

Puzzling Evidence

As a privileged prolocutor this evening, allow as a prologue, the Budget's menu. It presents four courses. The *appetizer* is entitled "Puzzling Evidence." Your *salad* is captioned "The Soirée." Then the *Entre*, simply named "T.E.A.," and for the *desert* treat ... "Après Soirée." Let us begin.

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"And may God, in his infinite wisdom, have mercy on your soul," the final words of Judge Charles Bell, after passing sentence on Anna Marie Hahn, November 10, 1937 in the Hamilton County Court of Common Pleas. One year later, Anna was dragged to the State's execution chamber in Columbus, hysterically professing innocence all the way. "Warden, don't let them do this to me," she begged. Then Anna Hahn became the first woman to die in Ohio's electric chair.

The trial of Anna Hahn, a thirty-one year old German immigrant, commanded headlines for months. She was suspected of murdering nine older men, befriending luckless fellows in Over-the-Rhine saloons with charm and cleverness, learning their bank accounts and extracting funds with forged withdrawal slips. Once their cash was exhausted, she allegedly poisoned the victims with arsenic or croton oil, and readily moved to another unsuspecting soul for harvesting.

The prosecution team, headed by Dudley Outcalt, had five Assistant Prosecutors working around the clock on the case. One was assigned responsibility for matching Anna's handwriting to that on the withdrawal slips. Along with Cincinnati homicide detective, Walter Hart, the young prosecutor broke into Hahn's house one night, sliding down the basement coal chute. They rummaged through the dark rooms, and stepped on the

pedal of a garbage pail, finding paper torn into bits and pieces. While scooping up the last scraps, they heard someone at the front door, and escaped through the kitchen window. The next day all the bits and pieces, mingled with a little garbage, were dumped on the desk of Vera Lonsway, a secretary in the Prosecutor's office. Vera specialized in jigsaw puzzles. After an all day assembly, it clearly evidenced a note written by Anna. Within a week, the FBI's handwriting expert, who broke the Lindberg kidnapping case, verified the handwriting matched those on the withdrawal slips. The evidence was convincing and corroborated other evidence. However, it was not used in trial for reasons, you likely already expect, the 4<sup>th</sup> Amendment – law enforcement needs a good reason, and in most cases a warrant, to search and seize people's property.

That garbage-fisted Assistant County Prosecutor was Gordon H. Scherer. His influence impacted local politics for decades. Noteworthy, and in one instance notorious, Gordon made a mark on the national stage. It was Scherer, as a Member of the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1953, who asked the fateful question of Paul Robeson, provoking the actor's famous response. Scherer asked, "If you love Russia so much, why didn't you stay there?" Robeson replied, "Because my father was a slave and my people died to build this country, I'm going to stay here and have a part, just like you."

Gordon Scherer did distinguish himself in Congress by floor-managing President Eisenhower's 41, 000 mile - 43 billion dollar Interstate Highway legislation, a hallmark achievement for the Administration.

Aside from being a multi-term Cincinnati Congressman, Scherer was recognized for service as a United Nation Delegate and a good-governing

Republican County Chairman in the 1960s. He earned the respect and held friendship with Democrat Chairman, Socco Weithe, and Charter Party Chairman, Sidney Weil, and William Bowen, President of the NAACP. They often huddled, after hours, at a back-alley bar behind the old Metropole Hotel on Walnut Street, whenever the city's issues required common ground.

Before his death in 1988, the Cincinnati Enquirer asked me to author a three part biographical series on the political life of Gordon H. Scherer. During the fact gathering interviews with Mr. Scherer, he shared the never-disclosed details of how the handwriting puzzle in the Anna Hahn case had been gathered. He also expressed a regret in his political life... only one... the *question* asked of Paul Robeson. He acknowledged, "We made a mistake, I made a mistake, Paul Robeson was a good American."

Frank H. Mayfield, Jr.

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