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The Skinny on the Fatty Arbuckle Trial

When the million-dollar movie comedian faced a manslaughter charge, the jury was indeed scandalized—at how his reputation had been trashed

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Upon his arrest for murder, Roscoe Arbuckle was booked into custody and denied bail.

In the summer of 1921, Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle was on top of the world. Paramount Pictures had paid him an unprecedented \$3 million over three years to star in 18 silent films, and he’d just signed another million-dollar contract with the studio. The portly comedian’s latest film, *Crazy to Marry*, was playing in theaters across the country. So his friend Fred Fischbach planned a big party to celebrate, a three-day Labor Day bash at the [St. Francis Hotel](#) in San Francisco.

But by the end of the week, Fatty Arbuckle was sitting in Cell No. 12 on “felony row” at the San Francisco Hall of Justice, held without bail in the slaying of a 25-year-old actress named Virginia Rappe. *Crazy to Marry* was quickly pulled from theaters, and a nation was outraged to discover a sordid side to

the off-screen lives of Hollywood stars. Behind Arbuckle's troubles was a mysterious woman named [Maude Delmont](#), a witness for the prosecution who would never be called to testify because police and prosecutors knew her story would not hold up on the stand. Yet what she had to say would be more than enough to ruin Arbuckle's career.

The days leading up to the party did not put Arbuckle in the best of moods. He was in Los Angeles having his Pierce-Arrow automobile serviced when he sat down on an acid-soaked rag at the garage. The acid burned through his pants to his buttocks, causing second-degree burns. He was tempted to cancel the trip to San Francisco, but Fischbach would have none of it. He secured a rubber-padded ring for Arbuckle to sit on, and they made the drive up the coast to the St. Francis, where Fischbach had reserved adjoining rooms and a suite.

According to Arbuckle, Fischbach arranged everything from the rooms to the guests to the liquor (despite Prohibition), and on Labor Day, September 5, 1921, Arbuckle awoke to find that he had many uninvited guests. He was still walking around in his pajamas, bathrobe and slippers when he saw Delmont and Rappe and expressed concern that their reputations might alert police to the "gin party." In Los Angeles, Delmont was known as a madam and blackmailer; Rappe had made a something of a name for herself as a model, clothing designer, aspiring actress and party girl. But the food and booze were flowing by then, the music was playing, and Arbuckle was soon no longer focused on his exhausting work schedule, the burns on his backside or just who all those guests were. What happened in the ensuing hours would play out on the front pages of [William Randolph Hearst's](#) national chain of newspapers, in lurid headlines, before Arbuckle had a chance to tell his side of the story.



Virginia Rappe was 25 years old when she arrived at the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco for a Labor Day Weekend party.

Maude Delmont soon painted a sinister portrait of the happy-go-lucky portly prince of silent film. This is what she told the police: After Arbuckle and Rappe had had a few drinks together, he pulled her actress

into an adjoining room, saying, “I’ve waited for you five years, and now I’ve got you.” After a half-hour or so, Delmont heard Rappe screaming, so she knocked on and then kicked at the locked door. After a delay, Arbuckle came to the door in his pajamas, wearing Rappe’s hat “cocked at an angle” and smiling his “foolish ‘screen smile.’” Behind him, Rappe was sprawled on the bed, moaning.

“Arbuckle did it,” the actress said, according to Delmont.

Rappe was taken to another room. A doctor was summoned, and he attended to her. She stayed at the hotel for a few days before she was taken to a hospital—where she died, on September 9, of a ruptured bladder.

The Hearst papers had a field day with the story—the publisher would later say the Fatty Arbuckle scandal sold more papers than the sinking of the *Lusitania*. While sexually assaulting Virginia Rappe, the papers surmised, the 266-pound star had ruptured her bladder; the *San Francisco Examiner* ran an editorial cartoon titled “They Walked Into His Parlor,” featuring Arbuckle in the middle of a giant spider web with two liquor bottles at hand and seven women caught in the web. Rumors that he had committed sexual depravities began to swirl.

Arbuckle turned himself in and was held for three weeks in jail. Police released a mug shot of the dejected actor, photographed in a suit and bow tie, his round face showing nothing of the joy everyone saw on celluloid. He remained silent as the innuendo swelled. Arbuckle’s lawyers insisted he was innocent and requested that the public make no judgment until all the facts were established. But they quickly realized Arbuckle would have to make a statement, and the comedian told a very different story from Maude Delmont’s.

After having a few drinks with Virginia Rappe, the actress became “hysterical,” Arbuckle said. She “complained she could not breathe and then started to tear off her clothes.” At no time, Arbuckle insisted, was he alone with her, and he said he had witnesses to corroborate the point. He found Rappe in his bathroom, vomiting, and he and several other guests tried to revive her from what they believed was intoxication. Eventually, they got her a room of her own where she could recover.

Arbuckle was charged with manslaughter and scheduled for trial that November. San Francisco District Attorney Matthew Brady saw the case as the perfect opportunity to jump-start his career in politics, but he was beginning to have trouble with his star witness, Delmont. Sometimes she claimed to be a lifelong friend of Rappe’s; other times, she insisted they’d met just days before the party. She also had a criminal history of fraud and extortion, Brady discovered. Also known as “Madame Black,” Delmont procured young women for parties where wealthy male guests soon found themselves accused of rape and blackmailed into paying Delmont. Then there was the matter of the telegrams that she sent to attorneys in both San Diego and Los Angeles: “WE HAVE ROSCOE ARBUCKLE IN A HOLE HERE CHANCE TO MAKE SOME MONEY OUT OF HIM.”

Still, Brady proceeded to trial. The newspapers never questioned Delmont’s version of events, and they kept flogging Arbuckle. His reputation was in a shambles, even after his friends Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin vouched for his character.

But Arbuckle’s lawyers introduced medical evidence showing that Rappe had had a chronic bladder condition, and her autopsy concluded that there “were no marks of violence on the body, no signs that the girl had been attacked in any way.” (The defense also had witnesses with damaging information about Rappe’s past, but Arbuckle wouldn’t let them testify, he said, out of respect for the dead.) The doctor who treated Rappe at the hotel testified that she had told him Arbuckle did not try to sexually assault her, but the prosecutor got the point dismissed as hearsay.



Fatty Arbuckle was making \$1 million per year in 1921 with Paramount Pictures. Photo: Wikipedia

Arbuckle took the stand in his own defense, and the jurors voted 10-2 for acquittal. When the prosecution tried him a second time, the jury deadlocked again. It wasn't until the third trial, in March of 1922, that Arbuckle allowed his attorneys to call the witnesses who had known Rappe to the stand. He had little choice; his funds were depleted—he would spend more than \$700,000 on his defense—and his career was presumed to be dead. They testified that Rappe had suffered previous abdominal attacks; drank heavily and often disrobed at parties after doing so; was promiscuous, and had an illegitimate daughter. One of them also attacked Maude Delmont as “the complaining witness that never witnessed.”

On April 12, 1922, the jury acquitted Arbuckle of manslaughter after deliberating for just five minutes—four of which were used to prepare a statement:

Acquittal is not enough for Roscoe Arbuckle. We feel that a great injustice has been done to him ... there was not the slightest proof adduced to connect him in any way with the commission of a crime. He was manly throughout the case and told a straightforward story which we all believe. We wish him success and hope that the American people will take the judgment of fourteen men and women that Roscoe Arbuckle is entirely innocent and free from all blame.

One week later, [Will Hays](#), whom the motion picture industry hired as a censor to restore its image, banned Fatty Arbuckle from appearing on screen. Hays would change his mind eight months later, but the damage was done. Arbuckle changed his name to William B. Goodrich (Will B. Good) and worked behind the scenes, directing films for friends who remained loyal to him and barely earning a living in the only business he knew. A little more than ten years later, on June 29, 1933, he had a heart attack and died in his hotel room. He was 46.

Sources

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