from hiring regular civilians who would, presumably, actually have to receive consistent wages. Mattie was not completely against prisoners working; many, she claimed, would appreciate honest work as a way to break up the monotony of their days. However, they deserved to be paid minimum wage, as many had family to support who would otherwise have to rely on state relief.²¹¹

Something that Mattie does not include in her story of her early prison years was her claim of pregnancy—an incident that appeared in the last few articles dealing with her incarceration. It makes sense that she chose to omit this, as it challenged the narratives she sought to present. First, Mattie presented herself as functionally sexually pure, writing out her failed marriage and sanitizing the relationship she had with Albert Pagle and other Kansas City gangsters. A claimed pregnancy would imply sex outside the bounds of marriage, which would not be acceptable to Mattie’s intended audience. Second, the pregnancy claim could weaken the

²⁰⁹ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 121.

²¹⁰ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 121

²¹¹ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 122.

impact of Mattie's attacks on the prison labor system. A Kansas City paper noted prisoners often claimed to be sick when they first entered prison in order to get out of work detail.²¹² Mattie's claim of pregnancy, especially when it was revealed to be false, would depict her as a shirker, rather than someone who grimly faced the jaws of the prison-industrial system.

Beyond that, Mattie depicted herself as a rebel against an unjust system. Driven by an antipathy to the prison matron, she recalled engaging in what she termed "pranks." The activity, however, was more akin to active rebellion. At one point, she claimed that she convinced another inmate to lay in wait for the matron. When she passed by, Mattie and her accomplice jumped her and dragged her down the stairs of their cell block. Drawn by the matron's screams, guards quickly arrived at the scene, where Mattie and her accomplice "quickly began rushing the dirt off of the matron's dress... addressing her in forced sympathetic tones" and asking if she had hurt herself falling down the stairs. Their act was so convincing that the warden believed them and ignored the matron's claims that she had been physically assaulted.²¹³ In addition, Mattie recalled engaging in what might be termed industrial sabotage. Growing increasingly frustrated with being forced to participate in the prison labor system, Mattie regularly threw "a piece of fat pork" into the driving belt of the prison sewing machines, causing malfunctions and forcing work for her and her fellow inmates to stop in order to allow for repairs. She also purposefully sewed the wrong size collars onto shirts and bending needles to break her sewing machine.²¹⁴

This creates an interesting contrast. Mattie's autobiography steadfastly denied participation in criminal activity while living in Kansas City, but readily admitted engaging in destructive behaviors while incarcerated. One likely explanation for this contrast is that Mattie's

²¹² "Mattie Howard Yet May Cheat Justice," *The Kansas City Kansan*, 11 December 1921.

²¹³ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 161-162.

²¹⁴ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 164.

“targets” in prison were less sympathetic to her audience. American prisons in the 1930s were widely depicted in popular media as places of violence, with guards, wardens, and other officials generally portrayed as villains. Prisoners were more likely to be viewed positively in these depictions than those meant to “rehabilitate” them. Mattie’s prison activity placed her in the role of the innocent woman fighting against an evil system that continued to wrong her. The writings stress that the only reason she was behaving this way was due to the antagonistic actions of the corrupt prison matron. In 1925, after the matron was replaced by a more benevolent official, Mattie claimed that her behavior drastically improved as her tormentor was gone.²¹⁵

While depicting her struggle with diabolical prison officials, Mattie also continued to reinforce the narrative of her own inherent morality. She was shocked at the behavior of her fellow inmates. “Their blasphemy and their obscene conversations, their vicious quarreling and their vices” shook her more than any activity she saw carried out by criminals in Kansas City. Mattie was also shocked by the sanitation and health procedures at the prison. The female inmates who were too ill to work in the sewing room were tasked with work in the kitchen. Clothing of diseased and non-diseased prisoners were washed together without soap or disinfectants. “Clothes of syphilitics, and of those suffering from sores, ulcers, venereal diseases, and tuberculosis, were all laundered together,” Mattie lamented. She also made the shocking claim that 180 of 184 female inmates at the penitentiary while she was there were syphilitics—she, of course, being one of the lucky four who was not.²¹⁶ Given the specific numbers Mattie gave, one would not be remiss questioning how she may have gotten such precise information.

²¹⁵ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 195.

²¹⁶ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 124-125.

However, by tying her fellow inmates to syphilis, Mattie both reinforced her claims of her fellow inmates' immorality, as well as highlighting the unsanitary conditions of the prison.

Even more shocking to Mattie than this, however, was that there was no segregation between white and black female prisoners. Her memoir's prison section deals extensively with race. Mattie, despite claiming that she was not racist and never using explicit language, nevertheless viewed Black inmates with intense suspicion.²¹⁷ In her narrative, all of the corrupt matron's inmate accomplices were Black.²¹⁸ Black inmates, according to Mattie, were responsible for maintaining an illegal laundry racket, where they charged white inmates for use of the laundry room.²¹⁹ They ran this scheme with implicit permission from the matron. Additionally, Mattie claimed that Black inmates often acted as stool pigeons for the matron, reporting on other prisoners' behaviors to her. Whenever Mattie described a fellow prisoner that was being targeted by the system, the matron, or the Black inmates, their race was never explicitly stated but the implication was that they were white. By engaging in such racialization, Mattie sought to create an image of a "true" female offender that differed completely from her own. A true female offender was Black, sexually promiscuous, syphilitic, and more than willing to engage in illegal behavior for personal gain. Mattie, on the other hand, depicted herself as white, virtuous, hygienic, and (at this point in her narrative, at least) innocent of any real wrongdoing.

Mattie also racialized the homosexual relationships she witnessed between female prisoners. Mattie claimed that Black and white inmates "pretended to be husbands and wives to one another... they indulged in familiarities unfit to print." This behavior was not viewed by

²¹⁷ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 138.

²¹⁸ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 133-134.

²¹⁹ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 134.

Mattie as natural, and she claims was the result of the prison system which she wrote was “perfectly designed to promote degeneracy.”²²⁰ Black inmates who were trusted by the matron were, in Mattie’s recollections, key to this system. At night, they would leave cell doors unlocked to allow inmate couples to meet. Mattie emphasized that Black inmates were the ones to initiate these relationships by claiming that the only woman who approached her for sex was Black.²²¹

These claims fell in line with contemporary views on lesbian relationships. According to scholar Siobhan Somerville in her book *Queering the Color Line*, early 20th century psychologists claimed that female institutions saw “widespread” interracial homosexual behavior. Somerville notes that one psychologist claimed that in these relationships “the girls incorporated racial difference into courtship rituals self-consciously patterned on traditional gender roles.” According to these psychologists, Black women would take the more active role of “males,” while white women would adopt a more passive, “female” role. Somerville additionally writes that the interracial element of these relationships highlighted their sexual nature. “In a culture in which [authors] could remark that [they were] accustomed to women being on intimate terms, race became a marker for the sexual nature of that liaison.”²²² By racializing lesbian relationships in the Missouri State Penitentiary, Mattie tied herself to this line of reasoning.

The seeming prevalence of homosexuality among her fellow inmates provided a chance for Mattie to emphasize her own morality. She claimed that, with the help of a priest, she sent a

²²⁰ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 146.

²²¹ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 147.

²²² Siobhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 34-35.

letter to the State Welfare League requesting an interview with the director to discuss the widespread occurrence of lesbian relationships in the prison. The field secretary of the League, a woman named Miss Bates, met with Mattie in private and listened to her concerns. Upon the conclusion of their interview, the field secretary proclaimed that Mattie was “as beautiful within as she [was] without,” and immediately promised to take action.²²³ Thanks to this, Mattie claimed, segregation was introduced thus causing “many of the evils in question” to be “removed.”²²⁴ By framing the introduction of segregation as a moral good, Mattie appealed to her evangelical audience. As highlighted by noted historian of American evangelicalism Matthew Sutton in his text *American Apocalypse*, “Segregation was so prevalent in churches around the country that it rarely provoked comment.”²²⁵ Even those evangelical movements based in the North “did not see racism or segregation as signs of injustice or as sins that required their penance.”²²⁶ Some leaders in the movement even viewed “segregation as a characteristic of godly living.”²²⁷ Expressing pro-segregation views placed Mattie solidly in the evangelical mainstream.

Mattie additionally claimed responsibility for the removal of another evil from the penitentiary- that of the corrupt prison matron. Mrs. Brown’s patience evidently ran out after losing a “tussle” with Mattie and being temporarily trapped in a cell.²²⁸ Sending guards to wake up Mattie in the middle of the night and physically drag her from her cell, Mrs. Brown ordered her confined in what Mattie called “the dungeon.” Her usage of the word dungeon was quite

²²³ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 147.

²²⁴ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 148.

²²⁵ Matthew Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 131.

²²⁶ Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 278.

²²⁷ Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 136.

²²⁸ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 184.

literal. “Many of the victims [in the dungeon] were compelled to stand all day with their wrists chained high above their heads to a steel ring,” she wrote, casting imagery of a Medieval torture chamber.²²⁹ Living in a damp, cold cell with only the bare minimum of food, Mattie fell ill.²³⁰

However, this sickness would be to her advantage. After five days, the prison doctor advised the warden to take Mattie out of the dungeon. Agreeing, the warden ordered the matron to release her. Mrs. Brown protested; when that failed, she resigned. The reason for this resignation, Mattie claimed, was that the matron was afraid of what Mattie would do to her once she was back in the main prison population.²³¹ Therefore, Mattie’s darkest time in prison had a pleasant result, not only for her, but for all other prisoners who had been targeted by Mrs. Brown. Her narrative of this becomes more intriguing when one takes into account that Mattie referred to her time in the dungeon as her own personal “Gethsemane.”²³² While she was using the language of Biblical suffering, her text can be read in such a way that she directly compared herself to Jesus. Like Christ, she had undergone a severe trial only to come out of it alive with pleasant results for the sinners that surrounded her. The Devil, in this case Mrs. Brown, had been defeated through her suffering.

Mrs. Brown’s departure marked a new chapter in Mattie’s prison career. The warden, who was only recently appointed to his position, was a firm believer in rehabilitation. To this end, he decided to move most of the female prisoners out of the penitentiary to work and live on the state prison farm.²³³ Believing in second chances, the warden agreed to let Mattie go to the farm despite her bad record in the prison—a record which Mattie was quick to remind her

²²⁹ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 185.

²³⁰ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 193.

²³¹ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 194.

²³² Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 187.

²³³ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 197.

readers was the result of her war with the corrupt Mrs. Brown and her cronies.²³⁴ Mattie was excited at the prospect of the farm, and was grateful for the chance at a life outside the crowded confines of the prison. However, Mrs. Brown, in certain sense, followed Mattie to the farm. Before resigning from the prison, Mrs. Brown removed the previous superintendent of the farm and installed one of her accomplices, a man Mattie only identified as “Mr. U.” According to Mattie, Mr. U’s purpose was “to make a harem out of the Farm.” On multiple occasions, Mattie recalled only narrowly escaping Mr. U “[forcing] his affections upon her.”²³⁵ At one point, she claimed that she had to fend him off with a pitchfork.²³⁶ Growing tired of her rejection, Mr. U convinced several female inmates that he would supply them with liquor and drugs if they murdered Mattie.²³⁷ Mattie barely survived their subsequent assault with the timely intervention of the guard and the warden, who defeated Mattie’s attackers. After hearing the truth of what was going on at the prison farm from Mattie, the warden dismissed Mr. U, declared that Mattie “need never do another lick of work,” and appointed a new, more friendly, superintendent.²³⁸

The warden exempted Mattie from doing labor on the farm for other reasons as well. According to her memoirs, her health was beginning to fail. She recalled that “her lungs were affected, causing her to have a persistent cough.”²³⁹ She had also lost much in weight,” dropping to 118 pounds.²⁴⁰ Despite recovering slightly with the better conditions of the prison farm, Mattie was still susceptible to occasional spells of sickness that “kept her indisposed for days.” After one of these spells, Mattie was examined by the doctor who discovered that one of her lungs was

²³⁴ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 198.

²³⁵ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 202.

²³⁶ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 204.

²³⁷ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 207.

²³⁸ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 208-209.

²³⁹ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 210.

²⁴⁰ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 215.

tubercular, a condition exacerbated by a bout of pulmonary pneumonia in 1928. By this time, she had been in prison for nearly seven years, and, according to the prison doctor, she likely would not survive another year.²⁴¹ The warden, worrying for her health, gave Mattie her release papers and discharged her to the care of her sister.²⁴² She explained that she had not perished from tuberculosis, after she was released, because she had eaten a lot of “oranges and lemons in great quantities” with her meager allowance from the prison. According to a physician she consulted outside of the prison “partaking of these health-giving fruits was all that prolonged her life.”²⁴³

The prison records offer a fragmentary counter record to Mattie’s story of her time in prison as newspapers were mostly disinterested in her story after she was safely locked away. Her entry in the prison register survives as the only non-Mattie produced record of her imprisonment. It lists the term of Mattie’s sentence and then writes that she was disobedient, insolent, and profane. Mattie wouldn’t disagree, and attributes that to the antipathy of Mrs. Brown. However, the prison register gives another, very different explanation for why she was released. The register records that she was “discharged under merit time,” rather than due to medical concerns.²⁴⁴ Missouri in the late 1920s was facing issues with prison overcrowding. A law passed by the governor allowed for prisoners with relatively good behavior to be released from custody if they had served two-thirds of their sentence. This was the law that allowed Mattie’s release. The fact that she was released “for merit” does seem to support her claim that she turned her behavior around in prison, but it disagrees with her claim that she was released due to illness.

²⁴¹ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 212.

²⁴² Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 213.

²⁴³ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 215.

²⁴⁴ Entry for Mattie Howard, Numerical Register, Missouri State Penitentiary Database, Missouri Digital Heritage. <https://s1.sos.mo.gov/records/archives/archivesdb/msp/Detail.aspx?id=45124>

This, then, raises the question of why Mattie would invent the story of a life-threatening illness. One possibility may have been that she sought to reinforce her claims that the prison system was an unhealthy environment. After all, she made the claim that the clothing of sick women was washed alongside that of healthy women, and that sick prisoners were forced to continue to work in the workshops. Another potential possibility is that she sought to hone in on the narrative of persecution. Her time in prison was mostly spent dodging the unfair dictates of Mrs. Brown and her various lackeys, who personified the corruption inherent in the prison system. If she had been released by a law created by that same system, it may have undercut that aspect of her story.

After her release, newspaper interest briefly surged and their stories told a different story of her release. Kansas City reporters, surprised that such a dangerous woman was being let out early, came to the penitentiary to witness the event. They did not describe her as an emaciated woman afflicted by racking coughs. Instead, *The Kansas City Star* described her as having grown considerably “heavier,” wondering if a recent illness had “contributed to the plumpness.”²⁴⁵ While reports disagreed with Mattie over her physical condition, the articles seemingly concurred that her behavior had changed for the better.²⁴⁶ *The Kansas City Times* claimed that “when Mattie Howard first was committed in the penitentiary she was disobedient and defiant,” but that she “became a different girl from the sanguine gang queen.”²⁴⁷ A newspaper in Bowling Green, Kentucky, remarked that the transformation Mattie had undergone in prison should be viewed as an example for rehabilitation, writing that “every once in a while something like the

²⁴⁵ “To Free Mattie Howard,” *The Kansas City Times*, 17 May 1928.

²⁴⁶ See “Prisons and Reform,” *The Park City Daily News*, 23 May 1928; “A Changed ‘Agate Eyes,’” *The Kansas City Star*, 17 May 1928; and “‘Agate-Eyed’ Woman Out of State Prison,” *The Springfield Leader*, 17 May 1928.

²⁴⁷ “To Free Mattie Howard,” *The Kansas City Times*, 17 May 1928.

reformation of Mattie Howard comes to encourage us to persevere.”²⁴⁸ Most articles attributed this change to the practices of one particularly wise prison matron, who had gone out of her way to help Mattie to slowly change over time. While the newspaper articles did not directly cite any sources for this aspect of the story, it seems as if the information on this unnamed matron’s role came from officials within the prison. It is easy to imagine that these same prison officials may have exaggerated the system’s role in Mattie’s rehabilitation in order to demonstrate the efficacy of their corrective regimen, and reporters may have been more than happy to take up that narrative. It is important to note that there is no positive matron mentioned in Mattie’s personal recollections. According to Mattie, she was always inherently good and had been forced into antisocial behaviors by the pressures of prison officials.

The articles made note that there was a growing movement in the United States to turn prisons into places of rehabilitation rather than punishment. Prison labor systems, such as the one that Mattie had been forced to participate in while at the Missouri State Penitentiary, were coming under increasing scrutiny, as were other aspects of prison administration. The Texas Committee on Prisons and Prison Labor, for example, engaged in a lengthy study of that state’s prisons in 1924. They “recommended practices emblematic of... progressive penology.” Several of their proposals, such as “increased educational and recreational opportunities for all prisoners” and the “establishment of a parole board,” would be implemented by the state government of Texas by the end of the decade.²⁴⁹

This push for reform would continue into the 1930s, allowing Mattie a chance to tie her own autobiography into the push for reform. Several times within the prison portion of her

²⁴⁸ “Prisons and Reform,” *The Park City Daily News*, 23 May 1928.

²⁴⁹ Paul M. Lucko, “A Missed Opportunity: Texas Prison Reform during the Dan Moody Administration, 1927-1931,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 96 (July 1992): 34.

narrative Mattie made “asides,” in which she would quote extensively from newspapers or leading experts on the topic of prisons. These experts included a former warden of New York’s infamous Sing Sing Prison, the National Society of Penal Information, and a prison labor report by a committee of the National Recovery Administration.²⁵⁰ These asides reinforced her claims on the brutality of prison and added additional power to her calls for reform.

The most novel way Mattie sought to tie her narrative into the prison reform movement, however, came in its authorial attribution. Rather than placing her name on the cover, Mattie claimed that the book was written by an individual named “M. Harris.” This was almost certainly an attempt on Mattie’s part to tie her book to Mary Belle Harris, who was at the time serving as the administrator of the Federal woman’s prison in Alderson, West Virginia. According to historian Claudine Schweber, Harris believed that “women’s criminality was largely due to economic or psychological dependency,” and therefore sought to teach her inmates “employable skills which would free them from being dependent on a man or a burden on the community.” To that end, her prison was “a place where women would be educated and active, trained to be good citizens and self-supporting individuals.”²⁵¹ Many of Harris’s ideas coincided with the points pushed in *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, as well.

Upon analysis, the claim that Harris was the author of *The Pathway of Mattie Howard* does not hold up. The “biographical” portion of the text supposedly written by Harris and a letter written by Mattie at the end of the book are very similar in their construction and language usage. Second, Harris took a very different approach to Christianity than Mattie did. To Harris,

²⁵⁰ See Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 122, 156, and 158.

²⁵¹ Claudine Schweber, “Mary Belle Harris,” in *Notable American Women of The Modern Period: A Biographical Dictionary*, eds. Barbara Sicherman, Carol Hurd Green, Ilene Kantrov, and Harriette Walker (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), 316.

Christianity and religion in general was a strategy to be used to get at her larger goal of rehabilitation in her institution's inmates.²⁵² In Harris's own treatise on prison reform, she begins with an anecdote where a clergyman asked her if the work she was doing was good for her soul? Laughing, Harris replied that "she was far too busy taking care of her 'girls' to stop to think whether or not she had a soul."²⁵³ This differs strongly from the evangelical positions taken by the author of *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*. Third, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard* was published in 1937, while Harris was superintendent at Alderson. It seems extremely unlikely that the proactive and busy Harris would have been able to find the time to "spend many happy hours in the company of Mattie Howard," as claimed in the foreword to the text.²⁵⁴ Finally, historian Claudine Schweber, the eminent scholar on Mary Belle Harris, was unable to find evidence that she and Mattie Howard ever interacted. Given that, it seems even highly unlikely that Harris wrote a hagiographical account of Mattie's life.²⁵⁵

Why, then, did Mattie put M. Harris's name on the cover of her book, and make an effort to disguise the true authorship? A possible reason could have been connected to the publication of Harris's book on prison reform, *I Knew Them in Prison*, in 1936. This text was relatively successful and brought public attention to Harris's efforts at Alderson. By adding Harris's name to her book, Mattie may have been attempting to add respectability to her claims. After all, if a major figure in prison reform claimed that Mattie never truly needed to be reformed, who would be willing to contest that claim? Of course, Mattie was careful about this; by only using the term

²⁵² Mary Belle Harris, *I Knew Them In Prison* (New York: The Viking Press, 1936), 372.

²⁵³ Harris, *I Knew Them In Prison*, x

²⁵⁴ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, i.

²⁵⁵ Claudine Schweber, personal communication, 18 September 2021.

“M. Harris,” Mattie gave herself plausible deniability if she was confronted. Harris, on the other hand, always placed her full name on the covers of her books.

The attempted link with Mary Belle Harris illustrates the importance Mattie gave to her calls for prison reform. Her time in the Missouri State Penitentiary was intensely focused on in her autobiography, with almost a third of the page-count being devoted to outlining her experiences in the prison system. This stood in stark contrast with her treatment of her life in Kansas City, which received roughly half as much coverage within the text of *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*. She concluded her account of imprisonment by writing that she was “excited over her freedom and the marvels of the outside world.”²⁵⁶ The excitement of this release, however, was soon to fade.

Section Two: Mattie’s Chicago and Conversion Narrative

Newly released from prison, Mattie reunited with her sister, who reintroduced her to the outside world. Mattie recalled that the world had greatly changed in the years she had been in prison. Women’s skirts were much shorter, as were their haircuts.²⁵⁷ She barely had time to adjust to the changes before she and her sister traveled to their mother’s home. Mattie was shocked to see how much her mother had aged while she was in prison. Her mother, who had moved back to Denver from Raton, was now “a tiny, white-haired lady with deep furrows in her face and dark shadows under her eyes.”²⁵⁸ This had nothing to do with age, according to Mattie.

²⁵⁶ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 215.

²⁵⁷ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 214.

²⁵⁸ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 217.

Rather, her mother had been so worried for her daughter's wellbeing while in prison that she had wasted away to little more than skin and bones. Mattie, being a dutiful daughter, therefore intended to stay with her mother in order to "be as helpful and kind to her [mother] as she possibly could, to make up for all her mother had suffered on her account."²⁵⁹ This stood in stark contrast with the attitude Mattie exhibited earlier in her narrative, when she chafed at her mother's pleading influence and sought freedom. Prison, it seems, had taught her the importance of obedience.

This, however, would prove easier said than done. Because she had served time in prison for murder, she had become a marked woman in town. As she recalled, "neighbors were antagonistic toward her. People who were supposed to be her mother's friends... became suddenly very cool toward the family." Wherever she went, Mattie felt the judgmental stares of those around her. "All was hostility, suspicion, and coldness," she lamented.²⁶⁰ One day, a large number of visitors gathered outside the door, trying to catch a glimpse of Mattie and gawk at a murderess. Invariably, this hostility made it hard for her to find work. As an ex-convict, she was "coolly turned down" every time she applied for a job.²⁶¹ While this was a tragedy, it did allow Mattie to chance to preach against the social stigma that followed those released from prison. "Is it any wonder," she asked, "that ex-convicts generally seek the company of those whose influence is not good, when the so-called respectable people shun and snub them?"²⁶² Recidivism to Mattie, therefore, was due to society's treatment of newly released prisoners, as opposed to individuals simply falling back into old habits.

²⁵⁹ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 218.

²⁶⁰ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 218.

²⁶¹ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 218.

²⁶² Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 220.

After two weeks in Denver, Mattie claimed that she encountered a “former acquaintance from her dead lover’s gang.” This was the very same gangster who had, oddly, encouraged her to return to Kansas City in order to stand trial instead of continuing to hide in Mexico.²⁶³ This chance encounter would lead Mattie back into the underworld. After she complained to him that she had no opportunities or prospects in Denver, “he immediately tossed a roll of bills to her, and said, ‘Meet me up in ‘Chi.’”²⁶⁴ After some initial reticence, Mattie gave into the temptation, justifying it as a way to buy her mother and stepfather a large house. Mattie left her family once again and undertook the journey to Chicago. For the first time, Mattie claimed, “she *knew* she was affiliating herself with gangsters.”²⁶⁵

Mattie’s initial place in the new gang was more similar to the traditional gun-moll. The unnamed criminal organization she was now a part of had rented out an entire apartment building to use as their headquarters, and it was Mattie’s job to pretend to be the landlady and answer any phone calls. Additionally, she was tasked with serving food and drinks during meetings.²⁶⁶ Eventually, however, she became a more active participant. The gang was based out of Chicago, but it often struck out well beyond city limits. Mattie recalled that “on their raids they went from coast to coast, and from Mexico and Florida to Canada.” Her time in prison was key to this, as it had instilled “in her the traits of craftiness and slyness, which... enabled her to be of important service to the gang.”²⁶⁷ For the first time in her memoirs, Mattie admitted to participating in crime.

²⁶³ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 221.

²⁶⁴ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 222.

²⁶⁵ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 224. Emphasis in original.

²⁶⁶ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 225.

²⁶⁷ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 226.

This turn in her narrative is intriguing. By placing it after her time in prison, Mattie was able to reinforce her argument that ex-convicts turned to a life of crime due to polite society shunning them and preventing them from finding honest work. This argument is strengthened even more given her claims of innocence in the murder of Joe Morino. If she, a woman of good moral character who did not commit a crime, was driven to criminality by the rejection of society, what chance did an *actual* criminal have of “going straight?” Because no one would hire her, she was forced to become a criminal, which may have been understandable to a Depression-era audience. This also meant she couldn’t be responsible for those crimes, at least according to Mattie.

Surprisingly, Mattie writes about her crimes in Chicago in great detail. She outlines various confidence schemes that she participated in, including one in which she pretended to be disabled and got money from those who have sympathy for her.²⁶⁸ She also claimed to have acted as the get-away driver for the gang, speeding them away from bank robberies under the hail of gunfire. Mattie also admitted to participating in gun battles with the police. But lest her audience believe that she had tried to kill officers of the law, she clarified that “she always aimed at the policemen’s legs in order to avoid actually killing any of them.”²⁶⁹ She could not escape physical peril, no matter where she aimed. She admitted that she was grazed by bullets on two occasions, and on one occasion a finger on her left hand was hit by a bullet and left permanently crooked. In one chase, the car she was driving flipped over and caused long-lasting damage to her back.²⁷⁰

While these activities were bad, Mattie claimed that there were worse injustices performed by those in authority. Mattie insinuated that “respected men in many cities, who held,

²⁶⁸ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 230.

²⁶⁹ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 230-231.

²⁷⁰ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 231.

and may still be holding, official positions of great prominence... have accepted bribes from gangsters to grant protection to the latter in their lawless escapades.” Mattie also informed her readers that many of their bank robberies were planned not by the gangsters, by the bank officials themselves.²⁷¹ This claim reinforced an anti-elite narrative present throughout her book. The wealthy only make appearances in Mattie’s memoirs as unsuspecting marks or as agents of corruption. This played to the feelings of her target audience, mainly poor, white, fundamentalist Christians. As outlined by historian Heather D. Curtis, fundamentalist Christians during the great depression believed that “the banker... the politician, and the racketeer” were the chief examples of “degenerated humanity [that] was responsible for the misfortunes” of the Great Depression.²⁷² By placing these figures as a shadowy cabal directing the violence of the Chicago gangland, Mattie provided first-hand confirmation of her audience’s suspicions.

Mattie’s gang not only had supposed connections to the elite, but they also rubbed shoulders with the major criminal figures of Chicago. Mattie claimed that she was “affiliated” with many of “the leading gangsters,” citing Al Capone, John Dillinger, “Pretty Boy” Floyd, and “Baby Face” Nelson.²⁷³ It is here that a modern reader, with the benefit of reference material, may begin to realize that Mattie’s life as a Chicago gangster woman was a work of fantasy. John Dillinger, for example, was not an active criminal during this time period, as he was incarcerated in the Indiana State Prison from 1924 till 1933.²⁷⁴ “Pretty Boy” Floyd’s activities mostly took place in Ohio, Missouri, and Oklahoma, and he is not associated with the Chicago gangland.²⁷⁵

²⁷¹ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 233.

²⁷² Heather D. Curtis, “‘God Is Not Affected By the Depression:’ Pentecostal Missions during the 1930s,” *Church History* 80 (September 2011): 581.

²⁷³ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 235-236.

²⁷⁴ John Dillinger Timeline, American Experience, Public Broadcasting System. Accessed 3 February 2022. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/dillinger-john-dillinger-timeline/>

²⁷⁵ Floyd Charles Arthur, *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, Oklahoma Historical Society. Accessed 3 February 2022. <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=FL004>

Only Nelson and Capone were active in Chicago during this time period.²⁷⁶ Instead of placing herself in the Chicago gangland as it was, Mattie instead seemed to rely on popular culture perceptions of Prohibition-era mobsters when crafting her narrative.

Mattie's audience in 1937 would have been well-versed in the stories of Capone, Dillinger, and other notorious criminals of the era. Their stories were picked up and sensationalized by the press, as Mattie's own criminal activity had been. The "gangster film" was also ubiquitous in 1930s cinemas, with films such as *Scarface* in 1932 bringing the politics and violence of the Chicago gangland to the American public. Additionally, the newly created Federal Bureau of Investigation had helped to further increase the visibility of major gangsters. Historian Mary Elizabeth Strunk wrote that the Bureau engaged in a variety of propaganda efforts, ranging from the publication of its "Most Wanted" list, which broadcast the names of gangsters across the nation, to encouraging the creation of gangster films that depicted the FBI in a positive light.²⁷⁷ On the other hand, by 1937 the exploits of the Jones outfit were nearly twenty years in the past, and had not been as well-known nationally. If Mattie had attempted to focus her narrative on that part of her life, she may not have been able to as effectively capture her audience's interest. By linking herself to more notorious and recent criminals, Mattie was able to increase interest in her story which would, by extension, expose more people to her Christian evangelism.

²⁷⁶ See Lester Gillis ("Baby Face" Nelson), Famous Cases and Criminals, Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessed 3 February 2022, <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/lester-gillis-baby-face-nelson>; and Al Capone, Famous Cases and Criminals, Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessed 3 February 2022, <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/al-capone>

²⁷⁷ Mary Elizabeth Strunk, *Wanted Women: An American Obsession in the Age of J. Edgar Hoover* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2010), 133-134.

Other details of Mattie's Chicago narrative reflect this fictionalization. While associated with the unnamed Chicago gang, Mattie claimed that they would often travel to Kansas City. There, she achieved notoriety as one of the most well-dressed women in the town, and one of its most notorious female drunkards.²⁷⁸ This did not happen. Kansas City newspapers retained an interest in Mattie Howard after her release from prison. While there were rumors that she was engaged in Chicago criminal activity, the papers stressed that those were unconfirmed reports.²⁷⁹ Because the press continued to wonder where Mattie Howard was, it follows that an actual appearance by her back in Kansas City would attract at least a passing reference in the papers. Instead, this seems to be a clever attempt by Mattie to bring Kansas City and aspects of her former life there into her post-incarceration story. Shifting reports of her drunkenness and her fashionability to her post-incarceration life reinforced the idea that prison, and society's subsequent rejection of her, had forced her into a life of moral uncertainty. Additionally, it would preserve her narrative of innocence prior to her release.

Of course, the main purpose of Mattie's memoirs was not to discuss her criminal past; it was to show her spiritual journey. Mattie includes anecdotes from the Chicago era that show her inward goodness. In one such story, she bought all the newspapers a young boy was selling, then took him to a movie, and then gave his impoverished mother money.²⁸⁰ However, she also claimed that the negative lifestyle she was immersed in caused her to occasionally lash out. For example, a street meeting of the Salvation Army was playing loud music, much to Mattie's chagrin. She then bought a knife from a nearby store, which she then threw into their drum as she sped by in her car. Several days later, however, the street meeting was taking place again, and

²⁷⁸ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 236.

²⁷⁹ See "Nation Wide Hunt Under Way for Robber-Killer," *The Sedalia Democrat*, 17 December 1929.

²⁸⁰ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 239-240.

the band had a new drum, seemingly “undismayed by the insulting incident that had disturbed their meeting a few days previous.” She was more than a little surprised at this quick recovery. She recalled her thoughts at the time as “‘Hm! I guess it’s no use to do anything to them... They keep right on anyhow.’”²⁸¹ This seems a reflection on what Mattie viewed as the positive characteristics of Christianity, giving its true believers the ability to weather any trial.

With time the gangster lifestyle wore Mattie down. The behavior of the gang clashed with her internal goodness, eventually forcing her to reach her limit. Finally, she confronted the head of the gang. “I wish you would let me get away from all this,” she cried. The gang leader, suspicious, let her know that if she needed time to settle her nerves, they could provide her a cabin in Alberta. Mattie insisted that she needed to get away and “earn a decent living” for herself. After a tense moment, the gang leader relented and let Mattie leave with a simple “okeh, you may go.”²⁸² Such a simple release, especially when Mattie had supposedly been deeply involved with the gang’s illegal activity, seems very unlikely.

However, in the narrative this serves to demonstrate Mattie’s strength of character. In spite of facing the possibility of death, her internal goodness had won out and she was rewarded for it. Now she was heading down what she later termed “an upward trail leading to... God’s pathway.” While she hadn’t yet had her conversion moment, she was being now being nudged in what she viewed as the right direction. She returned all of her jewelry and almost all of her expensive clothing to the gang, keeping only a few items of clothing.²⁸³ This reflected several

²⁸¹ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 238-239.

²⁸² Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 243-244.

²⁸³ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 244.

New Testament admonitions for the faithful to give up their material wealth and follow Christ, something that her readers would have readily caught onto.

According to her memoirs, leaving the gang proved to be the easiest part of turning her life around. As an ex-convict, Mattie confronted the same problems with mainstream society after Chicago. Her first two legal jobs as a governess ended with her termination after insurance company detectives informed the families she worked for of her criminal past. “[The insurance company] will not insure my jewelry, furs, or other possessions if I keep you here,” one of her employers explained to her, “so I must let you go. I’m sorry.”²⁸⁴ These back-to-back terminations proved detrimental to Mattie’s mental health. “No one will ever want me... What chance in life have I, an ex-convict? I want to live right yet no one will ever believe me,” she wrote, once again shifting the reason for her circumstances to society. As “she did not know God, nor the right way to pray,” she claimed she had no way to pull herself out of her desperate state. Although she remembered some Catholic prayers from when she was a child at the convent, Mattie claimed that they were “meaningless.”²⁸⁵ Not seeing any path forward, Mattie attempted suicide, but was saved through the intervention of a passerby who took her to a local hospital.²⁸⁶

After her attempted suicide, Mattie once again tried to find work. And once again, her status as a former criminal haunted her. This time, her former gang members were now targeting her, attempting to extort bribes in exchange for not disclosing her past.²⁸⁷ This seems at odds with how easily they let her leave the organization, but to Mattie this was the last straw.

²⁸⁴ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 246.

²⁸⁵ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 247.

²⁸⁶ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 248.

²⁸⁷ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 249-250.

Determining that the only way to get out from their thumb was to leave Chicago, she purchased a train ticket to Denver. On that trip, two gangsters stole her luggage, leaving her with “the clothes she had on, a railroad ticket, the small package of toilet articles she had purchased, and—eleven cents.”²⁸⁸ Still, Mattie was determined to fully escape her past life, and left Chicago with almost no material possessions.

When she arrived in Denver she made her way to her mother’s home, only to discover that the long-suffering woman had passed away nine days before. Two telegrams had been sent to Mattie’s former address at the gang-operated apartment building in Chicago, informing her first of her mother’s illness and then of her death. The gangsters “had heartlessly destroyed these messages,” Mattie claimed, which prevented her of learning her mother’s condition.²⁸⁹ Heartbroken, Mattie attempted to turn to her remaining family but found herself rebuffed. Her stepfather swore at her, blaming her for her mother’s death. Her sister rejected her as well. “I came for you when you left prison, and tried to help you... but you chose the other route,” she told Mattie before closing the door on her.²⁹⁰ With little recourse, Mattie attempted to find work in Denver. She eventually succeeded after she adopted a pseudonym in order to avoid association with her past. As “Tossel Lee,” she secured employment as a governess to a wealthy Denver family.²⁹¹ In spite of finally acquiring steady employment, Mattie recorded that she was “verging towards a nervous breakdown.” The effort to maintain her fake identity, as well as the ghosts of

²⁸⁸ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 252.

²⁸⁹ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 258.

²⁹⁰ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 259.

²⁹¹ The name “Tossel” appears in English more commonly as “Tossell” and only ever as a surname. Mattie does not give a reason for selecting this very unusual name.

her past, resulted in “a terrific mental strain upon her, with a resultant [sic] wearing effect upon her physically. What Mattie needed was God.”²⁹²

Mattie was attempting to turn her life around, but from an evangelical perspective those efforts were insufficient. Most fundamentalist Christians believe that man is saved only through the grace of God and cannot save themselves.²⁹³ Mattie was trying to save herself, but without God her efforts were only half-successful. Mattie wrote that she was “(struggling) to do right-- by her own human efforts,” but the “temptations” to do wrong were damaging her mental health.²⁹⁴ This section of Mattie’s narrative is a denunciation of “salvation through works.” She needed God’s grace to truly be redeemed.

Mattie was introduced to God’s grace through a modern medium—the radio. After setbacks during the 1920s, many fundamentalist Christian leaders saw radio as a chance to reinvigorate their movement and create a new community of the faithful. These radio Christians believed in “the mythos of the electronic church, a technological utopianism in which the mere broadcasting of the gospel could, like a magic bullet, convert the world in a single generation,” according to historian Mark Ward.²⁹⁵ While the mass conversion of the globe’s population did not take place, Mattie, at least, was touched by the Gospel message on the radio. Turning on her radio in hopes of hearing some “lively jazz music,” Mattie instead heard “a sacred strain that was being played softly and sweetly upon string instruments.” The song “soothed and uplifted [Mattie’s] soul, and filled her with a strange sense of peace.”²⁹⁶ The juxtaposition of “lively jazz

²⁹² Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 285.

²⁹³ Teresa M. Bejan, “Evangelical Toleration,” *The Journal of Politics* 77 (October 2015): 1105.

²⁹⁴ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 285.

²⁹⁵ Mark Ward, *The Lord’s Radio: Gospel Music Broadcasting and the Making of Evangelical Culture, 1920-1960* (Jefferson: McFarland Publishing, 2017), 127.

²⁹⁶ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 287.

music” and “a sacred strain” is important. This fit well with fundamentalist Christian views on music. One radio minister of the era said “Unbelievers favor jazz, which is composed of a series of conflicting sounds and discordant notes. Christianity alone reaches to the depths of the human soul.”²⁹⁷ It reached into Mattie’s soul and she immediately felt the effect of Gospel music. She then became a true believer at heart who just needed a push in the right direction.

Radio pastor S.H. Patterson provided the push. “Somewhere this morning I feel there is a soul that is so discouraged, tired of life, and alone,” Reverend Patterson said. “Oh weary soul, if you are listening in, hear what Jesus has to say... ‘Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.’”²⁹⁸ This idea of rest appealed to Mattie, given the “terrific mental strain” she felt trying to turn her life around by herself. She felt this sermon was aimed directly at her. When Patterson informed his listeners of an upcoming prayer meeting, Mattie determined that she would attend. At the prayer meeting, Reverend Patterson gave a thundering sermon that “struck her like a shot,” and she decided that she needed to embrace the religious life. “Praise the Lord for this night of September 15, 1932, when Mattie Howard, ex-convict and ex-gangster, prayed through to complete surrender and salvation,” she recorded in her memoirs.²⁹⁹ Her life as a Christian officially began.

However, she had one last trial to overcome. Mattie recalled an intense feeling of guilt, as she was still living under the assumed name of Tossel Lee. That deception was incompatible with her new outlook on life. However, she also feared rejection if she admitted who she truly was. But “she did go bravely through with it.” Standing in front of the prayer meeting, Mattie proclaimed that “I am not Miss Lee. I am Mattie Howard and an ex-convict from the Missouri

²⁹⁷ Ward, *The Lord’s Radio*, 220.

²⁹⁸ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 288.

²⁹⁹ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 294.

State Prison.” She expected to be condemned by the congregation. Instead, “they rushed to her side, embraced her, and shed tears with her. It was said to her, ‘Sister, we don’t care what you have done in the past.’”³⁰⁰ Mattie’s unique past was noted almost immediately by Reverend Patterson and other area ministers, however. They soon encouraged Mattie to speak at gatherings and revival meetings. As she recorded, “she appeared by request at various churches to give her stirring testimony... she was always eager to tell what the Lord had done for her.”³⁰¹ While she had been able to keep her job as a governess after her revelation, her frequent speaking engagements pointed her towards a new path. Only a few months after her conversion, in January 1933, Mattie proclaimed her decision to become a traveling evangelist.³⁰² She had found her calling.

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³⁰⁰ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 295.

³⁰¹ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 301.

³⁰² Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 308.

³⁰³ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 295.

speak at gatherings and revival meetings. As she recorded, “she appeared by request at various churches to give her stirring testimony... she was always eager to tell what the Lord had done for her.”³⁰⁴ While she had been able to keep her job as a governess after her revelation, her frequent speaking engagements pointed her towards a new path. Only a few months after her conversion, in January 1933, Mattie proclaimed her decision to become a traveling evangelist.³⁰⁵ She had found her calling.

The final section of Mattie’s narrative delivered the promise given in the subtitle of her autobiography—the “True Story of the Regeneration of an Ex-Convict and Gangster Woman.” Due to her insistence of innocence while in Kansas City, it is only here that she admits to being some kind of “gangster woman.” This made it the most important section of the book to Mattie, as it allowed her a chance to both solidify the story she had already begun to share on the ministerial circuit and gave her the ability to appeal to her readers to reject temptation and embrace religion. In addition to providing exciting stories of gangland violence, this section allowed Mattie a chance to demonstrate what she viewed as the inefficacy of salvation by works, as well as roundly condemn society’s attitude towards ex-convicts. This final section would also provide the template for Mattie’s sermons long into her career as a traveling evangelist.

Section Three: Mattie the Evangelist

³⁰⁴ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 301.

³⁰⁵ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 308.

After listing a few highlights from the early years of her evangelistic career, Mattie concludes her autobiography by writing that “in times past, the name, ‘Mattie Howard’ was mentioned with scorn by the public and flaunted ignobly in newspaper headlines. Today that name is uttered with affection and respect by the best people, and is emblazoned in lorry in the Book of Heaven.”³⁰⁶ While the Book of Heaven is not readily available as a source, newspapers are. Just as she had been during her trial, Mattie got widespread media attention after her conversion. Unlike the articles published then, however, the media seemed to take a more positive view of her; they saw her conversion as sincere. Maybe they were right; or maybe it is what they wanted to believe; or maybe it is what Mattie wanted them to believe.

Mattie took active steps to shape the narrative of her changed lifestyle. On 9 October 1932, the *Kansas City Star* published a feature article focusing on Mattie’s conversion. This article is notable for two main reasons. First is the timing. The article was published less than a month after Mattie’s conversion event on 12 September, indicating that news of the event was spreading quickly as Mattie took her first forays into evangelism. Second, this is the first newspaper article—after fourteen years of media fascination with Mattie Howard-- to feature a direct interview with her. For this article, she sat down with a reporter the *Star* had sent to Denver. This gave her a unique opportunity to shape the newspaper’s story, and she took full advantage of it.

While she had been criticized during her trial for wearing flashy clothing and jewelry, now Mattie appeared with “no make-up or rouge.” Her hands were “calloused from hard, but honest toil,” and she was clad in “a plain, near blue, serge dress.” She modestly listed the

³⁰⁶ Howard, *The Pathway of Mattie Howard*, 313.

luxuries she once had, including diamonds, cars, and ermine capes, but claimed that “with all of these I was always seeking something—always searching and seeking some new pleasure. I never found it. The end of the trail of gayety and bright lights led to prison.” This was a direct reference to the narrative she provided of her early life, where she strayed from her faithful mother’s guidance due to the siren call of leisure culture. While she had lost those worldly pleasures, Mattie now had something more important. “I have peace of mind,” she humbly declared to her interviewer.³⁰⁷ By rejecting adornments and luxuries, Mattie rejected the things that had contributed to her characterization as a dangerous woman. Alongside her lack of makeup and her calloused hands, Mattie was now presenting herself as a spiritual working-class woman.

In the interview Mattie also sought to reframe her past, challenging the narrative established during her trial. When she discussed her life before coming to Kansas City, Mattie did not mention her marriage to Frank Vanders. Instead, she had left Colorado “to avoid parental restraint.” She also insisted on her innocence in the murder of Joe Morino, claiming that “I wasn’t guilty, but I was convicted... I served seven years for a crime I didn’t commit. I didn’t do lots of the things I was charged with in Kansas City.”³⁰⁸ This marked the beginning of the innocence narrative that would carry itself into her memoirs five years later.

The narrative of the memoir was not totally worked out yet though. She told a different story about what she did after prison than she would a few years later in the autobiography. In her *Star* interview, she does not mention traveling back to Denver or joining in the violence of the Chicago gangland. Instead, Mattie implied that she remained near Kansas City for a time

³⁰⁷ “The Girl With Agate Eyes’ Says Hymn Led Her To God,” *The Kansas City Star*, 9 October 1932.

³⁰⁸ “The Girl With Agate Eyes’ Says Hymn Led Her To God,” *The Kansas City Star*, 9 October 1932.

post-release, and then changed her name and moved to Denver.³⁰⁹ This could be more evidence that Chicago portion of her memoir was a complete fiction. Or it could mean that she didn't yet know how to square that time of her life while maintaining her innocence.

Over the next year, Mattie's career as an evangelist began and continued to attract media attention. Reporters from Missouri, Illinois, and Ohio tracked her first path on the revival circuit. While all of the articles published interesting details, one stands out from the rest. The *St. Joseph Gazette* published the full-text of a sermon given by Mattie, the only example to survive. In this sermon, detailing her "trip down the primrose path" and back, the full dimension of Mattie's narrative took shape. There was no mention of her failed marriage to Frank Vanders. She claimed to have met Albert Pagle after moving to Kansas City, glossing over his criminal association with her brother. After being arrested for a crime she did not commit, Mattie was sent to prison and was subject to the persecution of a vindictive matron. Her release from prison led to a participation in the gang life in "Chicago, Detroit, [and] New York" for two years. Finally growing tired of the life, she left and tried to go straight, but found no one would hire her under her name. Moving back to Denver, she adopted a pseudonym, acquired a position as a governess, and then was subsequently converted.³¹⁰ This sermon could serve as a functional summary for her biography published four years later. After a year on the road as an evangelist, Mattie had come to the final version of her story. Along the way, she must have realized that her appeal as a former gangster turned preacher would be lost if she claimed that she never was a gangster in the first place.

³⁰⁹ "The Girl With Agate Eyes' Says Hymn Led Her To God," *The Kansas City Star*, 9 October 1932.

³¹⁰ "Woman's Life of Gayety, Scarred by Scandal and Crime, Finally Leads Her Down 'Sawdust Trail,'" *St. Joseph Gazette*, 18 June 1933.

She needed to maintain this appeal in order to separate herself from the many other traveling preachers that were crisscrossing the nation in the 1930s. In the 1930s, “American fundamentalists... felt a new sense of urgency,” wrote historian Matthew Sutton. The rise of authoritarian governments in Europe and the economic stresses of the Great Depression convinced many that the apocalypse was imminent.³¹¹ The implementation of the New Deal, in particular, was viewed as a concrete sign of the times. As Sutton wrote, “to turn the tide in the nation and ultimately the world, they believed, they must defeat the forces of New Deal liberalism and restore the United States to its supposed Christian foundations.”³¹² To this end, hundreds of evangelical ministers set out to save as many souls as possible before the end of days. While they shared the same goal, these ministers also competed for audiences and support; Mattie’s focus on her gangland history provided her with a unique story that gave her an edge.

To this end, in subsequent years advertisements for Mattie’s sermons would perpetuate and sell the now cemented narrative of “the regeneration of an ex-convict and gangster woman”. A notice in the 16 June 1934 *New Castle News* of New Castle, Pennsylvania, claimed that “evangelist Miss Mattie Howard... has held her audience with interest as she wove in her varied experiences of jail life and gangland with her sermons.”³¹³ An announcement of a scheduled visit to Pennsylvania in 1935 depicted her as a “former gangster’s moll,” who claimed to have “joined the Al Capone mob” as a getaway driver.³¹⁴ The *Altoona Tribune* reported that Mattie’s sermons drew large crowds. “There has been unusually good interest shown ever since Miss Howard began her services there last Thursday night,” the *Tribune* reported. A 1936 Fresno, California

³¹¹ Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 207.

³¹² Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 258.

³¹³ “Mattie Howard Speaks to Men,” *New Castle News*, 16 June 1934.

³¹⁴ “Once a Gangster’s Moll, Now An Evangelist, Miss Mattie Howard Plans Campaign Here,” *Altoona Tribune*, 21 September 1935.

newspaper referred to her as the “notorious Mattie Howard,” and proclaimed her sermon “From Prison to Pulpit” would “tell of her life in the underworld prior to her reformation.” The Fresno article also noted that Mattie “(claimed) acquaintance with Hymie Weiss, Baby Face Nelson, John Dillinger, and others of the criminal gangs.”³¹⁵ In 1937, the same year her book was published, she was scheduled to give a sermon at the Ventura Foursquare Church in Ventura, California, entitled “Gangster Life.” Below her name was the subtitle, “converted gangster.”³¹⁶

What stands out as intriguing is the papers’ willingness to accept Mattie’s narrative as stated fact, despite the many instances in which she left the truth far behind. Perhaps the foremost example of this is found in the *Kansas City Star*, which was the main paper reporting on Mattie’s life prior to her imprisonment. The *Star*’s own articles from 1918 made mention of Mattie’s abandonment of her marriage tied to her arrest. During her trial, the *Star* was the loudest public voice naming Mattie as the leader of her own criminal gang, and supporting the prosecutor’s claims that she was an extremely dangerous woman. But a decade later, the *Star* does not question her motivations or the gaps in her story when discussing Mattie’s career post prison. While it is impossible to conclusively answer why this was the case, there are a few options. Perhaps Mattie’s direct engagement with the press after her conversion won over reporters. She was more actively involved with interviews, partly due to the need to promote her revivals, and this would have given her a chance to present her case directly. Another reason could be the positive aspects of the narrative. Mattie was a former criminal who turned to God and became a minister. A journey like that would make for a compelling story, one that would

³¹⁵ “Evangelist Howard Drawing Large Crowds,” *Altoona Tribune*, 24 September 1935.

³¹⁶ “Hear Mattie Howard Converted Gangster,” *The Ventura County Star*, 6 March 1937.

sell papers. Mattie's story attracted large crowds to her meetings; it likely drew in a large readership too.

Mattie's fame as an evangelist only continued to grow. Speaking to the media ahead of Mattie's planned arrival for a camp meeting in 1940, the Reverend John Kelliner told the *Binghamton Press* that "a book published on her life... reveal[s] Miss Howard as an convict, onetime prisoner at Missouri State Penitentiary, who was notorious called 'Queen of the Bandits.'" Kelliner told the *Press* that Mattie had been "preaching and telling her testimony, 'From Gangland to the Pulpit,' and in recent years has become an outstanding evangelist."³¹⁷ The high praise on her talent was echoed in 1941 by a Salinas, California newspaper. Alongside the usual mentions of Al Capone and other gangsters, the paper claimed that Mattie was "one of the world's greatest woman evangelists." She was returning to preach in California on the heels of a tour of the East Coast, where the paper claimed "she has been booked a year in advance with throngs gathering to hear her tell how she was... arrested, sent to prison, converted, and became an evangelist."³¹⁸ Her fictionalized take on her story had completely subsumed the narrative it had been written to counter, and had been accepted as the faith-affirming truth.

In 1942, Mattie left the revival circuit and established a church of her own. Located in Minneapolis, Minnesota, "the Little Chapel" relied heavily on its connections to Mattie to attract congregants. Its Christmas Eve service, for example, was a sermon delivered by Mattie entitled "Christmas in Prison."³¹⁹ Mattie did more than preach on her experiences, however. Under her direction, she established a "program of aid to women," which sought to "offer shelter, counsel

³¹⁷ "Convert Tells of Her Life," *Binghamton Press*, 7 September 1940.

³¹⁸ "Mattie Howard One of World's Greatest Evangelists Here Next Week," *The Californian*, 26 September 1941.

³¹⁹ "Mattie Howard Welcomes You," *Minneapolis Star Journal*, 23 December 1942.

and assistance to women without creed or color distinction.”³²⁰ This seemed to be a result of Mattie’s hard life experience. She sought to provide a way to help keep other women from following the path that she had taken. By opening the program to all women without a care for race, Mattie’s view on Blacks seems to have evolved since writing her autobiography. However, this would prove to only be a temporary stop for Mattie; she resumed traveling in 1943, and the Little Chapel seems to have folded without her act as a draw.

Despite her enthusiasm for the road, one thing was becoming undeniable: Mattie was growing old. In 1949, when she participated in a radio broadcast in Seattle, Washington, reporter Maury Soward described her as “a stocky gray-haired old woman in a white dress [with] a gravelly voice.”³²¹ She was only fifty-four years old, but it seems as if the physical cost of her life seemed to have caught up with her. The gangland stories she relied on during her sermons were also becoming less compelling to her audience. Tales of Al Capone, John Dillinger, and others had been told and retold, saturating the market. Additionally, her experiences were almost twenty years in the past, making her tales no longer as relevant as they once had been. All of these factors contributed to a declining media interest in her tours. Even advertisements for her sermons became fewer and farther between throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Even with this decline in public attention, Mattie continued to control her own narrative. A feature in the 15 January 1970 *Los Angeles Times*, focused on her 75th birthday. Discussing her past, Mattie does not mention the Chicago ganglands or her time spent in the Missouri State Penitentiary. It didn’t even mention Kansas City. Instead, Mattie painted herself as a child of poverty, who managed to make her way out of it through “right living.” She highlighted her brief

³²⁰ “Chapel Will Open Program for Women,” *Minneapolis Star Journal*, 14 November 1942.

³²¹ “US Radio Preacher Plans Canada Link,” *The Vancouver News-Herald*, 2 August 1949.

ministry in Minneapolis, with a focus on the woman's program that she set up there. She did not present herself as an ex-convict or a regenerated gangster woman; instead, she simply claimed to be a recovering Catholic. She also indicated a desire to head back out on the "Bible trail," despite her age.³²² It seems as if she tailored her narrative to meet the demands of a law and order Nixonian era. This would be the last mention of Mattie Howard in a newspaper after fifty-two years of attention. She would pass away fourteen years later on 13 November 1984 at the age of 89.

After her death the story of Mattie's life would be all but forgotten. When she did make an appearance on the pages of history, it was in association with someone else's story: the Lewis-Jones outfit, or the story of defense lawyer Jesse James, Jr. These references would focus on her criminal associations, narrowing in on the view of her as the "Girl with the Agate Eyes." A few copies of her memoirs floated around the Internet, occasionally resold as vintage books. One sale announcement on Amazon.com linked her with a 1960s Civil Rights activist of the same name, confusing the authorship of the text. This demonstrated how far knowledge of her had faded just over a hundred-years after she had gained national notoriety as a fugitive suspected gang leader.

The story of Mattie Howard, despite its disappearance from public memory, provides valuable historic information. First, her trial and conviction in Kansas City serves as a prominent exception for the contemporary trend of women not being found guilty of capital crimes. The way that the conviction was gained is also important, as it seemed to be less founded on actual evidence and more on painting Mattie as a dangerous social deviant. Using her trial as a frame of

³²² Donna Scheibe, "Evangelist, 75, Recalls Many Years of Traveling Ministry," *The Los Angeles Times*, 15 January 1970.

reference one can investigate other examples of women convicted of capital crimes during the early-20th century to see if a similar reliance on attacking character was utilized to gain conviction.

Second, Mattie was subject to newspaper interest for over fifty years. Over that time, portrayals of her shifted from a vicious, conniving murderer to a godly woman capable of attracting large audiences for her sermons. This narrative shift was due, at least in part, to Mattie's efforts to create an effective counter-story through her autobiography and sermons. Her ability to change the story provides an intriguing demonstration of successful reinvention. This shift also provides an intriguing view on the perceptions of different womanhoods. Mattie's more intendent, deviant womanhood was treated as a threat, while her religious, ministerial womanhood was treated as a worthwhile example.

Finally, the early life of Mattie Howard provides a look at female criminality that has not been fully explored. While scholarly work has been done on women who served as "gun-molls," Mattie, at least according to the newspapers, went beyond mere association with gangsters to become a gang organizer in her own right. Female leadership in crime has not been sufficiently researched, and studies of female criminals before the 1920s have not been widely carried out. This makes Mattie's status as a nationally well-known female gangster important, and using her as a starting point one could build a more in-depth examination of the prominence of female criminals in that era.

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