Fear and Media: An Examination of Serial Killers in 19th Century America

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FEAR AND MEDIA: AN EXAMINATION OF SERIAL KILLERS IN 19TH CENTURY AMERICA

by

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Abstract

This research is focused on two serial killers in the late 1800s and comparing the amount of media coverage for each case. They are H.H. Holmes who was killing in Chicago, Illinois and the Servant Girl Annihilator in Austin, Texas. Holmes was caught and convicted, while the Servant Girl Annihilator was not. This research shows that this was due, in majority, to the amount of media coverage for both cases. The Servant Girl Annihilator had minimal media coverage, mostly because of racial issues at the time, and he was never caught. In contrast, Holmes was convicted for insurance fraud and his case was covered nationwide, which caused people in Chicago to report Holmes’s odd behavior in the city to authorities. The argument of this research is that media coverage impacted the level of police investigation, which was why the Servant Girl Annihilator was not caught, while Holmes was.

The sources that have been used for this research are newspaper articles and articles from psychological and historical journals.
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Fear and Media: An Examination of Serial Killers in 19th Century America

During the mid-to-late 1800s in the United States, cities formed and became the focus of American life. Two cities that came to the forefront of the American scene were Austin, Texas and Chicago, Illinois. Austin became a cultural and social hub, while Chicago had just been selected to host the World’s Fair. These two cities shared many similarities in their rise to the top of American life, while also having the presence of a serial killer in their midst. Austin was the home to the “Servant Girl Annihilator,” who killed from 1884 to 1886. The name “Servant Girl Annihilator” was coined by writer William Sydney Porter in 1885. Chicago had the infamous Herman Webster Mudgett, alias H.H. Holmes, who killed from 1891 to 1894, a decade after the Servant Girl Annihilator. These two killers utilized the growth of these cities to their advantage when it came to their victim pool. There were many differences between the two killers, but the focus of this research will be to examine and compare the two killers in their methods, types of victims in terms of gender and race, presentation in the media, and police investigation.

Both of these serial killers had a very specific type of victim, but only H.H. Holmes was caught and convicted for his crimes. Holmes was initially charged with the murder of Benjamin F. Pitezel after being caught for committing insurance fraud with Pitezel’s wife.1 Mrs. Pitezel was eventually cleared of being associated with her husband’s murder and was regarded as a victim and witness during the trial.2 This research will argue that the successful arrest of Holmes and the failure to catch the Servant Girl Annihilator were due to the amount of media coverage. This will be argued using newspaper articles, census data, and telegrams that reveal the

1 The spelling of ‘Pitezel’ varies and for the purposes of this paper, the most common was used.
underlying issues in the cities of Austin and Chicago at this time which created an environment where the Servant Girl Annihilator and Holmes had easy access to victims that would not be initially investigated.

What is a Serial Killer?

The term “serial killer” is a recent classification for certain crimes. While the term had not been coined during the time that the Servant Girl Annihilator and H.H. Holmes killed, they both meet the criteria for this label. The definition of serial killer differs across cultures. For the purposes of this research, the definition used is that most commonly accepted in the United States. Since 1988, the Behavioral Sciences Unit of the F.B.I. has classified serial killers as anyone who has claimed the lives of more than three victims in separate events with a period of time without killing in between each victim. In the mid-1960's there was an attempt to systemize the way in which criminals and crimes are classified for legal purposes. This eventually branched out into the use of various labels for crimes ranging from burglary to murder so that there could be more accuracy in the criminal law field. However, it was not until a decade later that the term “serial killer” was first coined and used to describe a specific category of criminal and crime. Prior to the use of this term, police only used the term “murderer,” for these crimes. “Serial killer” was first used in the 1970's, coined by Robert Ressler, a criminal profiler for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Ressler was one of the first people to interview and research serial killers in depth. He convinced the F.B.I. of the importance of criminal

3 Eric Hickey, Serial Murderers and their Victims (Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning, 2010), 315.
profiling, a psychological method of studying and tracking down criminals. Because of Ressler, the term "serial killer" has now been applied to countless cases in the modern day. It has also become used to refer to many different killers throughout history, not just those killing after the creation of the term.

Serial killer as a classification did not come with a clear-cut explanation of what it means. Over the course of several years, criminologists, behavioral scientists, and F.B.I. agents have worked on defining what a serial killer is and which crimes would fall under this new classification. With these efforts came an effort to differentiate between mass murderers and serial killers. Mass murderers claim multiple victims in one single event and do not repeat this event with another group of victims. In contrast, serial killers kill over a period of time and there are multiple different events with time without killing in between. Along with the classification tied to number of murders, many criminologists and psychologists have noted that most serial murderers usually select specific victims in order to fulfill their specific needs. This is evidenced by the Servant Girl Annihilator’s selection of primarily African-American females and Holmes’s selection of primarily lower and middle class white females.

The Servant Girl Annihilator and H.H. Holmes were both selected for this study based on the definition of serial killing, with both falling under this category. They each had more than three victims and there was a period of time between murders. While there were other people in the United States during the 19th century that killed more than one person, they were mass murderers because they killed their victims all at one time, mostly by the use of poison. There was a young boy who was charged with the murder of two younger females, but this case was not examined because it falls outside of the specifics of this research. There was little to no

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8 Sullivan, "The FBI Investigator Who Coined The Term 'Serial Killer.'"
media involvement, the perpetrator was caught at the scene of the crime, the victim count was less than three, and the official classification was juvenile violence. 10

Austin, Texas and Chicago, Illinois in the 1800s

During the late 19th century the state of Texas experienced rapid growth, economic change, and a maturing culture. By the end of the 1880s, the overall population had increased by almost one million, due to both a growth of the existing resident population and immigration from Mexico and Germany. 11 The growth and development of industries during this time period caused an increase in many urban populations as well. As a result, unions were formed in order to protect worker’s rights, especially as women were entering the working fields. 12 While life generally improved for many in Texas at this time period, segregation was still at the center of everyday life. General Gordon Granger had released an official proclamation that abolished slavery in June of 1865, but anti-black ideology was still strong in the state 20 years later. 13 Literacy rates for African-Americans increased and there were more opportunities, but they were victims of 81% of reported lynchings. 14 As life improved for the African-American community in Texas, racially motivated violence and segregation continued to be part of everyday reality. In the late 1800s, election laws were passed in Texas that required a poll tax, which prevented many African-Americans, Mexicans, and some lower-class whites from voting. 15

12 Barr, “Late Nineteenth-Century Texas.”
14 Barr, “Late Nineteenth-Century Texas.”
Austin experienced most of these changes as well, as the city shaped itself into what it is today. In 1870, Austin was named the permanent capital city in Texas. Many resources were put aside at this time in order to build a new capital building and expand the city. As such, Austin attempted to increase its population by promoting itself as a residential town instead of an urban one. This was only partially successful since Austin experienced immense debt after attempting to build a dam to provide energy for the city. From the mid-1840s onward, there was also an influx of European immigrants to the city, mostly from Germany and Holland, which brought new cultures to the city and the state as a whole. A strong anti-black and pro-segregation ideology remained, especially as only 20 years had passed since slavery had been abolished statewide.

While Texas dealt with racial issues and economic growth during the late 19th century, Chicago, IL experienced its own struggles and successes. At this time, Chicago was the defining point of Illinois as the state’s center for culture, economy, and urban life. The population of Chicago steadily grew throughout the late 1800s, especially as the city became the central hub for many railroad companies west of Lake Michigan. Throughout the 1800’s, Chicago expanded as a city and a cultural hub, offering many retail establishments and opportunities for wholesale markets that had more goods at lower prices than other cities in the United States.

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17 Williamson, _Austin, Texas: An American Architectural History_, 90.
18 David C. Humphrey, "Austin, TX (Travis County)," in _Handbook of Texas Online_ (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2010), accessed March 6, 2017, https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hda03.
19 Humphrey, "Austin, TX (Travis County)."
22 Cronon, _Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West_, 281.
October of 1871, a fire broke out that destroyed one-third of the city and left thousands homeless.23

The population in Chicago following the fire grew at an increased rate due to better construction of buildings and roadways. The city was rebuilt with an improved transportation system and many up-and-coming architects began to collect fame. By the 1900s, Chicago had a population that was almost two million, making it one of the five largest cities in the world.24 In April of 1890, Chicago was selected to host the World’s Columbian Exposition, also called the “World’s Fair,” with the start date of the exposition being in 1893.25 It gained the nickname the “White City” because of the Gilded Age buildings and the towering, white, architecture.26 The city became viewed as an example of the epitome of urban life. Many saw the growth of the city after the fire in the 1870s to be symbolic of a Phoenix rising from the ashes.27 After being selected to host the World Columbian Exposition, this city became a cultural hub and the population grew at such a rapid rate, it was ranked in the top five largest cities of the world after a period of only 20 years.

Both killers lived in a city where they had a plethora of possible victims, but both chose the ones that would be less likely to be missed. Serial killers tend to have a specific victim type, which they find in targeted locations where previous experience has wielded interaction with their desired victims.28 For the Servant Girl Annihilator, that was the African-American servant class in Austin. For Holmes, it was women who had traveled alone to Chicago for the World’s

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Fair. These were both victim types that, in their respective areas, would be easily missed. As Austin was segregated and the African-American community was seen as less important than that of the whites, their deaths were never extensively looked into, which would mean less chance of discovering key evidence leading to a conviction. In Chicago, the World’s Fair brought many visitors and with an increase of people in the city, it was harder to notice if someone went missing, especially a visitor who was expected to leave anyway.

Who Were the Victims?

In Austin during the mid-to-late 1880s, segregation was an everyday reality and African American servants were easier targets because they were in a different part of the house. Their deaths were also less likely to be thoroughly investigated. At this point, the population of Austin had undergone a 9.5% increase from previous years and was at an estimated 11,013 residents.29 African-Americans constituted approximately one-third of the population.30 Even though they were a large part of the greater Austin community, there was still segregation. Servant women lived in small apartments that were separate from the house where they worked. This kept them at a distance from their white employers.31 In 1884, when the first victim of the Servant Girl Annihilator, Molly Smith, went missing from her quarters another servant alerted the man in charge, Tom Chalmers.32 Chalmers did not begin to look for Smith until the next morning.

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29 U.S. Census Bureau, “City of Austin Population History: 1840 to 2016,” https://www.austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/files/Planning/Demographics/population_history_pub.pdf (accessed April 28, 2017). Though this source is from the U.S. Census Bureau, it was not found on any federal database with census data.
31 Galloway, The Servant Girl Murders, 259.
because he felt that it was not important to look for a “black man’s missing girlfriend.”

She was found dead the next morning. The police were quick to arrest and convict her former boyfriend, William Brooks, and the case was closed. In addition to moving quickly to close the case, the police department in Austin was under-staffed and under-funded at this time, which pushed them to close smaller cases in order to give more attention to those deemed more important.

By the end of 1885, the Servant Girl Annihilator had killed eight people and injured twelve. Of the murdered victims, five were African-American women, one was an African-American male, and two white females. The twelve injured were mostly African-Americans, at least one was a Swedish servant girl. Some members of the Austin police department believed that it was not possible for the murders to be committed by the same man and looked into the crimes on an individual basis. Detectives were called in by the mayor in early October, but they had made little headway in their investigation of the crimes being committed against the servant class. It was on Christmas Eve of 1885 when two white women, Sue Hancock and Eula Phillips, were killed that the police began to seriously get involved, showing the racial disparity of the times. This was the first time that a reward was offered for more information.

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The governor offered 300 dollars for any help in gaining a conviction for the murders of Hancock and Phillips. The two white women were the last of his victims and the murder of African-American servant girls ceased after this point.

With Holmes in Chicago, his victims were also female, but they were white and selected because they would not be missed in the large crowds of the city and were easy to con. Many of them traveled into the city for the World’s Columbian Exposition. During this time, Chicago was the destination of thousands of visitors due to the World’s Fair. Holmes chose younger women that traveled alone because they were open and enchanted with him, especially as he would use his fairly good looks, charm, and smooth manners to his advantage. Holmes was married to multiple women throughout his criminal career under many different aliases. This also made him seem trustworthy to the women traveling alone; a man alone is cause for alarm, but a hotel manager who is married seems harmless and kind. He also selected women who were “virtuous” and extremely naïve, such as Minnie Williams, one of his victims. Holmes did not only kill women during his criminal period, he also killed at least one man and three children. His one known male victim, Benjamin F. Pitezel, was the murder for which he was arrested and eventually charged, along with the murder of three of Pitezel’s children. Though the majority of his victims were women, there was no indication of sexual assault. The majority of his kills were for the purpose of insurance schemes. He got them to sign over a life insurance policy to him and then cash in once he killed them.

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44 Schechter, Depraved, 71.
The Servant Girl Annihilator chose his victims based on race because African-Americans were not seen as equal in the eyes of many white people in this time period, so their murders would probably not receive the same attention as white women. Many in Austin felt that African-Americans were the “old fashioned servants,” but that the “race” of good servants was almost extinct.48 The terminology used in this article shows that African-American women were seen as less than whites. In addition, many of the articles that discussed the murders of the African-American women were much shorter than that of the murders of the two white women. This reveals that there was less importance placed on the murders of the first five victims than that of the last two, which is significant because the first victims were solely African-Americans. He chose women instead of men because of a sexual drive, which is evidence by the rape of his victims before he killed them. The women that he chose were separated from the people that they worked for and their wellbeing was seen as less important, as evidenced by the reaction of Tom Chalmers when his help was requested with finding Molly Smith. Holmes, in contrast, chose his victims based on how naïve and trusting they were, as well as whether or not they traveled with little to no contact with family or friends. The availability of victims for both killers was situational, African-American women who were seen as less important than whites and white women who traveled alone and needed a place to stay for the night. While the Servant Girl Annihilator and Holmes had similar reasons for selecting their victims in order to avoid being caught for their crimes, they had extremely different methods of killing.

Methods of Killing

The Servant Girl Annihilator broke into the servants’ quarters with the intention to kill. These murders were committed in the victim’s home, with many of them being attacked in their own beds. The most detailed account of this was from Dr. L. B. Johnson, who found one of the victims with an axe wound through her face, laying on the floor next to her blood-soaked bed. According to some witness testimony, he had a pistol with him during at least one of his attacks, but he did not shoot any of his victims. These witnesses were the husbands or children of the victims and the killer would strike them, knocking them unconscious, and bludgeon his intended target to death. Though the police initially viewed many of these crimes as robberies gone wrong, the murder weapon, an axe, was brought by the killer and left at the scene of the murder. This reveals that the Servant Girl Annihilator planned on killing his victims. It also shows he could afford to replace the axe or he robbed from stores or other homes. The Servant Girl Annihilator’s method of killing was extremely violent, as evidenced by the rape and use of an axe through the head of the victims.

Holmes, on the other hand, had no indication of sexual assault and used chloroform or asphyxiation to kill his victims. Most of his murders were committed in his infamous “murder castle,” which he built with the intention of hosting visitors to Chicago during the World’s Columbian Exposition. The rooms of his hotel were built with the intention to kill, designed with doors and windows that locked from the outside and soundproof walls.

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the media deemed the building a "factory for murders."\textsuperscript{54} There was a shaft where bodies could be lowered into the cellar, a sealed chamber with human remains, hidden trap doors, secret rooms without light or air, and a crematorium.\textsuperscript{55} As Holmes built his hotel, he frequently switched contractors and architects so as to not have his motives discovered. However, some came forward and stated their concern with the noxious gasses in the basement.\textsuperscript{56} His first victims were poisoned, but then he switched to the use of chloroform to render them unconscious and flooded their rooms with poisoned gas, causing asphyxiation, or he would lock them in a vault that he made that would cause them to suffocate.\textsuperscript{57}

**Racial Bias and Media in Austin**

With these crimes and the culture of the society in which they were committed, there were many differences in how they were portrayed by the media. The Servant Girl Annihilator received only short articles until the murder of two white women on Christmas Eve, while Holmes’s trial was front page news and filled half of the entire day’s newspaper. For the Servant Girl Annihilator, African-American women were seen as lesser beings in the eyes of many and the police department was understaffed and convinced that the murders were robberies gone wrong. In the case of Holmes, there was the impact of the increased number of people in Chicago for the World’s Fair, which pushed the police to find the many people that were classified as missing during this time period.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{55} Associated Press, "Modern Bluebeard."
\textsuperscript{57} Associated Press, "Holmes His Own Lawyer."
\textsuperscript{58} Rosenberg, *America at the Fair*, 21.
In Austin, there was little indication of the murders going on in the city for a long period of time, any articles that discussed the cases were in the middle of the paper and fairly short. The first murder was reported in detail, but the focus was placed on the fact that the victim was "colored" and the article itself was a few paragraphs long. In the days that followed the murder of Molly Smith in 1884, several articles discussed the murder as a mystery and reported that the jury was working to come to a verdict on the guilt or innocence William Brooks, who had been accused of the murder. Brooks was found guilty of the attack, even though there were several men that stated he had been with them during the time of the murder and did not slip away from their company at any point. As an African-American man in a segregated city that referred to African-Americans as "colored folk" or "Negros," Brooks was most likely only charged because of his race and not due to actual guilt. The newspapers reported on the trial of Brooks as though he was guilty, but he was later released from police custody due to lack of evidence, which was not covered in the newspapers.

The media did not focus on the African-American victims because they were not seen as worth the time or effort needed to bring their murderers to justice. Many of the longer articles referred to the crimes because of the involvement of white men or women in the attack, usually as victims themselves. It was not until early October of 1885 that the mayor of Austin brought in an outside detective agency to assist with catching the criminal that committed the murders. This was not done until after seven white women were attacked and three African-American women had been murdered. Once two white women had been killed, the under-manned police force

was increased by order of the mayor and stores began to close before midnight.\textsuperscript{64} It also was not until the two white women were killed on Christmas night that outside states covered the news. The New York Times published an article about the murders on December 26, 1885, that discussed the number of victims and noted that over 400 arrests had been made, stating that the majority of those arrests were of “suspected negros [who] were subjected to very severe examinations.”\textsuperscript{65} These actions by the media, the mayor, and the police force show that there was little importance placed on the murders of the African-American women. Without a push for answers, refusal to increase the number of police officers, and minimal media coverage city and nationwide, it is revealed that not much attention was given to the African-American victims because they were seen as second class citizens.

Between the murder of Smith and the unnamed girl, who survived, the newspapers were silent about the murders that were taking place in Austin, further emphasizing the minimal amount of importance placed on the murders of African-American women. When an article reported the attack of a white German girl, there was a short mention of previous assaults that had been directed towards the “colored portion of the community.”\textsuperscript{66} This indicates that there was little concern with the well-being of the African-American citizens of Austin as they were attacked in their beds.\textsuperscript{67} As the number of attacks increased, the media began to claim a rise in crime in Austin, stating that there was a “reign of terror” in their city, as there had been an increase in attacks of “midnight robbers.”\textsuperscript{68} There was a suspicion among the citizens of Austin

that there was more than one offender. Many felt that those involved were regular citizens of Austin that would embark on violent murder sprees at night. This perception was aided by the fact that the news reported “colored robbers” that were breaking into homes in order to “rob and outrage.” Yet, the evidence pointed to the fact that the murders were planned, as the weapons used to kill were brought and left at the scene, and witnesses recounted only one offender.

Even with witnesses alive and able to give a description of the perpetrator as white, the police rarely only arrested African-American males, indicating their racial bias. One woman who survived her attack in early March identified her attacker as a man named Abe Pearson, a local barber described as a “mulatto” by the newspapers. She also described the presence of a second robber who was “yellow painted black,” which indicates it was a white male, but only Pearson was ever arrested. This indicates that the focus was on the “ruffians” being African-American and not white, which further emphasizes the segregation of the times. By ignoring the witness statements of a white male perpetrator in favor of a black male, the bias of the police department in clearly shown. Austin had a killer in its midst, but the media and police did not consider that the crimes could be perpetrated by a white male. Even though Servant Girl Annihilator left children or neighbors alive that could give a description and was tracked by blood-hounds on one occasion, there were never any solid leads.

The racial bias in the investigation of these crimes is further emphasized by the murder of Eliza Shelley. In early May of 1885, she was raped and murdered in her home, with her children

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70 Associated Press, “Reign of Terror!”
71 Associated Press, “Still a Mystery.”
left behind as witnesses to the crime. This was the first time that the newspapers reported extensively on the murders of the African-American servant women. Shelley was found by Dr. L. B. Johnson. The article about her death was longer than previous reports on the murders in Austin and contained more details about how she was murdered, found, and the testimony of her children. Her children reported that a single white man, with a white rag over his face, came into their home and wanted to know where they kept the money, threatened the children and promised that if they kept their heads down, he would not kill them. Even though the children claimed there was only one perpetrator and that he was white, the newspapers continued to refer to the attack as one that was committed by a group of “colored” men. Andrew Williams was initially accused. He was a 19 year old “half-witted colored boy” who was found barefoot and arrested because there were footprints that were left at the crime scene that indicated the perpetrator was not wearing any shoes. This evidence was circumstantial at best and Williams was released, but another African-American man, Ike Plummer, was tried and convicted of the murder. Regardless of witness statements that the perpetrator was a white man, a black man was charged with the murder, which shows that there was racial bias in the trial and the conviction of Plummer.

The racial bias that protected the Servant Girl Annihilator from being caught is apparent in the way that the cases were tried and presented in the media of the times. This bias is evidenced by the dehumanization of the African-American victims. Newspapers at this time

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frequently referred to the murders as the “servant girl epidemic.” Words such as “ruffian” and “fiend” were used in tandem with “colored” or “negro,” which paints a very specific image of an evil, black person committing these crimes. They took away from the tragedy of the victims’ murder and focused on the idea of a “bogey man” of sorts in the city. When one woman, Irene Cross, was attacked and managed to “stagger out into the yard,” an unnamed reporter was nearby to hear her screams and rushed to the scene, but only asked her who did it and left without waiting for a doctor to arrive. Cross eventually died due to her wounds, but there was never any article to indicate that she had died and no backlash came to the reporter on the scene who left her to die.

As tensions rose in Austin during the year of 1885 and into 1886, many people began to take matters into their own hands. This drive increased after the murders of Eula Phillips and Sue Hancock, white women who were the wives of well-to-do men in the city. In late January, an “infuriated mob” attacked and lynched an African-American man named Sydney Brown, believing him to be involved with the murders. This again shows how the town was convinced that the perpetrator must be African-American, as they specifically targeted black males. From Christmas in 1884 to early January of 1886, the city of Austin was plagued by an unknown assailant that raped and killed both black and white women, but the newspapers hardly mentioned the murders of the African-American women. Many men of African descent in the city were arrested and charged with the murders, but it was not until white women were raped and killed that the mayor called in outside help and the people of Austin called for justice. Even

when people started to call for answers, the focus remained on African-American males as the perpetrators, which further indicates the presence of racial bias. Mrs. Hancock and Mrs. Phillips had their murders investigated for months following their attacks, while the African-American servant girls were hardly mentioned and articles discussing their murders were short and had no call for alarm or justice.

The way that the newspapers in Austin reported the crimes of the Servant Girl Annihilator show that race was an important factor in terms of how long the article was and how much the people of the city cared about the attacks. In the beginning of the Servant Girl Annihilator’s murder spree, there was hardly any mention of his crimes, but once white women were the victims he stopped killing and the police focused more on finding him. The words used in the articles about the African-American women show dehumanization of the victims. Due to the racial divide, many people in Austin were unconcerned with the murders of black servant girls, which also played into the lack of attention from the media. There was also the impact of an under-manned police department that was focused on closing the cases quickly and in order to have more time to focus on perceived larger, more important criminal acts. Because of all of this, the Servant Girl Annihilator was able to get away with his crimes.

Cause Célèbre and Media in Chicago

For Holmes, his trial and past were the focus of media and police investigation, which led to his arrest and sentencing, especially as people grew more fascinated with his crimes. His insurance schemes brought about an investigation and there was extensive media coverage throughout the course of his trial. There was also greater police involvement, with police from
Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Toronto involved in his arrest and trial. In addition, the media called for justice in the case of Holmes and they utilized his notoriety in order to make money, which increased the length of articles and push for answers.

If the media and the police had not continued to investigate Pitezel’s death after his body was found in September of 1894, many of Holmes’s crimes would have gone unnoticed. When Benjamin Pitezel was found dead and Holmes, along with Pitezel’s wife, claimed the $10,000 in insurance money, newspapers ran the story and continued to through Holmes’s trial and to his death. Mrs. Pitezel and Holmes were originally arrested for insurance fraud, because the police had suspicions that the man identified as Pitezel may have been a stolen cadaver. Due to extensive media coverage nationwide on Holmes’s trial for insurance fraud, more people were aware of the case, which caused witness in other states to come forward about Holmes’s past. Though Holmes was arrested and charged in the state of Pennsylvania, an article in the New York Times brought up the details of Chicago and Holmes’s hotel. After he read the papers, a mechanic in Ohio who had worked on Holmes’s hotel in Chicago brought some concerns to the Chicago police and fire departments. He stated that he felt Holmes was strange and articulated that the construction of the building was “peculiar” and he had not trusted Holmes from the start. Without the national coverage of his trial and accused crimes, people such as the mechanic in Ohio would not have come forward. These witnesses are how the “murder castle” and truth about Holmes’s past were eventually discovered, which played an integral role in his conviction.

The media was fascinated with his life at this point, even though there were no formal charges of murder, and articles that followed the investigation into his insurance schemes were on the front page. This is an example of a phenomenon known as ‘cause célèbre,’ when a legal case gains notoriety and is the focus of much public interest. Instances of cause célèbre can be traced back as far as Ancient Roman times and are present in the academic, economic, and historical disciplines. Holmes’s case of cause célèbre parallels that of Dr. Pritchard in Scotland who was charged with the murder of his wife and mother-in-law. The case gained national attention in Scotland and many became focused on the trial, following along with newspaper articles on the case, much as people did in the case of Holmes. For Holmes, newspapers across the United States covered the case and his name became well-known. Museums had advertisements for viewings of replicas of his cell and the Chicago murder castle. In the last year there has been discussion of a movie to tell the story of Holmes’s murder spree.

A specific example of how Holmes fits into the idea of cause célèbre is in his arraignment and build of notoriety to the point where people paid to learn more about him. In September of 1895, a year from the initial discovery of Pitezel’s body, the focus of the media turned from the alleged murders in Chicago back to Pitezel’s death. Pitezel’s widow traveled to Philadelphia in order to formally identify her late husband’s body and over the next few months Holmes became

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infamous. A few weeks later Holmes was charged with Pitezel’s murder at his arraignment, where he claimed to be “not guilty,” and his trial was set to be on October 28 of that year. As Holmes’s notoriety grew, he became the focus of a new exhibit in Boston, with advertisements for tours of a lifelike display of him in his cell, as well as replicas of his “famous Chicago Castle,” and other places where he had lived. For 10 cents a person could go and witness the “life-like appearance” of the exhibit. In the year and several months since Pitezel’s body had been discovered, Holmes became a point of fascination for many throughout the United States and remained the main focus of media attention.

The media’s obsession with Holmes brought greater attention to detail in examining his past and the actions that preceded his arrest for insurance fraud. Without this focus, Holmes’s other victims would not have been found. Because the media was so focused on the case, there was increased pressure for the police departments in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston to perform well. This instigated a further investigation of his past and the discovery of, initially, seven other possible victims. The number of victims would increase as time went on. This news, like previous articles that covered the insurance schemes enacted by Holmes, was on the front page of, not only newspapers in Pennsylvania and Illinois, but also New York and other states. Articles discussed the theories that detectives had of how Holmes killed and disposed of the bodies of the six women he was linked to. Police departments in several different cities, as well as in Canada, got involved in the case as it gained notoriety. The combined efforts of

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93 Associated Press, “Advertisement.”
95 Associated Press, “Many Eyes Moisteneds.”
these police departments uncovered Holmes’s hotel in Chicago, the bodies of other victims, witnesses for the trial, and evidence of other insurance schemes. This caused Holmes to panic and attempt to attribute some of the murders to other people, such as the death of Nannie Williams. He accused her sister and wrote that the bones found in his cellar were from dinners with guests. He also attempted to explain Pitezel’s death as a suicide, but did not account for the deaths of Pitezel’s children that were attributed to him as well. With the media and so many police departments involved, he was unable to explain away the deaths of the people that were linked to him.

Newspaper coverage of the trial increased the number of witnesses that were willing to speak up and prompted a further investigation of Holmes’s hotel in Chicago. As the time grew closer to Holmes’s official trial in October, the police and media continued to delve deeper into the life of Holmes. There was a specific focus on the mysterious happenings in Chicago during the World’s Columbian Exposition. People came forward and reported strange occurrences during Holmes’s time in the city, such as the restaurant that he opened and employed solely women at, which had a “new force nearly every day.” These statements led to the further investigation into the claims from two women that stated they had been attacked in their home. They told of wet rags that smelled of chloroform which had been placed over their faces. The witnesses that gave statements were from a variety of areas and, as with others, brought their concerns to the police after they read about Holmes’s trial and crimes in the newspaper. Witness reports also instigated a search of the hotel in Chicago which led the discovery of a gas in some

96 Ibid.
100 Associated Press, “Trial of Holmes: Developments at Chicago.”
rooms that was deadly if inhaled. The rooms were designed to be airtight and soundproof so that the calls for help from the victims and the gas could not escape.101

After a week into Holmes’s trial, he was found guilty for murder and sentenced to death by hanging, a result due to the involvement of the media and multiple police departments. Justice for Pitezel and his children was greatly pushed for by the media. Articles about his trial played on the emotions of the reader, with many references to Pitezel’s widow and her tears as she recounted seeing her children for the first time in months laying side by side in the morgue, waiting to be identified.102 The result of his trial surprised none, though it was noted by an unnamed reporter that Holmes, himself, seemed surprised at the verdict.103 Though Holmes was only tried for the murder of Pitezel, his guilt was strengthened by his “bloody record,” and it was the discovery of his past crimes that caused the jury to sentence him in the murder of Pitezel.104 On the day of Holmes’s hanging, there was an extensive report on his crimes, the investigation, his last words, and death. The article reported Holmes had been “executed successfully” and stated there were “crowds at the prison” and the police had “permit the body to hang for a while.”105 This article was over two pages long. This shows that, even at Holmes’s death, he remained a point of fascination for the people of the time and they wanted to be able to see that justice had been served.

The media pushed for answers and the people wanted to see Holmes hang for his crimes. This focus, as well as efforts from multiple police agencies, assisted in the discovery of

101 Rosenberg, America at the Fair, 20.
104 Associated Press, “Holmes is Found Guilty.”
witnes ses that corroborated police theories and suspicions about Holmes. This led to his successful trial and hanging. Without this media attention and focus, as well as a nationwide call for justice, Holmes would have only been charged with committing insurance fraud and would have escaped being caught for his crimes, much like the Servant Girl Annihilator in Austin.

Conclusion

The amount of media coverage was integral in the capture of Holmes and the failure to catch the Servant Girl Annihilator. With the Servant Girl Annihilator, there was a lack of media coverage until the murder of two white women, which caused there to be little concern and push for justice in the community. Without this push for justice from the community and the media, the police moved forward with a weak investigation and arrested men due to their race in order to keep up appearances with a lacking police force. It was not until white women, who were seen as more important parts of the community, were killed that the police began to increase their search and the Servant Girl Annihilator was covered nationwide. Because of the racial issues and segregation in Austin during the 1880s, there was little concern for the victims and, thus, no push from the media for justice.

In contrast, Holmes was caught for insurance fraud and the potential murder of Pitezel, a white male with a wife and children. When the media and surrounding community caught wind of this story they called for justice, which, in turn, pushed the police to look into Holmes’s background more extensively. Also, since the media covered the insurance fraud and Pitezel case so closely, and since it received attention in more than just Philadelphia, more people were aware of the case in other areas. These people came forward with statements about Holmes’s time in Chicago. Once details about the hotel that had been built in Chicago, missing women
during the World’s Fair, and the bodies of three of Pitezel’s children had been found, the media pushed even harder for justice. The media made sure that the police completed a proper investigation into Holmes’s insurance schemes, which led to his trial for the murder of Pitezel and his hanging on May 7, 1896.
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Reflection

This experience of writing an honors thesis pushed me as a student and helped me to gain more understanding of the field that I have chosen to study, as well as a greater respect for the work that goes into researching and writing a thesis. At the beginning of this process I assumed that it would be about the same amount of work as had gone into my history thesis for my major, but found out that it was not the case. I was stressed in the months leading up to declaring my specific topic because I was so interested in so many different parts of history that I felt it would be impossible to choose just one. However, through that stress I was able to realize that I could pick a topic that would lead me into law school with great ease, as well as be something that I was passionate enough about to spend months researching. I learned through this experience in choosing my topic that by picking one specific area of history, it did not mean that I was denying myself the ability to research other areas that interested me, but that I could continue to learn about other time periods, while taking the time to do research on a topic that was interesting and would be applicable to my life today.

Throughout the last year that I have worked on studying serial killers in 19th century America, I have spent much more time in the library looking at microfilms and combing through online archives for information that I had initially expected. Since the majority of my sources are not part of a digitized newspaper collection, I had to learn how to request a microfilm via inter-library loan and spent many hours looking through each reel. I also had to learn how to adapt as my thesis grew and changed with time. Initially I had planned on focusing the majority of my thesis on comparing American serial killers to Jack the Ripper in London. I wanted to look at how the presence of a serial killer in one country affected the discovery of others in a different country, but as I looked at my information my topic changed. I found myself looking
more at the media in the United States and noticed many differences between two particular cases; the Servant Girl Annihilator in Austin and H.H. Holmes in Chicago. After discussing how interested I was in the differences between amount of media coverage my advisor encouraged me to change my plan and go in a different direction. That experience showed me how fluid research is and revealed that there are going to be many instances where you set out to research one thing, but the information you find will guide you in a different direction and you just have to go with it.

This last year also has taught me how to work with a professor who was not an expert in the specific area of the field that I chose to research, as I worked with a history professor that did the majority of her research in Medieval Britain. Through this, the both of us were able to work together to work out alternatives and she taught me how to ask other professors that had different areas of expertise for assistance with different sections of my paper. I was able to find an English professor that had previously done work with a student on the folklore of serial killers and was able to use the assistance of both a History and an English expert in order to form a paper that was well rounded. It also gave me the ability to connect more with professors of other disciplines, as I asked for a little unofficial input on the psychological side from one of my psychology professors. In this situation and with this topic, I was able to combine my major and my minor together in a way that I feel really helped wrap up my senior year of college.

In all, this was an experience that I feel I was able to learn from and grow a lot as a student. I was faced with finding sources that did not seem to exist, but was able to reach out to other archives and ask questions that led me to the answers I needed. I also learned how to manage my time better and work around conflicting schedules with my mentors in order to make sure that I could get the feedback I needed. There was also a moment where I started to pull
back a little bit and was not as passionate about my research, but my faculty mentor was able to set me straight and say exactly what I needed to hear. Even though it was hard in the moment, I was able to realize later that her words were the push I needed to get over the hump and finish my thesis.

This has been much more of an impactful experience than I was honestly expecting in the beginning of the fall semester, but I have learned so much from it. I feel that it has helped prepare me for law school, especially in that I now have the tools I need to find documents that are extremely important but seem to be inaccessible. I have also learned how to better work one on one with my professors, which I feel will be a valuable tool as I continue on in life and need to work with law professors, future bosses, or even my peers. In addition, I have learned how to push myself further and find the things that I’m passionate about and pursue them. All of these things I will be able to take with me to law school and into my future career, which is why I think that this experience has been more than worth it. I have truly gotten back what I put into it.
Author Bio

Tatyanna Johnson is a senior at Utah State University who will be graduating in early Mary of 2017. She has been studying history with a minor in psychology and has been a member of the Honors Program since her sophomore year. During her college career, she has done independent research with several history professors in a range of topics. These research projects were focused on cults in Ancient Rome, the censorship of novels in the Soviet Union, comparisons of Incan and Ancient Greek religions, and preliminary work on her honors thesis. As a culmination of her collegiate career she completed two separate theses, one on the effects of violent crime on small town communities in the 20th century and the other on serial killers in 19th century America. Her first thesis on violent crime was presented during a conference for history majors to various history professors and peers. The thesis on serial killers was presented at the Student Research Symposium and was considered for Ignite USU. After graduation Tatyanna will be heading off to law school at the University of New Hampshire and hopes to complete a dual J.D. and M.A. program so that she can get her Masters in History in tandem with her law degree.