

# The Corpses in the Cope

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or  
Murder, Marriage, and Modernity:  
Understanding the Hall-Mills Case

Ezra Fischer

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The Corpses in the Copse or  
Murder, Marriage, and Modernity:  
Understanding the Hall-Mills Case

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Ezra Fischer, New Brunswick, New Jersey, April 18, 2004

## Disclaimer

The Preface and Introduction will spoil some of the mystery of *The Corpses in the Copse*. If you are reading purely for pleasure, you might as well skip them until the end.

## Preface

*September 13, 1922 - The Saint John’s Episcopal Church rewarded its most active members with a day-trip to Lake Hopatcong. Travelling together were the Reverend Edward Hall, his wife Frances Hall, his mistress Eleanor Mills, his mother Fanny Hall, and his suitor Minnie Clark. Jim Mills, Eleanor’s husband, remained in New Brunswick, possibly sweeping the floor of the church, where he served as sexton. Less than 36 hours later two of them would be dead.*

*September 16, 1922 - A young couple from New Brunswick wandered out to a popular trysting place past Easton Avenue. There they found the dead bodies of Edward Hall and Eleanor Mills. They had been posed under a crab-apple tree. They were lying side by side, on their backs. Her head rested on his arm. His face was covered by his hat and her throat was covered by her scarf. Edward had been shot once through the head, Eleanor three times. Some love letters from Eleanor to Edward were scattered over their dead bodies, and one of Edward’s calling cards had been propped up on his right foot. Eleanor’s throat had been cut so severely that she was almost decapitated; her tongue and voice-box had been cut out.*

October 1, 1922 - Thousands of sightseers swarmed over New Brunswick, visiting the site of the crime, and the houses of the bereaved and the suspected. The site of the crime became more like a carnival site, with vendors selling food, drink, and souvenirs. This daily occurrence was interrupted by the destruction of a nearby farmhouse by curious and ruinous tourists.

October 12, 1922 - The New York Daily News reported that, "The story which started in a church, has led to amazing moral turpitude. One character after another enters the sordid tale, each seemingly less moral than the last. Figuring in the case are several half-witted persons, numerous characters with police records, women with ugly, warped natures and shrill voices, hideous houses, dirty crooked streets."

November 3, 1926 - After four years a trial finally began. The attention of the entire country was fixed firmly upon the Somerville courthouse. Reporters from all over the country scrambled to get rooms nearby and a seat in the court-room. Dorothy Dix, the famous advice columnist could not resist the New York Evening Post's offer of \$1000 a week to cover the trial. Damon Runyon wrote of the 53 seats assigned for "casual spectators" that "if speculators could have gotten hold of these extra seats, they would have cleaned up. They could command any price."

## Introduction

Other historians have done an admirable job of retelling the story of the Hall-Mills murder case. There have been four books written about the subject, in 1927 James G. Dunton wrote *The Murders in Lovers' Lane*, in 1953 Charles Boswell and Lewis Thompson wrote *The Girl in Lover's Lane: The preacher and the choir singer in America's greatest murder*, in 1964, the celebrated lawyer William Kunstler weighed in on the subject with his book, *The Minister and the Choir Singer: the Hall-Mills murder case*, and most recently, in 1999 Gerald Tomlinson published *Fatal Tryst: Who Killed the Minister and the Choir Singer*. It is interesting that Boswell and Thompson, Kunstler, and Tomlinson each derived the title for their books from the title of the previous book, because in many ways each book builds upon its predecessors.

*The Murders in Lovers' Lane* is a semi-fictional account of the Hall-Mills case. Writing less than a year after the famous trial concluded, James Dunton was forced to disguise his story by changing all of the names involved. No one would have been fooled at all. Here is a short list of a few of the substitutions: for New Brunswick, Fanwick, for Hall, Alson, for Mills, May, for Mrs. Gibson, Mrs. Gleason, and most hilariously, for Mrs. Gibson's popular title, "the Pig-Woman," Dunton substituted "the Dog-Dame." A few fictional characters are introduced into the case in order to facilitate the narrative, most prominently the protagonist, a young reported named Hans Christian Anderson who grew up in "Fanwick" and who covers the case throughout all its twists and turns. Dunton's work is especially interesting because it is so contemporary to the case. In Dunton's characterization and his few editorial comments he reveals his own attitudes; attitudes which are valuable in studying the culture surrounding the case.

*The Girl in Lover's Lane* is primarily a re-telling of the story with a special emphasis on the trial.<sup>1</sup> The advertising on the back of *The Girl in Lover's Lane* targeted an audience that usually read fiction. The claims that "fiction has

never matched the drama of the Hall-Mills case, the greatest murder mystery of the century” and that “it was a murder that had every ingredient of the great novels and plays” are telling about the tone and form of *The Girl and Lover’s Lane*. So, it was no surprise that Boswell and Thompson left no notes about where they got their information on the case. The year of publication, 1953, was only roughly 30 years after the Hall-Mills case, so many of their desired readership would either have remembered the case themselves, or have had parents that did.

The crime still loomed large in public memory and interest, at least in New Jersey, eight years later, in 1961 when William Kunstler was asked whether he thought he knew who Eleanor Mills and Edward Hall’s murderer or murderers were. Kunstler claimed that he thought he did know, and three years later, he published *The Minister and the Choir Singer* in an attempt to back up his claim. Kunstler had many motives for writing this book, as he notes in the introduction, “The desire to solve the double killing was soon coupled with an equally compelling desire to re-create one of the most fascinating murder stories in American history.”<sup>2</sup> Later he wrote that he hoped to have “succeeded in presenting not just another murder story, but a ‘sociological document’ of possibly the only era in our history when such a crime could have caused the stir it did.”<sup>3</sup> Kunstler effectively re-created the murder and the people who were involved in the following investigations and trials, but he failed in writing sociologically about the cultural surround which informed the beliefs, desires, and actions of those people. He gestured towards writing this type of history by opening many of his chapters with a report of other prominent news stories of the day. For example Kunstler begins chapter 7 “An Arrest At Last (*Friday, October 6, through Thursday, October 12, 1922*)” by reporting the October 6 hanging of Bennie Swim a 20 year old resident of New Hampshire who had been convicted of murdering his cousin and her husband. Kunstler editorializes that “the fall of 1922 was producing more than its share of macabre news.”<sup>4</sup> What does he mean “more than its

share?” More than its share by whose standards? By the standards of the early 1960’s or by the standards of the early 1920’s? What were the standards of the early 1920’s and what created those standards? Why were people killing each other more often than usual or if they weren’t why was it being reported more than usual?

Kunstler did not even attempt to address questions of that sort and the next paragraph he returns to his admirably researched (although again lacking any citations) retelling of the Hall-Mills case. Kunstler was at least partially motivated by his political animosity towards the Ku Klux Klan, and it should have been no surprise that his proposed solution was that the Klan committed the murder. Kunstler’s theory created a furious debate at the time the book was published. Mystery writer Rex Stout, who wrote the *New York Times* book review of *The Minister and the Choir Singer* found the argument compelling and convincing, but it has since been challenged, if not entirely disproved. Nonetheless, it is here that Kunstler did his only real sociological writing. He wrote a history of the Klan’s activity, especially in New Jersey, and then attempted to place Edward and Eleanor in their correct positions in society. He suggested that their position was so intolerable to the Klan, which at that time saw itself as the protectors of public morality, that they were murdered. Even if he was wrong, Kunstler had begun to think about the people in the case in their cultural context.

The latest of the books on the case, *Fatal Tryst* by Gerald Tomlinson attempted “to sort out the known facts of the case, examine the physical and testimonial evidence, and assess the truthfulness of the key witnesses” and also offer “a reasoned solution to the long-standing Hall-Mills mystery.”<sup>5</sup> Tomlinson is an able historian and writer and his book succeeds in all of its goals. Furthermore, it is the first of the three books to have source notes and as such is useful for future work on the case. Nonetheless, it too does not examine the larger issues, the cultural significance of the case and the sensation it provoked, or the cultural context that the principals of the case acted in. Tomlinson’s pro-

posed solution, that Willie Stevens, brother in law of the deceased Edward Hall, was the murderer, was as he graciously admitted, conjecture based on a mass of written evidence about times, people's whereabouts, alibis, motives, and a certain amount of psychology.

If anyone would be able to sort through the massive amount of evidence to find out who actually murdered Eleanor Mills and Edward Hall, it would have been Charles Boswell and Lewis Thompson, William Kunstler, Gerald Tomlinson, or any of the many other people who have made the effort. A solution is not one of the goals of this paper. Instead, I have used the Hall-Mills case as a vehicle to examine the cultural world of the first quarter of the twentieth century. Instead of dwelling on who killed Edward Hall and Eleanor Mills, I have examined their relationships with each other and with their spouses. Instead of analyzing where the investigators might have made mistakes, I have examined the atmosphere that they worked in. I have provided a short history of journalism that helps to explain the coverage that the Hall-Mills case received. I have inquired into the history of the New Jersey judiciary to see how that may have played into the case. I have written about why it was so interesting for people to read, listen, talk, and think about the case. The overarching motive of the paper is a desire to expose the give and take relationship between the behavior of those directly involved in the case and the ongoing transformation of the society they lived in.

This essay alternates sections of narrative, which proceed chronologically, and sections of analysis, which correlate to the chronological story, but which also have their own logical order. The order of analysis proceeds generally from the simple to the complex and from the individual to the social. While the story is told in a straightforward chronological way, the sections of analysis focus on Victorian ideals of women and marriage, post-Victorian ideals of women and marriage, the effects of World War One on American society, the rise of the automobile, the transforming form and function of the press, New Jersey state and county politics, economic and racial tensions, and

the New Jersey Judicial system. The idea behind this broad analytical focus is that the Hall-Mills case, as dramatic and violent events often do, revealed a great deal about virtually every facet of life. Writing on September 22, 1922 - just six days after the bodies had been found - a particularly astute *New Brunswick Daily Home News* writer mused that "one can glimpse just how far-reaching is the eddy when a rock is thrown into the placid waters of opinion."<sup>6</sup> This essay will attempt to use the story of the rock (the Hall-Mills murder case) in order to examine the eddy (the culture of the 1920's.) If this essay is successful, its readers will finish with an understanding and appreciation of both the micro-history of the Hall-Mills murder case and the macro-history of the 1920's.

I have taken certain liberties with the micro-history of the Hall-Mills case, in order to accomplish my primary goal of revealing the cultural surround of the case. At the beginning of *Fatal Tryst*, Gerald Tomlinson notes that "the Hall-Mills case brought forth a bewildering array of characters, rather like the multitude of characters in a Russian novel... to help readers keep them straight, William M. Kunstler, in his book *The Minister and the Choir Singer*, added a *Dramatis Personae* list at the end, consisting of one hundred and thirty-eight names."<sup>7</sup> In this essay, the case has been whittled down so that the layperson can enjoy the story enough to see the connections to the analysis. By retelling the story as primarily a melodrama among five or six people, with the inclusion of about ten other characters when needed, I believe I have not harmed the essence of the story.

The trial in 1926 has received a disproportionate amount of attention in previous writing about the case. Perhaps it is the most important event if one is attempting to find a solution to who murdered Edward Hall and Eleanor Mills, but for my goals, it is no more interesting than the grand jury in 1922 or a romance in 1919. There were something like 12 million words written about the trial as it was going on, but one will find far fewer in this essay.

One final note is necessary: I love detective novels and this essay was in part motivated by this love. I also like to have people enjoy reading my writing. As far as was possible to do without damaging the analytical use of the chronological story, I adhered to classic detective novel form by keeping the reader in suspense about who was killed and who was the murderer... although in the latter case, I did not have much choice.

## Notes

1. The trial begins on page 37 and continues uninterrupted until the end of the book on page 159, so four years of discovery and investigation receive roughly 1/4 the attention that five weeks of trial do.
2. William M. Kunstler, *The Minister and the Choir Singer: The Hall-Mills Murder Case* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1964), vii.
3. *Ibid.*, viii.
4. *Ibid.*, 45.
5. Gerald Tomlinson, *Fatal Tryst: Who Killed the Minister and The Choir Singer?* (Lake Hopatcong, New Jersey: Home Run Press, 1999), 13.
6. The *Daily Home News*, Sept. 22, 1922, 2.
7. Tomlinson, 21.

## Chapter One:

CONTAINING AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS,  
A DESCRIPTION OF THEIR MARRIAGES, AND A DISCUSSION OF  
THE VICTORIAN IDEAL.

Yesterday a new pastor came to town. His name was Edward Wheeler Hall, and, to use the words of Jane Austen, “it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.”<sup>1</sup> For Edward, the fact that he had no fortune only transformed his desire for a wife from a want to a need. Edward was born in 1881 which makes him 28 years old when he moved into New Brunswick, New Jersey to take up his new job as the rector of the Saint John’s Episcopal Church. Not the most fashionable of churches, and yet not the least fashionable, either, the Saint John’s church had been started as a mission chapel of Christ Church, the main Episcopal church in town, in 1861.<sup>2</sup> Saint John’s was located in an elegant stone building on George Street, near the corner of George Street and Commercial Avenue. The church was suspended between an extremely rich part of



*...an elegant stone building on George Street...*

town, on top of the hill which rises above the church to the east, and an extremely poor area of town in the opposite direction.

Edward too was suspended between worlds. He grew up in Brooklyn, New York, the only son of a poor family. He involved himself in the Church from an early age. As a boy he became the head of the choir boys at Grace Church in New York. He then moved on to the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute, where he graduated in 1898, winning a scholarship to Hobart College.<sup>3</sup> At Hobart Edward was a “rather wild youth.”<sup>4</sup> Edward’s particular brand of wildness included a fair amount of drunkenness, gambling, and companionship of all sorts, with... all sorts. He dropped out of Hobart and entered the ministry. His first placement was as the assistant pastor at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in Basking Ridge, where he must have at least managed to hide his wildness behind a cloak of respectability, for it was only two years later that he received a promotion and moved into New Brunswick.

Edward’s first concern, as he moved into town, was his new church and its congregation, but his second concern was probably housing for himself and his mother who accompanied him. They rented rooms in a rambling Victorian boarding house, 161 George Street, not more than a hundred feet from the Church. This was fine for a short stay, but the rector knew that the arrangement would not be suitable for long. In the first place, he was a natural climber. He had climbed his way out of the holes that he created for himself in college in order to receive a good placement as an assistant in a well respected town in New Jersey. He had climbed his way out of assistantship in merely two years. He was not willing to remain a poor rector, living in a boarding house and off of the measly (and diminishing) contributions of his parishioners. He was determined to raise himself in life. He knew that to accomplish this he needed to marry, “for many Protestant congregations look askance at a bachelor pastor.”<sup>5</sup> To find a wife, Edward Hall determined to set his eyes securely up the hill to the east – towards security and wealth.

It was not long before a woman from the top of that hill changed her allegiance from the luxurious downtown Christ Church to Saint John's down the road. She quickly became involved in many church activities, including the very popular activity of wooing the pastor. In this activity she had the advantage of being one of the richest and best connected women in New Brunswick. Her name was Frances Noel Stevens.



... from the top of the hill...

Frances was born in South Carolina in 1874, but came to New Brunswick as an infant. She had two older brothers, William, born in 1872 and Henry born in 1870. When Frances decided to switch her allegiance, she was still unmarried and lived in the family mansion on 23 Nichol Avenue, where she took care of her aging mother and her slightly mentally retarded brother Willie. They did not have to worry about money. Although they were very private about their finances, rumor had it that Frances and her two brothers were worth around 2 million dollars.<sup>6</sup> They were related by marriage to the owners of Johnson and Johnson, the famous medical supply company.

Edward and Frances's courtship was a strange one. Edward was charismatic and although not conventionally ideal in appearance, he had a certain something that attracted women. James Dunton described him as "the playboy of the pulpit."<sup>7</sup> This quality was only exaggerated by his position as a man of the cloth. Frances was relatively unattractive, a fact which was only enhanced by her being 7 years older than Edward. Always reserved, her personality did not mesh well with the outgoing, boisterous Edward's. Yet they both must have seen in each other something which they had been waiting and searching for, because they threw themselves into the relationship the best they could. Frances became involved in the workings of the church. She ingratiated herself by being an able and willing assistant to the pastor in all areas of his work. With her influence and money, she would have been very helpful indeed to a new rector seeking to build the reputation of his church. For his part he encouraged her involvement in church activities and bestowed upon her his romantic attention, which was no mean gift.

They were married two years later in a ceremony that merited an article in the *New Brunswick Daily Home News*. Frances' family wealth was noted, as was her active interest in Edward's Saint John's church. The only problem with an otherwise perfect day was the absence of Frances' eldest brother, Henry. His absence forced Frances to walk up the aisle with her mother, a *faux pas* so shocking it would be



... *the playboy of the pulpit...*

remembered by some of those present, more than ten years later. Edward and his mother left their George Street boarding house and moved up the hill into the Stevens' mansion, 23 Nichol Avenue. Once again, it seemed that Edward had quickly succeeded at what he had determined to do.

On the day of their wedding, Edward and Frances thought very little, if at all about 49 Carman Street, where, in the top two floors of a "rather dilapidated house," an average working class family lived.<sup>8</sup> The Husband, Jim, 34, once a cobbler, was now a factory worker: the wife, Eleanor, 23, was surprisingly well educated and intelligent for a woman of her means. They were the parents of two

children, a one year old son, Danny, and a five year old daughter, Charlotte. Jim Mills was described as "a colorless, passive, insignificant sort of man," by James Dunton in *The Murders in Lovers' Lane*.<sup>9</sup> As a child, Jim's brother and friends called him "Simple Jim."<sup>10</sup> In 1905, when "Simple Jim" was 28, he married Eleanor, who was 17 years old.<sup>11</sup> Eleanor at 17, was pretty and petite. Despite bearing two children, she kept this build throughout her life. Her sister described her as a "highly imaginative character" "fond of reading, and of expressing thoughts and ideas."<sup>12</sup>

Eleanor was a dedicated member of the Saint John's congregation. Her house on Carman Street was only about two blocks away from the church. Her allegiance to the



...*a rather dilapidated house...*

church began in 1904 when, at the age of 16, she joined the church choir. Then, she had been Eleanor Reinhardt, a young girl of German ancestry, now she was Eleanor Mills, a mother of two at the age of 23, but still she sang in the choir and participated in church activities when she had a moment free from caring for her children.

As time went by, the Mills' marriage began to sour. Eleanor was constantly frustrated by Jim's inability to provide for family luxuries in addition to family necessities. She thought that were the genders switched, she would be able to do a better job of providing than he did. She threw herself into various projects, trying to distract herself from her marriage. First she doted on her children; she cared for them and loved them, but as they grew up and went to school and began playing with the many other children in the neighborhood, Eleanor searched for another project. She became even more involved in the church life of Saint John's.

Eleanor's interest in Saint John's was not solely religious. For her, the church was also a place to sing and to socialize. As early as 1914, Eleanor began to experiment with extra-marital affairs and her dating pool was provided by the congregation and the church choir. She went on a few dates with a man in the choir, but it didn't work out. Later he would say that "she [Eleanor] told me I was her ideal man. We went motoring several times, but it came to nothing as I didn't like her style."<sup>13</sup> Another man had different notions of style and he and Eleanor became lovers. They kept this affair going for fully two years, despite the close proximity of Eleanor's husband and her three year old son and eight year old daughter.<sup>14</sup>

As Eleanor Mills became more and more involved in church activities, Frances Hall withdrew more and more from them. She explained her withdrawal by saying that she didn't think it was proper for the wife of the minister to be so involved in the daily workings of the Church, but it could be that her disappearance was a sign that the Hall's marriage was quickly becoming less than blissful. The Halls continued to live in the mansion at the top of the hill with



*...Eleanor's interest in Saint John's was not solely religious...*

both their aging mothers, Frances's brother (Willie, a grown man with a diminished mental capacity,) and a few servants. They were surrounded by people whom they easily could have regarded more as charges than companions, and it would have been equally easy for them to develop the habit of thinking of each other in the same way. Frances and Edward's marriage remained devoid of the child who might have cemented the bond between them. By the time Frances turned forty, the possibilities of a child seemed to disappear.<sup>15</sup>

\* \* \*

By the mid 1910's it was obvious that the Hall and Mills marriages were less than ideal. How did the Halls and the Mills fit into the marital trends of the day and could the disintegration of their marriages be explained in terms of cultural change on a large scale?

The Hall marriage and the Mills marriage both fit more or less into the mold of the late Victorian period. Most historians consider the Victorian period to have lasted from roughly 1830 until 1910. The Mills were married in 1905 and the Halls in 1911. So strictly by date, they are both rather borderline, but many of the elements of both marriages match the characteristics of a Victorian union.

The Victorian age was characterized by a sharp distinction between public and private spheres. The private sphere of one's life was, according to E.L. Godkin, a late Victorian editor, where "a person reveals and realizes his other authentic self." This realization and revelation was expected to happen within the married home. Godkin and other late Victorian writers, such as the novelist Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, both thought of the sanctity of private life as synonymous with civilization and protection against barbarism.<sup>16</sup> Marriage was the key institution in the private lives of Victorians, and both parties carried intense expectations to it.

The most stringent of these expectations fell upon the woman in the marriage. Not only was she expected to be

chaste upon entering the marriage, but she was expected to be dismissive of sex during the marriage. A woman was expected to quell her man's beastly sexual nature. She was expected to care for the children and the house, to "conform to the 'cult of true womanhood,' that is, to be 'pious, pure, domesticated, and submissive.'"<sup>17</sup> The pressures were all the more overpowering because of the belief that "a true wife more than doubles her husband's virtues and powers."<sup>18</sup>

Victorian men did not escape the intense expectations of marriage either. To a Victorian, "a man's character was revealed by how he treated women."<sup>19</sup> If this were truly the case, then how he treated his wife might be the most important signifier of his character. Still, partially because of the expectations that the women had to endure, the men were slightly freer. Because a "true wife" was meant to "double her husband's virtues and powers," then, if a man was not powerful or virtuous he was not completely culpable — it was partly her fault. In terms of sex and double standards, Walter Lippmann phrased it wittily and concisely when he said that a "virtuous man was one who before his marriage did not have sexual relations with a virtuous woman."<sup>20</sup> Notice that it was logically consistent for a virtuous man to have had pre-marital sex with a non-virtuous woman, but the Victorian code was very clear that a woman had no such wiggle room. On the other hand, the Victorian man bore the sole responsibility for providing for his family financially. It was not until the late Victorian era that women began to enter the workforce and earn money for themselves and their families.

When Eleanor Reinhardt and James Mills entered the church on their wedding day in 1905 they possessed many of the expectations characteristic of the Victorian marriage. Eleanor, married at the age of 17, was probably a virgin when she entered the courting stage with her husband to be. Jim on the other hand, at the age of 28 had certainly had opportunities to have patronized the prostitutes of the town, if not other eligible bachelorettes. However, because of the double standard regarding sexual activity, this would not

have been a stumbling block to their marriage. What might have been somewhat troubling to Eleanor as she entered the marriage, was Jim's potential as a provider. Years after their wedding, Jim Mills admitted that he had never in his life made more than \$38 a week. In 1905, this figure was probably much lower. Nor was his work steady. For several periods in his life he had been without work entirely. The question remained, was Jim able to meet the expectations of supporting a wife and family? Probably not. The average annual wage for a man working in manufacturing, like Jim, in 1911 was \$537 a year.<sup>21</sup> It remained about the same in 1912, a year in which according to the authoritative sociological source, *Recent Social Trends*, only "40 to 50 percent of the industrial families of the United States were entirely supported by the earnings of the head of the household."<sup>22</sup> This speaks of not only the need for the wife to enter the workforce, but also of the increasing acceptance of this practice, as Victorian mores gradually gave way to modern corporate ones. Yet Eleanor never worked for wages. The Mills marriage continued to be conducted in the old fashion, even if that meant that the family had to squeeze themselves into their small apartment on Carman Street and probably do without sometimes.

When Edward Hall and Frances Stevens entered the church on their wedding day in 1911, they too were possessed with many of the expectations characteristic of the Victorian marriage. The Hall marriage was not however, financially a case study of the Victorian marriage. Frances Hall had quite enough money for both of them, and Edward's small salary as a rector was not used to support his wife. The Hall marriage was characteristically Victorian in the attitudes of the partners toward each other and toward the marriage. It is challenging to prove any of this, because there are very few if any surviving discussions of the inner workings of the Hall marriage, but we can surmise about some things. In addition, the very lack of a public source about the inner workings of their marriage suggests that they held very securely onto the Victorian notion that the marriage was eminently private.

All of the descriptions of the Hall marriage made it sound sterile. In their 1950's semi-fictional work, Boswell and Thompson used a description of the 23 Nichol mansion as a subtle metaphor for the Halls' marriage: "It was a house of dark wood, much paneling, inlaid floors, and heavy furniture, mostly mahogany."<sup>23</sup> This description alone suggested only the wealth of the house, but in a short paragraph whose first sentence was about the childlessness of the marriage, the statement took on new significance. It suggested that the Hall's marriage was without child because it was without life, without passion, and it suggests that this was due to its holding on to old ways of life which were symbolized by the "heavy furniture" that weighs down the marriage. If this is too fanciful, then there are plenty of other suggestive descriptions. Lawyer William Kunstler, in his book *The Minister and the Choir Singer* proposed that the "couple led an orderly, if unexciting, life, which was completely circumscribed by church activities."<sup>24</sup> Later on, when Mrs. Hall was forced to issue a public statement about her marriage, the *New York Times* bracketed the statement in such a way that it was obvious they considered the statement completely impossible, "Mrs. Hall ended this document with the statement that she and the rector, who was about fourteen years younger than herself, had been happy together, and that her confidence in him remained "boundless and unshaken."<sup>25</sup> Frances was actually only seven years older than Edward, not fourteen, but intentional or not, this factual error shows just how sterile and Victorian the *New York Times* writers thought the Hall marriage was. Anthony Comstock, who was held up as the consummate, ridiculous Victorian, was often made fun of for marrying a woman ten years older than himself, and the age difference of the Hall marriage would have struck many observers in the same way.<sup>26</sup>

A woman in a Victorian marriage was expected to abstain from sex before marriage (or at least engagement if one was quiet about it) and to discourage sex during marriage. One can surmise that, as with all of her duties within the marriage, Frances Hall took this one seriously and that



...a subtle metaphor for the Halls' marriage...

she and Edward very rarely had sex. The history of sexuality during the nineteenth century is a heatedly debated topic, and I believe that my claim about Edward and Frances Hall's marriage should be positioned within this historiography. Historians agree about the Victorian rhetoric of sex. Carl Degler in *At Odds*, writes that the appearance of "a whole new literature on sexual behavior" in the mid nineteenth century, "gave birth to the idea, widespread in subsequent years, that women's sexuality was denied or suppressed in nineteenth century America." The controversy over sex in the Victorian age came about in his eyes, because some historians mistook this literature to be a description of "actual practices and common beliefs" rather than the "new ideology of sexual behavior" that it really was.<sup>27</sup> Nancy Cott in her essay "Passionlessness" suggests that instead of being forced into the role of the sexless gender, women may actually have been active in creating and encouraging that new ideology because of the advantages that they might accrue by doing so. She writes, "The positive contribution of passionlessness was to replace that sexual/carnal characterization of women with a spiritual/moral one, allowing women to develop their human faculties and their self-esteem."<sup>28</sup> Karen Lystra, in *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America*, writes that, "the Victorian approbation of purity did not reflect a simplistic anti-sexual stance," but rather showed that they "believed that sexual expression should be a sacred act of worship, even more specifically a sacrament of love."<sup>29</sup> Attitudes aside, Kevin White in his book, *Sexual Liberation or Sexual License?* notes that the birth rate in the United States fell throughout the nineteenth century, in part because of women's "increasing power to refuse intercourse."<sup>30</sup> Degler is also aware of the declining birth rate, which he believes was due to a "reduction in frequency" of sexual intercourse, which is "consistent with what we have been calling the assertion of women's autonomy within the family."<sup>31</sup>

Frances Hall is a likely candidate for having adhered consciously to the doctrine of passionlessness because of

the moral power it gave her. Furthermore, Frances would have likely made the sacred connection that Lystra makes between sex and love, as did Edward, as we can tell from his letters to and from Eleanor Mills. There is no evidence that Edward and Frances were in love, their marriage seems to have been one primarily of convenience, and so it would make sense if they were not often sexual with each other. Lastly, while I do not want to make the error of equating rhetoric with actual behavior, I would simply suggest that people living then might actually have made that error too. Cultural rhetoric does not exist alone, but is a powerful force in shaping the actual behaviors of actual people.

The two marriages appear to have become unhappy ones after only a few years. This was not because either couple failed to adhere to the Victorian guidelines with which their marriages begun. They didn't become unhappy because the Victorian mores were somehow inconsistent with joyful relationships. The two marriages failed, because the society that surrounded them changed – the Victorian age was on its way out, and with it went the viability of living a Victorian married life. The real tragedy is how close they were. Despite the roots of counter-Victorian movements appearing in the 1890's in the "cultural fears and anxieties of the Progressives and bohemians [which] reflected deep changes in the structure of American society," as Kevin White points out in *Sexual Liberation or Sexual License?*, it was not until the 1910's that "these were beginning to effect the mass of Americans."<sup>32</sup> It is an inexact science at the best to guess when social phenomena effect individual people but it seems plausible that despite the beginnings of a cultural change which would eventually bring about the demise of the Victorian era, at the beginnings of their marriages the Halls and the Mills remained firmly Victorian.

In late 1918 or early 1919 Edward and Eleanor began an illicit love affair which they each subconsciously hoped would fill the holes in their lives left by their failing marriages.

## Notes

1. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1976), 1.
2. The Daily Times, *The City of New Brunswick, New Jersey* (New Brunswick: The Daily Times, 1908), 77.
3. The *New York Times*, Nov 12, 1922, 1 and Tomlinson, 45.
4. *Ibid.* Oct 15, 1922, 1.
5. Charles Boswell and Lewis Thompson, *The Girl in Lover's Lane* (London: L. Miller & Son Limited, 1953), 10.
6. Mary S. Hartman, "The Hall-Mills Murder Case: The Most Fascinating Unsolved Homicide In America." (*The Journal of Rutgers University Libraries*, June 1984), 7.
7. James G. Dunton, *The Murders In Lovers' Lane* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1927), 5.
8. The *Daily Home News*, Sept. 22, 1922.
9. Dunton, 45.
10. The *New York Times*, Oct. 29, 1922, 1.
11. Although William Kunstler claims that she was 15.
12. The *New York Times*, Sept. 23, 1922, 1.
13. The *New York Daily News*, Oct 9, 1922.
14. The *New York Times*, Nov. 12, 1922. It is unclear whether the two men – one who rejected Eleanor and one who carried on with her for two years – are actually two different men, or one and the same, with the different stories coming from different sides of the issue. Even if they are the same, it is at least plausible that Eleanor would have dated several men before she settled on one for two years.
15. In his book, *Steppin Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture 1890-1930*, Lewis A. Erenberg extensively quotes Henry Seidel Canby, editor of the *Saturday Review* and an observer of late Victorian upper-class life. "Canby noted that among the prosperous classes, by the time a couple reached the mid-thirties they no longer considered each other passionate beings." (24) It even seems possible that Edward and Frances, married at 30 and 37 respectively, might never have expected to have

children.

16. Rochelle Gurstein, *The Repeal of Reticence: A History of America's Cultural and Legal Struggles over Free Speech, Obscenity, Sexual Liberation, and Modern Art* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 18.

17. Kevin White, *Sexual Liberation or Sexual License? The American Revolt Against Victorianism* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 7.

18. *Ibid.*, 20.

19. *Ibid.*, 6.

20. *Ibid.*, 8.

21. Research Committee on Social Trends, *Recent Social Trends in the United States* (New York and London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1933), 817.

22. *Ibid.*, 825, 826.

23. Boswell and Thompson, 12.

24. Kunstler, 10.

25. *The New York Times*, Sept. 24, 1922.

26. Gurstein, 133.

27. Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 253.

28. Nancy F. Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850." (*Signs* 4 (Winter 1978): 219-36), 233.

29. Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 5, 8.

30. White, 47.

31. Degler, 215.

32. White, 36.

## Chapter Two:

IN WHICH EDWARD AND ELEANOR'S RELATIONSHIP IS ANALYZED  
AND A DETAILED REPORT OF THE EVENTS LEADING UP TO  
SEPTEMBER 14, 1922 IS PROVIDED.

It should be no great surprise that the Reverend Edward Hall and the choir singer, Eleanor Mills soon became romantically involved. With her children needing less and less of her time, Eleanor was free to spend her time as she chose, and she chose the stone church on George Street and the Reverend Hall within. Edward, as a minister, was expected to spend much of his time outside of the home attending to people outside of his family. For Edward this ministerial duty was one he looked forward to, because he had no children and his wife was no great joy for him. His mother recently moved out of 23 Nichol Avenue, because of a disagreement between herself and Frances Hall, her son's wife. With his mother out of the house, and his wife in some amount of disfavor, there was not very much to keep his attentions from wandering. Edward's wandering attention would naturally have come to a halt upon Eleanor Mills. She was young, pretty, had a beautiful voice, and an intellect which could match his own. For her part, Eleanor found Edward to be just as desirable. He spoke to her in a way that her husband never did. He was up-beat and charismatic. He was good looking and the fact that he was a minister, and her minister, only increased his desirability. She quickly became like the character Beatrice O'Hara in *This Side of Paradise*, who said that "priests were her favorite sport."<sup>1</sup>

The two found that they shared many interests. Among them were a love of nature, music, and German, he having studied it in college, and she being of German extraction. They found each other to be spectacularly suited as companions and lovers. They gave each other books to read and then looked forward to stealing away for a few hours alone to compare their opinions. One book in particular affected Eleanor. She wrote to Edward, "I am sorry you bought me

that spicy book. It fired my soul and wafted me into the spiritual world – oh goodness!”<sup>2</sup> Sometimes they even marked parts of books so that the other would know which spots to give extra attention to.<sup>3</sup>

As their illicit relationship progressed, two parallel changes occurred. Eleanor and Edward began to think of their shared illicit relationship as their primary and most important one, and they were increasingly daring; they ran greater risks to be together and they cared less if they were found out. In 1920, Reverend Hall actually employed his mistress’s husband as the sexton for his church. Edward and Eleanor were afraid that because Jim Mills was not making enough money for his family to live on, that he was going to be forced to move out of New Brunswick and that they would be separated.<sup>4</sup> In 1921, the Reverend Hall once again aided the Mills financially, when Eleanor was in need of a simple kidney operation.<sup>5</sup> The operation was performed successfully by Dr. Arthur L. Smith at the Middlesex General Hospital, but not without much concern on the part of Edward. Before Eleanor went in for the operation,

Edward said, "If she dies, then I shall kill myself."<sup>6</sup> The operation was a success, and Jim Mills promised to pay Rev. Hall back in installments. In an interesting show of kindness, Frances Hall sent Eleanor a bouquet of flowers wishing her a quick recovery.

The automobile provided Edward and Eleanor with one of their favorite ways of spending time together. They went for long drives through the countryside, found a place to park and shared a meal and relaxed together. Sometimes they



"IF SHE DIES, then I shall kill myself," the Rev. Edward W. Hall told his wife as the two sat at the bedside of his stricken sweetheart, Mrs. Eleanor Mills, according to Charlotte Mills's story, told today for the first time.

...much concern...

brought along a portable phonograph and listened to music while they talked to each other about "literature, art, music." Once, on their way home from such an encounter, the two motored past a flower garden which contained a large patch of sweet-peas, Eleanor's favorite flower. Edward, full of romance and chivalry after their pleasant afternoon respite, planned to ask the gardener if he could have some, assuming she was at home in the nearby house. Thinking the better of it, he suddenly leaped out of the car and cried, "No, no; I won't do that. Watch!" He ran up to the wire fence, slipped his hand into the garden and plucked a single bloom out of the ground. Presenting it to his honey, he declared, "Eleanor, I have become a thief for your sake."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Edward in his love for Eleanor had become much more than a simple flower thief.

Eleanor and Edward's far most common solution, when they wanted seclusion and privacy, was the old Phillips farm. The Phillips farm was on an abandoned lot on the other side of town from where the Halls and Mills lived. Just off of Easton Avenue, near the county line between Middlesex and Somerset, the old Phillips farm and the surrounding area was a popular "lovers lane" frequented by many people in New Brunswick. To get there, Edward and Eleanor had either to drive (which they did only when they had a sufficient excuse to take the Hall family car) or to take the street car which traveled down George Street, across the raised railroad tracks, to its terminal on the corner of Easton Avenue and Huntington Street, near Buccleuch Park. From there, the lovers, (usually they met in the park, but sometimes they remained alone until they reached their final destination) walked through the park, down Easton Avenue for a little bit until they just crossed over into Somerset County. There, they turned left into De Russey's lane, and then a short distance later, make another left into Lovers Lane. By this time, the roads were little more than narrow dirt tracks. The trip was long, but the reward was well worth it, for here, among the fields and scrubby trees, the two lovers had privacy. They never remembered which of them first suggested going there, but



*...down George Street...*

whoever it was almost certainly had heard about it from someone else. Trysting near the old Phillips farm was something of a tradition in New Brunswick, and it was a rare night that found only Edward and Eleanor among those fields. Still, since everyone who was there was not supposed to be, the various couples stayed out of each other's way as much as they could.

One day, Edward had a great surprise for Eleanor. He had bought the abandoned Phillips farm house!<sup>8</sup> Eleanor was excited, but worried that this move would expose their affair to Frances Hall or her many loyal business friends. Edward assured her that he had bought the house through a trusted intermediary, who promised to keep the purchase a complete secret. No more would they have to deal with the dubious privacy of the field, nor the rough grass which constantly reminded them that their love must be relegated from the intimacy of the bedroom to the uncomfortably public field. Now they would have real furniture in a place where they could seek shelter when the weather did not allow them to be outside and their passion did not allow them to be apart.



*...a place they could seek shelter...*

In the meantime, Eleanor's relationship with her husband went from bad to worse. She spurned the matrimonial bed and moved up to the attic where she shared a room with her daughter Charlotte.<sup>9</sup> Commenting on this move, James Dunton wrote that afterwards, Eleanor and Jim were "married in name only."<sup>10</sup> Full of confidence in her new relationship with the rector, she felt free to tell Jim exactly what she thought of him. No longer did she even bother trying to disguise her frequent trysts with her reverend lover. Now she just left the house whenever she wanted to. One day, Eleanor was getting ready to leave when her husband got home from work. For once, Jim Mills challenged his wife, "Now, where are you going? Over to church again, I suppose?" Eleanor figured she would just roll with the punches and accept the church as her destination, "Yes, I'm going over to church." Jim angrily responded, "You do more for the church and Mr. Hall than you do for me." Not about to

back down, Eleanor came back with a monster of a statement, “Well, why shouldn’t I? I care more for Mr. Hall’s little finger than I do for your whole body.” And with that said, Eleanor “flounced off and her husband walked dejectedly into the house. Mills always came off second best in his quarrels with his wife.”<sup>11</sup>

The two lovers frequently wrote letters to each other when they were separated, even if just to pass the time in their dreary home lives. Edward’s daily routine included a morning alone in his office. Eleanor was alone all day at home, with her children both at school, and her husband Jim busy with his duties as a janitor at the Lord Stirling School. Both of the lovers had plenty of time to write and plenty of things to write about. The only tricky part was the delivery. The post was too risky in a city as small as New Brunswick and especially so for a Minister married to such a well-known local figure as Frances Hall. Also, since they only lived a few blocks apart, using the mail seemed not only risky, but uneconomical and unnecessarily slow. Instead, the two devised a system for local delivery. When either one had a letter to deliver, they left it in a hidden spot in the Reverend’s office. Since Eleanor performed so many tasks at the church, no one suspected anything out of the ordinary in her office visits. This system allowed them a convenient and quick method of “posting” letters with only a small risk of exposure.

During a customary week, Edward visited Eleanor three or four times at her home on 49 Carman Street. He normally came calling in the afternoons, when Jim Mills was out at work, often just two blocks away. Edward drove up to the house, and parked his car across the street from the Mills’ house, trusting that his having legitimate church business to attend to with Eleanor would mask their affair better than a furtive entrance would.<sup>12</sup> Or, he had stopped caring who knew what, long ago.

Friday night was a special night for them, since that was the night that the Church choir rehearsed. Edward made a point of attending all of the choir rehearsals. There were many reasons for this. To the completely uninitiated,

he did this because he was a musical man and enjoyed singing with the choir. To those in the know, he attended in an attempt to quell some friction which so often accompanied the hymns during choir practice. To those really in know, and this might just be a circle of two (Edward and Eleanor certainly hoped so) he attended choir practice to meet his lover when practice ended. At the end of choir rehearsal, “Mrs. Mills stayed behind and accompanied him into his study behind the altar.” The *New York Times* reported that “this attracted attention, but never any open comment.”<sup>13</sup>



*...friday night was a special night for them...*

Sometimes they slipped up. One day, Eleanor allowed a fellow choir member, Minnie Clark, to use her hymnal. She had forgotten that there was a “dear picture” in it that Edward had placed between two pages. Eleanor never knew whether or not Minnie discovered the picture, or the couple, but she wondered and worried.<sup>14</sup> In the spring of 1922, Edward and Eleanor went to a Broadway show in New York. As they were walking “arm in arm ‘like a bride and

groom' in the afternoon theatre crowd at Broadway and Forty –second street” they thought they saw someone they knew from the church. Later on the frenzied murmuring of the church gossips confirmed to them that they were seen.<sup>15</sup> Weeks later the two lovers managed to sneak away from their spouses for a few days. They took full advantage of this by spending “several days together in Atlantic City.” They enjoyed the beautiful early summer weather on the beach and in the ocean, often bathing together. They spent their nights at the Haddon Hall.<sup>16</sup> Again, after this trip, gossip ran through the congregation, reaching everyone but them. Have they been found out, they wondered? It seemed pretty likely that they had been, but by whom? And what would the response be? Every day must have seemed like an eternity of longing for a few stolen moments and a terrible infinity fearing exposure.

At the end of July, Edward was obligated to vacation with his wife in Isleford, Maine, for three weeks. Before he left, he agreed to keep a sort of “love diary” which he would write in every day while he was away. Eleanor agreed to do the same and they planned to exchange their diaries when he returned to New Brunswick. They also planned to send letters back and forth while they were apart. Eleanor sent some of her letters directly to Edward at his hotel, but reserved the most private to general delivery at the Post office in nearby Seal Harbor. This turned out to be a good idea, for as Edward remarked in one of his letters, his wife, Frances would have thought it strange if he did not receive at least some letters from his good friend Eleanor. Edward found a way to sneak away to the Seal Harbor post office every once in a while, where he picked up a letter from his love, and posted one back to her, straight to her house on Carman Street. Edward wrote, “Dearest, will these days ever pass? Each one seems weeks long. Oh, how I long to be with you again.” “Dearest, we were made for each other’s arms – that is our heaven.”<sup>17</sup>

This three-week separation only fired the passions of Edward and Eleanor. Both felt like they could not bear another separation. They wanted to rid themselves of every-

thing else and be together. They talked about what options they might have. One proposal was to have Eleanor live in an “Episcopalian home until the time came to run away from New Brunswick.”<sup>18</sup> Their destination during some impassioned musing was going to be Germany.<sup>19</sup> At other times, they dreamed about escaping to Japan where they could begin anew, this time together officially.<sup>20</sup> Sometimes they even talked about divorce. This subject caused a few arguments, because Eleanor thought it was a possibility, but Edward disagreed. Divorce remained a point of contention in their relationship. One day, Eleanor saw an article about it in the *New York World* that interested her, and she cut it out and laid the clippings on Edward’s desk at the church.<sup>21</sup> Aside from thinking about divorce, they took the idea of running away so seriously that they began to make general plans for it. Edward made sure that he always kept the business of the church in such good order that it would be easy for the next Reverend to take over should he disappear.<sup>22</sup> Eleanor did nothing concrete, but perhaps she started treating her children, especially her daughter, Charlotte, just a bit differently than she would have otherwise – preparing her to take over Eleanor’s position as housekeeper to her husband and mother to her son.

In early September 1922, church business required that a group from Saint John’s be sent up to Bound Brook, to an Episcopal home for the aged. This type of mission normally included Edward and his wife, and some of the more involved members of the church, often Eleanor Mills. This time however, Eleanor told Edward that she was not coming along. Disappointed, he went home and told his wife that he was not going to go to Bound Brook because he was too tired. Shortly afterwards, Mrs. Elsie Barnhardt, a married sister of Eleanor’s who was planning on taking part in the trip, came to 49 Carman Street and convinced Eleanor to go with her. Eleanor ran down to the church and announced to her lover, that she would go to Bound Brook after all. Edward said, “Why Eleanor, I thought you were not going.” When he arrived at home that night, he announced to Frances that he had changed his mind and

would be going on the trip. Frances, just as surprised as Edward was a few hours earlier, responded by saying, “Edward, I thought you were too tired. But if you wish; we will go.” Edward was completely nerve wracked for the first half of the trip, and who could blame him? The party resembled nothing more than a boxing match, with Eleanor Mills on one side, with her sister, Elsie Barnhardt sitting in her corner, and Frances Hall on the other side, with Barbara Tough, the Hall’s servant in her corner. Edward was, of course, the prize belt. Everything went smoothly on the trip up and during the visit. On the ride home, Edward was just beginning to relax. The women were in a great mood, and began to “exchange” a few toasts, when disaster struck. It was Frances’ turn to speak. Without any discernible change in attitude, she firmly spoke a toast, “Here’s to our wives and sweethearts. May our sweethearts be our wives and our wives our sweethearts.” A silence fell in the car. Not to be outdone by anybody, especially not her lover’s wife, Eleanor raised her own voice and responded, “I have a better one. May our sweethearts and wives never meet.”<sup>23</sup>

If the first car trip was Round One, then later on in the month, September 13, to be exact, was Round Two. On this day, the Halls took Eleanor Mills and Minnie Clark on “a picnic in appreciation of all of the work they have done for the church.”<sup>24</sup> This was the fourth annual church picnic, and this year, the Halls were taking their star parishioners to Lake Hopatcong. If the first round went to Eleanor Mills, then this one went squarely to Mrs. Frances Hall. Again, the trip began nervously for Edward. Not only were his wife and his mistress traveling together, but so too was Minnie Clark, who, despite being married herself, was a rival of Eleanor Mills’ for his extramarital attention. As if this weren’t enough, Edward’s mother was also along for the trip. His mother moved out of 23 Nichol Avenue about three years earlier because of a disagreement with his wife, Frances. So, Edward was alone, in a car with his mother, who didn’t get along with his wife, Frances Hall, whose position was coveted by his mistress, Eleanor Mills, whose position was, in turn, coveted by Minnie Clark. The day

began inauspiciously for the prospects of harmony. Eleanor prepared herself and was ready by 9:00 in the morning, the hour she thought had been appointed for leaving New Brunswick. She waited, and waited, and waited. Finally, at 10:30, she gave up, picked up her phone and asked for New Brunswick 74, the Hall’s phone number. Mrs. Hall answered “very coolly when she got her on the phone, but promised to come around soon.” Eleanor assumed that the delay was due to a fight between Edward and Frances Hall. She was pleased that Edward’s relationship with her was more harmonious than his marriage, but also worried that she might have been the subject of the argument. In reality, the Halls were running late because their car tire needed to be inflated, forcing them to take a short trip to the mechanics. They were getting along very well, and when Edward got his pants dirty inflating the tire, Frances carefully brushed the muck off of him. The trip only went down hill once it got rolling. Because of their late start, there was only time enough to spend half an hour at the lake before the group needed to start back. In that short time, Edward ripped his pants while climbing over a barbed wire fence, and Frances seized the moment... and a needle and thread and mended them for him on the spot. This deeply pained Eleanor to see “some one else doing this service for him.”<sup>25</sup> The car ride home was a quiet one, with Eleanor “thinking hard” about “what a muddle [they] are in.”<sup>26</sup>

At 10:00 a.m. on the next day, Sept 14, 1922, Edward and Frances Hall along with Willie Stevens and Edward’s ten year old niece, also named Frances Hall, who was spending the day with them, went marketing. They returned home for lunch. Afterwards, Mrs. Hall retreated into the kitchen, while Edward went to a nearby PTA meeting. When the meeting ended, he swung by Nichol Avenue because he was on his way to Saint Peter’s Hospital, where he was going to distribute flowers. He thought it would be a good thing both for the patients and for his niece if she accompanied him. Right after he left, (as generally happens when one leaves the house...) he got a phone call. It was Eleanor Mills and Frances Hall answered it. Eleanor left a

vague message about needing to see Edward so that he could explain something to her about the bill for her operation. Mrs. Hall took the message and promised to relay it to Edward when she saw him. Sometime in the afternoon Mrs. Addison Clark – the same Minnie who accompanied them on their trip the day before – arrived at 23 Nichol Avenue with a young relative, Marion Stokes who wished to take photos for her high-school graduation in the Hall's beautiful back garden. Hours later, at around 4:30 or 4:45 Minnie and her young friend left the house.

At 5:45 Jim Mills, finished with work at the Lord Stirling school, walked over to the church and cleaned up after some men who had been working on the interior of the building. It took him a little bit longer than expected and so when he returned home for dinner at 6:15, he was greeted by his wife who snapped at him, "You are late for your supper."<sup>27</sup> In Charles Boswell and Lewis Thompson's *The Girl in Lover's Lane*, Eleanor also said "something about jealousy over Mr. Hall and that [Jim] made a hell of a house for her."<sup>28</sup> After dinner, Eleanor sat with her daughter on the front stoop of their house and confided in her. She told Charlotte that she had read an edition of the *New York World* earlier in the week and was especially interested in an article about divorce by Dr. Percy Stickney Grant, a very visible New York Episcopalian minister.<sup>29</sup> She had cut it out of the newspaper, and at 7:00, Eleanor ran over to the church and threw the clipping on Edward's desk. She was back by 7:15. She left again almost immediately, after telling her daughter that she would be right back and not to go anywhere. This time she ran to a nearby candy store to call Edward again.

Edward returned at 6:30 and received a cool reception from his wife, despite his not being late. As soon as the family finished dinner, Eleanor called again. Frances, stepping in from the veranda, picked up the phone, but quickly realized that one of their servants had already answered the call and was now getting Edward. Edward answered it and had a short conversation with Eleanor, during which he said, "Yes, yes, yes. That is too bad. I was going down to the

church a little later. Cannot we make arrangements for later, say, about quarter after eight."<sup>30</sup> Less than half an hour later, Edward Hall left 23 Nichol Avenue.

Meanwhile, Eleanor had returned from the telephone in the candy store, only to find that her children had left to go to their aunt's house. Disappointed, she nevertheless grabbed a hat, shawl and scarf, and walked out of the house. As she was leaving, she was challenged by her husband, who wanted to know where she was going. Her response was a confident, "Follow me and find out!"<sup>31</sup> As his wife walked down the street, Jim Mills returned to the back stoop of his house and threw himself back into the window boxes he had been constructing. At 9:00 his downstairs neighbor complained about the noise, but he continued where he was until 9:45 when he moved the work up to a gas-lit back porch, where he could see better.

It was about 8:00 p.m. when Eleanor got on to a street-car at the corner of Carman Street and George Street. She rode to the end of the line and got off at Buccleuch Park. She was the last passenger on the car and nodded at the driver on her way out. Eleanor began to walk to the old Phillips farm, where she was supposed to meet Edward. On her way, she saw a mother with her children enjoying the crisp, early fall evening.

About fifteen minutes later, Edward passed the same family on their evening stroll. From the sleepy look on the children's faces, he suddenly realized how late it was. He pulled his watch out of his pocket and checked it against the Easton Avenue Vocational School's clock. It was after 8:30. He pushed by the sauntering family and hurried on towards De Russey's Lane and his waiting mistress.

Back at the Hall house, Frances Stevens Hall put the young Frances Hall, to bed at around 9:00 and then proceeded to play solitaire for two solid hours. By the time she put her cards away, she was worried. Edward almost never got home after 10:00, and it was now close to 11:00. She decided that there was nothing she could do, and so she went to bed, leaving a light on.

At the Mills house, the children returned home from

their aunt's house at about 10:30. Jim put them to bed and then decided to go to the church to look for his wife. He stopped at the corner store for a glass of soda water and reached the church at 11:05. His search was to no avail, so he locked up and walked home. He got back at around 11:20 and went straight to bed, also leaving a light on. He awoke at 2:00 a.m., and went up to the attic, to the bedroom that Eleanor shared with their daughter Charlotte. He looked in and was surprised not to see his wife sleeping. He asked Charlotte where her mother was, but received only a mumble in return. Feeling that something must be wrong, Jim got dressed and went back to the church to search for her again. Again, his search was fruitless, and he shut up the church again and returned.

Mere minutes later, Frances Hall, who had also awakened and decided to search for her missing spouse, arrived at the church with her faithful brother Willie. They did not have a key to the church and were forced to assume that Edward was not there because there were no lights on inside. The two made their way over to the Mills where they thought Edward might be. When they arrived they found another unlit house and concluded again that Edward was not there. They returned home after 3:00, and Francis resigned herself to bed for a restless and haunted sleep.

The next morning neither Edward nor Eleanor were asleep in their houses. They were missing. Jim Mills and Frances Hall ran into each other at Saint John's church, where both had come to look for their spouses between 8:30 and 9:00 a.m. on Friday September 15. Neither one knew what the other was doing there, but they soon sorted things out. Frances asked Jim, "Is anyone sick in your family?" "No, why?" was Jim's reply. Frances paused for a moment and then came out with it, "My husband has not been home all night." Without missing a beat, Jim answered, "Neither has my wife. What do you think it is, an elopement?" Frances, not willing to consider that possibility, said "No, it must be foul play. My husband has never stayed out all night before. I'm going to notify the police."<sup>32</sup> Jim suggested another possibility, "Maybe they have gone to Coney

Island."<sup>33</sup> This struck Frances as incredibly foolish, and before she left the church, she repeated, "I think they are dead or they would have come home."<sup>34</sup> Apparently the reticent Frances was more willing to believe that her Husband was dead than to consider the possibility of his being on Coney Island. Frances did call the police and ask if there were any "casualties?" When she received a negative in response, she disconnected without leaving her name or the names of the missing people.<sup>35</sup>

After her church run-in with Jim Mills, Frances Hall went home and stayed there for the rest of the day. Jim Mills visited her three times during the day to see if there was any news of his wife or her husband. After visiting at 12:00 and again at 5:00 Jim Mills made his third and last trip up to Nichol Avenue at around 8:00. There he saw Frances Hall sitting alone on her front porch. After greeting her, he poured out his feelings to her, "Mrs. Hall, I don't know what to make of this. I am just lost, at sea on it." Frances, not to be outdone, replied with her own metaphor, "I am looking at a blank wall before me." They went on for a while, but neither had any news about their missing spouses. As Jim was leaving, he said, "I don't know what to make of it, Mrs. Hall," and she replied, in what had become a repeated idea for her, "They must be dead or they would come home."<sup>36</sup> As Frances Hall prepared herself for another sleepless night, Jim Mills walked slowly home, with his wife in his thoughts, but not in his home.

\* \* \*

Edward and Eleanor were a part of a nationwide cultural change in the position of women in society and the dynamics of romantic relationships.<sup>37</sup> These changes, which can generally be termed post-Victorian transformations, had their beginnings in the 1890's and began to affect the general population around 1910. The Hall and Mills marriages occurred during the Victorian period, just before the post-Victorian transitions began to effect the lives of most people, but it is important to emphasize that, like any

cultural change, this wave of change occurred on a person to person basis. So although there almost certainly were some people in New Brunswick in 1911 and even 1905 that had begun to adjust their lives, the Halls and the Mills had not. Of the four, Eleanor Mills, and Edward Hall transformed themselves in the ten or fifteen years after their marriages in accordance with the post-Victorian movement, and their spouses did not. Edward and Eleanor's relationship will be the key evidence which points towards this conclusion.

*This Side of Paradise*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald is a wonderful source to help define the post-Victorian transformations. Published in 1920, it was seen even then as the first definitive work of a new era. It is explicitly biographical (and fairly autobiographical,) as it follows Amory Blaine, born in 1896 through to 1920. Amory is younger than any of the Halls or the Mills, and so instead of being caught in the end of an era, it is his mother who "absorbed the sort of education that will be quite impossible over again... in the last of those days when the great gardener clipped the inferior roses to produce one perfect bud."<sup>38</sup> This quote not only establishes that there is a cultural transition going on, but also begins to hint at one of the elements of this transition – increasing democratization. There are many examples of aspects of democratization in the post-Victorian transformation. A few of these were related to promiscuity and publicity, two key factors in the Hall-Mills case. In his study of journalism and celebrity, *Self-Exposure*, Charles Ponce de Leon explores the idea of a "new mode of presentation" that evolved from the 1890's to the 1920's. He suggests that one result of this new form of journalism was a "devaluation of 'greatness'[that] was a direct result of social and economic changes that most Americans regard as eminently progressive. Empowering common people required belittling the distinguished — and shattering the notion that a human being could ever be 'great.'"<sup>39</sup> Beth Bailey notices another forum of democratization; courtship, the subject of her book, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*. One step in the process of dating (which she claims came to the middle

class from above and below<sup>40</sup>) becoming a "national practice" was the dance hall, whose popularity brought people of all classes together, "to dance among all sorts and conditions of men and women."<sup>41</sup> Lewis A. Erenberg's analysis of New York nightlife, *Steppin' Out*, coincides with Bailey's points about democratization. During the Victorian age, he writes, "each sex, class, and race had its specialized attributes and amusements, and each was expected to occupy its exclusive sphere."<sup>42</sup> Although Erenberg's book explores many of the complications and contradictions inherent in nightlife, the general trend of the period is undeniably that, "the nightclubs of the twenties continued to bring diverse groups together for an evening in the exploration of a new and vital popular culture that offered a way out of many of the limitations and controls of nineteenth-century society, culture, and institutional identity."<sup>43</sup> When counter-cultural movements could no longer be ignored, then the Victorian establishment was forced to answer these charges and in doing so, themselves began to blur the distinctions between public and private. The Victorians' prized private had to be discussed publicly. The obscene had to be seen and so the Victorian age began to crumble.

The youth were the first group whose behavior bears witness and is evidence of the social changes going on. Foremost among the changes was an increasing promiscuity. During the Victorian age, a large degree of independence was granted to young couples. They were allowed considerable time alone and pre-sexual activities and even sexual activity among engaged couples, was if not encouraged, at least tolerated.<sup>44</sup> In the new era, premarital sexual activity took on a new and increased significance. Amory, when he is 13 uses the fact (or claim) that he "went to the burlesque show last week" to impress a girl he likes.<sup>45</sup> After Amory's first kiss, Fitzgerald ends the scene with a quote from a song playing on a graphophone. The song speaks of another man, "Casey-Jones" taking a journey to the "promised land."<sup>46</sup> Although in the original, the "promised land" probably referred to something else, here Fitzgerald seems to be suggesting that for Amory and many others of his age,

the “promised land” was the realm of sex. Amory’s first year (1914) of College at Princeton University, (a mere 12 miles away from where the Halls and the Mills lived,) reveals a much more pervasive and promiscuous sexual atmosphere for Amory to explore and Fitzgerald to explain. “Amory had come into constant contact with that great current American phenomenon, the ‘petting party.’ None of the Victorian mothers – and most mothers were Victorian – had any idea how casually their daughters were accustomed to be kissed.” Fitzgerald compares the behavior of the new “Popular Daughter” or the “P.D.” to the older Victorian modes of femininity. “The ‘belle’ had become the ‘flirt,’ the ‘flirt’ had become the ‘baby vamp. The ‘belle’ was surrounded by a dozen men in the intermissions between dances. Try to find the P.D. between dances, just *try* to find her.” The change was not just sexual as Fitzgerald goes on to describe a few paragraphs later. “Amory saw girls doing things that even in his memory would have been impossible: eating three-o’clock, after-dance suppers in impossible cafés, talking of every side of life with an air half of earnestness, half of mockery, yet with a furtive excitement that Amory considered stood for a real moral let-down.”<sup>47</sup> Again, this was the behavior of the youth in the years leading up to the first world war.

The entrance of the United States into World War One is today widely assumed (as it was then) to have had some great effect on the national cultural transformation which the nation was in the midst of before April 6, 1917. Exactly what the effect of The Great War on the cultural politics of post-Victorian transformation was, is still an open question. Three common interpretations are of World War One as a postponing factor, as a termination of change, and as a culmination of change.

One interpretation was that The Great War postponed many cultural changes by distracting the populace from domestic and social issues. Newspapers, magazines, movies, sermons, and other means of disseminating information were all dominated by talk of the war. Before the United States entered the war, these media were full of

debate over whether the US should or should not join and on what side and to what degree. Once the decision was made to enter the war, the media was even more completely dominated by news of the war. This time the domination was official, coming under the auspices of the Committee on Public Information. One measure of this is that “the volume of magazine discussion about divorce declined two-thirds during the war.”<sup>48</sup> In the US Congress a similar moratorium settled in. Determined to transform the Republican party, Hiram Johnson was frustrated by the attitude of the Senate, “Everything here is war, to suggest a social program or a domestic policy would simply afford an opportunity to those who believe in none to boll[sic] you over.”<sup>49</sup>

Many at the time, feared or hoped that the war would not simply postpone, but actually end the post-Victorian transformations, and as much as would be possible, restore the society to its previous norms. In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson expressed this exact fear, “every reform we have won will be lost if we go into this war.”<sup>50</sup> In the same year, August 29, 1914 to be exact, 1500 New York women marched against the war because they were afraid that it “would set back the feminist cause by re-establishing the male military dominance.”<sup>51</sup> It seems that their fears were partially vindicated. David Kennedy, in *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*, wrote that, because of the war, “many reformers would be destroyed. Some would be driven further left. The majority, who with fear and trembling decided to take their stand with Wilson, began almost immediately to feel the withering effect of war on the liberal spirit.”<sup>52</sup> Then, as now, it seems that the men who rose to control the country during war tended towards the more regressive, and the war presented them with a chance to pursue their own cultural goals with the unquestioned authority that war vests politicians. George Creel, the head of the Committee on Public Information “confessed after the Armistice, ‘when I think of the many voices that were heard before the war and are still heard, interpreting America from a class or sectional or selfish standpoint, I am not sure that, if the war had to come, it did

not come at the right time for the preservation and reinterpretation of American ideals.”<sup>53</sup> Perhaps the most glaring example of this was Prohibition. The legislative movement towards establishing prohibition began before the war but took on the mantle of a war-time measure, similar to the war-time liquor regulation enacted in Britain.<sup>54</sup> By the time Prohibition had navigated its way through the legislative and constitutional amendment process, the war was over, but the control of the government by its war time champions was not and so it passed.

The Red Scare that followed The Great War was motivated not only by a real fear of communism but also by a desire of the war-time politicians to lengthen their inviolable control. They feared that the war was ending too soon for them to complete their organized reconstruction effort. Grosvenor Clarkson, secretary of the Council for National Defense said that “if peace were to come today, there would be only chaos in our efforts to unscramble the eggs that we have broken.”<sup>55</sup> By simulating a war time atmosphere, these men hoped they would be able to continue their re-establishment of Victorian mores. According to Frederick Lewis Allen in his history of the 1920’s, *Only Yesterday*, “a cloud of suspicion hung in the air and intolerance became an American virtue.”<sup>56</sup>

During the war patriotic restrictions abounded. “The German language was all but banned from schools and usage” because it was thought of as, “a language that disseminates the ideals of autocracy, brutality, and hatred.”<sup>57</sup> In May of 1918, the New Brunswick government actually did discontinue all German courses and banned the sale of German language publications.<sup>58</sup> A month before, Samuel Chovenson, a Rutgers College freshman who refused to speak in favor of the Liberty Loan campaign, was “tarred and feathered” (although molasses was substituted for tar) and run out of town by a mob whose members carried signs bearing messages like, “This is what we do with Pro-Germans.”<sup>59</sup> This may have been an isolated incident of youthful and violent patriotism, but the tension in New Brunswick was palpable. The Mayor, Edward Farrington,

felt it his duty to assure the many foreign-born residents of New Brunswick that their safety was his concern. Nonetheless, the fear of these foreign residents’ disloyalty<sup>60</sup> was real enough that “the water plant, the bridges, factories, and public buildings were put under guard,” the secret service had an office in the post office, “and what they did not know about the citizens of this vicinity did not amount to much.”<sup>61</sup> Eleanor, as a woman of German ancestry and Edward as a student of German might have felt that this was unfair to them. They considered themselves patriotic Americans, and this attitude toward a language dear to them must have stung.<sup>62</sup> It might have brought them together, because it was in this period of intolerance and suspicion that Eleanor and Edward became lovers. Years later, by signing their letters, “DTL” an abbreviation for “dein treuer Lieber” or “thine true love,” in German, they might have been making a silent reminder to each other of the circumstances in which they first found each other and the language that united their souls.

There is another and contrasting approach to describing the effects of The Great War on the morals of the country. There is a school of thought which suggests that WWI really marks the culmination of the struggle between the forces trying to throw down and those trying to re-build Victorian society in America. Amory Blaine, the hero of the new generation, blames the Victorians squarely for the war. Before he allows Amory to leave for France, Fitzgerald presents the reader with this damning accusation, “Victorians, Victorians who never learned to weep, who sowed the bitter harvest that your children go to reap.”<sup>63</sup> Leaving the country with this attitude, Amory feels that he was undergoing a process of “breaking all the links that seemed to bind us here to top-booted and high-stocking generations.”<sup>64</sup> When the soldiers landed in France, Fitzgerald suggests that the war only aided them in their social rejection of Victorianism. “I think four men have discovered Paris to one that discovered God.” Amory Blaine says.<sup>65</sup>

Fitzgerald’s analysis of the situation is supported by Kennedy, who notes that when the United States Army

entered Europe, they were entering an anti-climactic fight against “a manifestly defeated foe in full flight.”<sup>66</sup> The United States Army performed no greater task than “mop up” duty, and the American soldier spent his most memorable hours, not in the midst of trenches and shells, but in the midst of French burlesque shows and prostitutes. John P. Wall in his *New Brunswick in the World War* provided many counter-examples in the form of heroic war stories, but even these stories show that American units were usually only at the Front for around ten days at a time.<sup>67</sup> The United States Army made an innovative decision and “chucked [their] Puritan prejudices” and issued contraceptives to all of its men.<sup>68</sup> As opposed to veterans of other wars, the American veterans of The Great War for the most part came back less socially conservative than they were when they left. In Amory Blaine’s case, the effect of the war was exemplified in his attitudes towards religion, “I confess that the war instead of making me orthodox, which is the correct reaction, has made me a passionate agnostic.”<sup>69</sup>

If the effect of the war on the American soldiers was a generally liberalizing one, what was the effect on those that stayed home? Again, there are two somewhat conflicting theories. The war was seen as being both a restricting and liberating influence on the social lives of Americans. Fitzgerald seems somewhat unsure on this point. Perhaps he was writing too close to the end of the war, for the social significance to be clear to him. On page 182 of *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald writes of the liberalizing effect that the war had on social relations, “Oh, she’s average – smokes sometimes, drinks punch, frequently kissed – oh yes – common knowledge – one of the effects of the war you know.”<sup>70</sup> Only six pages later, in dialogue format, Amory Blaine meets the girl in question and tries to romance her,

“HE: I’m always afraid of a girl – until I’ve kissed her.

SHE: (*Emphatically*) My dear boy, the war is over.”

HE: So I’ll always be afraid of you.”

SHE: (*Rather sadly*) I suppose you will.”<sup>71</sup>

of course, a few moments later, they do in fact kiss, but the point is that Fitzgerald is unsure of the significance of

the war to romantic and sexual relations. Writing with the benefit of more than a decade’s hindsight, Frederick Lewis Allen definitively views 1918 and 1919 as a time of loosening morals that went along with the end of the war abroad and the war effort in the United States.<sup>72</sup>

The social world of the United States was affected in many different and often contrasting ways by The Great War. The home front was not only the united war effort that it appeared to be, but it was also a war in and of itself. It was a battleground between the forces of the post-Victorian transformation and those men and women who tried in vain to stem and turn the galloping charge of change. During the war, the Victorian order could be re-established on the surface of the country’s culture, in its media and its politics, but underneath, in the dances, the bars, and the homes of Americans, the changes which had begun before the war, continued. In the immediate post-War years, the effort towards reestablishing Victorian order continued on in the form of Red Scares. This effort had less and less success as the country accustomed itself to being at peace again. By the time most of the soldiers placed foot on American soil again, the post-Victorian transformations had made it through the fiercest days of contention and the country was ready to explore the significance of its new found mores to their fullest extent.

Edward and Eleanor would have been more likely than their spouses to feel the pull of the post-Victorian transformation. Age is the clearest factor in this calculation. Although age is a problematic measure to base an analysis of personality and moral outlook, because of the lack of information about their upbringing, age, however problematic it is, must be used. In this case, the age calculations simply set the tone for the more detailed analyses which follow. In 1919, roughly the year in which Edward and Eleanor began their illicit relationship, Edward was 38 and Eleanor was 31. Edward’s wife, Frances, was 45 and Eleanor’s husband Jim was 42. Eleanor and Edward, in their thirties, would have been more aware of the changes going on and more likely to want to take part in them. It is

not just their age in 1919 that matters, but also when they spent their formative years. Frances Hall and Jim Mills, being significantly older than their spouses, were children during a time that was more firmly Victorian than the childhood of either of their spouses. In 1885, Frances would have been an eleven year old girl, Jim Mills an eight year old boy, both far along in the process of socialization. In that same year, Edward Hall would have been just four and Eleanor Mills not even born yet. Edward and Eleanor certainly did not grow up in the post-Victorian era, but they became socialized when the Victorian society was slightly less secure. It is likely therefore that Edward and Eleanor were always more skeptical and open to societal change than their spouses who learned their first life lessons when what was Victorian was what was unchallengeable.

Eleanor and Edward's positions in life also disposed them towards taking part in the post-Victorian world. As a preacher, Edward was likely to (and even partly obliged to) keep up to date on the attitudes of the general population. His duties would have brought him into conversations with more and more varied people than either his wife, who would have conversed primarily with women of her class, or Jim Mills, whose conversational partners would have been primarily other factory workers. During this period, the churches were in a period of crises. Frederick Lewis Allen describes this crisis philosophically, "something spiritual had gone out of the Churches – a sense of certainty that theirs was the way to salvation" and also numerically by pointing out that church attendance was on the decline.<sup>73</sup> While Allen blames science for this change, the Lynds in *Middletown* blame the automobile. Whatever it was, the responses on the part of the clergy to the post-Victorian movements were varied and numerous. "From those liberal clergymen and teachers who prided themselves on keeping step with all that was new came a chorus of reassurance" and Edward Hall was one of these men.<sup>74</sup> The Episcopal church was one of the more liberal churches at that time and Edward would likely have been one of the more liberal Episcopalians, because of his urban background and his



*...those liberal clergymen...*

college experience. An example of this liberality was that in 1922, the General Convention of the Episcopal church decided to omit the word “obey” from the marriage oath and also passed the phrase “with my worldly goods I thee endow” on to a commission for further study.<sup>75</sup> These actions showed an acceptance of the post-Victorian notions of equality between marriage partners and an easing of the financial aspects of marriage in lieu of the more sexual and romantic aspects. Clearly Edward was a part of this movement.

The key component of Eleanor’s life that made the post-Victorian world more real for her was her children, especially her daughter. Eleanor’s daughter, Charlotte was very close to her. They shared a bed room in the attic and imparted many confidences in each other. Eleanor would have been intimately aware of the society that her daughter lived in and that society was firmly post-Victorian. Charlotte grew up in the same era as Fitzgerald’s creation Amory Blaine, despite hers being poor and his, if not always rich, always upper-class. When Charlotte was described, it was always as a girl “of the modern type” or a “flapper.”<sup>76</sup> Her dress, her attitudes, and her actions all loudly declared this fact, from her bobbed hair to her knee length skirts, and her blasé demeanor, Charlotte epitomized the youth of the post-Victorian era. Eleanor must have shared many of these qualities, because her brother-in-law, Henry Mills, once remarked, “Well, there’s your heredity for you. She’s her mother all over again.”<sup>77</sup>

While Edward and Eleanor both were affected by the cultural changes underway, their spouses remained fairly insulated from them. Jim Mills was always working, if he wasn’t at work as a janitor, then he was fulfilling his duties as a sexton. When he finally got home, there were always more household tasks to complete, like the window-boxes on the evening of September 14. Although he generally read a newspaper, (he was, like many working class men, attracted to the “populist editorial voice” of the *New York World*, and similar newspapers,<sup>78</sup>) he was not as well educated, or intelligent as his wife was. His children were less likely to

have confided in him about their lives at school or with friends. Jim was more of an authority figure than Eleanor was – he sometimes beat his children. He might have shared more with his son, Danny, but the younger Danny, would have drawn him less urgently into the new society than the older Charlotte would have. Whether or not Frances Hall was exposed to the post-Victorian world is almost of no account. She certainly was not transformed in any way. She remained, like Charles Elliot Norton, who in 1888 claimed that he was, “the one man in America who has kept myself private.”<sup>79</sup> Frances lead her life according to the rules which she learned in 1888 and by 1919 had so firmly settled into her way of living, that it would take more than another world war, an earthquake, an elopement, or a double murder to budge her from her ways.

Edward and Eleanor did not become lovers because of any large-scale cultural changes. Adultery, motivated by love or lust, is not specific to any period, whether of transition or not. Adultery in the post-Victorian age, however, did become seemingly more accepted. Judge Ben Lindsay, who had a lot of experience with adultery as the judge for a divorce court, noted that, “of all the remarkable things that are happening to-day in American society, the change that has come about in the popular attitude toward adultery is the most striking... they don’t call it “adultery” any more.



*...her mother all over again...*

They don't even call it "infidelity" or "unfaithfulness" or "philandering," or any of the other more or less opprobrious names by which this human, ancient and modern failing has always been known."<sup>80</sup> Later in the page, Lindsay goes even further by noting that not only are people less violently against adultery, but some even go so far as to defend it and say that it is sometimes good for a marriage. Lindsay's *The Companionate Marriage* was published in 1927, seven or eight years after Eleanor and Edward's tryst begins. The change in attitude that Lindsay wrote of was not complete, but it had certainly begun by the beginning of the 1920's and Edward and Eleanor were a part of it.

Edward and Eleanor's relationship shared many more features with a post-Victorian union than a Victorian relationship.<sup>81</sup> In the classic Victorian marriage, the woman entered into the relationship with very little knowledge of sex. "Sex seems to me a horrible thing" was the attitude of one Victorian-raised woman, "It seemed so to my mother before me. She said the Bible teaches that it is evil, and that its only excuse is for propagating the race."<sup>82</sup> Not only were women expected to be chaste before marriage, but they were expected to resist sex during marriage. Men on the other hand were expected to experiment with sex before marriage and to engage in it during marriage. These double standards caused many problems. Men complained that their wives were not willing often enough, and women complained that their husbands were too demanding. These problems seemed to be a common reason for divorce in New Jersey, because, despite their not being of any legal use as testimony in court, many couples who sued for divorce discussed them "in spite of [their] private and potentially embarrassing nature."<sup>83</sup> In the classic post-Victorian marriage, both partners entered the marriage with a reasonable amount of sexual experience. This did not necessarily make them more liberal about extra-marital sex, but it did make them more liberal about inter-marital sex, also known as marital sex... Eleanor and Edward might not have entered their marriages with very much sexual experience nor experienced a lot of enjoyable sex within their mar-

riages, but when they began their new affair, they entered it with sexual experience and desire. Some of the letters from Eleanor to Edward speak to this point – "I want to fondle and caress you, oh, so much... Dearest, we were made for each other's arms – that is our heaven."<sup>84</sup> Sexual experience and desire is the first aspect that makes their illicit affair similar to a post-Victorian marriage.

That same quote suggests another way that Edward and Eleanor's affair is both product of and evidence for the post-Victorian transformation. During the Victorian age, married life and the sphere of the home were given enormous import. The home was seen as the one place where a man could be himself. Friendships were also enormously important. It was quite usual for men and women to have extremely close friends of the same sex. Letter writing was common, and "such was the language that men used with each other that it is impossible to distinguish friendships that were physical and erotic from those that were not." The ways in which same sex friends addressed each other, shows the intense almost romantic way that they related to each other, "'Lovely Boy' or 'Dearly Beloved' or ... letters with 'accept all the tenderness I have'" as an ending.<sup>85</sup>

Religion was also enormously important in Victorian life. The heyday of the Victorian era was a time before Charles Darwin challenged the idea of God as the creator and before Freud challenged the role of the churches in guiding the everyday lives of people. These two key challenges, along with the challenges of many American writers who experienced the bitter realities of world war, and because of them questioned the existence of God, made the post-Victorian period a period of religious uncertainty. Kevin White proposes that during the Victorian age, "for right or wrong, romantic love itself became a kind of substitute for religion."<sup>86</sup> One solution to the problem of religious uncertainty was the increasing trend towards the conflation of religion and business. By the 1920's this trend had progressed so far as to produce and accept works such as Bruce Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows*, which explained the life of Jesus Christ as the life of an ingenious sales-

man.<sup>87</sup> These influences shifted many people's rationale for religion from being faith based to pragmatically based. If one could no longer be entirely sure of the truth of religious claims, this move allowed religious belief to be rationalized by its effect on life in this world. Business was not the only new analogy for religion. Sex also served. "One of the most striking results of the revolution was a widely pervasive obsession with sex... the public taste in reading matter revealed it."<sup>88</sup> People who once read the Bible now read the daily picture papers, full of sexually alive topics such as divorce, adultery, domestic violence, and of course, the lives of celebrities from the stage and the screen. This analogy was not experienced only from afar, but began to play itself out in the actions and words of people. Sex gained the reverence once reserved for religious experiences and as F. Scott Fitzgerald shows, when he used the language of the "promised land" to refer to sex, the language of the sexual and the religious became quite blended and jumbled.

Nowhere was the language of sex and religion more thoroughly conflated than in the language of Eleanor Mills and Edward Hall. In them, Eleanor was said to have exhibited a "condition of religious ecstasy."<sup>89</sup> Eleanor's letters to her lover are full of religious imagery: "dearest, we were made for each others arms – that is our heaven" and "it seems as though we have open[ed] the doors of a wonderful world... intangible and yet eternal it is" and "a strong burning kiss on your lips – liquid fire into your very soul."<sup>90</sup> Edward in his role as a religious man was no less prone to blend the religious and the sexual. In his case he used the religious to justify his actions to himself and to his love, saying that "there was no such place as hell... a merciful god would not consign human beings to eternal damnation" and also that "we are placed on this earth to enjoy ourselves and make the most of life."<sup>91</sup> There must have been an iniquitous power dynamic created by this blending of love and religion, since Edward was by definition the expert. James Dunton examined this dynamic in *The Murders in Lovers' Lane*, "Their love affair was sort of a fanatical thing," he wrote, and "he stimulated her in strange ways, made her

almost crazy about religion, almost drove her mad sometimes."<sup>92</sup>

The *New York World* article that Eleanor Mills cut out and put on Edward Hall's desk is one of the most fascinating elements of the case. What was the article? Why did she put it on his desk? The article seems to have been the article by the Reverend, Doctor Percy Stickney Grant which appeared in the *New York World* on September 2, 1922.<sup>93</sup> Grant was, according to the *World*, "the foremost leader of liberal thought in the Protestant Episcopal Church."<sup>94</sup> The article was a thorough statement of his position on divorce. In particular, Grant attacked the church's position on remarriage. In 1922, the Episcopal church would only remarry "the innocent party in a divorce for adultery," which, as William O'Neill points out in *Divorce in the Progressive Age*, was actually quite liberal compared to many churches.<sup>95</sup> Still, this would not include Eleanor or Edward, since both of them would have to qualify as the guilty party if they received a divorce on grounds of adultery. Furthermore, New Jersey was one of the strictest states in the country when it came to divorce. As of 1902, there were only two possible grounds for divorce, adultery and desertion.<sup>96</sup> Although nationwide, many people were petitioning for and being granted divorces for false reasons, New Jersey judges took their laws very seriously. Elaine Tyler May in, "In-Laws and Out-Laws: Divorce in New Jersey (1890-1925)," quotes a judge in 1922 as saying, "If any of you ladies and gentlemen here practicing law have had to come before the Vice-Chancellors petitioning for a divorce for clients, you will realize that you have got to put up some arguments and make out a tremendously proper case."<sup>97</sup> It seems pretty certain that Eleanor, but especially Edward would not have been able to escape from his marital contract without leaving the country. Frances would have been unlikely to consent to any type of falsification for the courts, nor would she have been likely (as we shall see...) to lose in a confrontational judicial setting. Jim might have been easier to sway one way or another, but as James Dunton suggests, because Jim was "a willing cuckold who

had profited in more ways than one from his wife's affair with the wealthy pastor," he would be unlikely to "kill the goose that brought forth the golden eggs" by consenting to a divorce.<sup>98</sup> All in all, it seems very unlikely that Edward and Eleanor could seriously have expected to both get legal divorces from their spouses and then legally and religiously remarry within the same society. Nonetheless, Grant advocated widening the pool of remarryable people and his message would have been one of hope for the two lovers.

The post-Victorian transformation which the United States underwent in the years following the Great War affected Edward Hall and Eleanor Mills in major ways. Their ways of thinking about religion, relationships, and their own futures were altered dramatically by their exposure to the new ways epitomized by the youthful flapper lifestyle. Edward and Eleanor acted on their newly held ideas and their friendship turned to an illicit affair and from there transformed itself into something totally different. As the 1920's began in earnest, Edward and Eleanor started to consider their relationship not just more special, but also more important than their married lives. Ahead of their time, they began to justify their affair and so, were far more obvious and bold about it. As a result, during the summer of 1922 their situation became increasingly unsustainable. They had to do something. They considered divorce. They considered elopement. Then on September 14, 1922 they disappeared.

## Notes

1. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), 7.
2. The *New York Times*, Oct. 7, 1922.
3. The *New York Daily News*, Oct. 18, 1922.
4. The *New York Daily Mirror*, July 16, 1926, Cartoon.
5. As far as can be determined, this really was a simple kidney operation. I spent a good deal of time trying to find evidence that maybe the operation was actually an abortion. I was encouraged in my search by a cartoon in the *New York Daily Mirror* (July 16, 1926) which strongly suggested that Eleanor's operation was a direct result of her sexual escapades with Edward Hall. Furthermore, after Eleanor was killed, two doctors independently opened her abdomen up to see if she was pregnant, actions which obscured an operational scar she already had in that area. Unfortunately for my pet abortion theory, abortions did not involve incisions.



...a direct result of her sexual escapades...

6. Tomlinson, 70. Although in the *New York Times* (Sept. 22, 1922,) it was reported that a Dr. R. McKennon performed the operation on Eleanor Mills in a hospital in Trenton and in *The Daily Home News*, (Sept. 18, 1922) it was reported that they both performed it at Middlesex General. Quote from the *New York Daily Mirror*, Aug 9, 1926.

7. The *New York Times*, Oct. 21, 1922.

8. This is a conclusion that I came to based on certain facts about the farm found in the September 20, 1922 issue of the *New York Times*. While there is no way to unconditionally prove that Edward arranged to buy the house as a trysting place for him and Eleanor, but it seems fairly likely to me. Here are some quotes about the house: “the mysterious feature of the house is that despite its outward appearance of abandonment, a glance through the windows at the interior shows that it is completely furnished, and appears to be without the accumulation of dust that characterizes a house that is never used.” In 1921 the former owner of the farm, Asa D. Phillips put it on the market, asking \$30,000. “Samuel T. Levine, a real estate broker of New Brunswick told him in November that he had a buyer for the place.” The buyer turned out to be Joseph H. Porter, an officer of the Middlesex Title Guarantee and Trust Company who was involved in the Hall/Stevens family finances. When questioned about who he bought the farm for, Porter refused to answer. The house was also rumored to have been used as a speakeasy, a gamblers den, and a KKK meeting place. James Dunton, in *The Murders in Lovers’ Lane* doesn’t comment directly on the house, but mentions a “Rum Center” which was “a colony of rough characters not far from Lovers’ Lane, a community of people who lived by extra-legal methods and occupations” (110).

9. Boswell and Thompson, 52.

10. Dunton, 141.

11. The *New York Times*, Sept. 27, 1922.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., Sept. 24, 1922.

14. The *New York Daily News*, Oct. 19, 1922.

15. The *New York Times*, Oct. 7, 1922.

16. Ibid., Sept 22, 1922.

17. Tomlinson, 49,50.

18. The *New York Times*, Oct. 17, 1922.

19. Ibid.

20. Kunstler, 238.

21. Tomlinson, 72.

22. The *New York Times*, Sept. 25, 1922.

23. Ibid., Oct. 22, 1922.

24. Ibid., Sept. 24, 1922.

25. Ibid., Oct 20, 1922.

26. Tomlinson, 39.

27. Kunstler, 17.

28. Boswell and Thompson, 54.

29. Tomlinson, 72.

30. Ibid., 80.

31. Kunstler, 17.

32. The *New York Times*, Sept. 26, 1922.

33. Boswell and Thompson, 127.

34. Ibid., 51.

35. Kunstler, 24.

36. Boswell and Thompson, 51.

37. More recent historians have raised questions about the significance of the “revolution in manners and morals” during the first quarter of the twentieth century. It is somewhat ironic that the literary form of the debunking analysis was actually a part of these same societal changes. While I admit that historians like Frederick Lewis Allen might have over-estimated the real change, for the purposes of this paper, what people who were alive during the 1910’s and 1920’s thought was going on is more important than what actually was going on. With this as a guide, I believe the writings of Allen and F. Scott Fitzgerald are quite reliable. In 1922 people really did feel like they were living through a revolution, experiencing great societal changes. Whether or not they were right is immaterial, to quote Judge Lindsay once again, “That those ideals may be false and divorced from reality has nothing to do with the fact that they are *there*” (35).

38. Fitzgerald, 4.
39. Charles Ponce De Leon, *Self-Exposure: Human Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 41.
40. Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 17.
41. *Ibid.*, 18.
42. Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981), 5.
43. *Ibid.*, 258.
44. White, 9.
45. Fitzgerald, 13.
46. *Ibid.*, 17.
47. *Ibid.*, 64-66.
48. Recent Social Trends, 416.
49. David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 40,41.
50. *Ibid.*, 11.
51. *Ibid.*, 30.
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Ibid.*, 63.
54. *Ibid.*, 7,8.
55. *Ibid.*, 248.
56. Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties* (Original, 1931. Reprinted, New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 59.
57. Kennedy, 54.
58. John P. Wall, *New Brunswick, New Jersey, In the World War (1917-1918)* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: S. M. Christie Press, 1921), 116.
59. *Ibid.*, 117.
60. President Woodrow Wilson said, "Any man who carries a hyphen about with him carries a dagger that he is ready to plunge into the vitals of this Republic." (Kennedy, 87).
61. Wall, 37.

62. If they weren't patriotic Americans, then the point of their being brought together by the shared experience is even more persuasive.
63. Fitzgerald, 164.
64. *Ibid.*, 167.
65. *Ibid.*, 176.
66. Kennedy, 201.
67. Wall, 130,131.
68. Judge Ben B. Lindsay and Wainwright Evans, *The Companionate Marriage* (Boni and Liveright, 1927. Reprinted, New York: Arno Press, 1972), 341.
69. Fitzgerald, 176.
70. *Ibid.*, 182.
71. *Ibid.*, 188.
72. Allen, 45-49.
73. *Ibid.*, 196.
74. *Ibid.*, 95.
75. *The Daily Home News*, Sept. 13, 1922, 1.
76. Tomlinson, 22.
77. *Ibid.*, 72.
78. Ponce de Leon, 33.
79. Gurstein, 36.
80. Lindsay, 20.
81. Actually, it is somewhat anachronistic to be using the term relationship, since the word first came into usage as an element of the post-Victorian transformation in romance.
82. Lindsay, 117.
83. Elaine Tyler May, "In-Laws and Out-Laws: Divorce in New Jersey (1890-1925.\*)" (In *Women in New Jersey History*. Ed. Mary R. Murrin. 31-42 Trenton: New Jersey Historical Commission, Department of State, 1985), 39.
84. Tomlinson, 50.
85. White, 13.
86. *Ibid.*, 10.
87. Allen, 177,180.
88. *Ibid.*, 119.
89. *The New York Times*, Sept. 18, 1922, 3.
90. Tomlinson, 50.
91. *The New York Times*, Sept. 30, 1922.

92. Dunton, 142.

93. This is the article in the case investigative files, Special Collections, Alexander Library. It is somewhat worrying that it was published 12 days before Eleanor put it on Edward's desk, but I think it is fair to assume, that even if this is not the exact article Eleanor read, it at least approximates it. Rev. Grant was a well known figure and would not have flip-flopped on his positions.

94. Dr. Percy Stickney Grant, "Attack is Begun Against Episcopal Cannon on Divorce." (In *The New York World*, September 2, 1922, Alexander Library Special Collections: Hall-Mills Investigative Files [S-61] and [S-62(?)]).

95. William L. O'Neill, *Divorce in the Progressive Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 39.

96. May, 31.

97. *Ibid.*, 32.

98. Dunton, 213.

## Chapter Three:

CONTAINING THE DISCOVERY OF THE BODIES, THE REACTIONS  
OF THE BEREAVED AND THE OTHERWISE INTERESTED, AND  
A HISTORY OF CELEBRITY.

Edward and Eleanor remained missing for two days, until the morning of Saturday, September 16. On that particular morning, a man and a woman walked hand in hand away from New Brunswick. They walked down Easton Avenue until they came to De Russey's Lane. Here they turned left as they had done many times before. Every time they came to this hallowed spot they chose a slightly different route; a different spot for their lovemaking. This time they turned left again, off De Russey's Lane and into a dirt path. Suddenly, the woman saw something. "Look,



*...here they turned left as they had  
done many times before...*

Raymond,” she said, “there is a girl and fellow asleep.”<sup>1</sup> He didn’t look. He knew full well what went on in this field, and he knew that soon he would appreciate passing strangers who averted their eyes, so he did so. The couple walked on until they found a suitable spot and then there was, as they say, an interval... Raymond Schneider and Pearl Bahmer had done this before. Raymond was in his early twenties,<sup>2</sup> and Pearl was only fifteen, but they had been involved for around two years. He was unemployed now and had never been able to hold on to a job when he had had one. He was restless and did not fit in very well. Pearl was hardly a model citizen. The daughter of a saloon – now pool-room because of prohibition – keeper, she was sexually precocious and rebellious. Her older brother had been in and out of jail, and her father was an abusive drunk. When the two had finished, they began to retrace their steps, to return to Easton Avenue and home. When they passed the spot where Pearl had seen the lying couple on their way in, she glanced over quickly. What she saw surprised her. The couple was lying in exactly the same position that they had been the first time she saw them. She had to investigate. As she approached them, she turned back and shouted to Raymond, “Ray, just a minute. The people ain’t breathin’.”<sup>3</sup> Raymond turned back to see for himself, and what he saw rattled him just as much as it had his diminutive female counterpart. “Let’s get out of here!” he cried.<sup>4</sup>

They turned and ran, but they stopped at the nearest building, one Edward Stryker’s house, to report what they had seen. There, a telephone call was made to the New Brunswick police department, which immediately sent a policeman, Patrolman Edward Garrigan to investigate. Garrigan left his downtown police station and hitched a ride from a Mr. George Cathers, who just happened to be passing by. On their way they picked up another policeman and a short automobile ride later, the two members of the New Brunswick police stepped into Somerset County to investigate a pair of bodies that were found by New Brunswick residents and who indeed, turned out to be New Brunswick residents.

There lay Edward Hall, dead. There lay Eleanor Mills, dead. They had been posed in death. They had been placed next to each other, both on their backs. Eleanor’s head rested on Edward’s right arm. Their feet pointed toward the trunk of the small crab apple tree whose shade Pearl Bahmer assumed the couple had been enjoying. Edward’s face was covered by a Panama hat, which, when lifted revealed eyes closed as if in sleep. Eleanor’s left hand rested on Edward’s right knee, and her brown scarf covered her neck. There was a small card leaning against Edward’s left foot, which declared to the world that he was Edward Hall, Minister of Saint John’s church. There were also scraps of paper scattered across the bodies, letters from Eleanor to Edward, suggested the exact state of their relationship. Edward had been shot once, through the head. Eleanor had been shot three times in the head. Beneath the scarf, the quivering mass of maggots hid the fact that her neck was severed so severely that her head had almost been taken clean off. Her voice-box was missing.<sup>5</sup>

Few of these details were known to the two New Brunswick policemen, who almost immediately began bungling the case. Within minutes, a reporter from the *Daily Home News*, the New Brunswick newspaper, was at the scene of the crime. The policemen let him observe the bodies and handle the evidence, in particular the calling card. By the time a more experienced man, Detective George Totten of Somerset County arrived, so had a rabble of “curious spectators” who overran the area, trampling any useful footprints, passing valuable evidence around, for all to look at and handle, and even stripping the crab apple tree of most of its bark. Totten later explained his late arrival by saying, “there was some delay there in making inquiries because we realized we were on the wrong road.”<sup>6</sup>

Doctor William H. Long accompanied Detective Totten to the scene of the crime. He was the first medical man to observe the bodies. Around 2:00 the Somerville undertaker, a man named Samuel Sutphen arrived on the scene to remove the bodies. Doctor Long told him that he “better get them out of here in a hurry, Sam, they’ve been



*...even stripping the crab apple tree  
of most of its bark...*

dead for at least thirty-six hours.”<sup>7</sup> Sutphen removed the bodies to the Somerville morgue, where they lay for only a few hours, before the New Brunswick undertaker picked Edward up and took him to New Brunswick. Little did Eleanor and Edward know when they died that they were only at the beginning of many travels.

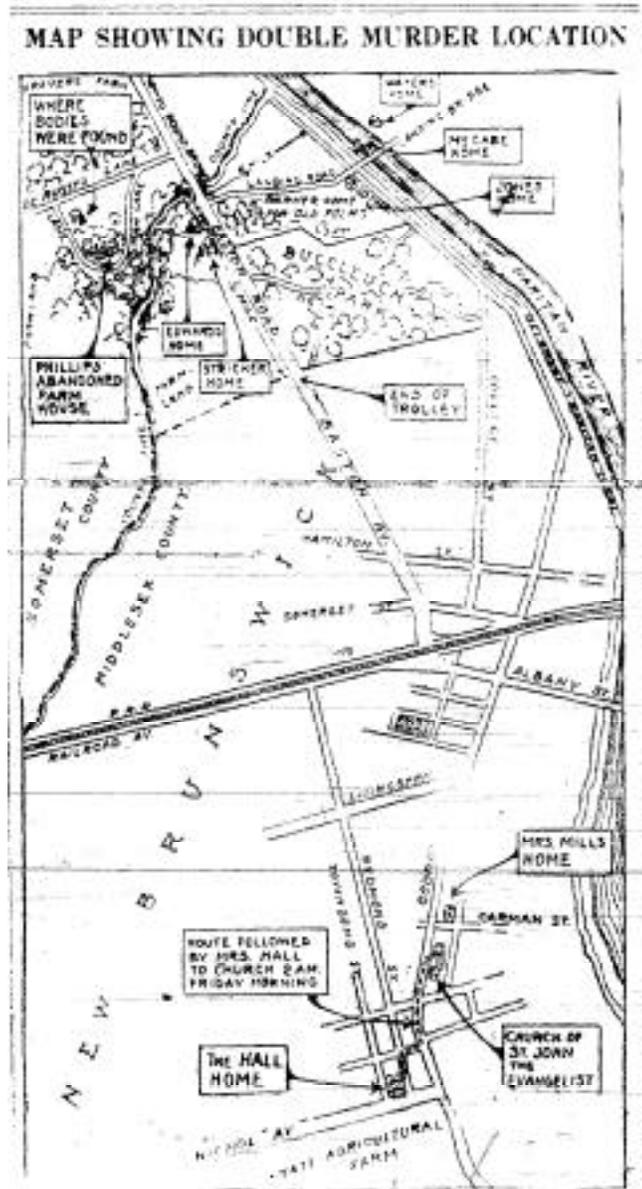
On Sunday, Edward and Eleanor were reunited when Hubbard returned to Somerville to pick up Eleanor’s body and bring it to New Brunswick. Before Eleanor left Somerville however, Long, the first doctor on the scene, visited her in the morgue and examined her briefly. He opened her abdomen and looked into her uterus. This done, he sewed her back together. When Eleanor arrived in New Brunswick, the undertaker Hubbard recommended an early funeral to both families. He explained that because of their wounds, the embalming process was not complete. Later in the day, one of Frances Hall’s cousins, Edward Carpender, who was in charge of the funeral arrangements, asked the undertaker to have Edward Hall’s remains officially identified. A Doctor Cronk, who happened to be available, identified Edward’s remains and like Long, examined the contents of Eleanor’s uterus, only to sew her back up again. In the next two days, both bodies were buried, but their travels were not over. They could not rest until an autopsy had been performed, but an autopsy had not been ordered, nor executed.

If the dead bodies of Edward and Eleanor could not rest, nor could their living spouses. In the days following the murder, New Brunswick was overrun with newspaper men and non-affiliated sightseers. According to James Dunton, “all of the editors with noses for news, smelling the potentialities of this case from hundreds and thousands of miles distant, were pouring their representatives into the town. It was like a rush to the gold fields.”<sup>8</sup> Mrs. Frances Hall decided to stay in her house. She hated publicity, hated the reporters, she despised the people who would spend their day waiting to catch a glimpse of her. If she had her way, she would not have left her house again, until the interest in her died down, but she had to, at least once, for her

husband's funeral. During the funeral, Frances Hall leaned on her brother Henry, who had traveled from his summer home in Lavallette to be with his sister in this time of need. Frances remained veiled throughout the ceremony, but someone's penetrating eye saw a scratch on her face, which reinforced her determination to remain secluded, when that piece of information merited remark in the next day's newspapers.

Jim Mills could not keep himself as secluded as Frances Hall did. He needed to leave his house to work and to do the everyday tasks that for Frances were taken care of by one of her servants. Jim was constantly hounded by reporters at every turn and by the crowds of interested people surrounding his house. The attention angered him, but he was more used to not getting his way than Frances Hall, and he put up with it in an ill-mannered, but resigned manner, suggesting to a reporter that he "look at those fools here, coming around and staring at an honest man's house. What do they expect to see?"<sup>9</sup>

Not all of the attention was centered in New Brunswick, on the houses of the bereaved. In fact, the most intense attention of all was spent on the scene of the crime, which every day was overrun by tourists. Almost immediately after the bodies had been found, the crab-apple tree nearby had had its bark stripped. Now the tree was little more than a remnant of its former self. The ground around it had been dug up and taken little by little for souvenirs. The nearby Phillips farm house also received its share of attention. One day, the "normal" routine of gawking, pointing, and discussing was interrupted when this particular group of "thousands" of tourists became so rowdy that they charged the house, broke into it and removed virtually all of its interior decorations and furniture.<sup>10</sup> It did not take long for inspired entrepreneurs to pounce on the opportunity. "Fakers from New Brunswick flock[ed] to the scene with balloons, popcorn, peanuts, and soft drinks, so that the scene resemble[s] a circus lot more than a farm."<sup>11</sup> On November 17, it was reported that the Phillips property was leased to a New Brunswick carpenter who planned to turn it



into a museum and charge 25 cents admission.<sup>12</sup> Boswell and Thompson perhaps caught the atmosphere the best, when they described it, “Throngs choke[d] the paths and byways, troop[ed] across the fields, and converged on the main attraction – the big top of this Carnival of murder – the crab-apple tree.”<sup>13</sup>

\* \* \*

The carnival atmosphere, the souvenir hunting, the intense news coverage, and the great celebrity status that was granted to the principals, put together were one of the most striking aspects of the Hall-Mills affair. So striking was it, that when Charles Boswell and Lewis Thompson wrote *The Girl in Lover's Lane* in 1953, the first book-length re-creation of the case, they began their book by reminding the reader that “this frantic souvenir hunting was one expression of an abiding interest that gripped America over a period of more than four years.”<sup>14</sup> For Boswell and Thompson, the interest in the case from 1922-1926, was the rationale for their re-creation in 1953.

The popular reactions to the Hall-Mills murder can be explained as the product of a number of cultural changes in the United States in the first decade and a half of the twentieth century. First among them were the technological changes that enabled people all across the country to become informed about the case on a daily basis and secondly to travel to New Brunswick and become tourists at the actual scene of the crime and to view for themselves the principal characters of the case.

Newspapers were the primary source of information about the case for the great majority of Americans. Newspapers were by no means a new invention in the 1920's, but there were several new developments in the media world that allowed the newspapers of 1922 to spread their news to more people than ever before. Using the fictional “Middletown” (actually Muncie, Indiana) as the representative American town the Lynds note that by the 1920's, “there was no family... which did not take either a

morning or evening paper or both.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, “Middletown is served with some three and a half times as much news in its leading paper each week as it was a generation ago,” because “only one Middletown paper in 1890 had a daily telegraph service” whereas “today, wireless radio, the cable service of the Associated Press, and syndicated features, reinforced by pictures, including radio and photographs, bring the world to Middletown breakfast tables.”<sup>16</sup> Telegraphs and radio made the news travel farther and faster and the introduction of pictures into newspapers made the news more accessible to the large number of uneducated or non-English speaking persons in America.

The rise of the automobile in American society is the main reason why so many people were able to come to New Brunswick and become “crime-scene tourists.” The automobile has been granted significant meaning in histories of the United States in the 1920's. In *Middletown* one resident tells the sociologists, “Why on earth do you need to study what's changing this country? I can tell you what's happening in just four letters: A-U-T-O!”<sup>17</sup> Somewhat more dryly, J. F. Steiner writes in the *Recent Social Trends* report, that “it was not until after the World War that the automobile began really to revolutionize the recreational habits of the people.”<sup>18</sup> Not only did automobiles influence the way people reacted to the murder, but they also influenced the sexual behavior of couples. *The Daily Home News* reported on September 19, 1922, just five days after the murder, that State Troopers had been assigned to break up petting parties on state highways in Pennsylvania, and that 80% of the people they stopped were married (although they did not specify ‘to each other’) and that many of the women were young. According to James Dunton, “every town in the United States has a ‘lovers’ lane’ and when you get a minister and a choir singer in such a place, you’ve got something like fireworks.”<sup>19</sup> Clearly Edward and Eleanor took full advantage of this new form of intimacy. Cars had been around in basically the same form since before the war, but what had really

changed was the expectation that one should own a car, “as at the turn of the century, business class people began to feel apologetic about not owning a telephone, so ownership of an automobile has now reached the point of being an excepted essential of normal living” and the accessibility of ownership under new installment plans, “75 to 90 per cent of the cars purchased locally are bought on a time payment.”<sup>20</sup> For the first time, families, couples, people who had never been farther than a few miles from their town, could, spurred on by the automobile advertisement, “Increase Your Week-End Touring Radius” and for many of those in the tri-state area, during the fall of 1922, that meant visiting New Brunswick.<sup>21</sup>

Why the double murder of a Minister and a choir singer in New Brunswick, New Jersey should have been a key facet of the “world” brought to America’s breakfast tables is another question entirely. The answer to this question lies in the cultural politics of War America. Throughout the 1920’s Americans’ attention was sparked and reflected by the tabloid newspapers, which “presented American life not as a political and economical struggle, but as a 3-ring circus of sport, crime, and sex.”<sup>22</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen theorizes in *Only Yesterday*, that Americans on the whole were not interested in explicitly economic topics, because throughout the 1920’s, they “believed that at the end of the rainbow there was at least a pot of negotiable legal tender consisting of the profits of American industry and American salesmanship.”<sup>23</sup> Direct political stories in newspapers became steadily less published and read, because, “by the time Calvin Coolidge reached the White House” in 1923 “Genuine Public issues about which the masses of the population could be induced to feel intensely were few and far between.”<sup>24</sup> The people were weary of high political news. Since the outbreak of war in 1914 they had had to deal with a steady stream of anxiety producing politics that truly didn’t let up until 1920-1921 because of the Red Scares following the end of conflict in Europe. A symptom of this fatigue from politics is the way that the people of the United States basically ignored Woodrow

Wilson in the post-war years. Once one of the most popular presidents, he could not get his way with the League of Nations, in part simply because the people of the United States were sick of spending their attention on international political news. They were ready to concentrate on other, lighter things.

As a result, the early 1920’s become an age of celebrity and national fads. The attention of the nation would fixate on something, anything it seemed, and then just as fast it would move on to the next new interest. Examples of this celebrity culture were sports stars such as Red Grange, Babe Ruth, and Jack Dempsey, movie stars like Rudolph Valentino and Clara Bow. Americans also grasped onto national fads such as games like, in 1922 and 1923, Mah-Jong, and in 1924, cross-word puzzles. Also popular were songs, for example, the 1923 hit, “Yes, We have no bananas.”<sup>25</sup> The Hall-Mills murder became one in this series of national obsessions, Edward, Frances, Eleanor, Jim, and many more became celebrities and household names known throughout the country and the particulars of the affair, the murder, and the investigation were known and debated, because as Allen, an expert judge of the public taste from his magazine days, pointed out, “the Hall-Mills case had all the elements needed to satisfy an exacting public taste for the sensational.”<sup>26</sup> It had sex and love. It had cheating and murder. It illuminated contrasts between the Victorian age and the modern age and the very rich and the working class. All of these elements together meant that the case was covered by the tabloids and by the elite newspapers and was followed by almost the entire population.<sup>27</sup>

If one views the intense interest in the case as a modern day carnival, then the case’s aspect of economic role reversal cannot be ignored. A traditional carnival was the one day (or week, or month...) during which the poor had free rein to ridicule the rich. In ceremonies of all types, the rich were brought down through parodies and satires. The poor were elevated by being able to denigrate the rich and by eating, drinking, and acting in ways that would never be

acceptable during the rest of the year. The crowds who attended what Charles Boswell and Lewis Thompson described as the “big top of this Carnival of murder - the crab-apple tree”<sup>28</sup> and the multitude of people who avidly followed the case in the newspapers were participants in a similar overthrowing of cultural norms.

Edward Hall’s liaison with Eleanor Mills broke two cultural norms before they were even killed: a rich man with a rich wife should not dally with a poor woman, and a Minister should not be adulterous. The New York *Daily News*’s first article on the murder, on September 17, 1922 firmly established these two themes as principal attractions in the case. Here are some quotes from that article: “Bodies of Millionaire Rector and Wife of Sexton found side by side in lonely spot on farm” and “Rector of the fashionably exclusive Protestant Episcopal church... his home in Nichol Avenue in the most exclusive residential section in New Brunswick is a magnificent estate surrounded by the impressive mansions of many of New Jersey’s wealthiest citizens. In a poorer quarter of the city, at 40 Carmen Street, lived Mrs. Mills with her husband...”<sup>29</sup> The *Daily News* kept up their economic slant on September 20, 1922 by showing a photo of Eleanor Mills’ funeral with this caption, “In marked contrast to the elaborate funeral of Rev. Hall, her companion in death, were the simple rites at an undertakers chapel yesterday at the burial of Mrs. Mills.”<sup>30</sup> Even the *New York Times* took up this type of story when, on October 21, reporters got to look at the clothes Edward and Eleanor were wearing when they died, “the clergyman’s expensive garments contrasted sharply with the cheap material of which Mrs. Mills’ garments was made.”<sup>31</sup> It seems that in 1922, there was still plenty of interest in a romance between an upper-class man and a working-class woman. The New Brunswick *Daily Home News* immediately ran with the other broken cultural norm, on September 16, the day the bodies were discovered, by featuring this quote from an Eleanor Mills love letter, “You are a true priest. You see in me merely your physical inspiration.”<sup>32</sup> Alexander Woolcott pointed out in his short essay

on the case, that the fact that Edward was a minister, “lent the case its peculiar savor and assembled its enormous audience. At that very time, over in a shrouded theater on Broadway, a magnificent actress named Jeanne Eagles was rehearsing for her long and punishing engagement in *Rain*, at which, through five seasons, the American playgoers watched a hot-eyed missionary overwhelmed by his passion for a rowdy harlot he had thought he was trying to redeem. Such little slips by the clergy always fascinate the urchin hearts of the laity, and the Hall-Mills case enjoyed its long run for the selfsame reason.”<sup>33</sup> Woolcott may have been on to something, because, when it later came out during testimony that the Reverend Hall’s favorite hymn was “If you love me keep my commandments” the mirth was colossal.<sup>34</sup> Everything about their romance was upside down from what it should have been. He was rich, she was poor. He was a minister, and she was not his wife.

One more element of the case that made it so irresistible to the populace was its discussion of police routine and judicial proceedings. Given the country’s great obsession with puzzles and games, such as mah-jong and the newly invented crossword puzzle, many Americans were clearly interested in spending a lot of time thinking about mysteries. When the Hall-Mills case hit the papers, it was likely read first for its sensation and then for its class interest, but a third significant reason, was that it itself posed a type of intellectual puzzle. Who was the murderer? Why were the bodies posed like they were? Joseph Stricker was frustrated by this, when he issued this harassed statement, “I am getting tired of denying stories sent out by the horde of amateur criminal solvers now in this city.”<sup>35</sup> The police’s inability to solve the crime themselves opened the door for this type of behavior and “the interest in the mystery seems to have increased with every day that it has remained unsolved.”<sup>36</sup> As soon as court proceedings started there were lengthy question and answer sessions about the intricacies of the New Jersey court system and its Grand Jury proceedings, which were so complicated that sometimes even officials of the state disagreed about them.

This only fired interest in the case. Here was yet another puzzle, another game, another facet of life that the general public could begin to comprehend.



*...the country's great obsession with puzzles and games...*

## Notes

1. Boswell and Thompson, 23-24.
2. Raymond's age varies from account to account, in a range from 19 to 24.
3. Boswell and Thompson, 24.
4. Kunstler, 4.
5. Ibid., 5.
6. Ibid., 6.
7. Ibid., 8.
8. Dunton, 29.
9. *The New York Times*, Nov. 6, 1922.
10. Ibid., Oct. 2, 1922.
11. Ibid., Oct. 23 1922.
12. Ibid., Nov. 17, 1922.
13. Boswell and Thompson, 9.
14. Ibid., 5.
15. Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1929), 471.
16. Ibid., 473.
17. Ibid., 251.
18. *Recent Social Trends*, 921.
19. Dunton, 19.
20. Lynd, 253,255.
21. Ibid., 259.
22. Allen, 79-82.
23. Ibid., 160.
24. Ibid., 187.
25. Ibid., 85.
26. Ibid., 81-82.
27. *The New York Times* actually provided more coverage of this sensational murder than the tabloids did. When asked why that might be, publisher Adolph S. Ochs replied, "The yellow see such stories only as opportunities for sensationalism. When the *Times* gives a great amount of space to such stories, it turns out authentic sociological documents.
28. Boswell and Thompson, 9.

29. *The New York Daily News*, Sept. 17, 1922.  
 30. *Ibid.*, Sept. 20, 1922.  
 31. *The New York Times*, Oct. 21, 1922.  
 32. *The Daily Home News*, Sept. 15, 1922.  
 33. Alexander Woolcott, "The Hall-Mills Case." (In "Five Classic Crimes." In *Long, Long Ago*. 113-116 New York: The Viking Press, 1943), 114.  
 34. Damon Runyon, "The Hall-Mills Case." (In *Trials and Tribulations*. 11-96 New York City: International Polytonics, Ltd., 1946), 69.  
 35. *The New York Times*, Oct. 23, 1922.  
 36. *Ibid.*, Oct. 15, 1922.

## Chapter Four:

IN WHICH THE INVESTIGATION LIMPS AHEAD  
 AND ITS DEFECTS ARE CONTEMPLATED.

The investigation into the mysterious deaths of Edward and Eleanor required the New Brunswick and Somerset police forces' full attention. Throughout the first weeks of investigation, there was a constant confusion about who was really in charge, Somerset Detective George Totten or Joseph Stricker, the Middlesex County prosecutor. The jurisdictional issue stemmed from the fact that the bodies were found in Somerset, but all of the people involved in the case lived in New Brunswick, in Middlesex County. According to New Jersey law, wherever the victims were killed, was where the authority to investigate lay. So, instead of who it was who killed them, the key question early on in the investigation became where were they killed. Almost a month after the bodies were found, this debate had not been settled. The authorities claimed "that they have established without a doubt that the murder did not take place where the bodies were found."<sup>1</sup> Only four days later two men claimed that they had found evidence in the form of handkerchiefs that would prove definitively that the murder took place five miles away, in fields owned by the Carpender family, relatives of Frances Stevens Hall.<sup>2</sup> Among the county police forces, uncertainty reigned and the investigation continued with no great success. To complicate issues further, it was not long before the New Jersey State police were sent in to begin their own investigation. This move was seen popularly as a preliminary move in the Governor's plan to put control of the entire investigation into the hands of a State authority. The New Jersey governor, Edward Edwards, told the newspapers that he had no such power, but his word was not widely believed, least of all among the officers of the county police forces, who now came under intense pressure to solve the crime, from their constituents, their governor, and the newspapers.

The county detectives re-doubled their efforts. They re-examined witnesses that they had already thrust aside. They questioned Jim Mills and Frances Hall and her brother Willie. Although they were gentle with Frances, they badgered Willie, hoping that his mental condition would not allow him to hold up to interrogation if he was lying. Instead of a confession, they got a surprisingly well put together story, which never varied, no matter how much they pressured him. They were similarly forceful when interrogating Jim Mills. They picked him up for interviews at all times of the day and let him go only when they were ready. Fortunately for Jim, his simple alibi stood up to this repeated assault. After these first interrogations failed to turn up any leads, the police turned to the Sixth Ward (New Brunswick was organized into Wards, and the Sixth Ward was near Buccleuch Park, where many poorer people lived) and began to round up the usual suspects. Assault was a good term to describe the police's handling of Raymond Schneider, the young man who found the bodies. The reverend's pocket watch and cash were missing from his body, and police suspected Raymond of at least taking them once Edward was dead, if not of knowing something important about the murder itself. When they picked up Raymond, they gave him the legendary "third-degree." The police interrogated Raymond for almost thirty hours, on and off, allowing him little sleep. They lied to him, claiming that his friend Clifford Hayes, who was with him on the night of the fourteenth, had accused him of murder. Finally, Raymond Schneider relented and spoke a name...

\* \* \*

Can the ineffectiveness of the Hall-Mills murder investigation honestly be attributed to a simple jurisdictional conflict? No, it cannot. Although the complications would have been many fewer, had the murder occurred elsewhere, these simple jurisdictional conflicts actually mask a very complex world of county politics that informed many of the actions taken by each force within the

investigation. There are two key ways that the investigation might have strayed from being completely honest. The first influence on the investigation was the direct and indirect influence of the Hall/Stevens/Carpender family on the investigation. Estimations of the exact effect of this influence varied depending upon the observer and most especially, depending on whether or not that observer believed that Frances Hall was guilty of planning or carrying out the murder. For example, the *New York Times*, which was generally favorable to Frances Hall and her family, reported on October 14, 1922, that, "the atmosphere of New Brunswick is charged with every sort of rumor that political pressure, money, and social prestige have been made use of by Mrs. Hall and her family to hinder and delay the administration of Justice in this case... in truth it [the disorganization and delay] is due to the bungling stupidity of the officials of the two counties."<sup>3</sup> Following its target audience, the *New York Daily News* was more certain in its condemnation of the Hall influence; "powerful influences were able for three weeks to divert the attention of the detectives and other officials to channels which led nowhere in the murder investigation."<sup>4</sup>

Politics also played a part in diverting the investigation from its primary goal, or at least provided people with spurious secondary goals to busy themselves with. In the 1920's in New Jersey, the rich tended towards the Republican party and the working class toward the Democratic party. Frances Hall and her brothers and cousins were all Republican. Later on, when they hired lawyers to represent them in court, the attorneys were all Republicans and many of them were state senators. Both of the county prosecutors were Democrats, as was the state's governor, Edward Edwards. The politics of this case went far beyond simple two party politics, however. The most active dynamic throughout the investigation, was the rivalry between Middlesex and Somerset counties, which was only made worse by the presence of the state in the case.

The differences between Somerset County and Middlesex County had their roots in colonial history. John T. Cunningham's *This is New Jersey* pointed out that Somerset

County was created when it split away from Middlesex County on May 14, 1688. The reason for this schism was “settled by persons, who, in their husbandry and manuring their lands, are forced upon quite different ways and methods from other farmers and inhabitants of Middlesex County.” Cunningham notes that “the pleasant land” of Somerset County “has always attracted those accustomed to the good things of life.”<sup>5</sup> This history contrasted with the history of Middlesex County, which by 1920 had undergone a transition from “a residential to a retail, banking, and commercial center” and was attracting a large number of immigrants, in particular Hungarian immigrants, who in 1915 made up over 15% of New Brunswick’s population.<sup>6</sup> In 1909 there were 35,000 people living in all of Somerset County, in 1920 there were just under 160,000 people living in Middlesex County.<sup>7</sup> Many of New Brunswick’s foreign residents were beginning to move out towards the Somerset County line in the 1910’s and 20’s, so the conflicts of “ways and methods” between Middlesex and Somerset that began in 1688 were still present and virulent in 1922.

The state police were present in the investigation almost from the start. The force was sometimes a positive force, encouraging the counties to work together and over all, to work. For example, on September 18, 1922, just two days after the bodies were found, a few state policemen were sent to New Brunswick to begin an investigation. Their arrival must have impelled the county forces to some action, because it wasn’t until the day after they moved in, that the county investigators met with each other to trade notes and coordinate their actions.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, when on October 1, 1922 some more State troopers arrived on the scene, their arrival “stimulated the county authorities to more activity than they had shown at any time during the two weeks since the discovery.”<sup>9</sup> As time went by, and the investigation stagnated without any real hope for solving the crime, the presence of the State became increasingly oppressive. The county prosecutors felt threatened by this autonomous third investigative force in their midst, and there were widespread

rumors that the state was going to step in and appoint a special prosecutor to take charge of the case. Governor Edwards was in turn, feeling pressure from impatient constituents, made all the more pressing in an election year. September 27 was a turning point. On that day, Somerset county prosecutor Azariah Beekman admitted that he had not the slightest clue, and Charlotte Mills sent a public letter to the Governor pleading for his aid and stating that she had “received letters from strangers saying that a political gang is running things.”<sup>10</sup> In a public response, the Governor told Charlotte that “the shocked conscience of the State of New Jersey will never be satisfied until the murderer or murderers of your mother are apprehended.”<sup>11</sup> Privately a few days later, Governor Edwards called Colonel H. Norman Schwartzkopf, head of the State Constabulary to New Brunswick to solve the murder case, telling him “not to come back until he does.”<sup>12</sup> The events of that day, not particularly momentous in and of themselves, exemplified the state of the investigation. From that point forward, the pressure on the county investigators to make an arrest became almost unbearable.

From the point of view of either the Middlesex or the Somerset County investigative teams, the worst possible thing that could happen, would be for the other county group to solve the crime. The rivalry between the two counties was intense. An example of this is the offering of a one thousand dollar reward by the Middlesex Board of Freeholders for any information that would aid in the arrest and conviction of Edward and Eleanor’s murderer or murderers. This offer, published on September 29, stipulated that they would only reward the informant, if it could be proved beyond a doubt that the murder took place in Middlesex County. The Middlesex Freeholders not-so-subtly suggested that the Somerset Freeholders should offer a similar reward.<sup>13</sup> The very next day, the Somerset County Board of Freeholders called Middlesex’s bluff and offered a reward of a thousand of their hard earned dollars, similar in all details, especially the stipulation about the location of the crime.<sup>14</sup> The leading men of both counties did not want to pay a single, much less

a thousand dollars for information that would aid the other county, even if it also helped to solve a heinous crime. It was a rare point of unity that the Somerset Freeholders and the Middlesex Freeholders both preferred that their own prosecutors solve the case, rather than have the state take over, in which case, they felt they would bear the exponentially greater cost of a state investigation.<sup>15</sup>

As September turned to October, the county detectives were under increasing pressure to solve the Hall-Mills murder case. The newspapers heralded their feeble attempt at detection. The people of Somerset or Middlesex accused them of being bought off and of being imbeciles and demanded that they solve the case soon, before the other county did and before the state moved in. This pressure resulted immediately in an increased squabbling between the county prosecutors, Azariah Beekman of Somerset County and Joseph Stricker of Middlesex County. The county rivalry remained a problem for the duration of the investigation and indeed still posed a significant problem in studying the evidence during all subsequent trials and investigations.<sup>16</sup>

The building pressure for a solution – an arrest, came to a head on October 8, 1922, a day when the headline of the customary Hall-Mills story on the front page of the *New York Times* read, “Governor Edwards Demands Arrest of Hall Murderer.”<sup>17</sup> That day, perhaps after reading the newspaper, the authorities from both counties got together in a last ditch effort to solve the case. They decided to detain and interrogate a series of young people involved in the periphery of the case, Raymond Schneider and Pearl Bahmer, who found the bodies, and two young men, Clifford Hayes and Leon Kauffman, friends of Schneider who had been seen with him on the night of September 14. The county authorities desperately needed to make an arrest, and they decided to focus their combined effort on these four young people. Completely disreputable and without legal counsel, the four youths were defenseless. Separated, confused, over-tired, and scared, almost definitely lied to and manipulated, one of the young men, Raymond Schneider broke and issued an accusation.

## Notes

1. The *New York Times*, Oct. 15, 1922.
2. *Ibid.*, Oct. 19, 1922.
3. *Ibid.*, Oct 14, 1922.
4. The *New York Daily News*, Oct. 9, 1922.
5. John T. Cunningham, *This is New Jersey* (3rd ed. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1978), 43.
6. Gary Karasik, *New Brunswick & Middlesex County; The Hub and the Wheel: An Illustrated History* (United States of America: Windsor Publications, Inc, 1986), 98,100.
7. Cunningham, 50, 146.
8. The *New York Times*, Sept. 18, 1922.
9. *Ibid.*, Oct. 1, 1922.
10. *Ibid.*, Sept. 28, 1922.
11. Kunstler, 41. And, yes, this Norman is a direct ancestor of the Norman of Gulf War fame.
12. The *New York Times*, Oct. 8, 1922.
13. *Ibid.*, Sept. 29, 1922.
14. *Ibid.*, Sept. 30, 1922.
15. *Ibid.*, Oct. 17, 1922.
16. *Ibid.*, Oct. 1, 1922 and Oct. 23, 1922.
17. *Ibid.*, Oct. 8, 1922.

## Chapter Five:

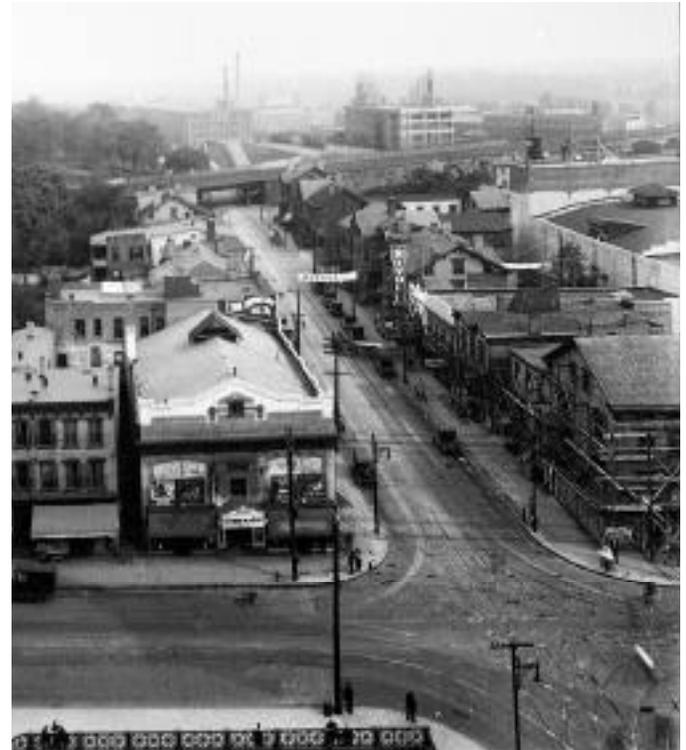
### CONTAINING THE LOW COMEDY OF THE CASE.

“Clifford Hayes” was the name that Raymond Schneider told the detectives after so many hours of questioning. The story of the events of September 14 that the detectives put together from Raymond’s testimony, as well as that of Pearl Bahmer, Leon Kauffman, and Clifford Hayes himself, went roughly as follows.

On the evening of September 14 Raymond Schneider met his two friends, Leon and Clifford in front of the Rivoli Theatre on George Street. It was around 10:30 p.m. and he was furious. He told his friends that he had just seen Pearl Bahmer, his girlfriend, in the company of her drunken father, Nick Bahmer. He told them that Nick had abused Pearl before and that they had to stop him this time. The three young men decided to follow Pearl and her father, and if need be, protect her. They caught up to Pearl and Nick around Seminary Place and George Street, and Raymond, full of rage, took off his coat and swore to teach Nick Bahmer a lesson. This was no mean claim, because Nick Bahmer was one mean man. He had a bar before the days of prohibition, where he now sold “soft drinks.” Whether or not he ran a speakeasy, he, himself still managed to be drunk most of the time. He had been arrested many times, most seriously in 1917 for “highway robbery.” He was well acquainted with Raymond Schneider, and did not like him. Nick’s son, “Happy” Henry Bahmer had been arrested eight times in the last year, twice for beating Raymond Schneider.<sup>1</sup> Tonight, “Happy” was once again detained by the law, and so Nick would have to deal with Raymond himself.

Before Raymond confronted Nick, his friend Clifford Hayes showed him a pistol that he had and said, “we’re protected with this.”<sup>2</sup> Despite this boost to the young men’s confidence, Nick managed to scare them away without

coming to blows. He continued to walk towards the other side of town with his daughter. The three young men continued to follow the couple, all the way to the entrance of Buccleuch park. Here, they lost sight of the couple in the deep darkness of the park and after a quick search, Leon Kauffman decided to go home. It was then after 11:00. Raymond Schneider and Clifford Hayes decided to continue their search, so they walked through the park from George Street towards Easton Avenue. When they got there, they figured they might as well continue to the other side of the street and over to the area around De Russey’s Lane, although they knew that if they found Pearl and Nick there,



*...he continued to walk towards the other side of town with his daughter...*

they would probably be too late. For what seemed to be an eternity, they continued their furious search. Then finally, around midnight, they saw an entwined couple faintly in the moonlight. The couple was on the ground under a crab apple tree about 75 feet from the old Phillips farmhouse. Without saying a word, Clifford Hayes took his gun out and fired four shots into the dark ending the movements of the couple. In the confusion and darkness, Raymond moved in to investigate and discovered the horrible truth. The couple his friend had just killed were not Pearl and Nick Bahmer. Clifford Hayes had murdered a pair of strangers. Raymond squawked his discovery to Clifford and then ran away, leaving Clifford to deal with the enormity of his error and two still-warm corpses.

That was the story that the authorities presented to the world on the morning of Monday October 9. As soon as the reporters read through the press release, and as soon as the story reached the people of New Brunswick, New Jersey, and the whole country, it was considered dubious, at best. In fact, it was never believed at all. The *New York Daily News* in their first article covering the arrest of Clifford Hayes included a box of questions that they believed the story did not answer, but which needed to be answered to make any sense of the case at all. These questions are: “Who cut Mrs. Mills’ throat after she had been shot, and why? Who stole Pastor Hall’s gold watch, and why? Who carefully arranged the two bodies, laying them out as an undertaker would, and why? Who scattered about the love letters of Mrs. Mills to Pastor Hall, making them a prominent feature of the murder layout, and why? What was the motive for seeking to kill Pearl Bahmer, since she was supposed to be young Schneider’s sweetheart, and Schneider says he witnessed the shooting? What became of the .32 caliber automatic with which Pastor Hall and Mrs. Mills were murdered, according to the autopsy? What became of the ejected cartridges? Why did Schneider, if his story is true, take Pearl Bahmer with him to find the bodies?”<sup>3</sup> *The New York Times* was equally scornful of the arrest, putting as a sub-headline to their “Youth, Accused By Comrade, Held For Hall-Mills

Murder” headline, “Case Remains A Mystery.”<sup>4</sup>

The townspeople of New Brunswick also refused to give any credence to the Clifford Hayes theory. The local paper, the *Daily Home News*, declared in an editorial, that “public sentiment would not be satisfied until a conviction was obtained and ‘someone higher up’ was brought down.”<sup>5</sup> A crowd of angry New Brunswick residents took the matter into their own hands one day, and almost lynched Frank F. Kirby, a detective who they believed made Raymond Schneider accuse his friend. The mob ambushed him as he got out of the train from Somerville, and followed him for four blocks, growing every step of the way, both in size and in intensity. When it seemed like Kirby had reached his destination, the New Brunswick courthouse, the crowd positioned itself firmly between him and the doorway. Understandably spooked, Kirby turned tail and ran back down George Street, towards the train station. As if this was the signal they had been waiting for, the crowd, now officially a mob, switched from flinging insults and derision, to “loose paving stones, rocks, and bricks.” Kirby, moved with the speed that only an angry mob can grant, made it back to the railroad station without being seriously damaged, and barricaded himself in the baggage room. The crowd, huffing and puffing, dropped their stones, and raised their voices again, until eight policemen (the entire New Brunswick police force) arrived to escort Kirby out of danger.<sup>6</sup> Other New Brunswick citizens were also busy creating a less violent, but just as meaningful protest against the arrest of Hayes. During the day after the publication of Hayes arrest, “there were no less than two hundred callers at the Hayes home... to express sympathy with the boy and his family, to scoff at the murder charge lodged against him, to predict his speedy discharge and to proffer aid.”<sup>7</sup> A young man, who lived on nearby Bartlett Street, Russell Reilly conceived of and organized a “justice fund” which would be financed by a “Hayes Tag Day” this Saturday. The tags were “small discs with Hayes’s name on one side, the other bearing a Ruskin quote, ‘The truth in one’s heart does not fear the lie on the other’s tongue.’”<sup>8</sup>

Clifford Hayes was the living instantiation of Ruskin on that account. Hayes, unlike his friend Raymond, had both a good reputation and a job. He was "mild of manner and generally well liked." The newspapers quickly seized him as the model of what a boy should be. He had an "Honorable Name" as opposed to Schneider who was a "Ne'er-Do-Well." He was referred to as a "youth who delighted in planting ferns for his mother and making her neat little yard beautiful."<sup>9</sup> Despite the surprise of being accused by his friend and then arrested for murder, Hayes remained calm and collected. "Do you suppose I'd be here three weeks after the murder if I were guilty of the crime" Hayes says.<sup>10</sup> He felt angry and betrayed by Raymond, but clung to the hope that Raymond was not "in his right mind when he made this alleged confession."<sup>11</sup> About the gun he was reportedly carrying on the night of the murder, Clifford explained that it only fired blank cartridges and that he bought it for the Fourth of July. That he had it on him that night, he explained away as childish.

Equally childish were the answers of the authorities to the barrage of questions posed to them by reporters. When asked how the Hayes arrest explains the fact of Mrs. Mills' throat being cut, Middlesex Assistant District Attorney John A. Toolan snapped, "Now, don't cross-examine me."<sup>12</sup> Azariah Beekman, the Somerset County prosecutor showed the absurdity of the arrest, when he stated to a reporter questioning the veracity of Raymond Schneider's accusation, that "we are not trying to determine the truth of his statement, I don't have to do that. All I have to do is to look for a reasonable basis for prosecution."<sup>13</sup>

The case against Hayes collapsed only three days after it began, when Raymond Schneider admitted to perjury and withdrew the accusation in his signed statement. "When the news that Hayes had been set free reached New Brunswick, the spirit of the Sixth Ward turned from resentment to joy." When he finally returned home, the *New York Times* reported that Clifford Hayes had to "fight his way through a friendly crowd to reach his mother's side... rejoicing and feasting went on in the neighborhood of the lad's cottage

## Mother Hayes Glad When Son Is Freed



*...the spirit of the Sixth Ward...*

home all afternoon and evening, and as dusk fell the neighbors brought out torch lights and paraded through the street, cheering for the vindicated lad."<sup>14</sup> Their attempt to settle the Hall-Mills affair without upsetting any of the prominent citizens involved, had failed, and so the authorities came to the unhappy (for them) conclusion that they must begin to investigate the last suspect remaining. This suspect had been suspect during the entire investigation, but had managed to remain virtually untouched by the police because of her money, her influence, her personality, and her sex. Now, with no other choice, the thrust of the investigation pointed inexorably toward Mrs. Frances Stevens Hall.

\* \* \*

The arrest of Clifford Hayes, Raymond Schneider, Pearl Bahmer, Nick Bahmer, and Leon Kauffman was the equivalent of the Shakespearean entrances of Bottom, Pompey, Barnardine, and Sirs Andrew Aguecheek and Toby Belch rolled into one. It was true low comedy. From the moment the arrest was announced, no one believed that Hayes had done it. The newspapers mocked the arrest, the townspeople railed against it, even the people who ordered it, the detectives and district attorneys, seemed not to take it seriously. The primary purpose of the arrest could not have been to arouse and entertain, although it succeeded marvelously in this. So what was the purpose of the arrest? Was it meant to find and convict a scape-goat or just to buy the county authorities more time to investigate? No matter what the primary purpose of the arrest was, it was quite possible that a secondary motive behind the arrest was a desire on the part of the middle-aged authorities to expose the realities of the new youth to the world.

If one were to choose a candidate for scapegoat, it would have been Raymond Schneider. At the age of 21 or 23, he had been married for more than three years, and separated from his wife for most of that time. By 1922, Mrs. Edna Schneider lived in South Bridge, and Raymond lived in New Brunswick, where he actively pursued Pearl Bahmer and not much else. Pearl, for her part, admitted to having relations with Raymond for a year and a half and accused her father of forcing her to have sex with him for a year. Her father was probably a bootlegger, and a crook before that. Around the time that Clifford Hayes was arrested, Nick Bahmer was also arrested and put in jail under charges of incest brought by his daughter, who in turn was thrown in jail for "incurability." His son, Happy Bahmer only escaped interest on the part of the authorities in the Hall-Mills murder, by actually being in jail on the night of the murder. Indeed, as William Kunstler ironically noted, "a lot of people were suddenly going to jail, but none of the

incarcerations were moving the Hall-Mills case toward a solution."<sup>15</sup>

Pearl was anywhere from 15 to 17 years old in 1922. Although, the *New York Daily News* was almost definitely exaggerating for dramatic effect, this was their description of her: "Picture a thin, undernourished girl of sixteen, undeveloped in mind and body, and yet familiar with the sordid side of life at her tender age as few women of mature years have been. Poor, a child of want, sent into a pants factory at twelve to work for her own living, she had hit the depths at less than fourteen, and in the depths had known the only sweetness of her life — the love of Raymond Schneider, twenty-three, married for three years and reputed to be shiftless."<sup>16</sup> This description can be read as a denunciation of the post-Victorian era. First, the disgust at Pearl having been sent to a factory to earn her own living, would have been seen at least partially as a product of the breakdown of supportive families, the rise of factory labor, and the increasing acceptance of women in the workforce, all elements related to the post-Victorian transformation. In the idealized post-Victorian world, Pearl should have been the ideal woman. The best description of the ideal post-Victorian woman comes from Frederick Lewis Allen, who perhaps with fond memories still fresh, recalled that "the women of this decade worshipped not merely youth, but unripened youth: they wanted to be — or thought men wanted them to be — men's casual and light-hearted companions; not broad-hipped mothers of the race, but irresponsible playmates."<sup>17</sup> Pearl was definitely an unripened youth and her "undernourished body" would have been the exact opposite of a "broad-hipped mother" of the race. Irresponsible, Pearl certainly was, but she was not, could not be a casual and light-hearted companion. Economic necessities, bad parenting, the newspaper seems to have said, undermined the dream of the post-Victorian age. That Pearl had attempted suicide only two months earlier by jumping into the nearby Delaware and Raritan Canal would have only encouraged the belief that something was going wrong in the culture if Pearl could outwardly appear to

epitomize the new feminine ideal, but actually lead such a sad, hard life.

The day after Pearl and Raymond found Edward and Eleanor lying dead in a field near De Russey's Lane, Raymond's wife, Edna, came to New Brunswick and confronted Pearl to tell her to stay away from Raymond. Edna demanded that Pearl take her to the Phillips farm, where Pearl and Raymond had been "picking mushrooms" the morning of September 14. The two of them went to the scene of the crime and snooped around. When they approached the Phillips farm house, Edna Schneider produced a key, saying "I just remembered, I have a key."<sup>18</sup> With rumors already flying around that the old farmhouse had been used as a gambler's den and a speakeasy,<sup>19</sup> it took only a short leap of intuition for people to begin assuming that Raymond Schneider or Nick Bahmer, or both had been involved with illegal activity in the house and could reasonably be investigated for the Hall-Mills double murder.<sup>20</sup>

Conspiracy theories aside, what can explain the introduction of these lower class and underworld characters into the Hall-Mills case? The obvious interpretation of these events is that the arrest was a desperate attempt on the part of the authorities to find a scapegoat on whom they could pin the blame for the murder. The county detectives were under intense pressure from the state, the media, and the general public to solve the case. Clifford Hayes as a poor, unmarried young man, might have seemed like a good candidate for not being able to prove his innocence. The whole thing doesn't make very much sense, interpreted this way, though. The case against Clifford Hayes was so poor, it didn't have a chance to stand up against the scrutiny focused on the case. There was no motive, if anyone were to have killed Nick Bahmer for having sex with Pearl, it would have been Raymond Schneider, her jealous boyfriend, not Clifford Hayes, his friend. And neither of them would have killed the girl involved in the coupling, mistaken identity or not. The problems with the theory were limitless, not the least of them being that the investigators would have to explain the unprecedented fact of Edward and Eleanor

being in the midst of rapture in De Russey's Lane at midnight, a good two hours after each of them were normally expected to be home. There was never any chance that the charges against Clifford Hayes would stick, and the investigator knew it the whole time.

It wasn't a scapegoat that the county authorities needed, it was a postponement, a respite from the pressure they were under, and an extension of their investigation before the inevitable entrance of the State into the case. By detaining and interrogating a group of known delinquents involved on the periphery of the case, they were almost sure that they could stir up something, some piece of information that they could parade in front of the circus of reporters which would buy them an extra few days. Stricker and Totten were probably not expecting to be able to make an arrest for murder, but it was an added bonus. They bought themselves not an extra day or two but almost a full week. If time was their motive, the key question becomes, why did they want extra time, what did they think they could accomplish in a few days that they had not in the previous weeks?

The answer lies in the texts of newspaper articles directly preceding the Low Comic interlude of the Clifford Hayes arrest. The day before the arrest, *The New York Daily News's* leading story about the case had as its headline, "Hall Murderers Known Through Scene Witnessed by Romancing Pair at Farm." *The New York Times* ran an article on its front page headlined, "Governor Edwards Demands Arrest of Hall Murderer" but which had as two of its sub-headlines, "Officials Get New Rumor" and "Report That Couple In Car Saw Hall and Mrs. Mills Going Toward Phillips Farm." These headlines and the articles that lie beneath them, include the fact that the Bahmers and Schneider's group were being interviewed again, but they are included only as the peripheral figures that they were. The main focus of the articles were the "Couple In Car," and the "Romancing Pair at Farm" who was not Edward and Eleanor, but who might have seen something of great relevance to Edward and Eleanor's deaths. This couple remained unnamed by the newspapers, but it was strongly

hinted that the man involved was none other than Ralph V. M. Gorsline, the man who once dated Eleanor Mills before her infatuation with Edward Hall, but after her marriage to Jim Mills. The police received information suggesting that he and a woman were seen driving away from De Russey's Lane on the night of the murder. Gorsline, when pressed by the police, claimed that on that night, he had picked up a woman who was in the Saint John's congregation, but he drove her straight home from outside of the State Theater on Livingston Avenue to her home on College Avenue and by no means did he venture anywhere near the now famous lover's lane.<sup>21</sup> The *New York Daily News* was very suspicious of Gorsline's story. They did not reprint his side of the story, but instead printed such vague suggestions and rumors as, "the circumstantial story thus told involves a married man and a married woman whose mouths have been sealed so far because of their own relations" and that "things which were whispered about New Brunswick in strictest confidence immediately after the discovery... which were left untouched or ignored by the investigators for fear of unveiling another social scandal... are coming to light now." The story mentions that Raymond Schneider and Pearl Bahmer were questioned, "but it is from the story of the married man and married woman that the detectives hope to avenge the murder of the pastor and the choir singer."<sup>22</sup> The *Daily News* was more likely than the *Times* to have attacked Gorsline in this way. The *Daily News* had no reason not to, because as opposed to the *New York Times*, their working class target audience would have only enjoyed suspicion falling on yet another prosperous New Brunswick citizen. In this case however, the *Daily News* was correct, the detectives were more seriously interested in Gorsline and his unidentified female than they were in Schneider and Bahmer and Hayes, but it was Schneider's testimony that led to Hayes' arrest the next day, not the testimony of Gorsline leading to... whatever it might have led to.

There is yet another possible explanation for the Hayes arrest. Coming so shortly after the breaking of the Gorsline



*...he drove her straight home...*

story, it is possible that the arrest was the product of pressure put on the authorities, not by the State and the people, but by one particular person. If Gorsline's story threatened the murderer, whoever that was, that person would have done everything under his or her power to keep his story from coming to light. One way of accomplishing this would have been to end the investigation by instigating an arrest. This is a sinister way of viewing the case, but not a completely impossible one, because the one person who might have been able to impel the county police forces to make an insupportable arrest, became the primary suspect once Clifford Hayes was set free. That person was Frances Stevens Hall.

## Notes

1. The *New York Daily News*, Oct. 12, 1922.
2. Kunstler, 48.
3. The *New York Daily News*, Oct. 10, 1922.
4. The *New York Times*, Oct. 10, 1922.
5. *Ibid.*, Oct. 10, 1922.
6. Kunstler, 50-51.
7. The *New York Times*, Oct. 11, 1922.
8. *Ibid.*, Oct. 11, 1922.
9. The *New York Daily News*, Oct 10, 1922.
10. *Ibid.*, Oct. 10, 1922.
11. Kunstler, 50.
12. The *New York Times*, Oct. 10, 1922.
13. *Ibid.*, Oct. 11, 1922.
14. *Ibid.*, Oct. 13, 1922.
15. Kunstler, 54.
16. The *New York Daily News*, Oct. 15, 1922.
17. Allen, 108.
18. The *New York Daily News*, Oct. 11, 1922.
19. The *New York Times*, Sept. 21, 1922.
20. *Ibid.*, Oct. 14, 1922.
21. *Ibid.*, Oct. 8, 1922.
22. The *New York Daily News*, Oct. 9, 1922.

## Chapter Six:

### IN WHICH FRANCES HALL BECOMES THE FOCUS OF THE CASE AND THE MEDIA BECOMES THE FOCUS OF OUR SCRUTINY.

From the moment that she heard that her husband had been found dead, lying next to Eleanor Mills, Frances Hall took certain measures to insulate herself as much as possible from the inquiring eyes of the public, the press, and the police. Her money and position as one of the most revered women in town made at least the police treat her with more restraint than some of the other suspects in the case. Jim Mills, Frances' counterpart of sorts, complained to some reporters about this one day, "they seem to think that because I am poor and they are wealthy that it doesn't matter what they say or do with me and my daughter."<sup>1</sup> Frances Hall could not help the fact that people treated her differently because she had money, but she could and did take other steps to augment her preferential treatment. She virtually barricaded herself into her house on Nichol Avenue. When necessary she sent either her servants or her volunteer companion, Sally Peters out to deal with the demands of the world. Sally Peters was a life-long friend of Frances and had served as bridesmaid at her wedding. Peters, who moved from her residence in Manhattan to live with Frances Hall, was an active suffragette and a "woman of wealth and leisure."<sup>2</sup> The *New York Times* noted on September 24 that "She [Mrs. Hall] and her family have taken unusual efforts to prevent their pictures appearing in the newspapers."<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Hall retained, in addition to her normal family lawyers, Mr. Timothy N. Pfeiffer to represent her in all facets of the Hall-Mills case. Pfeiffer, hired ostensibly to investigate the murder, was a former district attorney of New York State who had experience with criminal investigations. In reality, his main responsibilities were to represent Frances to the media, make sure she was treated with respect by the police, and eventually to defend her in various judicial proceedings.

MRS. HALL CANNOT BE SEEN IN MESSAGE GIVEN INTERVIEWER



...virtually barricaded herself...

Despite a legendary aversion to the newspapers, Frances periodically issued statements to the media through her favorite intermediaries, Sally Peters and Timothy Pfeiffer. In the days after the discovery, she issued several statements in which she insisted that her marriage with Edward Hall was a perfectly happy one, that she didn't believe that anything was going on between him and Eleanor Mills, and that the murderer must have been motivated by the 50 odd dollars and the gold watch that Edward had on him when he was killed, not by jealousy.<sup>4</sup> In the

month of investigation that followed, she continued to issue public statements of this sort, despite the fact that they were increasingly insupportable because of published love letters and other evidence to the contrary. On October 18 the *New York Times* reported that upon being told that Mrs. Hall still persists in thinking that her husband was not having an affair with Eleanor Mills, Jim Mills commented that "Mrs. Hall had better get a new pair of glasses."<sup>5</sup> Possibly in response, Frances Hall was reported two days later as having said that "if Edward were here today, he would be able to make an explanation that would satisfy me."<sup>6</sup>

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Frances Hall's distaste for the press and her aversion to having her private life opened up to public eyes are symptomatic of her social identity. She was an archetypal Victorian woman living in the modern age. By the 1920's, the impenetrable division between the private – family and sexual – life and the public life had been shot full of holes, sawed apart and trampled in the dust. Journalism both drove this process and was itself, transformed by it. Frances Hall cannot be understood without delving into the history of the media leading up to the headlines of 1922.

The newspapers of the 1920's were highly sensational, their front pages covered with stories about celebrities, crimes, and politics. There was an assumed division between "respectable" newspapers and tabloid newspapers. "Respectable" papers such as the *New York Times* sold for a higher price, to a richer and smaller audience, and advertised themselves as respectable, as their slogan, "all the news that's fit to print," clearly shows. Tabloids such as the *New York Daily News* and the *New York Mirror* had a readership that was poorer, sometimes without an advanced knowledge of the English language and with less concern for the respectable and conversely a more avaricious desire for the sensational. When it came to coverage of the Hall-Mills case, tabloids and "respectable" papers alike printed

virtually the same content, just with different emphases, styles, and biases. In covering the Hall-Mills case, the *New York Time* actually gave more print to it than many of its tabloid competitors, however, the methods and styles they used were more reserved. The *New York Mirror* and *Daily News* ran far more photos, and were on the whole more sympathetic to the Mills family and hostile to the Stevens/Hall family. None of these papers in 1922 resembled the newspapers from which they descended.

The ancestors of 1920's newspapers started in the 1830's and sold for a penny. Before the "Penny Press," newspapers "provided a service to political parties and men of commerce." They were strictly a means to disperse information from a central leadership to a dispersed leadership, whether that meant explaining political party positions to county or town leaders or advising merchants of an incoming ship and its cargo. These older newspapers were basically private ventures, paid for by the organizations which they represented and the people who made up these organizations. Michael Schudson describes the new characteristics of the penny press in *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*, "With the penny press a newspaper sold a product to a general readership and sold the readership to advertisers."<sup>7</sup> This change in the financial status of the newspaper revolutionized its content. The men behind the penny press were obliged to print what they thought the most people would want to read, not what they themselves found to be of use. The more general the readership became, the more elements of life that they as a whole might be interested in, and so the editorial section declined in prominence to be replaced by a growing news section. The news section grew not only in prominence, but in size, and in the depth and width of subjects it would touch upon. Subjects that the penny press would cover were sometimes controversial, for example as Schudson writes, "it was common for penny papers, covering a murder trial, to take a verbatim transcript of the trial and spread it across most, or all, of the front page. What the 6-penny press decried as immoral was that a murder trial should be cov-

ered at all."<sup>8</sup>

The great commercial success of the penny papers in the 1830's was a challenge to the Victorian mores about what should be common, public knowledge. Schudson describes a penny press that "ushered in a new order, a shared social universe in which public and private would be redefined."<sup>9</sup> The result, he suggests, was the creation of an idea of there being a "society" of people whose private lives, because of their wealth or their position in life became public. In *Self-Exposure: human-interest journalism and the emergence of celebrity in America, 1890-1940* Charles Ponce de Leon points out that this process began long ago, by noting that who could become famous gradually became larger and larger — first those descended from gods, then kings, nobles, rich people, and so on until the virtually universal coverage of today.<sup>10</sup> Figuring out which people were a part of "society" and exactly what elements of their lives were fair game for publicity remained a key question in the 1920's, but that there was such a group of people was firmly established in American society by the penny press of the 1830's.

The forces of the established Victorian order were not powerless to confront the challenge of the penny press. The older newspapers or the six-penny press led a "moral war" against the penny press and its new conceptions of what was appropriate. This conflict was not confined to the publishing world, but in fact was linked to other political and cultural struggles in society. One can make a comparison between the role of the penny press in challenging the Victorian order in the 1820's-1840's during the fight for universal white male suffrage to the role of the tabloid press in the 1900's-1920's fight for universal white suffrage, which culminated with the granting of women's suffrage in 1920. Back in the publishing world, "some papers, like Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* and Henry Raymond's *New York Times*, were conceived in opposition to the insouciant, popular style" of the penny press. The dramatic success of these newspapers in the 1850's forced the penny press to reel its radical coverage and style back. This more

or less respectable equilibrium was interrupted in the 1890's by William Randolph Hearst, whose newspapers "set a new standard for sensationalism and entertainment values in journalism, forcing [their] competitors... to develop similar practices."<sup>11</sup> By the time Edward Hall and Eleanor Mills' murder became newsworthy, "celebrity journalism," as Ponce De Leon observed, "appeared in virtually every American newspaper and mass-circulation magazine — even conservative publications that professed outrage at the spread of entertainment values into journalism."<sup>12</sup>

"The established papers found" these new papers to be "deeply disturbing and wrote of them with the same moral horror that had greeted their own arrival in New York journalism fifty years before."<sup>13</sup> Henry James, the Victorian writer, expressed his own outrage in 1887 when he wrote that "one sketches one's age imperfectly if one doesn't touch on that particular matter: the invasion, the imprudence, the shamelessness of the newspaper and the interviewer, the devouring publicity of life, the extinction of all sense between public and private."<sup>14</sup> His disgusted descriptions were not without response and according to Michael E. McGerr in *The Decline of Popular Politics* old newspapers developed and new ones were "born out of a distrust for the aristocratic class."<sup>15</sup>

How much more horrible must it have been for the reticent Frances Hall who was the focus of an even more shameless and imprudent press following the murder of her husband? Part of the violation she must have felt was a result of the forms that celebrity journalism took. Ponce de Leon traces the development of these forms, which he says became fully matured in the 1920's. The first form of celebrity journalism was the gossip column, the "local intelligence" column, or the "people often talked of" column. By 1911, the year that Frances Stevens married Edward Hall, the distinction between public and private had perished to the point that there was a "personal note" section in the New Brunswick *Daily Home News* that contained information about the daily excursions and activities of members of New Brunswick society. The interview became standard

procedure in the 1870's and in the 1900's reporters began to intersperse quotes from their subjects along with narration. In the 1890's the celebrity profile or sketch became a common element in many newspapers. The significance of this was that the subject need not have done anything to become newsworthy at that moment. By the 1920's "the most common strategy that reporters employed in their quest to reveal the "real selves" of celebrities was visiting their homes... Interest in the "home lives" of the famous was encouraged by journalists' claims that... it was here that they let down their guard and that one could 'get behind the veil with which everyone attempts to conceal his innermost thoughts and feelings.'"<sup>16</sup> This journalistic belief was a variation of the Victorian beliefs about the home, the only difference being that celebrity journalism encouraged exposure, and Victorianism, privacy. One way to escape the devouring publicity of the press in America was to travel to Europe or other places where the people would be "shocked at our system of interviewing... not being democratic."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in the wake of the murder, many members of the Stevens family tried to find solace by traveling out of the country.

By the second decade of the twentieth century there was a major change underway in the relationship between the "society" and the press. Before the turn of the century, newspapers were reporting the details of the private lives of an increasingly large group of public figures, but no matter how large that group was, it was what they did in other realms of life that made them public figures. By the 1920's, the press could create public figures. A lone newspaper reporter could make ordinary people into celebrities. Aggressive reporters transformed the role of the press from a reactionary one to a creative one. Consider the example of Floyd Collins, a young man who trapped himself in a cave and eventually died there. A reporter from the *Louisville Courier-Journal* discovered Collins' plight, and in a few days hundreds of reporters and tourists surrounded the entrance to the cave and hundreds of thousands more read his story across the country for the two weeks that it took to extract his body from the rock.<sup>18</sup> On a happier note,

reporters made celebrities from people like Gertrude (Trudy) Ederle the first woman to swim the English Channel. She completed the journey in fourteen hours and thirty one minutes. The whole country fixated on her attempt, which they were able to follow as she swam because of the cross-Atlantic telegraph line, the advent of radio, and the commonplaceness of morning, afternoon, and evening newspaper editions. When she returned to America, she was treated to “the wildest ticker-tape welcome ever staged for a woman.”<sup>19</sup>



...Gertrude  
(Trudy) Ederle...

Another American who became the first to cross a body of water soon outdid even her great celebrity. In 1927 Charles A. Lindbergh became the most famous and revered man in America after his successful flight across the Atlantic. The famously reticent Calvin Coolidge might have been the only person in the country who could rival Lindbergh in terms of celebrity. The president sent a cruiser to bring him back from France and then made his “longest and most impressive address since his annual message to Congress” in welcoming him home.<sup>20</sup>

Five years before Lindbergh’s flight and four years before Ederly’s swim, the first reporter who arrived on the scene of the double murder in New Brunswick launched Edward Hall, Eleanor Mills and anyone even remotely connected to the case into the public arena. Soon there would be over a hundred reporters assigned to the case, in and around New Brunswick.<sup>21</sup> From that moment, any element of the principals’ lives was open for investigation and publication. No one was less equipped to deal with this exposure than Frances Hall. While she was not completely isolated from the cultural changes around her, she clung to her

sense of reticence as a source of pride. When she did read newspapers, it was always the *New York Times*, a paper which “in advertising... stressed its ‘decency’ not its news coverage or accuracy or politics.”<sup>22</sup> There was a clear equality in Frances Hall’s mind between the media and indecency. When asked why she never offered a reward for information about the murderer, Frances responded, “I think it would almost be an indecent thing to do... that is a regular newspaper plan.”<sup>23</sup> This connection is more dramatic, when one recalls that the Freeholders — normally a group of very respectable citizens —of both Middlesex County and Somerset County offered rewards of \$1000 each with no mention of decency. A New York *Daily Mirror* reporter, after being spurned, “I won’t talk for publication, I won’t be interviewed,” described Frances as “very nervous of publicity, which she fears more than death.”<sup>24</sup> Even Frances’ legal representation seemed to mirror her reticent attitude toward the media. Her lawyer, Timothy Pfeiffer responded to a question about publicity by saying that he was “not in the habit of trying my case in the newspapers. I disapprove of it.”<sup>25</sup>

Along with proclaiming their dislike for the media, Frances Hall and her family were busy issuing other inciting comments. They must have enraged many people by claiming that they were too high class to be suspected of guilt in this murder. For instance, in 1922, Frances asked rhetorically, “do you think any member of our family had a hand in this? We are of a fine people. This was a low, brutal crime, and none of us would have had any hand in it.”<sup>26</sup> Later on, this would become one of the key planks in her court-room defense, but when she offered this opinion to the newspapers in October of 1922, it not only angered many middle and lower class people, but also served to deepen the conflict between her and the sensationalist newspapers. It is no coincidence that the newspapers began to not-so-subtly shift their assumptions of guilt towards Frances Hall. Not only was she one of the most likely suspects, wife of the deceased with no unassailable alibi, but she was not from their point of view a very sympathetic



...which she fears more than death...

character. The *New York Times* ridiculed her attitude towards her dead husband, on October 18 reprinting Jim Mills commenting that, “Mrs. Hall had better get a new pair of glasses.”<sup>27</sup> On October 24, the *New York Daily News* ran a story citing the opinions of five “famed sleuths,” the first two of whom suggested that investigators, “look for a woman between the age of forty-five and fifty-five who had undergone a natural physical change which had increased her jealousy of Mrs. Mills to the killing point” and “check up on all telephone calls at the Hall home for months back” respectively.<sup>28</sup> Even the *New York Times*, Frances Hall’s newspaper of choice<sup>29</sup> ran stories that pointed towards the widows guilt. One unsubstantiated story, printed on November 2, told of a chance encounter between some officials photographing the scene of the crime who were interrupted by a well-dressed woman who claimed to be the Mayor’s wife. She told the men that it was too late for pictures, that “The \_\_\_’s said they could get away with anything in this town except murder. It looks as if they had got away with it this time.”<sup>30</sup> By the time the case against Frances Hall and her two brothers was brought in front of a Somerset Grand Jury, there was a significant amount of doubt about whether or not she had done anything wrong and if she did whether or not she would be getting away with it. The newspapers planted this doubt in the minds of the country by holding a grudge against a woman who refused to bend before what she saw as the indignities of a press gone wrong.

## Notes

1. The *New York Times*, Sept. 23, 1922.
2. Tomlinson, 42.
3. The *New York Times*, Sept. 24, 1922.
4. *Ibid.*, Sept. 22, 1922, Sept. 24, 1922.
5. *Ibid.*, Oct. 18, 1922.
6. *Ibid.*, Oct. 20, 1922.
7. Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978), 25.
8. *Ibid.*, 23.
9. *Ibid.*, 30.
10. Ponce de Leon, 18,19.
11. *Ibid.*, 46.
12. *Ibid.*, 65.
13. Schudson, 71.
14. Gurstein, 35.
15. Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 123.
16. Ponce de Leon, 57-58, 56,53,52 in reverse order.
17. Gurstein, 77.
18. Allen, 193,194.
19. Paul Sann, *The Lawless Decade: A Pictorial History of a Great American Transition: From the World War I Armistice and Prohibition to Repeal and the New Deal* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1957), 155.
20. Allen, 218.
21. Dunton, 129.
22. Schudson, 109.
23. Boswell and Thompson, 131.
24. The *New York Mirror*, July 16, 1926, 16.
25. Boswell and Thompson, 122,123.
26. The *New York Times*, Oct. 22, 1922.
27. *Ibid.*, Oct. 18, 1922.
28. The *New York Daily News*, Oct. 24, 1922.
29. Boswell and Thompson, 111.
30. The *New York Times*, Nov. 2, 1922.

## Chapter 7:

### CONTAINING THE ENTRANCE OF THE PIG WOMAN AND A BRIEF HISTORY OF JERSEY JUSTICE.

In the wake of Clifford Hayes' release, a series of events occurred that would change the course of the investigation. Timothy Pfeiffer, perhaps in an attempt to spin the inevitable take over of the case by the state as being desired by Frances Hall, issued the following statement: "the evidence is unmistakable, that the authorities of one county are at odds with the authorities of the other county, with the efforts of the state troopers, standing between the two, rendered abortive." He asked for "the conduct of this investigation to be under the exclusive authority and jurisdiction of a competent and fearless officer of the state who will not be subject to county limitations, political entanglements, or petty disputes between rival detective forces, but who will be of one mind and determination to establish the truth and to bring the guilty to speedy justice."<sup>1</sup> It seemed counter-intuitive for the lawyer representing Frances Hall to issue this statement. After all, Frances was the only one who could have scared the county authorities from their duties, or complicated the investigation through political influence. And Frances was likely to be the focal point of any new centralized independent investigative force. The are only two explanations for Pfeiffer's gambit. That he knew that the investigation was to be centralized, and wanted to have his client seen as encouraging this move, in order to defray the attention on her. Or that Frances Hall really wanted to be investigated thoroughly, because she was either innocent or, if guilty, thought that she would be vindicated anyway.

On the morning of October 23, 1922 Justice Parker of the New Jersey Supreme Court took the case out of the county prosecutors' hands, and gave it to Wilbur A. Mott, the Prosecutor of Essex County. Wilbur Mott was an experienced Prosecutor, in his sixties and knew how to handle himself with the press. The first reporter who got to him

after he was appointed, got nothing but neutral statements and denials along with a promise to hold daily press conferences once he began work. Mott promised to include both warring county factions in this new investigation. Despite this honorable statement, one of his first moves was (against the prevailing wisdom of George Totten, Somerset County detective,) to listen to a woman who had been desperately trying to be heard since shortly after the murder. She claimed to be an eyewitness to the crime, who could positively identify the killers.

Her name was Jane Gibson, or at least that is what she said. Mrs. Gibson's calendar told a strange story. The entry for September 14 read, "Farmer fired four shots." Three days later, on September 17, after the discovery of the bodies had launched the murder into the news, her entry was "must have been what I heard and saw on 14th." On September 20 her calendar read "called Totten." Somerset Detective, George Totten, must have been busy, for three days later, on the 23rd, the entry repeated. "Called Totten" appeared on October 7th, the 8th, the 9th, and the 12th. These calendar entries, discovered by William Kunstler roughly thirty years after they were written invalidate James Dunton's portrayal of Mrs. Gibson as a reluctant witness.<sup>2</sup> Why Totten refused to speak to her is not clear, but eventually she reached an official of Somerset County, Azariah Beekman. Mr. Beekman however did not think it was necessary for her to sign the statement she gave him, because he doubted her good will and reliability as a witness. When Mott took over, he reviewed the case and then asked Mrs. Gibson to come in and tell her story.

Jane Gibson was a 50 year old woman who lived on a farm close to the spot where the bodies were found. She lived with her 21 year old son, William, who helped her raise her crops, and her forty-eight pigs. She lived with no husband. Her personal history was at times vague and varying. Gibson might have been born in Kentucky and might have graduated from a seminary or college in the South. She said that she once had been connected to a circus in some capacity and had traveled all over the world. She also

said that her husband, Mr. Gibson, a clergyman, died 17 years ago.<sup>3</sup> There was some confusion about her husband or husbands, because she was "technically" the wife of a Mr. William H. Easton, a New Brunswick toolmaker with whom she did not live, but when confronted with this information, she casually changed her story and said that the previous owner of her farm was called Gibson, and she found it easier just to use that name.<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of the media, the court system and this paper, she was known as Mrs. Gibson or often, the "Pig Woman." Her story about the murder was even more astounding than her story about herself.



*...her story about the murder was even more astounding...*

Mrs. Gibson claimed that on the night of September 14, she was alerted to the presence of an intruder on her farm. Thinking that it might have been one of the “foreigners,” who were in the habit of stealing her crops, she saddled her favorite mule, Jenny, and set out in hot pursuit. She lost her quarry in the darkness and decided to out flank whoever it was by cutting around the Old Phillips farm. At this point, she slowed her mule because she heard voices. Male and female voices quarreling. The time was sometime between 9:00 and 10:00 p.m. when the voices shifted from a quarrel to a yelling match which was soon deafened by the four shots that rang out through the night. Mrs. Gibson said that she saw a man fall, followed by the body of a woman. In the light of an automobile which turned into the lane at this exact moment, Mrs. Gibson saw a woman in a gray polo coat and a man with “bushy hair and Negroid features.” Although Mrs. Gibson remained completely calm, her mule panicked, and so she and the animal were forced to beat a quick retreat back to the farm. During this graceful exit, the Pig Woman, in the great tradition of Jason (of the Argonauts) and Cinderella, lost a single shoe. She realized this sometime later in the night and once again ventured out into the night to find it. As she was searching the area where she was when she heard the shots, she saw a “large, white-haired woman” weeping over the bodies of the dead. This was the story that George Totten refused to certify, but on which Wilbur Mott based his case against Frances Stevens Hall and her brothers, William Stevens and Henry Stevens when he approached a Somerset Grand Jury at 9:30 a.m., the morning of November 20, 1922.

The Hall-Stevens camp and the prosecutors entered the judicial arena with differing attitudes toward their chances for success. Frances Hall and her brothers were worried, but extremely confident. When asked about her chances in the grand jury setting, Frances said to a group of reporters, “doesn’t a person’s past count for anything? I have been something of a figure in this community. I have been honest and honorable. Why should I not be believed.”<sup>5</sup> Her brother Henry was equally confident. “Exactly! Exactly!”



...and once again ventured out...

he cried out in agreement when his wife stated that “It wouldn’t worry me a minute if Henry were arrested. In fact we would welcome it, because his arrest would mean his eventual elimination from the case.”<sup>6</sup> Even Eleanor Mills’ sister was of the mind that “if they should arrest Mrs. Hall, she would never have to worry. My sister-in-law tried to steal her husband. Mrs. Hall was treated very shabbily.”<sup>7</sup> James Dunton in *The Murders in Lovers’ Lane* allowed his reporter protagonist to say, “Well—I doubt if any jury could be found to convict either of them [Jim Mills or Frances Hall] if he or she should come forward and confess the slaying... the unwritten law is recognized by individuals if not by the law.”<sup>8</sup> Judge Ben Lindsay, the author of *The Companionate Marriage* wrote about the same unwritten law, “If you don’t believe me,” he challenged, “try to

assemble a jury that will pronounce guilty of murder the man or woman who slays in such a fit of *traditional, customary, socially sanctioned, homicidal rage*.”<sup>9</sup> Both agree that in cases of known adultery, people often feel that the slighted spouse, as Dunton wrote, “*should have been jealous enough to murder*,”<sup>10</sup> and that if he or she, as Lindsay wrote, “did not experience such homicidal rage under such conditions [he or she] was falling far short of his or her duty, and was either a coward or a cold-blooded fish.”<sup>11</sup> It seems almost fantastic that Lindsay was not commenting directly about the Hall-Mills case when he wrote that line, because indeed, people who thought that Jim Mills had not committed murder, often characterized him as a “coward,” and people who thought that Frances Hall had not committed murder, often characterized her as a “cold blooded fish.”

Frances, Willie, and Henry (regardless of whether or not they are guilty or innocent) had a much better chance of escaping punishment for this crime than most people would have, because of their wealth. Although, as reported by the *Daily News*, “the law says certain things about equality of rich and poor... the law speaks with its tongue in its cheek.”<sup>12</sup> The civility with which Frances Hall was treated by the police, in comparison with their previous murder suspect, Clifford Hayes, was a prime example of this principle in action. Furthermore, the Stevens family could easily afford the absolute best legal counselors that could be got in New Jersey at the time. These lawyers would be expert at manipulating the intricacies of the outdated and overcomplicated New Jersey legal system. For all of these reasons, the accused Hall and Stevens clan viewed the grand jury procedure with confidence that they would not be indicted.

Wilbur Mott and his team of investigators and prosecutors entered the same grand jury process with much less confidence. They asked primarily for an indictment of Frances Hall, despite “not believing that Mrs. Hall shot anyone,” because “a crime committed under such circumstances becomes a joint act, in which the perpetrator and the accomplice are equally guilty.”<sup>13</sup> So, although they suggested that William Stevens and Henry Stevens were present at

the time of the murder and that one of them was actually the murderer, they concentrated their case on Frances Hall, because she had the strongest motive, and they had the most direct and circumstantial evidence against her. The *New York Times* reported that there was “an apparent difference of opinion between Mr. Mott and his investigators, on the one hand and the Somerset county authorities on the other hand, as to the legal value of the evidence Mr. Mott has assembled.” The same article suggested that there were “hints that the inquiry had been buoyed up until after Election Day, and now that that momentous day had come and gone there would be an end to all serious activity.”<sup>14</sup> Although this report was of doubtful veracity, it did show an abiding resentment and distrust on the part of the people of Somerset County toward the newly appointed state investigative team. There was a suspicion in Somerset County that, as the *New York Times* reported, “the new officials would accomplish nothing but run up big fees and expenses which Somerset County would have to pay”<sup>15</sup> and as a result, the public opinion in Somerville was against an indictment that would doom the county to further costs, just for a trial which may or may not end with a conviction.<sup>16</sup>

The grand jury proceedings were a carnival. A massive crowd of people thronged to the Somerville court house, spurred on by the former circus performer, Mrs. Gibson, and her claim that she would “tell on the stand what I know. I have not disclosed all. Wait and see. Murder will out.”<sup>17</sup> Made up of the professionally curious and the just curious, the crowd had to be kept back by state troopers who were charged with keeping the grand jury proceedings, which were private by law, private in reality. The mob was not easily discouraged and soon discovered that from a position on the mezzanine, one could see into the chamber through a transom. As soon as this was discovered, a bailiff covered the transom with a black cloth. The attempt to keep the actual proceedings private may have been successful, but the gossiping crowd of reporters and sightseers easily picked up much of what was going on by accosting witnesses as they entered and left the courtroom.



*...the mob was not easily discouraged...*

The grand jury hearings went on for eight days. On the second day of the grand jury, Tuesday November 21, a letter, signed by 76 reputable New Brunswick women, was published in the New Brunswick *Daily Home News*. The letter was meant to express their “unswerving faith in her [Frances]’ absolute and unswerving devotion to truth and integrity and to all the highest ideals of Christian character.”<sup>18</sup> On November 27, Ralph Gorsline and Catherine Rastall, a couple said to be trysting near De Russey’s Lane on the night of the murder were called to the stand. While the press stalked them, the grand jury asked them only a few

questions about their own actions on the night of the 14th.<sup>19</sup> November 28 was by far the most dramatic day of the grand jury. It was expected to be the final day and in the hopes that she would be called to testify, Frances Hall traveled to Somerville and sat outside the large doors of the grand jury’s chamber. She waived the immunity from being asked to testify, which was hers by law. Her position at the door to the chamber put Frances directly in the path of her key accuser, Mrs. Jane Gibson, as she entered the room to give her eyewitness account of what happened on the night of September 14. While the “Pig Woman” testified, Frances Hall waited outside. After Gibson’s testimony, while the members of the grand jury were deliberating, Frances Hall remained motionless outside the doors, waiting to hear whether she would be indicted or not. At 4:35 p.m. the grand jury announced their decision, but Frances Hall “displayed no emotion, she just walked away, a silent, black-clad figure, with her head held high.”<sup>20</sup>

**MRS. HALL MAINTAINING ALL-DAY  
WATCH AT SOMERVILLE JURY DOOR**



*...Frances Hall waited outside...*

\* \* \*

This grand jury hearing should be viewed in respect to the history of New Jersey's courts. People have often had very strong feelings about the New Jersey justice system, which from early on in New Jersey's history was referred to as "Jersey Justice." People used this term to refer to the particular brand of justice dispensed by the New Jersey courts and held in the view of the world as the very best and the very worst. The term originated in West Jersey in the 1600's, where Quaker justice was swift and simple, but by 1881 had "become not only a proverb, but has passed into a senile and decrepit old age... a term for inefficiency, confusion, and frustration."<sup>21</sup> In 1693, the Quaker assembly created the Court of Oyer and Terminer to deal with capital offences.<sup>22</sup> If Frances Hall and her brothers were to be indicted by the grand jury on charges of murder, their case would be tried in the same Court of Oyer and Terminer. This speaks volumes about the course of New Jersey Judicial history and the transformation of the term "Jersey Justice." In 1702, West and East Jersey were reunified into the Royal British Colony of New Jersey. From this point on, the New Jersey judiciary became a confused blend of existing systems and the Royal Court. During the mid-1740's the governor of New Jersey, Lewis Morris, who was a wealthy landholder, "succeeded in packing all of the colony's courts with persons favorably disposed to proprietary interests."<sup>23</sup> By July 1769, popular distrust of the Judiciary had reached a boiling point and "in Monmouth County, attorneys were driven from the county court by townspeople armed with clubs and 'other offensive weapons.'<sup>24</sup> Change came slowly in New Jersey and, although the Judiciary was finally separated from the Legislature in the 1844 Constitution (after the sixth movement for revision succeeded) an observer wrote that "even as New Jersey hurtled into the 20th century to become one of the most industrialized and populous states, its legal system remained lodged in another era."<sup>25</sup>



*...the very best and the very worst...*

The storied history of "Jersey Justice" created an interesting and unique dynamic surrounding the Hall-Mills murder. Neighboring states were used to ridiculing New Jersey for its judicial system, and so when the Hall-Mills case emerged as the nation's top crime story, the honor of the state quickly became at stake in the outcome of the case. This increased the political pressure on the investigation

beyond what would have been likely otherwise. New Jersey's representative to the United States Senate promised, before the grand jury met, that the case would be solved.<sup>26</sup> Many followers of the case felt that the competence of the state's justice system was on trial, and that the verdict would not be issued from the mouth of a jury member, but from the typewriters of newspapermen. Despite widespread distrust of the media on the part of wealthy New Jersey residents, (even the current governor had been quoted as saying "I never read the newspapers, they would probably have it wrong anyway,"<sup>27</sup>) there was little doubt that much more than the punishing of a murder was at stake during the deliberations of the grand jury. What would people think about New Jersey? How would they react to the news as the foreman of the grand jury solemnly declared that "for reasons which to them seem sufficient and controlling, the grand jury [takes] no action on the Hall-Mills murder case."<sup>28</sup>

## Notes

1. Kunstler, 56,57.
2. Dunton, 85-88.
3. The *New York Times*, Oct. 29, 1922.
4. Tomlinson, 130.
5. The *New York Times*, Oct. 29, 1922.
6. *Ibid.*, Oct. 28, 1922.
7. *Ibid.*, Oct. 19, 1922.
8. Dunton, 60.
9. Lindsay, 73.
10. Dunton, 59.
11. Lindsay, 74.
12. The *New York Daily News*, Nov. 20, 1922.
13. The *New York Times*, Nov. 6, 1922.
14. *Ibid.*, Nov. 10, 1922.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, Nov. 29, 1922.
17. *Ibid.*, Oct. 30, 1922.
18. Kunstler, 98.
19. The *New York Times*, Nov. 28, 1922.
20. Kunstler, 103.
21. Carla Vivian Bello and Arthur T. Vanderbilt II, *Jersey Justice: Three Hundred Years of the New Jersey Judiciary* (Newark, New Jersey: Institute for Continuing Legal Education, 1978), 25.
22. *Ibid.*, 8.
23. *Ibid.*, 14.
24. *Ibid.*, 15.
25. *Ibid.*, 22.
26. Kunstler, 104.
27. The *New York Times*, Oct. 15, 1922.
28. *Ibid.*, Nov. 29, 1922.

## Chapter Eight:

IN WHICH THE STORY MOVES AHEAD FOUR YEARS AND  
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CLASS IS INVESTIGATED.

When she heard news of the decision, Frances Hall “displayed no emotion, she just walked away, a silent, black-clad figure, with her head held high.”<sup>1</sup> Reactions elsewhere were more animated. Jim Mills opined “I suppose they will never do anything now, but there is a higher judge.”<sup>2</sup> Later, he claimed that “the thing was quashed. Everybody in town, at least 90 per cent of them knows that it was the Hall money that quashed it.”<sup>3</sup> The *New York Daily News*, which on November 20, the first day of the Grand Jury declared in its headline that “Wealth Swings Justice’s Scales – Rich Rector’s Widow Untouched by Law Which Seized Poor Youth,”<sup>4</sup> was remarkably subdued by the news of the non-indictment. Its headline on November 29 read simply “Hall Jury Fails to Indict” and “Suspicion Lifts from Widow as Case Becomes Unsolved Mystery.”<sup>5</sup> The *New York Times* in keeping with its editorially neutral style, reported that the “Hall-Mills Jury Refuses to Indict In Murder Mystery” and that the “Future of Case is in Doubt” – “In Suspended Animation.” The *New York Times* also reported that the people of Somerset seemed to support the Grand Jury’s decision, but the people of New Brunswick did not. Their opinions might have been better represented by the editorial in the *New Brunswick Daily Home News* which read “there can be no thought of surrender, of quitting under fire, in connection with the investigation of the Hall-Mills murder mystery, no matter what the cost and no matter what the length of time that may be involved with the effort.”<sup>6</sup>

With no indictment, interest in the case gradually died down. Investigations, public and private, continued, but the force behind them had been diminished by the failure of Mott’s attempt to indict Frances Hall. The newspaper reporters, who had haunted New Brunswick and Somerville

for the three months since the murder slowly disappeared, assigned to new stories. So too did the suspects who began to leave the arena of possible investigation. Two months after she walked away from the Somerville courthouse with her head held high, Frances Hall, still accompanied by Sally Peters, boarded a trans-Atlantic ship bound for Europe. Her brothers also left New Brunswick, Henry to his beach home in Lavallette, New Jersey and Willie to his own coastal home in Florida. In a sign that popular interest in the case had not and would not die down as long as no arrest was made, Frances disguised her arrangements so that it appeared she had boarded another ship. True enough, when the time came for her to leave, a crowd of sightseers and reporters created a commotion around Frances’ decoy ship. Frances returned to New Brunswick in the spring of 1924, and moved back into her house on Nichol Avenue, where Willie had been living since his return from Florida. Less than a year later, Frances was so unnerved by a rumor that she had married a Cornell professor that she fled the country again. She re-inserted herself into New Brunswick life again in April of 1925, and this time she stayed.<sup>7</sup>



...the thing was quashed...

Jim Mills continued to live and work in New Brunswick with his two children in their apartment on Carman Street. He did not have the luxury of leaving the country and so he remained an active target for investigation. On February 13, 1923, Ellis Parker, a Burlington County detective who was working independently on the case wrote a letter to George Totten, the Somerset County detective, in which he described an interview he had with Jim Mills. Several times Parker responded to Jim's professions of innocence by telling him that "if the facts are as I believe they are, no jury in the world would ever convict you; in fact, you would have the sympathy of the world, as the preacher not only betrayed the trust that you placed in him, but he was a hypocrite before his God and that, in my judgement, God committed this crime and that he used you as an instrument." Either through true innocence or practiced denials Jim managed to extract himself from the interrogation without offering any new information. Parker resolved to continue in the investigation of Jim Mills, because "there is no question as to this man's guilt."<sup>8</sup> The investigation may have continued, but it never resulted in any legal action.

Despite the fact that, as James Dunton wrote, "interest in [the case] continued unflinchingly intense, not only in [New Brunswick] but throughout the country among the millions of readers who had followed the events of the case from the day of the discovery of the bodies," the publicity of the case was confined to sporadic articles detailing the movements and life events of people involved with the case and to the inclusion of the particulars of the case into the growing national vernacular.<sup>9</sup> This might have been the case's final destiny if it had not been for Phillip Payne, the managing editor of the *New York Mirror*, a tabloid established by William Randolph Hearst in 1924 to compete with the *New York Daily News*.<sup>10</sup> Always on the lookout for a way to revive the dormant national obsession with the unsolved Hall-Mills murder case, Phillip Payne finally found an opening on July 3, 1926 when Arthur S. Riehl filed an annulment petition in the Court of Chancery,

Trenton New Jersey. Arthur S. Riehl was seeking to escape his marriage to Louise Geist Riehl who, in 1922 had been one of the two Hall family servants. The annulment petition contained many accusations that Riehl's wife knew much more about the murders than she had admitted during the police and grand jury and that her former employers paid her \$5,000 to keep quiet about the whole affair. Payne's *Mirror* immediately demanded that the case be re-opened and that a new investigation, with Frances Hall as the key suspect, be launched. Despite the fairly widespread belief that Riehl's petition was not his own work, but actually written by Payne himself, the call for a new investigation, with the *Daily Mirror's* screaming headlines in the van, became too urgent for the New Jersey Governor to resist. Phillip Payne had succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. His paper's circulation was booming, and he personally was credited with re-opening the case.

The New Jersey Governor A. Harry Moore responded to the *Mirror's* call by appointing state Senator Alexander Simpson as the special prosecutor in charge of the Hall-Mills inquiry. Both men were Democrats from Jersey City in Hudson County. Simpson was a short, flamboyant man who had a penchant for lost legal causes. James Dunton described him as "a famous fire-eater, an able and remarkably energetic man."<sup>11</sup> In taking on this assignment, Simpson saw himself as a defender of the rights of working men and women against the unfair influence of the rich. Having had to withdraw from Columbia Law School because he did not have enough money, he had a natural sympathy for the working class and his record as a politician exhibited this sympathy. Taking on the Hall-Mills case was also an opportunity to direct publicity at himself, which, he thought, could only help his political aspirations.<sup>12</sup>

At midnight on Wednesday July 28, 1926 policemen arrested Frances Hall on two charges, one of having murdered her husband, Edward Hall, and one of murdering his mistress, Eleanor Mills. She was brought to the Somerset County Jail, where she spent two days in one of six deten-



... a famous fire-eater...

tion cells reserved for women. During her stay, small entrepreneurial boys pointed out where she was staying to large, slightly less entrepreneurial reporters on the scene. According to one member of her “growing army of attorneys, Robert H. McCarter,” “she hasn’t wept a tear” during the duration of her stay.<sup>13</sup> Two days after she arrived, Frances Hall was freed on \$15,000 bail.



...small entrepreneurial boys...

In the next three months, a legalistic arms race occurred. Alexander Simpson led a single-minded investigation aimed at Frances Hall and her family. He, like his predecessor Wilbur Mott, relied heavily on the testimony of Jane Gibson, “the pig woman.” Willie Stevens was accused and arrested for the two murders, as was his brother Henry Stevens, and the Hall’s neighbor and cousin, the New York stock broker, Henry Carpender. In response, the accused hired many of the most qualified and prominent lawyers in New Jersey to defend them. The “Million Dollar Defense”

or even the “Billion Dollar Defense” as it was soon dubbed by the media, involved the ever-present Timothy Pfeiffer, who carefully submitted himself to an even more experienced attorney, Robert H. McCarter. These two pillars of law were joined in their well-paid defense of Frances Hall and her brothers and cousin by Clarence E. Case, Russell E. Watson, Robert H. Neilson, Augustus C. Studer, Jr. and Nathaniel Palzer.<sup>14</sup>

This time, the Somerset county grand jury had no qualms about indicting the Stevens/Hall clan and a trial date was set for November 3, 1926. As the opening day of the trial approached, the small town of Somerville prepared itself for the largest crowd it had ever known. Reporters bought out all the spare rooms available in town and for once in the history of New Jersey, it was cheaper to take a room in New York City and to commute to Somerville! Restaurants stocked up on food and refreshment stands flocked to Somerville’s main street. The courthouse, which was meant to hold 275 spectators had its capacity increased to 375. Although over 300 reporters from around the world were expected, only 100 seats would be allotted for them, the rest would have to wait outside for news. Finally, the day before the trial began, a 129-position switchboard that had just been used to report the Dempsey vs. Tunney heavy-weight championship fight was moved into the basement of the courthouse and 28 special operators were hired to use it to relay messages from reporters to their newspapers’ central offices. The first “live” broadcast of a trial was planned by a New York radio station, which had placed a microphone in a nearby building and hired men to run back and forth, relaying news of the court-room to the microphone. With all preparation done, on the following day, November 3, 1926, four years, one month and twenty days after Edward Hall and Eleanor Mills were murdered, the trial began.

\* \* \*



*...over 300 reporters from around the world ...*

Prosecutor Alexander Simpson was later to say in the summation of his case, that “the most wonderful thing in this whole prosecution is this: that after four years and two months, wealth is on trial for murder.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, class distinctions and economic differences were constant themes throughout the Hall-Mills trial.

The carnival of the Hall-Mills case in 1922 had always been somewhat incomplete. The refusal of a Somerset grand jury to indict Frances Hall represented an end, a defeat. In some ways it would have seemed like the wealthy had triumphed over the poor, regardless of Frances Hall’s actual innocence or guilt. The simple exposure of the rampant breaking of cultural norms, and the broadcasting of extremely private secrets wasn’t enough to complete the carnival. An element of revolution, of the poor triumphing over the rich was needed, and that element was provided when a poor woman, Mrs. Gibson, who entered the case in 1922, provided the key testimony needed to focus suspicion on to the rich widow, Frances Hall. One of the first things that was known about Mrs. Gibson was her class; before her name was public, the police had her try to identify Frances Hall, to see if she was the woman Mrs. Gibson was claiming to have seen. When asked about that exercise, Frances’ lawyer, Mr. Pfeiffer, told a reporter, “a woman whom Mrs. Hall regarded as one of the working class, possibly of the European peasant class, was ushered in...”<sup>16</sup> It turned out that Frances was right about Mrs. Gibson’s class, but wrong about Mrs. Gibson’s ethnicity. Mrs. Gibson was not only an old-stock “American,” but a xenophobe. She used her national stage to defend her home by saying that “this used to be a pretty good place before land speculators began selling lots to foreigners.”<sup>17</sup> This comment would probably have made her even more popular among the mass of poor, patriotic, and xenophobic Americans who followed the case.

In 1922, the poor hero, Mrs. Gibson, was not able to triumph over the wealthy forces of Mrs. Hall, and the Somerset grand jury’s non-indictment marked an end to the carnival. The carnival was re-opened 4 years later, by the New York *Daily Mirror*, a paper of the working class. The economic



THE “PIG WOMAN” LIVED HERE

*...this used to be a pretty good place ...*

underpinnings of the their effort were plain to see. They quoted Jim Mills, “last time the thing was quashed. Everybody in town... knows that it was the Hall money that quashed it.”<sup>18</sup> They described Frances Hall’s house as “pretentious,”<sup>19</sup> virtually screaming the implicit comparison with the Mills’ apartment, and the Pig Woman’s farm. This was the report of Frances Hall’s arrest, “Mrs. Hall, confined in Somerset County Jail charged with the double murders, has engaged the most formidable array of counsel ever gathered by a defendant in criminal proceedings in New Jersey. It is literally a billion-dollar aggregation of lawyers.”<sup>20</sup>

Frances may have had a “billion-dollar” defense team, but this time, in 1926 they could not keep her from trial, and as soon as the trial began, the carnival was in full swing, because under oath, the testimony of the poor was worth just as much as the testimony of the rich. The testimony of the

poor hero, the “pig-woman,” Mrs. Gibson was going to condemn the rich widow, Frances Hall to a life in prison. Well, perhaps nobody was so naïve as to believe that, (Damon Runyon reported that the betting line on the case was never less than 2 to 1 in favor of the defense,<sup>21</sup>) but in lieu of a conviction, it was still going to be fun to watch the rich, reticent Stevens family suffer through a long demeaning public trial.

## Notes

1. Kunstler, 103.
2. *Ibid.*, 102.
3. *The New York Mirror*, July 16, 1926.
4. *The New York Daily News*, Nov. 20, 1922.
5. *Ibid.*, Nov. 29, 1922.
6. *The New York Times*, Nov. 29, 1922.
7. Kunstler, 110.
8. Ellis H. Parker, “Letter to George Totten, Somerset County Detective.” (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Alexander Library Special Collections (Hall-Mills Investigative Files)), Feb. 13, 1923.
9. Dunton, 192.
10. A move which is later lampooned by Orson Welles in his movie about Hearst, *Citizen Kane*.
11. Dunton, 240.
12. Tomlinson, 179-182.
13. *Ibid.*, 173.
14. *Ibid.*, 239-240.
15. Boswell and Thompson, 149.
16. *The New York Times*, Oct. 18, 1922.
17. *Ibid.*, Oct. 26, 1922.
18. *The New York Mirror*, July, 16, 1926, 3.
19. *Ibid.*, July 29, 1926, 3.
20. *Ibid.*, July 30, 1926, 3.
21. Runyon, 80.

## Chapter Nine:

IN WHICH THE TRIAL BEGINS AND RACIAL ISSUES  
RECEIVE THEIR DUE ATTENTION.

Mrs. Gibson, the prosecution's star witness opened the courtroom proceedings by fainting. She was in court on November 4, the second day of the trial, but collapsed when she saw that her mother, Salome Cerrener, was also in attendance.<sup>1</sup> The following day, Prosecutor Simpson announced that Mrs. Gibson was dying and asked for the court to move to the hospital where she was being held, to take her testimony. The judges thought about it, and after visiting the hospital themselves to determine her true condition, denied his request. Mrs. Gibson would have to make it to the courtroom if she wished to be heard.



*...if she wished to be heard...*

Despite rumors that Mrs. Gibson was faking her condition for various reasons (to avoid testifying, to make her testimony more dramatic, etc.) she really was sick. She had a high fever and a fast pulse.<sup>2</sup> When she finally testified she had to be carried into the courtroom on a stretcher and testify from a gurney with a nurse and a doctor in attendance. The defense had pointedly placed her mother in the front row with instructions to "Sit there and don't let nobody move you. Watch her as she testifies, that's all."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps they were hoping that the sight of her mother would cause Mrs. Gibson to have a re-lapse. Mrs. Gibson made the best of a bad situation and performed like the old circus hand she was.

Damon Runyon reported the scene from the courtroom, "It was an unreal, creepy sort of business. Perhaps you can imagine attending a wake, and having the dead suddenly begin talking in and[sic] out-of-the-grave sort of voice."<sup>4</sup> At the end of her cross-examination by the defense, Mrs. Gibson was transferred from the hospital bed she had been lying on to a stretcher. She "rose on one elbow and pointed a trembling finger at the three defendants" and gasped, "I have told the truth, so help me God, and you know I've told the truth!"<sup>5</sup>



*...it was an unreal, creepy sort of business...*

\* \* \*

The Hall-Mills murder trial was an intense exposing of the cultural themes, the moral intricacies, the convoluted story lines, and the tenuous testimony of the last four years compressed into a small court room and a month. Many themes which had been in the undercurrent of the story during the investigation four years earlier were brought to light under the pressure of the courtroom atmosphere. James Dunton, in *The Murders in Lovers' Lane*, sensationally described how "the whole proceedings, the scarlet stream of passion, the sinful love of the minister for the poor sexton's wife, became more luridly plain for all to see and dominated the atmosphere of the trial like a huge many-legged octopus of lust whose tentacles smeared with the blood of sin and infidelity."<sup>6</sup> Other stories which were kept under wraps in 1922 were able to be told in 1926 because their immediacy had diminished or were forced into view because of the necessities of over 20 days of testimony under oath.

One of the most interesting of these court room exposures surrounded Willie Stevens, his mental capacity and his race. Willie, as one of the key defendants in the trial was brought to the stand by the prosecution late in their case, during the fourth week of the trial. How to treat Willie Stevens must have been a challenge for the prosecuting team. It was widely reported that Willie was mentally retarded, although the exact nature of his mental problems was never completely explained. In 1922, during the first investigation of the murder, Willie was taken by the Somerset police with little or no warning, and subjected to a long period of very harsh questioning. When asked by Frances Hall's lawyers whether she should expect the same type of treatment, Azariah Beekman responded, "Why, of course we wouldn't treat a woman the same way." Clearly the deciding factor in how to treat witnesses for those detectives was gender, because although Willie was a "half-wit," he was a man and could thus be subjected to the third-

degree.<sup>7</sup> Willie stood up very well to harsh questioning, never giving in to the pressure or changing his story. His interrogators even came to admire Willie, later one of them commented to a reporter that he "is a study. He has a remarkable command of English. He never loses his poise and he is always a cultured gentleman."<sup>8</sup>

From what happened at the trial, Alexander Simpson must have decided that badgering a retarded witness would only increase the sympathy of the jury towards the defendant. This was probably a good decision, considering the fact that Willie had long ago ingratiated himself to the general population, beginning with a single incident with the media on September 28, 1922. On that day, Willie endeared himself to the world by confronting a clamoring mob of reporters by insisting that they call him "William" or "Mr. Stevens" instead of "Willie" and by proving he was not a "sissy" or a "half-wit" by allowing the reporters to examine his pipe.<sup>9</sup> The jury members would have remembered this story and may have already been sympathetic to Willie, as was the audience, which erupted into peals of laughter every time they believed Willie to have outsmarted Simpson, by answering a question correctly.

Simpson's critical attack on Willie actually took place during his questioning of Willie's brother, Henry. It related to Willie's appearance and his birth. The prosecution's star witness, the pig-woman, had always stated that she saw a



...always a cultured gentleman...

man who looked like an African-American at the scene of the crime. Fit together with her identification of Frances Hall, it was always assumed that Willie was that man. Although to twenty first century examination, Willie does not look African-American at all, to contemporary eyes more sensitive (perhaps obsessively) to the appearance of mixed parentage, Willie's thick, bushy black hair, and his bristling mustache and eyebrows must have seemed to be proof enough. When Simpson began questioning Willie's brother, Henry, instead of beginning with the case against Henry, he began to ask Henry about Willie. The courtroom transcript shows that Simpson asked Henry repeatedly whether William was his real brother, where he was born, why there was no record of Willie's birth, whether he was Henry's "full brother," whether he was "by a mulatto," and finally how Henry could explain the difference in the two brothers' appearances if William really had been born of the same parents as Henry claimed he was.<sup>10</sup> Gerald Tomlinson, in his analysis of the trial, explained that Simpson may have been encouraged to continue on this line of questioning, because when he had mentioned that Willie looked like a colored man earlier in the trial, Willie had reacted as if he were enraged at the suggestion.<sup>11</sup> According to James Thurber, who wrote a character study of William Stevens, entitled *A Sort of Genius*, this was how Willie reacted to Simpson's inference "Willie had half risen from his chair and bared his teeth, as if about to leap on the prosecutor."<sup>12</sup>

It makes almost no difference whether Willie had really been a product of an inter-racial coupling, or not, the missing birth records and the violent reaction of his family to the suggestion, strongly suggests the possibility that his family had assumed he was part black from the time of his birth. Maybe he bore some type of resemblance to a black man his mother had been particularly close to. For whatever reason, Willie had been treated differently since the time he was a baby, and so it is no great surprise that he should have been seen as different in his adulthood. Willie's exact mental problem was never fully understood, but one student of the case, Dr. Richard McKeon, has suggested that he

might have suffered from Asperger's disorder.<sup>13</sup> Symptoms of this disorder are "severe and sustained impairment in social interaction... and the development of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests and activities" as well as exhibiting "stereotyped and repetitive mannerisms."<sup>14</sup> This may have been what Willie was suffering from, but there is another possibility.

It is possible that Willie was not born with any deficiencies that would be detected today, but, when he was born in 1872, being a bastard and of mixed parentage, would have been seen as a serious affliction. The symptoms of Asperger's disorder that Willie exhibited throughout his life, most prominently "impairment in social interaction" and "stereotyped and repetitive mannerisms" might have resulted from the way he was treated as a child. Willie had never had a job and had always been financially dependent on his family. When his mother died, leaving a small fortune to her children, Willie (as opposed to Frances and Henry) was given a trust fund, and "kept on a strict allowance."<sup>15</sup> Willie was most socially at home when he was in the local firehouse, where he was something of a mascot, or interacting with the large community of Hungarian immigrants who lived in New Brunswick. Willie felt comfortable on the outskirts of acceptable society, in the all-male seclusion of the firehouse or the racially secluded Hungarian neighborhood. Being always treated differently, set apart, assumed to be impure, less bright, biologically inferior to the rest of his family could easily have resulted in Willie's unique behavior.

James Dunton reported in *The Murders in Lovers' Lane*, that gossips in New Brunswick called Willie "a berserker and a werewolfe, an uncivilized beast," exactly the type of comments that one would expect to be applied a mulatto by suspicious racists.<sup>16</sup> Azariah Beekman's complement to Willie, that he "has a remarkable command of English... never loses his poise and... is always a cultured gentleman" is the kind of backhanded compliment that one issues to someone who has been assumed to be essentially inferior, but has conducted himself otherwise. Willie would

receive many similar compliments is hundreds of newspapers around the world, after he conducted himself with poise, humor, and intelligence on the witness stand. James Thurber commented that their was a “touch of admiration, almost partisanship in most of the reporters’ stories. The final verdict could be read between the lines.”<sup>17</sup> Like almost everyone else, Simpson had misjudged Willie Stevens.



*...assumed to be impure...*

## Notes

1. Runyon, 18.
2. Four years later she would die of cancer, never having been completely healthy since she collapsed during the trial.
3. Kunstler, 243. I can't help but mention that this gag was stolen and used in the Godfather Part II.
4. Runyon, 56.
5. Kunstler, 248.
6. Dunton, 248.
7. *The New York Times*, Oct. 8, 1922.
8. *Ibid.*, Oct. 18, 1922.
9. *Ibid.*, Sept. 29, 1922.
10. Tomlinson, 245.
11. *Ibid.*, 247.
12. James Thurber "A Sort of Genius." (In *My World and Welcome to It*. 172-195 Original 1940's. Reprinted, San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970), 182.
13. Tomlinson, 380.
14. *Ibid.*, 261.
15. *Ibid.*, 56-59.
16. Dunton, 214.
17. Thurber, 191.

## Chapter Ten:

### CONTAINING THE END OF THE TRIAL AND THE EFFECTS OF A HUDSON COUNTY PROSECUTOR IN A SOMERSET COUNTY COURTHOUSE.

In the final week of the trial, Prosecutor Alexander Simpson became more and more sure that he was going to lose this case, and he began to lash out at the people he believed had cost him the case – the jury. The day before the defense finished their case, Simpson met with reporters and told them that he would “move for a mistrial in the case” because he claimed that he had proof “that some members of the jury have been guilty of improprieties.”<sup>1</sup> He also presented the reporters with copies of a letter he had written to the Governor of New Jersey (and fellow Jersey City Democrat) Harry Moore in which he accused jury members of sleeping during evidence, receiving telephone calls and visitors without official witnesses, and openly boasting of their bias against the prosecution. The next day he presented his case to the judge, who, after thinking it over during lunch, rejected Simpson’s appeal for a mistrial.

With this final effort rejected, Simpson must have known that his case was a lost one. The antagonism between him and the jury, mostly a result of a county antipathy between the rural Somerset County jurors and the urban Hudson County prosecutor, had only been worsened by his public efforts for a mistrial. Still, Mr. Simpson carefully prepared his final statement. He was aware that his audience was far larger than the 12 jurors – that the whole world would be on the edge of their seats, listening to him as he spoke, judging the guilt or innocence of the accused, and also his worth as a lawyer and a man. Damon Runyon, who was reporting the case, noted that “no man ever faced a jury with less regard for what it thought than Simpson.”<sup>2</sup> After he summed up the case, Simpson left the Somerville



*...openly boasting of their bias...*



*...his audience was far larger than the 12 jurors...*

courthouse for Jersey City. For Simpson, there was no suspense in waiting for the verdict. He knew what it would be. He was not in the courtroom when the jury returned to pronounce verdicts of not-guilty for Frances Hall, Willie Stevens, and Henry Stevens on charges of murder.

\* \* \*

Prosecutor Alexander Simpson's motion for a mistrial on grounds of the jury's misconduct is very interesting. His motion was threefold, "(1) the proclivity of some of the jurors to doze while witnesses for the state were on the stand, (2) the failure of the sheriff to guard the jury properly, and (3) the open hostility of some of the panel's members, one of whom had referred to him publicly as "a goddamn lying little son of a bitch."<sup>3</sup> Although the first two parts of the motion were undoubtedly true — the enormous length and notoriety of the trial almost ensured that jurors would be in some way compromised — it is the third that is the most telling.

Just as the 1922 investigations of the Hall-Mills murder were impeded by county politics between Middlesex county and Somerset county, the 1926 trial of the Hall-Mills murder was impeded by county politics between Somerset county and Hudson county. Alexander Simpson and his team of prosecuting investigators were from Hudson county, and specifically allied with Jersey City and its political boss, Frank Hague. All of the jurors were by definition from Somerset County. The defendants almost certainly took advantage of this by choosing defense attorneys such as Clarence E. Case, who not only resided in Somerset, but was a virulent political enemy of Hague.<sup>4</sup>

From the very beginning of his investigation, Simpson made very few attempts to pander to Somerset county public opinion. Before he was even appointed special prosecutor, Simpson claimed that he was going to "go over the evidence with a fine-tooth comb, without fear or favor."<sup>5</sup> The implication of this statement is clearly that the 1922 investigation had been impeded by the fear of the Stevens fami-

ly or by corrupt officials. Many of the officials would of course, have been from Somerset County. During the trial, it was widely believed that Simpson was attacking the reputation of the 1922 Somerset County prosecutor, Azariah Beekman, by insinuating that Beekman had actually been an instrument of Frances Hall, offering bribes on her account to witnesses for their silence.<sup>6</sup> The jurors would not have appreciated this dragging through the dirt of a Somerset official, especially because Beekman had died in the interim between the alleged bribing and the trial, and as such, could not defend himself.

During the trial, Simpson showed no more delicacy to county sensibilities. He frequently referred to Defense Attorney Case as "junior counsel." As Gerald Tomlinson astutely inquires, "what prosecutor Simpson, a Democrat from Hudson County, hoped to gain by needling one of Somerville's favorite sons in front of a Somerset County jury is hard to imagine."<sup>7</sup> Damon Runyon picked up on a way in which Simpson was alienating his jury that many observers might have missed; style. On November 17, Runyon reported that "Simpson, a born showman, came bouncing into court in a shirt and collar with astonishing stripes... the jury looked slightly dazed as it gazed upon Senator Simpson."<sup>8</sup> During his extremely long and detailed examination of Henry Stevens alibi, (which was that he had been in Lavallette fishing on the night of the murder,) Simpson seemed to sneer at the importance fishing seemed to play in the lives of Stevens and his neighbors. While Simpson could be forgiven for trying to ridicule the detailed descriptions of a fish a murder suspect caught four years earlier, he should have caught on to the fact that many of his sleepy jurors perked up and looked sympathetic when there was talk of fishing. As Damon Runyon noted, "They know about fishing in New Jersey."<sup>9</sup> Senator Case, on the other hand, was "a local product... he spoke the language of the jurymen, mostly farmers."<sup>10</sup>

In the defenses summation of their case, they repeatedly called upon the jurors' county pride. They equated a victory for the defendants with a victory for Somerset county.

“Senator Case charged unfairness to the prosecution and placed some stress on the fact that Jersey City officials were so active in Somerset County affairs. The senator made plenty of that Somerset-Hudson-County phase of the situation. There is no love lost between the counties.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed it would have been easy for the jury to think of the case in that way, because “there [were] almost enough State Senators in the Hall-Mills case to constitute a Senate quorum” and they were lined up against each other politically as well as legally.<sup>12</sup>

As was the case in the county politics of the 1922 investigation, money played a large part in the conflict during the 1926 trial. The people of Somerset felt like they were being forced to pay for an investigation into a trial concerning Middlesex residents, driven by the personal, commercial, and political goals of outsiders, in particular Jersey City politicians and New York journalists. In the aftermath of the trial, Simpson said that “Somerset must ‘pay every cent,’” of the estimated 150,000 dollar bill, including the salaries of his detectives, many from Jersey City.<sup>13</sup> The Somerset Freeholders responded by refusing to pay certain of the bills, in particularly a \$1,872 bill for the T. C. Beet Detective Agency that Simpson hired to watch the Somerset county constables who were watching the jury.<sup>14</sup> An outside team may have been necessary to ensure that the Stevens family could not influence the prosecution, but it could not ensure that the prosecuting attorneys would be impartial nor that the jury would be impartial to them.

\* \* \*

December 3, 1926, the last day of the trial, marked the end of all significant official investigations into the Hall-Mills murder case. Starting on December 4, 1926, the mystery of who killed Edward Hall and Eleanor Mills became the full possession of the American national conscious which mulled the facts over, read and re-read the evidence, analyzed motives, and invented solutions, until one day maybe, just maybe someone will uncover the truth.

## Notes

1. Kunstler, 288.
2. *Ibid.*, 301.
3. *Ibid.*, 288.
4. Tomlinson, 240. Also see the footnote.
5. Kunstler, 124.
6. Tomlinson, 264. Although I don't think Senator Simpson would have used this to support his point, I found the following poem in the investigative files on the case held by Special Collections in Alexander Library:
 

August Azariah  
Should surely aspire,  
To rank very much higher;  
But to be frank,  
None is so rank  
Sir Azariah, Esquire.

Broadcasting suspicious vile,  
Doing it every little while;  
Creating a terrible muss,  
A vicious, noxious fuss —  
The malicious work,  
Of an atrocious Turk-  
A rabid, discredited blunderbuss.
7. Tomlinson, 221.
8. Runyon, 54.
9. *Ibid.*, 62.
10. Boswell and Thompson, 99.
11. Runyon, 91.
12. *Ibid.*, 74.
13. *The New York Times*, Dec. 8, 1926.
14. *Ibid.*, Jan. 8, 1928.

## Conclusion

With the trial's end, the Hall-Mills case may have exited the great national stage, but the cultural tensions that the case revealed were there to stay. James Dunton in *The Murders in Lovers' Lane* allowed one of his characters to prophesize about the case: "we cannot begin to predict the far-flung parts of the body politic which will be effected by this leprous growth."<sup>1</sup> This essay has chronicled many of the ways that the Hall-Mills case exposed the usually concealed cultural underbelly of the "body politic." The murdering of Edward Hall and Eleanor Mills revealed a multitude of tensions: between Victorian standards of marriage and a developing new standard of marriage, between Victorian ideals of women and a new feminine ideal, tension between the very rich and the very poor, between the urban and the rural, between the reticent and the sensation hungry, between the new immigrant and the older immigrant, between Middlesex County and Somerset County, between Somerset County and Hudson County. Issues about attitudes concerning race and miscegenation were raised through the character of Willie Stevens. Finally, the Hall-Mills case confirmed that there was a great deal of resentment toward the rich and influential among many of the less rich and less influential members of society.

Reading about the case, one is constantly surprised by its cultural relevance throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty first. The media carnival continues on unimpeded by any efforts to control it, and one of its favorite topics is still crime. If Court TV, television programs such as *Judge Judy* and *Law and Order*, and movies like *Runaway Jury* are not enough, the current national obsessions with the Kobe Bryant case, the Martha Stewart case, (and undoubtedly several other such cases which I have been too busy writing this thesis to notice) bear witness to the fact that the American people are just as fascinated by crimes as ever before. The Martha Stewart case is especially interest-

ing, because it shows that just as in 1922 and 1926 with Frances Hall, the spectacle of a rich, proud woman being persecuted and subjected to unfamiliar indignities, still captivates the American public. The interest in the recent and frequent sexual crimes of Catholic priests in America show that many people are still fascinated by stories of religious indiscretion. It is almost unnecessary to point out that the issues of race that the case revealed are still pertinent in today's America, but if there are any doubts about it, the recent "Racial Draft" held on Dave Chappelle's sketch comedy show, along with many of his other racially charged pieces about the court system, should be convincing.

The Hall-Mills case created many precedents that have carried through, untouched to today. The ability of rich defendants to obtain verdicts of not-guilty by hiring unbelievably expensive defense attorneys is virtually a cliché, as are the problems associated with holding a fair trial in the midst of a media frenzy. Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* regularly parodies reporters obsessed with being "on location," even if that location gives the audience no real insight into the story. The frequent sight of reporters standing in a courthouse parking lot, or outside a suburban house in which a horrible crime was committed... the day before, may easily have had its roots in the countless reporters who could not gain admission to the Hall-Mills trial, but who were stationed in Somerville nonetheless.

Living in New Brunswick made the experience of learning and writing about the Hall-Mills case even more interesting than it would have been otherwise. It seemed like each day I read about the case, I learned something new about my surroundings. I learned about old street-car routes. I realized that I can see 100 Sicard Street, where Raymond Schneider used to live, from my bedroom window. Rutgers University has appropriated some of the buildings involved in the case: the Douglass Dean's residence on Nichol Avenue was the Hall's house, and across George Street lies Carpender Hall, likely donated to the University by Frances' cousins. Tumulty's Restaurant, which advertises itself on its website as a "first date" spot

for Rutgers students, something which I can happily attest to, was started in 1937 by Peter Tumulty, who during the summer of 1922 had worked as the Hall's handyman and chauffeur. It seems fairly likely that, innocent or not, the seed money for this still popular restaurant might have come from Frances Hall, impelling or rewarding Peter Tumulty's discretion. The working class neighborhood where the Mills lived is still a working class neighborhood, and the Hungarian section of town where Willie Stevens felt so at home, is still the home to many of New Brunswick's Hungarian residents. I was surprised and amused to discover that Robert Wood Johnson used to live in an enormous mansion on the lot that now houses the grease trucks. Whispers of the case still survive in the courting practices of some New Jersey youth. Although I did not grow up with this particular practice, apparently it is customary for boys growing up in Hillsborough to take girls out into the woods and spook them with vague stories about a mystical "pig-lady." It was chilling to think that just down and across Easton Avenue from where I live, there used to be a local make out spot, and that on a September night, 82 years ago two people were killed there. Living in New Brunswick might not have given me any insights about the case that I could not have gotten otherwise, but it certainly kept me interested.

One thing that did not seem to have a whole lot of current relevance was the county politics that run through the case. I do not know for sure, but it seems that, at least in New Jersey people no longer identify so strongly with the county they live in. Perhaps this is a function of urbanization and suburbanization or perhaps the greater accessibility of state and national politics to the average citizen preclude this type of identity. Or do people move from county to county more often? A Hudson county prosecutor in a Somerset county case would not provoke the kind of reaction today that it did in 1926, nor, one hopes, would the authorities of Middlesex and Somerset counties have such a hard time cooperating. As far as I know, a comprehensive history of New Jersey county identity and politics has never

been written, which is a shame, because it would be a fascinating topic to learn more about.

The murder of Edward Hall and Eleanor Mills was partially a result of the transformation of America from a Victorian nation to a (for lack of a better word) modern one. Sex, adultery, jealousy, and violence are surely universal, but the specific forms that they took in this story were unique to the time and place. Although to really support this claim, I might need another ten years of intense studying, I contend that American society to date has not undergone as serious a transformation as it did in the first quarter of the twentieth century. If this is really true than to understand our lives today, we must understand what came before, the Victorian era, and exactly what the transformation from that age to our age entailed. The Hall-Mills case was my way to guide the reader through this changing society from different angles and at different degrees of magnification.

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1. Dunton, 165.

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