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Murderess Row: Selling Morals to 1920s America

Rachel Goldsmith

History 480: Historical Methods and Historiography

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Genevieve Forbes-Herrick gave her thoughts on Maurine Watkins' new play "Chicago" in the October 16th, 1927, edition of the *Chicago Tribune*.¹ Forbes-Herrick requested that the management reserve a block of seats for a few local women who "tarried on the fourth floor of the building at Dearborn Street and Austin Avenue long enough to get themselves into a play".² In Forbes-Herrick's opinion, Beulah Annan should have been given an aisle seat for her incredible beauty, inspiring the character named Roxie. The next best seat should have gone to the incredibly stylish Belva Gaertner to witness the characterization of Velma. Moonshine Maggie's inspiration, Sabella Nitti, deserved a fine seat to watch the play after all of the trouble she had gone through to inspire it. After becoming the first woman in Cook County to receive the death sentence, "she tarried in jail long enough to learn the value of a hot bath, a manicure, and a smart hair-do... She walked from jail a more modish, if not a better, woman".³ In the early 1920s, at the corner of Dearborn Street and Austin Avenue, three accused murderers named Beulah Annan, Belva Gaertner, and Sabella Nitti awaited trial on the fourth floor of the Cook County Jail, otherwise known by the public as "Murderess Row".⁴ The three had vastly different cases, differently handled trials, and ultimately the same verdict: not guilty.

Before Maurine Watkins wrote "Chicago", she was employed as a journalist at the *Chicago Tribune*. During her tenure, she wrote a handful of articles following the spike of women arrested for violent crime, most commonly against their romantic partners. Three of these women, Beulah Annan, Belva Gaertner, and Sabella Nitti received the most attention in the media, with their stories being "claimed" by the *Chicago Tribune* thanks to Watkins and Genevieve Forbes-Herrick, who primarily reported on Sabella Nitti. Even almost four years after

¹ Genevieve Forbes-Herrick, "Mrs. Forbes-Herrick on "Chicago"," *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 16, 1927.

² Forbes-Herrick, "Mrs. Forbes-Herrick."

³ Forbes-Herrick, "Mrs. Forbes-Herrick."

⁴ "Murderess Row Loses Class as Belva is Freed," *Chicago Tribune*, June 7, 1924.

the conclusion of the women's trials, details of their relationship status and living situation were still reported.⁵ If the *Chicago Tribune* successfully sensationalized the stories of these women, the question of what the articles contained arises. Through the *Chicago Tribune's* articles reporting on their arrests, trials, and lifestyle, what messages were spread to the readers, and more importantly, why?

Watkins gave her own answer to this question by writing the play "Chicago", which was adapted into a musical in 1975 by Bob Fosse, Fred Ebb, and John Kander, soon becoming one of the longest running Broadway musicals of all time.⁶ The multiple adaptations of the play and subsequent success has made the inspiration for the piece widely known in popular culture, but there is a surprising lack of academic research on the original cases. The stories of Annan, Gaertner, and Nitti offer the unique opportunity to analyze the most important societal and political concerns and debates of the decade when they aren't presented as such.

The *Chicago Tribune's* take on the underlying message of Murderess Row was in the form of a cautionary tale; a warning not to fall into the web of the social and beautiful "black widow" of a woman, because this woman would be too beautiful for conviction. Shortly after Annan was found not guilty, the *Chicago Tribune* published an anecdote on the predictability of the all-male jury's decision: "Beulah Annan, the most beautiful lady killer that ever killed in Cook County, was found not guilty by the jury. We almost won money on that verdict. We offered to bet an even thousand dollars against ten cents that a lady as pretty as Beulah would never be convicted by the jury. But we couldn't find anybody that wanted to throw away ten cents".⁷

⁵ "Beulah Annan, Beauty Freed of Murder, is Bride: Wedding Adds Sequel to Chicago Drama," *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 19, 1927.

⁶ James Leve, "Chicago: Broadway to Hollywood," *Kander and Ebb*, (2009): 78.

⁷ "News Summary," *Chicago Tribune*, May 26, 1924.

Jean Marie Lutes' analysis of Murderess Row focuses on the accused murderers' difference in composure, ranging from perceived insanity to tranquil and calm recollection. She argues that the representations of female emotionality, specifically a move from interiority to exteriority, was caused by a shift in seeking sentimental appeal to celebrity appeal.⁸ This shift would have been a calculated strategy executed by the accused murderers that was simply, and possibly unintentionally, embellished by Watkins' reporting style.⁹ Lutes and the *Chicago Tribune's* explanations are valid and evidenced by the outcomes of the trials, but both explanations place the intention solely on the accused women and the consequence on the greater society.

This paper will argue that the net of the responsibility must be cast wider than the women of Murderess Row. In fact, the motivations of the women themselves will be almost entirely irrelevant. Robert E. Crowe, Illinois State's Attorney from 1920 to 1928, publicly declared that he would put an end to the "husband killing" trend.¹⁰ By 1924, Crowe was credited to have "convicted a larger number of 'lady killers' than any of his predecessors".¹¹ While the city watched what had become a hot topic, they consumed underlying opinions relevant to the world around them in the form of tropes relying heavily on societal stereotypes. Through the entertaining stories of Nitti, Annan, and Gaertner, messages on the harmful effects of unlimited immigration and the danger that unmarried women and alcohol present to the family-based world were subtly spread as tropes to the public.

⁸ Jean Marie Lutes, "Tears on Trial in the 1920s: Female Emotion and Style in "Chicago" and "Machinal"," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 30, no. 2 (2011): 344.

⁹ Lutes, "Tears on Trial," 344.

¹⁰ Genevieve Forbes, "Mrs. Nitti and Consort Given Noose Penalty: Mrs. Buzzi Sentenced in New York," *Chicago Tribune*, July 10, 1923.

¹¹ Oscar Hewitt, "13 'Lady Killers' Sent to Prison in Crowe Term: Gov. Small Freed the Most Cruel of All," *Chicago Tribune*, Mar. 26, 1924.

Before this subject is explored in detail, several evidence related issues require addressing. Most importantly, every primary source that will be used consists solely of *Chicago Tribune* articles. The rise of mass-market newspapers allowed intimate details to be quickly ingested and discarded in a more accessible form than most books would have been able to achieve.¹² Through this medium, information was audience-oriented, meaning that information needed to become a written performance.¹³ If the information in these articles needed to be an easily digestible written performance, the first priority would not be to write a thorough and completely objective article. Consequently, none of the articles that will be used can be considered thorough and completely objective. Luckily, because these sources' information cannot be considered objective, the opportunity to find the motivation of the articles presents itself, which is the purpose of this analysis.

The world surrounding Murderess Row contained heavy debates on immigration, specifically the limiting of immigration to America on the grounds of "quality". Albert Johnson, a Republican Congressman for Washington state and primary figure in the 1920s American immigration debates, had proposed numerous forms and methods of restricting immigration since his first term began in 1912.¹⁴ The 66th Congress (1919-1921) saw eight proposals for a complete suspension of immigration ranging from lasting two to ten years, each attempting to use an acceptable version of the 'National Origins' scheme.¹⁵ James J. Davis, the United States Secretary of Labor from 1921 to 1930, is described as a 'Nordic' supremacist by Alfred J. Hillier. Another prominent voice on the subject, Davis "described German, British, and

¹² Lutes, "Tears on Trial," 344.

¹³ Lutes, "Tears on Trial," 344.

¹⁴ Alfred J. Hillier, "Albert Johnson, Congressman," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1945): 193.

¹⁵ Kristofer Allfeldt, "'And We Got Here First': Albert Johnson, National Origins and Self-Interest in the Immigration Debate of the 1920s," *Journal of Contemporary History* 45, no 1 (2010): 8.

Scandinavian immigrants as hardworking, productive, easily assimilated ‘beavers’. He condemned non-Nordics as undesirable, pestilential ‘rats’.¹⁶ With the complete suspension of immigration seemingly becoming a lost cause, the major debates to limit immigration focused on the limiting of immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe, as well as the prevention of immigration from Asia. While these debates were published as political commentary in the *Chicago Tribune*, an Italian immigrant, otherwise known as an “undesirable, pestilential rat” named Sabella Nitti received infamous attention a few pages away.

Sabella Nitti, a middle aged illiterate Italian immigrant and mother of five, was arrested



Figure 1. The First photo of Sabella Nitti to be used in the mass media. (Photograph, *Widow Seized*, May 10, 1923, *Chicago Tribune*.)

in September of 1922 for adultery along with Peter Crudelle, a young man who worked on the Nitti farm. A few months earlier, Sabella’s husband Frank Nitti disappeared from their farm. Charles, the couple’s teenage son, first testified that Crudelle killed his father with a hammer and forced Charles to help him dispose of the body in the Des Plaines River, asserting that his mother knew nothing of the crime until after it had happened. After Frank Nitti’s body was recovered, Peter Crudelle was charged with first degree murder and Sabella as an accessory to murder before and after the fact.¹⁷ Once

Charles was placed in juvenile custody, he told a new variation of the crime where Sabella had held Frank’s arms down while Peter hit his head with a hammer, insisting “My father was asleep outside near a wagon. It was about midnight and while my mother held him, Crudele took a

¹⁶ Allerfeldt, “‘And We Got Here First’,” 12.

¹⁷ “Nitti Murdered, Son Confesses; Absolves Widow: Peter Cudello Is Charged with the Slaying,” *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 26, 1922.

hammer from a toolbox nearby and struck him over the head”.¹⁸ After this testimony, Charles agreed to turn state’s evidence and Sabella was charged with first degree murder.¹⁹ Within a few weeks, Sabella became the sole subject of each article, making Peter merely a footnote.

In July of 1923, Sabella and Peter, now a married couple, were tried and found guilty of murdering Frank Nitti. Genevieve Forbes-Herrick reported on the trial for the *Chicago Tribune*, spending a large amount of the article on Sabella’s appearance and demeanor:

Mrs. Nitti ran stubby fingers, where the dirt was ingrained into broken nails, into her matted hair. She shifted her stocky legs and smoothed out the dark blue skirt, made full and short for work in the field. She hadn’t understood a word. But she twisted up her face in a grotesque angle of fear, and inferiority, and cruelty and hope.²⁰

After a short deliberation, Peter and Sabella were sentenced to death, making Sabella the first woman to be given the death penalty in American history. Forbes commented on the historic decision, writing:

Twelve jurors branded Mrs. Sabella Nitti “husband killer” and established a precedent for the state of Illinois at 3 o’clock yesterday afternoon by giving the death penalty to the dumb, crouching, animal-like Italian peasant, found guilty of the murder of Frank Nitti. The jury then returned a death verdict for Peter Crudelle, Mrs. Nitti’s co-defendant, former lover, and second husband.²¹

Throughout the trial, the jury was encouraged to “forget that this defendant is a woman”.²² After the verdict was read, nobody was willing to translate it to Sabella, leading Forbes to write, “all evening the greasy woman moaned and groaned in her Sicilian dialect for someone to tell her what ‘those men said’ and how many months she would have to stay in the jail”.²³ Once she better understood her sentence, “Mrs. Nitti grew hysterical with the frenzied pleading of a cruel

¹⁸ “Boy Tells How “Star Boarder” Slew His Father: Near Solution of Nitti Death by Finding Body,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 10, 1923.

¹⁹ “Near Solution of Nitti Death.”

²⁰ Forbes, “Noose Penalty.”

²¹ Forbes, “Noose Penalty.”

²² Forbes, “Noose Penalty.”

²³ Forbes, “Noose Penalty.”

animal that has been cornered and tortured by a new kind of trap”.²⁴ A consistent theme emerges in the descriptions of Nitti’s reactions and appearance, a theme of dehumanization. David Livingstone Smith wrote, “there is nothing novel in the assertion that dehumanization is a psychological lubricant for the machinery of violence”.²⁵ Forbes’ first article on Nitti explicitly refers to Sabella Nitti as a “dumb, crouching, animal-like Italian peasant” that reminded the audience “to forget that she was a woman”.²⁶



Figure 2. Drawing of Nitti’s appearance while her sentence was read. (Illustration, “Me Choke, Me Choke”, April 10, 1927, *Chicago Tribune*.)

Dehumanizing others is utilized to remove reservations against harming them. By distancing a reader from the subject as far as possible, relatability is less attainable, making actions that harm humans easier. Five years after Nitti’s first trial, Forbes revisited the animal-like character (see fig. 2), reintroducing her as “a wizened up, crouching, monkey-like creature, with chewed-off fingernails, matted hair, leathery skin, and inarticulate grunts”.²⁷ By using this language, Nitti became almost sub-human; a character of a woman undeserving of empathy or understanding, used to create the “illiterate immigrant” trope.

Through the eyes of the mass media, the dumb, animal-like Italian creature Sabella Nitti could not be redeemed; her lack of American values as well as American beauty were ingrained in her.²⁸ The *Chicago Tribune* failed to offer up a suggestion of redemption for Nitti during her

²⁴ Forbes, “Noose Penalty.”

²⁵ David Livingstone Smith, “Paradoxes of Dehumanization,” *Social Theory and Practice* 42, no. 2 (2016): 416.

²⁶ Forbes, “Noose Penalty.”

²⁷ Genevieve Forbes-Herrick, “Ladies in Crime: Eighteen Months in Jail Made Her a New Woman,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 10, 1927.

²⁸ Forbes, “Noose Penalty.”

1922 trial or while she awaited execution. Additionally, Nitti was not granted the luxury of consideration for her account of her husband's murder. Her claim was dismissed immediately by both the reporter of the claim and an outside quote from the trial's prosecutor:

Mrs. Nitti's "confession" is her old story...The "confession" proved to be a rambling story of how a son of the woman had killed Frank Nitti during a fist fight over a loan of \$400. "It's the same story she told on the witness stand during the trial," said Prosecutor Smith. "It's all untrue".²⁹

The very presence of quotations around the word confession compromises the content of the confession itself before it can be consumed. Problems are often accompanied by a solution. Since the solution of innocence or rehabilitation and redemption have been dismissed, the larger solution of immigration limitation presents itself.

The immigration limitation debate of the 1920s is defined by the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924, the Act responsible for establishing the modern American perception of immigrants and immigration based on nationality. Until the Immigration Act of 1924, race and nationality were casually homogenized. The act reorganized the two constructs to fit an ideal "hierarchy of desirability" in order to assemble an easily assimilated race of white Americans.³⁰ Fuel for the flames of the Act was Nordic Supremacy, championed by the Eugenics Committee of the United States of America, of which numerous members served as advisors to Congressman Albert Johnson.³¹ Immigrants arriving from Northern Europe, with the exception of Ireland, were considered the most desirable for the country, along with Western European immigrants. The House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, chaired by Johnson during much of his tenure, fought that the inferiority of Southern and Eastern European

²⁹ "Mrs. Nitti's 'Confession' is Her Old Story," *Chicago Tribune*, July 18, 1923.

³⁰ Mae M Ngai, "The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924." *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (1999): 82.

³¹ Kenneth M Ludmerer, "Genetics, Eugenics, and the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 46, no. 1 (1972): 60.

immigrants made them “undesirables”, meaning that allowing immigration from these regions would cheapen the quality of the country.³² This threat of cheapening the quality of the country was extended to both the workforce and the home by Johnson and other figures. Any argument for unrestricted immigration by nationality was “simply demanding serf labor and servants’ to service their own un-American and selfish needs” according to Johnson.³³

The crime Sabella Nitti had committed was not a unique circumstance. Murderess Row received widespread attention for its rising population of inmates, including women who admitted guilt. Sabella Nitti herself was the unique circumstance that admitted widespread attention. Rarely were immigrated individuals reported on, making Sabella Nitti an opportunity to demonstrate and justify the argument of “undesirable” Southern Europeans. This Italian immigrant was not fixable, not redeemable in fact, forcing the average American to ask if an unredeemable and therefore undesirable immigrant such as Sabella Nitti should have been allowed to take up space on American soil at all. This question was posed in the entertaining format of a true crime story, giving readers the need to question their immigration beliefs without being outright told to do so. By portraying Nitti as a dirty, cruel, unsavable sub-human, she became a trope; a tool to fuel the flames of the immigration limitation debates of the 1920s.

Placing a subtle political or social debate in the flashing lights of a true crime story was utilized again with a new trope: the homewreckers. In this trope, the homewrecker extends beyond simply a person, referring to any entity that threaten the preservation of the family unit, the ideal scenario in which to raise children. Stable children require a stable environment, free of unpredictable influences. This view of the family was heavily influenced by Protestant voices of the early twentieth century, who “saw the family as the cornerstone of society, the cornerstone

³² Ludmerer, “Genetics,” 64.

³³ Allerfeldt, “‘And We Got Here First’,” 12.

on which all other institutions were constructed, and every political authority meddled in family and domestic concerns”.³⁴ Without the predictable unit of the family in place as the bedrock of society, the ground the world walks on crumbles. If this view were to be accepted, the women of Murderess Row and a commonality in many of their stories, alcohol, become threats to the family.

While many stories of women on Murderess Row contained similar elements of homewrecking, Beulah Annan and Belva Gaertner found the most infamy in the *Chicago Tribune*. Just like Nitti, Annan and Gaertner were accused of killing their romantic partners. Walter Law, a young auto salesman and Belva Gaertner’s boyfriend, was found in Gaertner’s car on March 12th, 1924, after the couple had returned from an apparent cabaret gin party, shot by Gaertner’s gun. Once Gaertner was arrested, she claimed that she couldn’t remember what happened, only that “we got drunk and he got killed- I don’t know how”.³⁵ Outside of her plea, Gaertner never actually denied killing Law, only that she didn’t remember killing him. In Maurine Watkins’ arguably most famous article for the *Chicago Tribune* titled “No Sweetheart Worth Killing”, Gaertner explained to Watkins that no sweetheart in the world is worth killing, especially when you’ve had a flock of them:

I like him (Law) and he loved me- but no woman can love a man enough to kill him. They aren’t worth it because there are plenty more. Walter was just a kid- 29 and I’m 38. Why should I have worried whether he loved me or whether he left me...Of course, it’s too bad for Walter’s wife, but husbands always cause women trouble.³⁶

³⁴ Merry E Wiesner, “Nuns, Wives, and Mothers: Women and the Reformation in Germany.” in Sherrin Marshall, ed., *Women in Reformation and Counter Reformation Europe: Public and Private Worlds* (1989), 294-308.

³⁵ “Hold Divorcee as Slayer of Auto Salesman: Story by Law’s Pal basis of Charge,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 13, 1924.

³⁶ Maurine Watkins, “No Sweetheart Worth Killing - Mrs. Gaertner: Belva Hopes for Jury of “Liberal” Men,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 14, 1924.

Walter Law, a husband and father to a young child, was remembered by his close friend as a “boy who couldn’t refuse when women and gin were suggested”.³⁷ Belva Gaertner was employed as a cabaret dancer and locally known to be a charismatic gadabout with a revolving door of romantic partners.³⁸ The relationship between Gaertner and Law was portrayed as a trap employed by a clever cabaret dancer, with the media reporting “Mrs. Gaertner had ensnarled Law. He tried to break away, to stick to his wife and family. She killed him rather than lose him”.³⁹ The crucial word to recognize is the verb *ensnare*. An alien to the home, influenced by an alien substance successfully ensnarled a man, subsequently taking a foundational piece of the home away, causing the stability of a traditional family unit to crumble under the feet of Law’s newly widowed wife and fatherless child. Gaertner was reported as calm and collected throughout her entire arrest and trial, showing little to no signs of remorse (see fig. 3). Similar to Nitti, Gaertner presented the media with the opportunity to utilize her character to ask the average American to face their opinion on a homewrecker and her weapons of destruction in the thick of a national alcohol Prohibition.



Figure 3. Photograph of Gaertner’s demeanor during a court appearance. (Photograph, *Woman Hears Story of Killing with Calm*, June 5, 1924, *Chicago Tribune*.)

With stories of alcohol and an affair’s extreme aftermath, a warning is issued to all readers to choose the more honorable path or risk becoming ensnared in an attack on one’s foundation.

While Gaertner awaited trial, Harry Kolstedt’s body was found in Beulah Annan’s

³⁷ “Hold Divorcee as Slayer.”

³⁸ “Divorcee Held by Coroner’s Jury for Killing of Auto Salesman- Woman’s Story Hits Daughteryly,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 13, 1924.

³⁹ “Hold Divorcee as Slayer.”

apartment on April 3rd, 1924.⁴⁰ Annan had reportedly shot Kolstedt during an argument in the late afternoon with her gun, poured herself a glass of gin, and played “Hula Lou” on her husband’s phonograph while Kolstedt lay dying. Albert Annan, Beulah’s husband, discovered the scene and informed the authorities against Beulah’s wishes. The police arrived at the scene about four hours after the initial gunshot, though Kolstedt had only been deceased for about half an hour.⁴¹

After her initial arrest, a heavily intoxicated Annan claimed she killed Kolstedt to save her honor.⁴² A few hours later, Annan began to cry and told a different story of jealousy; her boyfriend Harry Kolstedt had threatened to leave her, so she killed him rather than lose him.⁴³ Similarly to Gaertner, Annan explained her actions away with the influence of alcohol. Nationwide Prohibition, the illegalization of manufacturing, transporting, and selling alcohol, was in effect from 1920 to 1933, and mainly supported by white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. When questioned on alcohol’s role in the death of Harry Kolstedt, Annan replied, “it wouldn’t of happened if we both hadn’t been drinking; and he had quite a lot before he came over. We both lost our heads, saw the revolver lying there uncovered by the pillow, for I hadn’t made the bed that morning, and grabbed for it”.⁴⁴ Watkins reported that that the ordeal began with an intoxicated Kolstedt:

a regular “bum” had come to her apartment early the morning of the shooting, and had tried to borrow a few dollars to get booze. Finally to get rid of him she had given him a

⁴⁰ “Woman Plays Jazz Air as Victim Dies,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 4, 1924.

⁴¹ Maurine Watkins, “Beulah Annan Sobs Regret for Life She Took: Lives Through Crime Again as She Awaits Trial,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 6, 1924.

⁴² Maurine Watkins, “Demand Noose for ‘Prettiest’ Woman Slayer: Mrs. Annan Held on Murder Charge,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 5, 1924.

⁴³ Watkins, “Demand Noose.”

⁴⁴ Watkins, “Beulah Annan Sobs Regret.”

dollar, and then that afternoon he had returned, intoxicated, and forced his way into the house. Frightened, she begged him to leave, but he refused.⁴⁵

Gaertner told a similar series of unfortunate events pertaining to Law, explaining “We got drunk and he got killed with my gun in my car. But gin and guns - either one is bad enough, but together they get you in a dickens of a mess, don’t they. Now, if I hadn’t had the gun, of if Walter hadn’t had the gin”.⁴⁶ A driving force for Prohibition was the idea of a respectable man, “a sober, temperate worker”, therefore “a more stable and a happier worker”.⁴⁷ Essentially, even seemingly ordinary men such as Walter Law and Harry Kolstedt could be corrupted into “bums” who ended their drunken nights with bullets in their backs.

An unusual, though not entirely unexpected byproduct of Annan and Gaertner’s portrayals in the *Chicago Tribune* was a local celebrity status. Similar to what is referred to as the “influencer” on the internet today, articles of Annan and Gaertner’s personal lives were reported on both during their trials and up to four years after them, such as their marital and family status, residences, arrests, and eventual deaths. This was likely due to the pair’s appearance aligning with Western beauty and fashion ideals.

Gaertner was referred to as “the most stylish slayer of Murderess Row”.⁴⁸ While factors such as her age and casual demeanor throughout her arrest were argued against the case for her freedom, the fashion she sported while the jury judged her was noted as her ticket out:

Not too pretty, with an unpleasant mouth curving always in a sneer; not too young, with an admitted 38 years; not too wistful, with a string of hyphens to her name, a career as cabaret singer, and the title of “double divorcee,” this amateur taxi driver and, it would seem, professional gin drinker, played the best card she had- clothes. She played that card and won not only her freedom but the reputation of being the classiest dresser in

⁴⁵ Maurine Watkins, “Judge Admits All of Beulah’s Killing Stories: Which of Them will Jury Credit?” *Chicago Tribune*, May 24, 1924.

⁴⁶ Watkins, “No Sweetheart Worth Killing.”

⁴⁷ J. C. Burnham, “New Perspectives on the Prohibition ‘Experiment’ of the 1920’s.” *Journal of Social History* 2, no. 1 (1968): 54.

⁴⁸ “Hold Divorcee as Slayer.”

murderer's row in the Cook County jail.⁴⁹

Annan was jokingly referred to as “the prettiest slayer on Murderess Row”, with the majority of her space in the *Chicago Tribune* devoted to her appearance:

They say she's the prettiest woman ever accused of murder in Chicago- young, slender, with bobbed auburn hair; wide set, appealing blue eyes; tip-tilted nose; translucent skin, faintly, very faintly, rouged, an ingenuous smile; refined features, intelligent expression- an “awfully nice girl” and more than usually pretty. She wore fawn colored dress and hose, with black colored shoes, dark brown coat, and brown georgette hat that turned back with a youthful flare.⁵⁰

The young woman received so much attention for her appearance, some of her case's jury admitted to wanting to hear the trial so they could see her in person.⁵¹ At the end of the trial, after Beulah Annan had been found not guilty, the all-male jury took a “victory” picture with the young woman, squeezing as many men into the background of the picture as possible (see fig. 4).



Figure 4. Beulah Annan takes a victory picture with her trial's jury. (Photograph, *Mrs. Annan Thanks Jury*, May 25, 1924, *Chicago Tribune*.)

Because of this byproduct of fame affecting Annan and Gaertner rather than infamy, the two were given a “pass” by the public; an approved opportunity to move past the crimes they were accused of. This was made possible by the homewreckers trope itself, explaining that adultery and intoxication were the sole causes of the crimes, not factors in the hands of two killers. Adultery also played a role in the case of Sabella Nitti, though focus was rarely cast on this. The public reaction is said to have been a motivation of Maurine Watkins to leave the

⁴⁹ Genevieve Forbes-Herrick, “Killing Ladies: Belva Gaertner and Walter Law,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 13, 1927.

⁵⁰ Watkins, “Demand Noose.”

⁵¹ Maurine Watkins, “Select Jury to Pronounce Fate of Beulah Annan,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 23, 1924.

Chicago Tribune and write the play “Chicago” as a method of reflecting on covering Murderess Row, an instance where criminals became celebrities, and the role she played in facilitating it.⁵²

Essentially, the homewreckers trope attempted to demonstrate the damage that an adulterous relationship, or specifically an adulterous woman, and alcohol could cause. No matter who was intoxicated, alcohol had turned attractive, fun loving women into killers, and respectable, innocent men into drunken nightmares that prompted their romantic partners to kill them. No matter what side of the coin was tossed, either were threats to the home, dismantling the foundation of a respectable society: the family. This perspective, containing elements of moralism, social desirability, and meliorism completed the temperance movement that peaked with a national alcohol prohibition.⁵³

Public fascination with true crime stories can be seen today in multiple avenues. True Crime novels, podcasts, and documentaries are intensely consumed by the public every day. The genre’s functionality is dependent on emotional response.⁵⁴ Within the articles on Sabella Nitti, Beulah Annan, and Belva Gaertner, the average reader was able to consume emotionally exciting entertainment with relevant messages concealed in the form of tropes. These tropes, subtle as they were, were well received because of the relatability to societal and political debates of the time. Oftentimes, analysis of Cook County’s Murderess Row can lead to a criticism of the women themselves. However, comparing the contents of Murderess Row’s reports and the decade’s context can point to a new conclusion that can offer insight into how moral values and lessons are sold.

⁵² Lutes, “Tears on Trial,” 344.

⁵³ J. C. Burnham, “New Perspective,” 53.

⁵⁴ Wiltenburg, Joy. “True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism.” *The American Historical Review* 109, no. 5 (2004): 1377–1404. <https://doi.org/10.1086/530930>.

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