



## Facts, fantasies caught in tangled web

**S**ince 1983 the nation has seen a dramatic increase in the number of reported cases of child sex abuse. A crime once hushed up had come out into the open.

Along the way, new social therapy theories and criminal investigative methods were rushed into use. As the best-known child sex abuse cases became notorious as much for the way they were handled as for the accusations children made, evidence now shows a kind of mass hysteria swept the country. Hysteria led some authorities, urged on by frightened parents and credulous members of the press, into a witch-hunt unparalleled in modern times.

Four years after the first cases attracted national publicity, many of the investigations have produced more questions than answers. This series explores those questions and how a social system created to protect the nation's young also has done harm to innocent people and brought about controversial issues that obscure the truth about child sex abuse.

### Horror stories of ritual sex abuse casting a spell of fear, confusion

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**By Tom Charlier and Shirley Downing**  
Staff Reporters

**I**t became a national witch-hunt. Literally.

In August and September 1983, two mothers who lived 2,100 miles apart said their children had been sexually molested.

Within weeks, children in Jordan, Minn., and Manhattan Beach, Calif., began to tell stories of sex rituals, pornography and murder.

In Manhattan Beach, one of the mothers made a handwritten statement that said her son had seen one of his teachers fly, and that three of his abusers had "dressed up as witches."

The accusations mushroomed. Children in the two cities named hundreds of people — including one of the mothers — as child abusers.

Before the criminal investigations in

Jordan and Manhattan Beach were over, authorities would be unable to separate fact from fantasy. The guilt or innocence of the accused — and the extent to which children were abused — will never be known.

Similar cases would soon erupt throughout the United States and Canada. And with the same results.

Children in more than 100 cities from Fort Bragg, Calif., to Grenada, Miss., told stories about sex abuse — and about mutilated animals, cannibalism and visits to graveyards.

One child in the Georgian Hills Early Childhood Center in Memphis said he had seen defendant Frances Ballard dressed as a witch, and that she had "messed" with his stuffed dog. Mrs. Ballard was convicted Dec. 4 on one count of aggravated sexual battery for kissing a 4-year-old boy on his genitals.

Reporters for The Commercial Appeal spent months researching the cases that followed Jordan and Manhattan Beach and found a nationwide epidemic of hysteria.

The newspaper reviewed 36 investigations involving claims of "ritual

abuse." "Ritual abuse" describes child sex abuse involving a group of adults molesting children and in which threats are used to keep children from telling what happened. The setting has pornographic or occult overtones.

In the 36 cases, 91 people were arrested and charged with abusing children or endangering them.

Of the 79 defendants whose cases have been settled, 23 were convicted, most on lesser charges that had little to do with ritualism. Some of those convictions have been overturned.

A pattern emerged in Jordan and Manhattan Beach that later cases followed. These are the key elements:

■ Most cases evolved from a single incident involving one child, but investigations often triggered runaway inquiries that fed on publicity and parents' worst fears. Accusations were made against grandmothers, police officers, pastors, defense lawyers and even social services workers who investigated the complaints.

■ Children's stories were the foundation of the cases — and they were almost completely uncorroborated by physical evidence or adult testimony.

■ Allegations were spread from child to child and from city to city by the



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**"Justice Abused"** is about the apparent wrongful prosecution of people for crimes that may not have happened.

Since the series was published, more people have been convicted under the circumstances described here. More will be. The numbers mount.

Each conviction makes the work here more important.

The stories were difficult for the reporters because of the qualifying words that had to be used in the first paragraph of this preface: apparent, may.

We cannot know — do not pretend to know — the guilt or innocence of all those involved in these cases. We obviously suspect that most of the accused in most cases of ritual child sex abuse are innocent.

The fact is that innocence often cannot be proved. Even that defense misses the point: It is guilt that our system is supposed to prove.

We believe that the reader will agree that guilt was not proved in these cases.

Just as the reporters could not conclusively prove innocence, they could not expose and pillory individual villains. They found that injustices occurred for the best of reasons, with the best of intentions.

It is the intentions and reasons for these prosecutions that make the cases dangerous.

It is those intentions and reasons that make it important for us to say what this series is not about.

"Justice Abused" is not about the fact that child sex abuse does not exist. The crime does exist. It is a terrible crime for which the guilty should be punished to the fullest extent of the law.

"Justice Abused" is not about legal technicalities. It is about how the entire system went so far off the track as to make technicalities irrelevant — and the proof of either guilt or innocence impossible.

Finally, "Justice Abused" is not really about ritual child sex abuse at all. It is about the dangers of popular justice, a less-than-skeptical press and the presumption of guilt.

"Justice Abused" is about hysteria and witch-hunts.

It is about the dark side of our democratic system — a system that works only when the rights of all those who live in it are respected.

**Dan Henderson,**  
Assistant Managing Editor

By Colin Ruthven



## JUSTICE ABUSED

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From Page A1

## Stories

news media, parents, prosecutors, social services workers and consultants.

■ Even where prosecution was successful, debate continues as to the guilt of the accused. Some convictions have been overturned. Children in several widely publicized cases have recanted some of their claims of abuse. Sometimes, as in the Frances Ballard case, which grew out of the Georgian Hills investigation, the jury verdict has been mixed: Mrs. Ballard was convicted on one charge, but acquitted on 15 other charges.

■ There is evidence that the child protection system established to investigate abuse reports is seriously flawed and contributed to the spread of unfounded allegations. The system is geared toward finding abuse — but provides no safeguards for those wrongfully accused. There are few checks and balances on investigators.

**N**o one interviewed during months of research by The Commercial Appeal doubted that child sex abuse is a serious problem. While reports exceed 100,000 cases a year, most confirmed cases involve incest — sexual abuse among family members. In ritual abuse cases, most suspects are outside the family.

The sensational cases of the past four years have few of the earmarks of traditional sex abuse cases.

Kenneth Lanning, the FBI's expert on crimes against children, says little evidence has surfaced to indicate devil worshippers are abducting, molesting and killing children. If the stories told by children were true, he said, they would represent "the greatest crime conspiracy in the history of man."

Lanning seeks the middle ground in these cases. Just because a child tells about bizarre ritual activities that aren't proved doesn't mean molestation didn't occur. It also doesn't mean that it did.

The number of skeptics is growing. They fear this about the ritual abuse cases in Memphis; Chicago; Bakersfield; Bouse, Ariz.; and elsewhere: that much of what the children said was simply untrue. That many innocent people have been accused, and their lives ruined. That the truth in most cases has been forever obscured by a system gone awry in an effort to protect children. That children who were not molested will think that they were.

Others remain convinced of the existence of devil-worshipping child abuse cults.

"They are very organized, and they know what they are doing," said Beth Vargo, one of five parents who believe their children were molested at a Chicago day care center.

Sandi Gallant, an intelligence officer with the San Francisco Police Department who has worked with investigators across the country, remains convinced. "I don't believe it is large-scale," she said. "I do believe it is nationwide, however."

Another proponent is Dr. Roland Summit, a Los Angeles psychiatrist who has advised prosecutors and parents' groups nationally. He believes cultists are molesting preschool children. He concedes that the only evidence he's seen to back that theory is the emergence since 1984 of adults who say they survived ritual abuse as children.

Those "survivors" most often are women with the psychiatric disorder of multiple personality, he said.

**T**he number of those skeptical of ritual abuse is growing.

"No honest person can say there's any evidence that this (ritual abuse) is a widespread problem," said Douglas Besharov, former director of the National Center for the Prevention of Child Abuse.

"The crimes described by children and accepted by credulous adults as real did not happen," said Roxanna Sweet, a criminal justice professor at California State University, in a recent talk at the annual meeting of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences in St. Louis.

"The actions described have nothing to do with real crime," said Ms. Sweet, who has studied 27 ritual cases.

She believes "real trauma" — such as divorce or the birth of a sibling or events which may or may not have anything to do with sexual abuse — may underlie each case.

Lee Coleman, a Berkeley, Calif., psychiatrist and critic of the cases, believes well-meaning concern for children sometimes has done more harm than good.

"If you (the investigator) get a child to the point where they believe they've helped kill a baby or eaten flesh, I want to know whether you're a child abuser," he said.

The Commercial Appeal found that several elements made criminal charges possible in the ritual abuse cases. Laws had been changed to allow children as young as 3 to testify. New theories about child sex abuse were used as tools in the investigations. Social workers, unschooled in criminal investigation, used faulty interviewing techniques.

**I**t happened for a number of reasons. By 1983, the climate of the country in regard to child sex abuse had changed. The crime had come out of the closet. New theories about diagnosing and investigating abuse were being tested; social workers would be used as criminal investigators; courtroom rules regarding evidence had been loosened.

Childhood behavior that earlier generations might have dismissed with a

scolding or a shrug — bed-wetting, masturbation, nightmares, sexual talk — led to questioning by parents.

Alarmed by the nature of many children's stories, some parents panicked. They demanded action from investigators even when evidence was sparse.

The news media contributed to the hysteria.

It was a big news story.

By late 1987, thousands of adults had been implicated in the alleged sexual abuse of children, ages 2 to 6, in homes, day care centers, preschools and summer camps.

In city after city, social workers, police and prosecutors launched massive investigations. At McMartin, the investigation was estimated to have cost more than \$6 million. Investigations spread to 64 day care centers.

In Memphis, about 20 police officers and social workers teamed to investigate allegations of ritual abuse at four day care centers and three schools. Five prosecutors worked on the case.

Authorities questioned children over and over — up to 35 times — and as they did, the stories grew increasingly bizarre. Authorities experimented with new techniques, such as anatomically correct dolls and puppets, to encourage the children to tell more.

As children around the country responded to the questioning, they told variations of stories first heard in Jordan or Manhattan Beach, or both:

■ Children in Bakersfield; Grenada, Miss.; Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates and Sacramento, Calif.; Memphis; Niles, Mich.; and Sequim, Wash., also said they were taken to funeral homes or graveyards.

■ Children in Carson City, Nev.; Chicago; Clarksville, Md.; El Paso; Fort Bragg, Calif.; Grenada; Malden, Mass.; Miami; Niles; Rolling Hills Estates; Sequim; and Torrance also said their abusers sacrificed or tortured animals such as hamsters, horses, pigs, cows, squirrels, possums and birds.

■ Children in Bakersfield, Chicago, Clarksville, Fort Bragg, Memphis, Niles, Rolling Hills Estates, Sacramento, Sequim, Torrance, and White Plains, N.Y., also said they were abused in basements, secret tunnels or cages.

■ Children in Bakersfield; Carson City; Chicago; Grenada; Malden; Memphis; Niles; Roseburg, Ore.; Richmond, Va.; and Sacramento also told of slayings ranging from the boiling death of an infant to the shooting deaths of adults. Youngsters in Bakersfield, Chicago, Grenada, Rolling Hills Estates, Sacramento and Torrance said they had to take part in cannibalism.

**T**he growth of such stories followed a pattern that began this way:

Judy Johnson, a housewife with a history of mental illness, claimed a teacher sexually assaulted her 2½-year-old son at McMartin Preschool in Manhattan Beach. That was August 1983.

Christine Brown, a former topless dancer, accused trash collector James Rud of molesting her daughter in a trailer park in Jordan. She went to the police in September 1983.

In Manhattan Beach, Mrs. Johnson pressured authorities into pursuing her lone complaint against Ray Buckley, a teacher at the McMartin preschool and the grandson of the school's founder.

Mrs. Johnson, described by former co-prosecutor Glenn E. Stevens as "paranoid," said her son described airplane flights, sex rituals in churches and animal sacrifice.

In Jordan, Mrs. Brown's complaint against Rud resulted in the eventual arrest and jailing of 24 people. Mrs. Brown became one of them.

Questioned repeatedly by authorities, 60 children in Jordan said they were sexually abused. Many told stories of sex parties with adults who stabbed,

shot and mutilated children and then threw them into a river.

In both cases, authorities said children had told of being abused by dozens of people during satanic rituals or pornographic photo sessions.

As with the cases in Jordan and Manhattan Beach, allegations of ritual abuse elsewhere usually followed a single report of molestation.

In Honolulu, a woman asked her 3-year-old daughter about bumps on her arms that the girl initially said were mosquito bites. Further questioning produced allegations that the girl and other children were abducted from their preschool by two men who took them to a nearby home where the children were burned, slapped, sexually abused and photographed nude before being returned to the school the same day.

One man was charged, but acquitted.

In Sequim, a woman noticed a redness in the vaginal area of her 2-year-old granddaughter. Her suspicions triggered an investigation that produced charges against a day care operator and the operator's son, who were alleged to have committed acts of abuse that included the slaughter of a pig and the gouging of children's eyes.

The charges were dropped in February 1987, 10 months after the initial complaint.

**I**n Carson City, Nev., a 5-year-old girl watching bathing suit-clad models being photographed on television asked her mother if it was proper to take such pictures. The girl's ensuing comments led to an investigation of a babysitter and the babysitter's nephew, who were alleged to have made children drink the blood and urine of animals and whose yard was excavated by authorities.

The trial is under way.

**"During the course of this investigation, virtually every name that was ever mentioned became a suspect. It was reminiscent of the Salem witch trials. . ."**

**BECKY MASON**  
Social worker,  
Georgian Hills case

**B**izarre as most of the stories were, social services workers, police and prosecutors — pressured by parents and the media — went to great lengths to prove them.

In the McMartin case, the district attorney's office hired an archeological firm to conduct a costly excavation of the empty, weed-strewn lot next door to the preschool, searching for evidence.

In Sequim, authorities scoured barns and homes, looking for evidence of satanic activity. In Spencer Township, Ohio, law enforcement officers and the news media descended on a rural wooded area looking for burial sites.

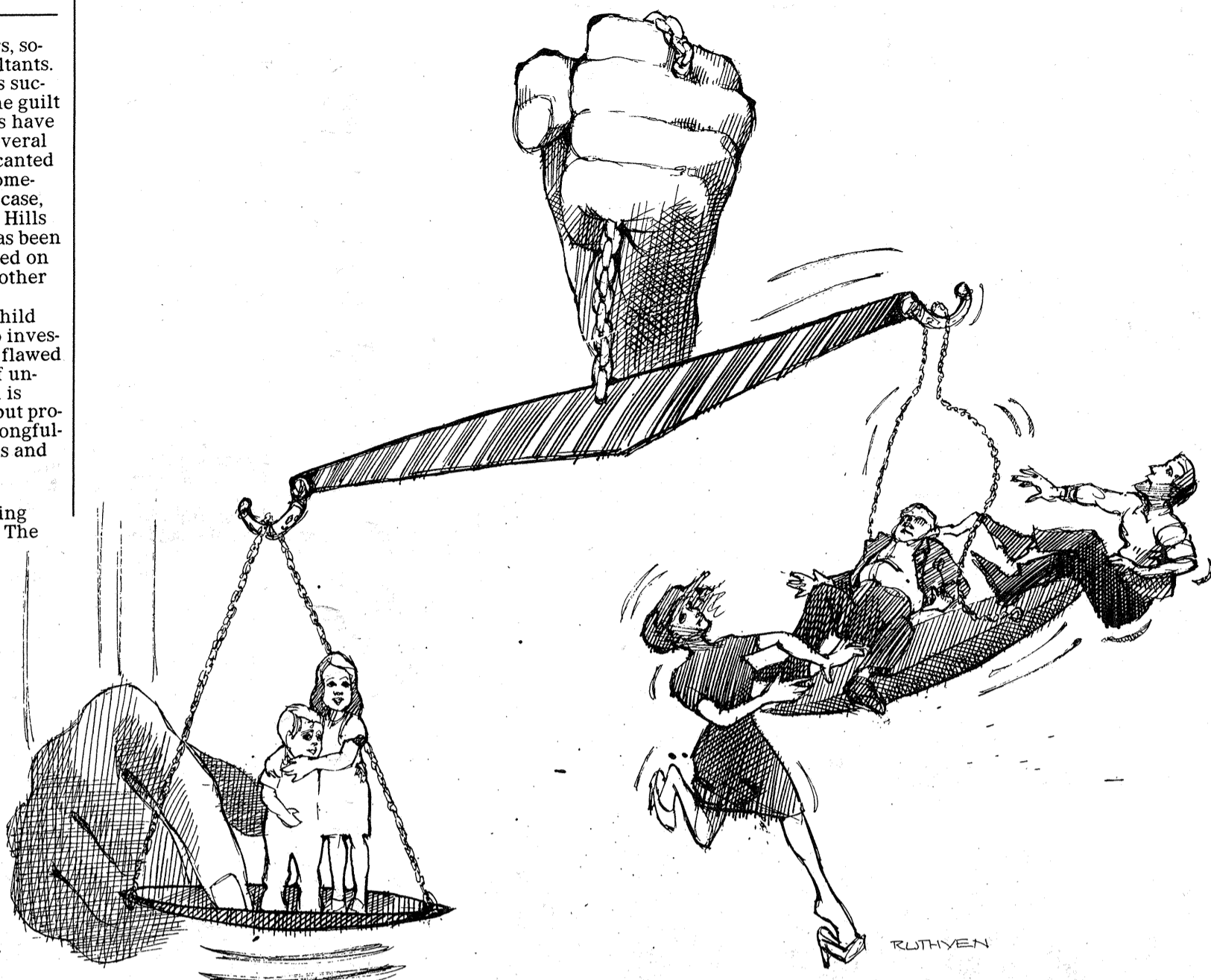
In Bouse, Ariz., and Bakersfield and Atascadero, Calif., authorities dug up back yards, fields and canyons in search of bodies.

In Chicago and Niles, Mich., they dug in crawl spaces and basements, searching for evidence.

In Memphis, a policeman accompanied by a 4-year-old and a day care worker tried to dig up part of the school yard looking for the burial site of a Smurf doll.

All authorities found were chicken bones, beer cans and old campsites. The stories remain virtually unsubstantiated by physical evidence.

Children in several cases have since recanted. In Sacramento, six children told uncorroborated and conflicting stories of sex abuse and pornographic



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movies that involved the killing of three children on camera. The stories put five men in jail in January 1985. Children later admitted to a judge they had fabricated the stories at the insistence of their grandmother, described by the judge as severely mentally ill. The men were released, but four had spent three months in jail.

**A** team of state and FBI investigators reviewed the Jordan case. They found that children there said they had made up stories of murders.

The team found other problems with the investigation and concluded it was so flawed that the truth could not be determined — that guilty people may have gone free and innocent people may have been falsely accused.

In Manhattan Beach, charges against five of the seven defendants were dismissed in 1986 for lack of evidence. Trials are under way for the remaining two defendants.

In a half-dozen other cases, courts and state and federal investigators have reached conclusions similar to those the FBI reached in Minnesota.

Critics liken the investigations of the last four years to the Salem witch trials of the 17th Century, when more than 30 people were convicted of witchcraft, some after torture. Nineteen people were hanged.

Children in Salem accused adults of satanic activities. Prosecutors encouraged belief in the tales that the children told and pressured them to add to the list of those accused.

Court records show that, in the ritual abuse cases of the past four years, children have also been manipulated into making such allegations.

As in the trials in Salem, people who came to the defense of the accused often found themselves accused.

In Jordan, policeman Greg Myers, who vouched for the character of the accused, soon was charged with the same crimes against children.

In Chicago, two women who expressed support for the accused later found their names had emerged on parents' lists as suspected child molesters.

Some cases went so far afield that accusations doubled back like a boomerang: In Bakersfield, repeated and tiresome questioning of children by authorities resulted in youngsters accusing a social worker, sheriff's deputy and prosecutor of sex crimes.

"People were falsely accused in Bakersfield," said Cori Taylor, a social worker who helped investigate claims of sex and Satan worshiping in Kern County. "I was falsely accused." She said her former co-workers took the accusations seriously and investigated her. "They still think they were right."

Glenn E. Stevens, a co-prosecutor in the McMartin case for more than two years, said parents in Manhattan Beach don't or can't believe "that all of this is a hoax. They can't believe all of this is Salem revisited, so what they are doing is rationalizing their own ignorance."

Memphis social worker Becky Mason's doubts grew when she compared investigative methods in the Georgian Hills case with those that led to the ruin of the case in Jordan. She realized the techniques — and the problems — were the same. She has since left her state job and was granted court protection against retaliation because of her testimony for the defense.

"During the course of this investigation, virtually every name that was ever mentioned became a suspect," she said. "It was reminiscent of the Salem witch trials or the McCarthy hearings of the 1950s."

Arthur Lyons, a Palm Springs, Calif., writer who has researched satanism for nearly two decades, said, "There seems to be a need to believe all this — it seems to be Salem all over again."

**Today:** The witch-hunt  
**Tomorrow:** Battling the devil

**"If you (the investigator) get a child to the point where they believe they've helped kill a baby or eaten flesh, I want to know whether you're a child abuser."**

**LEE COLEMAN**  
Psychiatrist,  
Berkeley, Calif.

Part 1 of 6  
**The Problem**

# Patterns emerge across nation

**S**ince late 1983, more than 100 communities across the United States have been witness to investigations of ritual abuse — cities and towns of all sizes and involving people of widely diverse backgrounds. Here is a summary of 36 such cases reviewed by The Commercial Appeal.

## AUGUST 1983

■ Manhattan Beach, Calif. — A woman told the police her son had been abused by his teacher at McMartin Preschool. Seven people were indicted in what authorities called the largest child molestation ring in the country. Children told about airplane flights, teachers dressed as witches, nude photography and trips. Charges were dropped against five defendants; trials for the other two are under way.

## SEPTEMBER 1983

■ Jordan, Minn. — Garbage collector James Rud was arrested and charged with the sexual assault of three children, launching an investigation that grew to include the arrests of 24 adults. Five children formed the basis for the charges. As they were repeatedly interviewed, their stories grew increasingly bizarre and included reports about the murder of children. Rud pleaded guilty to sex charges. Robert and Lois Bentz were acquitted a year later. Scott County Prosecutor Kathleen Morris dismissed charges against the remaining 21 defendants. A state-federal investigation concluded the Morris investigation had been flawed.

## OCTOBER 1983

■ San Geronimo, Calif. (suburb of San Francisco) — Stories surfaced at Meadow Way Day Care Center involving owner John McDowell, who said a rival day care center was the source of the accusation. Charges of oral copulation, sodomy, and lewd and lascivious behavior involved a 5-year-old girl and an 8-year-old boy who told about nude photo sessions and a pretend wedding. In April 1985, two child witnesses withdrew from the case. The charges were dropped by the state.

■ Bouse, Ariz. — Children in foster care in Omaha, Neb., told of children being kidnapped from shopping malls, drugged, abused and sacrificed by their natural parents and other adults in rituals dating to 1980 and 1981 in southwestern Arizona. Authorities, guided by photos on which the children had drawn Xs, excavated the area for remains, but could not substantiate accounts. A father was convicted of incest with a teenage daughter.

## MARCH 1984

■ Honolulu, Hawaii — Authorities investigated allegations that two girls, aged 3 and 4, were abducted from a preschool by two men, taken to a nearby home, and raped, burned, slapped and photographed nude before being returned to the school the same day. One man was charged but later acquitted.

## APRIL 1984

■ Pico Rivera, Calif. — Deputies arrested two men and two women on kidnapping and conspiracy charges, based on accusations of children who made continuing detailed claims of satanic rituals and child sacrifice. A judge dismissed the case against the four suspects a year later, saying the two boys who made the charges had lied.

■ Chicago — Deloartic Parks was charged with the sexual assault of preschoolers at Rogers Park Day Care Center, where he was a janitor. Children soon began to accuse teachers of abusing them in satanic rituals. No teachers were arrested. Parks was acquitted. The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services concluded most of 246 allegations against other staff members were unfounded. In February 1986, prosecutors dropped remaining charges.

## MAY 1984

■ Reno, Nev. — The owner of a Montessori day school babysitting service and two workers were indicted on 69 charges of sexual assault and lewdness and mental harm to 26 children. Several children talked of chanting, singing and "naked movie star" games. Charges were dismissed against one defendant after a judge ruled that children had been subjected to leading questioning. Trial is pending against two others.

## JUNE 1984

■ Spencer Township, Ohio — Sheriff James Telb and his deputies dug up a swamp in a wooded area, searching for the graves of 50 to 60 people allegedly slain in satanic rites. Despite days of digging, no bodies were found. There were no arrests.

■ Memphis — Georgian Hills Early Childhood Center teacher's aide Frances Ballard was charged with the sexual assault of 19 children. The next May, a Baptist minister and two day care workers were charged with similar crimes involving 26 children. Children told about airplane flights, satanic rituals, pornography, the slaying of animals and threats. Mrs. Ballard was convicted on one count of sexual battery, and acquitted on 15 others. Charges are pending against the remaining defendants. Investigations were later launched at two other Memphis day care centers, one of which served former Georgian Hills children. No arrests were made.

■ Sacramento, Calif. — Gary A. Dill, 34, and four other men were accused of sexually assaulting Dill's children, who told about orgies, cannibalism and the making of "snuff" films. Charges were dropped when Municipal Court Judge Ronald Robie said there was no credible evidence against the men, and that the

children had been contaminated by the "inhumane" interrogation techniques of their "severely mentally ill" grandmother. Two girls testified they made up stories on their grandmother's orders.

■ Bakersfield, Calif. — The first of seven defendants in the "Gonzalez-Thomas-Nokes ring" were arrested and charged with child sexual abuse. Children talked of satanic ceremonies, including the slaying of 29 infants. There were 88 suspects, including a prosecutor, a social worker, a deputy sheriff and a mortician; authorities removed 21 children from the homes of charged and uncharged suspects and put them into protective custody. No evidence of ritual crimes was found, and the allegedly slain children were found to be alive. Leroy Stowe was convicted and received a 30-year sentence, which was overturned. Two defendants pleaded guilty to lesser charges in exchange for dismissal of more than 300 counts against four other defendants.

■ Cincinnati — In an investigation that began after a girl mentioned the word "penis" at the family dinner table, three girls, ages 4 to 6, said counselors at the Isaac M. Wise Temple summer day camp made a nude video and sexually abused them. The camp director, a teacher and a camp counselor were charged with rape. Another counselor was charged with giving and showing pornographic material to children. One of the alleged victims later admitted she'd lied about a movie. Charges were dropped against a female defendant. The three men were acquitted.

## JULY 1984

■ West Point, N.Y. — An investigation of the Army's day care program began after a girl returned home bleeding in her vaginal area. During the next year, allegations grew to include several children, animal sacrifices, pornography and rituals involving people wearing bloody Dracula-type masks. An investigation concluded there were indications of abuse but insufficient evidence to prosecute.

■ Essex County, N.J. — Allegations of abuse developed against a summer camp counselor stemming from a bath that a girl received at camp. The counselor was accused of fondling nine 3- and 4-year-olds and of sexually abusing them with sticks and other objects. He was acquitted.

## SUMMER 1984

■ Los Angeles County — After a four-month trial, a 17-year-old teacher's assistant at the Manhattan Ranch Preschool was released when a jury deadlocked on 11 counts of child molestation. Pretrial testimony centered on children's reports of underground passages and a haunted house, but contradictory children's testimony was the main reason for the impasse.

## AUGUST 1984

■ Miami — Preschool children at the Country Walk Babysitting Service told about abuse and threats they allegedly were subjected to while attending Country Walk. Frank Fuster, previously convicted of killing a man in a dispute and of molesting a 9-year-old girl, was charged with 14 counts of sexual battery, lewd assault and aggravated assault on children aged 1 to 3 years. Allegations included pornography, the drinking of urine, eating of feces and sexual acts during such common preschool games as duck, duck goose and Simon Says. Fuster, said to have killed birds to terrify children into silence, was convicted of 14 abuse charges and sentenced to 165 years in prison. His wife, Iliana, 17, pleaded guilty to 12 sex abuse charges.

■ Niles, Mich. — A woman said her daughter had been molested by Richard Barkman, whose wife operated Small World Pre-School, located in a yellow building directly across the street from the police station. Barkman, who said he had previously reported possible neglect of the child to authorities, was arrested in October 1984 on charges involving nine

children. The children said they were sexually assaulted in the school basement, photographed in the boys' bathroom while naked, driven to photography sessions in barns and made to watch as Barkman snapped off the head of a chicken. Barkman, who passed a polygraph test, was convicted and sentenced to 75 years in prison. Charges were dismissed against Mrs. Barkman, who had been cited for failure to report possible child abuse. The case is on appeal.

## SEPTEMBER 1984

■ Malden, Mass. — Family members became concerned about a child's inability to urinate one night and questioned him. In an investigation afterward, a woman, her son and her daughter were arrested on child rape charges at the Fells Acre Day School. Allegations included a story from at least one child of killings and animal sacrifices. The son, Gerald "Tooky" Amirault, was accused of dressing as a clown and abusing children in a "magic room." All three defendants were convicted; the son was sentenced to 30-40 years, and the mother and daughter received terms of eight to 20 years. The cases are under appeal.

■ Indianapolis — Authorities investigating the alleged sexual abuse of a 4-year-old checked reports that children from the boy's preschool were loaded into vans and taken to a barn outside town. There, the children reported, they saw an airplane and could look through windows and see people wearing robes and carrying candles. No charges were filed. "There was physical evidence of abuse (of the one boy) but no evidence of who did it," Police Lt. Tom Rodgers said.

## OCTOBER 1984

■ Los Angeles County — Allegations of satanic ritual abuse, similar to those in the McMartin case, involved 63 other day care centers. A sheriff's task force and state social services department investigated cases, and closed down some preschools, but filed no criminal charges. Investigations centered on facilities in several communities, including Torrance, Whittier, Placentia, Covina and Lomita. Late last year, insurers of one school reached a \$1 million out-of-court settlement with families who alleged their children had been abused.

■ Atherton, Calif. — A high school honor student accused her stepfather and 10 other adults of sexual abuse. The girl said she witnessed blood-drinking, animal mutilations and human sacrifice. A dead cat was found in the girl's locker, the police said. There was insufficient evidence to prosecute, Asst. Dist. Atty. Elaine Tipton said.

## FALL 1984

■ Richmond, Va. — Two children believed to have been sexually abused by family members began telling of rituals they allegedly took part in nearly a year earlier. They said they had been forced to witness the slaying of a child, a friend of theirs whose decomposed body had been discovered in woods. Children told of adults wearing red robes and said they had to eat parts of the girl's body. The police found burn rings — similar to those left by candles — on the floor of the apartment where the acts were said to have occurred. But the police couldn't tell whether children were telling the truth or fantasizing. No charges have been filed in the girl's slaying.

## JANUARY 1985

■ Fort Bragg, Calif. — Authorities conducted a nearly yearlong investigation of Jubilation Day Care Center, where two teachers, sisters from Illinois, were suspected of molesting more than a dozen children, some as young as 2. Children said the women cut them with long, jeweled knives and sucked their blood, sacrificed an infant and animals, and photographed them. Authorities brought no criminal charges, citing a lack of physical evidence.

■ Clarksville, Md. — Preschool owner

Sandra Craig and her 16-year-old son were accused by a dozen children of sex crimes, including assaults with a screwdriver, nude photography and beatings with a stick. One child said Mrs. Craig killed a rabbit by hitting it on the head with a hammer; another child said she twirled a possum until it became dizzy. Mrs. Craig was convicted of felony child abuse and sentenced to 10 years in prison. She was released pending an appeal. Her son was acquitted.

## FEBRUARY 1985

■ New Braintree, Mass. — After an anonymous complaint, state child-protection workers investigated operators of a day care center, who were alleged to have defecated on children as young as 2 years old and to have photographed them nude. After a hearing on the state's suspension of the operators' licenses, a magistrate ruled that no abuse occurred and suggested investigators lacked objectivity. No charges were filed.

## MARCH 1985

■ Wilkes-Barre, Pa. (Luzerne County) — Two children at a rural church school said adults forced them to have sex with animals, including oral sex with a goat. They said they were forced to eat the raw heart of a dismembered deer. Authorities said they believed more children may have been involved, but had insufficient evidence to prosecute.

■ White Plains, N.Y. — Unlicensed day care operator Jeannette Martin and three employees were accused in May 1985 of molesting children in acts of sodomy and urination and fondling in the school basement. Defense lawyers said the children were contaminated in the manner of questioning, and that children, who initially denied abuse, told "bizarre" stories after repeated interviews. Eighteen children testified during an 11-month trial; one man was convicted on felony charges and got a 25- to 50-year prison sentence. A woman was convicted of a misdemeanor in April 1986.

## JUNE 1985

■ El Paso, Texas — Police and social workers began an investigation after parents questioned their 3½-year-old daughter about a word she had used. Several employees of East Valley YMCA Day Care Center were investigated; two were indicted that fall: teachers Gayle Stickler Dove and Michelle "Mickey" Noble. Nine children talked about monsters, being kissed and fondled, and having pennies put in their "pee-pees." Ms. Noble was convicted in March 1986 and sentenced to life plus 311 years in prison. Her conviction has been overturned. Ms. Dove was convicted separately in March 1987 and sentenced to 20 years in prison. Her conviction is on appeal.

## SEPTEMBER 1985

■ Carson City, Nev. — An investigation was spawned by a 5-year-old's comment while watching television. Martha Helen Felix, who ran a babysitting service, and her nephew, Felix "Paco" Ontiveres, who lived in the home, faced trial on 25 counts of felony child abuse involving 14 children. Children told of the murders of adults, animal killings, drinking blood and other rituals. The police discovered a photograph of mummified children — which Ontiveres said was taken at a museum in his native Mexico. No evidence of murders or animal killings was found. The trial is under way, and expected to last until mid-January.

■ Coos Bay, Ore. — State Children's Services Division suspended the license of the Kiddie Kastle day care center amid charges of sexual abuse. Girls at the center accused operator Dan Loudonbeck of fondling them, and a boy alleged that two female employees molested him, burned his feet with matches, placed his penis on stove burners and threatened to break one of his arms if he told. Operators claimed allegations arose from a disgruntled former employee and another woman planning to open a rival day care center. No criminal charges were filed, but in an administrative hearing on the license suspension, hearing officer Mary Wagner ruled that Loudonbeck committed acts of abuse. Loudonbeck is appealing on the grounds that he passed a polygraph test — evidence that the state admits into administrative hearings.

## NOVEMBER 1985

■ Maplewood, N.J. — Margaret Kelly Michaels, 24, was indicted on 235 counts of molesting 31 children, all under age 6, at the Wee Care Day Care Center in this suburb of Newark. She was accused of what an Essex County prosecutor called "repulsively bizarre acts": assaulting children with tableware and tampons and of playing the piano nude, licking peanut butter and jelly off their bodies and making threats. Her trial is under way.

## APRIL 1986

■ Sequim, Wash. — A woman noticed vaginal redness in her granddaughter. A preschool owner and her son were charged with three counts of indecent liberties involving five children, who said they had been assaulted by adults who wore hooded robes and wielded sticks, and that they had been taken to graveyards and witnessed animal sacrifice. Charges were dropped a year later for insufficient evidence.

## DECEMBER 1987

■ Roseburg, Ore. — Trial began in the case of Ed Gallup and his son Chip, accused of sexually abusing children at their religious schools. Allegations, which stemmed from a parent's discovery of two boys playing sexually at home, included satanic rituals and the shooting of people who were brought back to life.



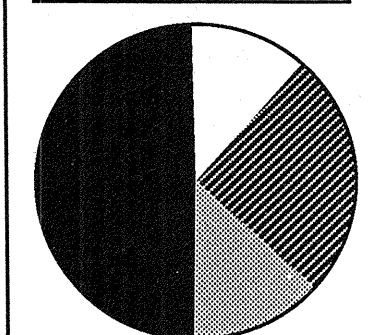
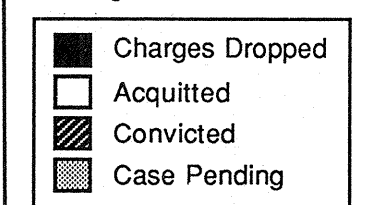
## JUSTICE ABUSED

A 1980s WITCH - HUNT

These are the known outcomes of criminal proceedings against individuals in the 36 cases described at left:

**CHARGED . . . 91**  
**DISMISSED . . . 45**  
**ACQUITTED . . . 11**  
**CONVICTED . . . 23**  
**PENDING . . . 12**

They were compiled by The Commercial Appeal from interviews, court records and reviews of news accounts from the cities where they occurred. The figures are subject to change as some of the investigations continue.



## RITUAL ABUSE INVESTIGATIONS in the U.S.

Since 1983, allegations of "ritual abuse" have been investigated in more than 100 communities across the nation. Ritual abuse is the term that has been coined to describe child molestation taking place on a large scale and involving rituals, overtones of satanism or pornography and threats to children. Reporters for The Commercial Appeal studied 36 cases in more than 30 communities — listed here chronologically — and found that, despite huge expenditures of time and money, investigators have turned up little evidence to support fears of widespread ritual abuse in the United States.

1. Manhattan Beach, Calif.
2. Jordan, Minn.
3. San Geronimo, Calif.
4. Bouse, Ariz.
5. Honolulu
6. Pico Rivera, Calif.
7. Chicago
8. Reno, Nev.
9. Spencer Township, Ohio
10. Memphis
11. Sacramento, Calif.
12. Bakersfield, Calif.
13. Cincinnati
14. West Point, N.Y.
15. Memphis
16. Essex County, N.J.
17. Los Angeles County
18. Miami
19. Niles, Mich.
20. Malden, Mass.
21. Indianapolis
22. Los Angeles County
23. Atherton, Calif.
24. Richmond, Va.
25. Memphis
26. Fort Bragg, Calif.
27. Clarksville, Md.
28. New Braintree, Mass.
29. Wilkes-Barre, Pa.
30. White Plains, N.Y.
31. El Paso, Texas
32. Carson City, Nev.
33. Coos Bay, Ore.
34. Maplewood, N.J.
35. Sequim, Wash.
36. Roseburg, Ore.

By Deborah D. Young



## JUSTICE ABUSED

A  
1980s  
WITCH - HUNT

Ex-prosecutor says hysteria has high price

# Pioneer case at McMartin called hoax

*"It got so bizarre at one point that one kid said they would go to school, do the flag salute, and then they would get loaded in the buses and go to a cemetery. The kids would carry shovels and pickaxes.*

*"The kids would remove a headstone from a grave. . . . They would dig six feet down and then, using ropes and pulleys, pull up the coffin and open the top of the coffin. . . ."*

*"... Ray Buckley would then take an arm out of a body, cut it with a knife and watch the body bleed and say, 'This will happen to you and your parents if you ever tell what happened at the school.'*

*"He then would put the arm back in the coffin. They would bury it again, put the grass and headstone back. Then they went to a house nearby. At the house they took showers, their clothes and shoes were washed and sun dried. They got dressed after watching a little television and were returned to the school and in time for their parents to pick them up at noon. And not a parent ever knew.*

*"This was testimony under oath, and on the stand. Now I ask, nobody in their right mind would believe that story. Nobody. But we will gladly accept the fact that the child was molested.*

*"Where do you draw the line?"*

—Glenn E. Stevens  
former co-prosecutor

By Shirley Downing  
Staff Reporter

**M**ANHATTAN BEACH, Calif. — Paint peels from the dinosaur slide on the playground. Weeds nudge the "For Sale" sign on a chain-link fence bordering a white stucco building that stands vacant and in disrepair.

That is all that remains of the McMartin Preschool, closed in February 1984 amid charges that it once sheltered the country's largest ring of child molesters.

In March 1984, the school's founder and six teachers were indicted on charges of sexually assaulting 100 children.

From this four-room school, fear fanned across the country. Similar cases soon surfaced in day care centers from coast to coast.

Children in cities as distant as Memphis, Miami, Newark and Chicago began talking about the sort of incidents first mentioned in McMartin: airplane flights, trips to cemeteries, infant sacrifice, candlelit ceremonies and teachers who dressed as witches.

Charges against five McMartin defendants have been dropped since Judy Johnson made the first accusation in

August 1983. The trial of two remaining defendants began last summer. Thirteen children are scheduled to testify.

McMartin was also the first case in which a prosecutor jumped ship and publicly denounced the case as a fraud. The questions he raises have been raised about succeeding investigations.

**G**lenn E. Stevens, co-prosecutor on the case for more than two years, says McMartin is a massive media hoax, "a complete and utter waste of money. They are throwing \$6 million down the toilet in McMartin. 'Unprofessional' only begins to scratch the surface."

The stories of satanism told by children are "hogwash," he says. "Unquestionably, children were led into giving statements of that nature."

Stevens says the McMartin case was built on the rantings of Mrs. Johnson, pushed by panicked parents and zealous reporters, rushed to indictments by a district attorney seeking re-election, and botched by incompetent investigators and therapists. He believes the accused are legally innocent — meaning there isn't enough evidence to convict anyone.

Stevens quit the district attorney's office in early 1986, and has since sold book and movie rights for his story. Defense lawyers say they are glad Stevens is speaking out, but wish he'd done so earlier — and not for money.

Parents in this beachside community five miles south of Los Angeles International Airport are saddened by Stevens' actions. Marymae Cioffi calls Stevens a "traitor" with a vested interest in seeing the case fail.

She, like other parents, wonders why Stevens stayed with the case for two years if he found so many problems. Mrs. Cioffi and other parents pray the case survives. They drive through clogged freeways each day to get to the downtown courtroom to hear prosecutor Lael Rubin argue in behalf of chil-

dren whose once-shocking stories no longer seem startling.

"I believe strongly in this case," says Mrs. Rubin. "I believe horrible things happened to children at McMartin."

**P**arents sit for hours and listen to legal arguments that have become laborious with repetition. During breaks, they gather in the wide, dim hallway and chat with friends.

They avoid contact with matronly, silver-haired defendant Peggy McMartin Buckley — she and her son, Raymond, are on trial — who often spends her lunch break on a hallway bench, talking with her lawyers, nibbling carrot and celery sticks or eating a sandwich.

Mrs. Buckley has been out of jail on bond for almost two years, but Raymond Buckley has been locked up for almost four years. Several weeks ago, his bond was set at \$3 million. He remains in jail.

Parents are angry and bitter. "It was fondling, oral sex, rape and sodomy. That was what was going on," says Robert Currie, 53, who has spent much of the past four years investigating and discussing the case with anyone who will listen.

Currie, a former mortgage banker and television executive whose three sons were students at McMartin between 1972 and 1981, has offered rewards for pornographic photographs of McMartin children. He has conducted surveillance of houses and businesses. He has taken children to funeral parlors and churches to see if they recognized the places.

Currie has talked to most of the McMartin children and their parents. He is involved with a private, nonprofit support and lobbying group for parents.

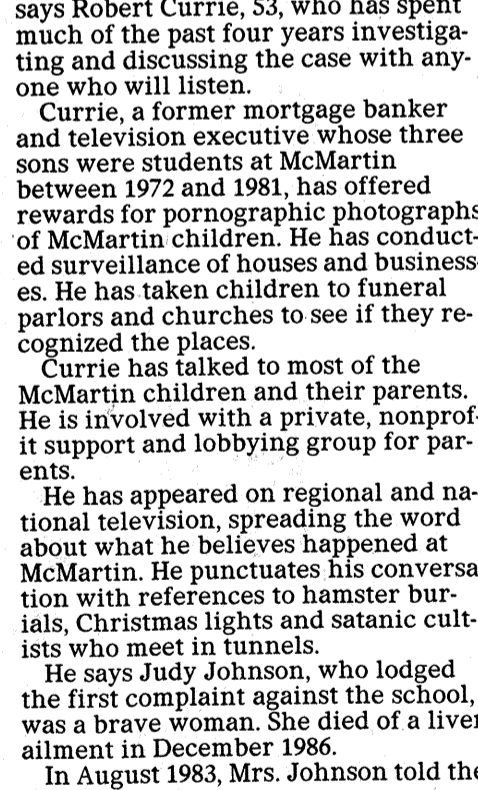
He has appeared on regional and national television, spreading the word about what he believes happened at McMartin. He punctuates his conversation with references to hamster burials, Christmas lights and satanic cultists who meet in tunnels.

He says Judy Johnson, who lodged the first complaint against the school, was a brave woman. She died of a liver ailment in December 1986.

In August 1983, Mrs. Johnson told the



Peggy McMartin Buckley



Shirley Downing and Tom Charlier

Ms. Downing and Charlier found that despite more than 100 investigations of ritual abuse since 1983, the convictions that resulted had little to do with the bizarre stories that surrounded the cases. Today, they explain why some authorities now doubt there is such a thing as widespread ritual abuse — and why some call the investigations a re-

peat of the Salem witch trials. Also today, the reporters talk to one of the original prosecutors in the McMartin Preschool case in Manhattan Beach, Calif. That case was one of the first cases involving allegations of ritual abuse to draw national attention.

The prosecutor explains why he now believes the case to be a fraud and a hoax, despite the fact that a court has yet to rule on two of the defendants.

The reporters present summaries of 36 cases they have reviewed that show the nature of allegations in ritual abuse cases and how the criminal justice system has disposed of the cases.

Why and how the witch-hunts took place is complicated. In the days that follow, Shirley Downing and Tom Charlier will examine various pieces of the puzzle and show how a number of influences combined to bias the investigations.

They show:

■ How a social services system designed to protect children from sex abuse became a machine for promoting

## Allegations of odd rites compelled closer look

Fevered fears cause epidemic of charges

**W**hy did it all happen? Why have thousands of people in the last four years been investigated on allegations of sexually abusing children during satanic or pornographic rituals?

How did a national initiative to protect children from abuse turn investigations into witch-hunts in dozens of cities? Reporters Shirley Downing and Tom Charlier have looked for answers as they traveled the country during the past five months.

They examined 36 of the more than 100 cases in which people — including pastors and policemen — have been accused of ritual abuse.

Ritual abuse is sexual abuse in which a number of adults band to molest children. The adults involved in such cases supposedly use terror to keep their victims from talking about either the satanic rituals or the pornographic acts that they force the children to engage in.

By Colin Ruthven



# JUSTICE ABUSED

A 1980s WITCH - HUNT

and using puppets and play-acting techniques, she elicited accounts of satanic rites, pornography and animal killings.

Videotapes of those sessions were taken to a grand jury, which indicted Buckey, his grandmother, his mother, his sister and three other teachers.

Ms. McFarlane testified before Congress that she suspected a wide-ranging network of "child predators" who were operating day care centers as a cover for child pornography.

Meanwhile, Stevens was assigned to the McMartin case shortly after indictments were returned. He learned no evidence had been found to support the children's stories.

Search warrants were issued for the school, a supermarket, a photography studio and private homes. Authorities dug up a lot adjacent to the school. They had the floors of the school ripped up, searching for tunnels, or the remains of animals. No evidence was found.

In the next two years, Stevens gained a firsthand view of the case. He says Mrs. Johnson was paranoid and lived in an "armed camp" at home. According to records, the Johnson boy said, "Daddy poked me with a stick," and "Ray flew

through the air." The boy told about going to a church where he saw witches and goats and a baby being killed.

He talked about flying on a plane and riding in vans. The boy said he was molested by a teacher named Miss Betty who was dressed as a witch. He talked about ceremonies in a church lit with candles, where his hair was cut and "Old Grandma played the piano."

Stevens learned that the Johnson child had not actually told the police anything. Mrs. Johnson did all the talking. Still, Mrs. Johnson's accusations were passed on to CII.

Stevens also learned that Ms. McFarlane was dating Wayne Satz, a reporter for KABC television station, an ABC affiliate, in Los Angeles. Satz broke the first story about the McMartin case before the investigation had been completed, Stevens says.

Satz "probably did as much as anyone to blow hot wind over the brushfire," he says.

Stevens later questioned Ms. McFarlane's professional credentials. She was considered a nationally known expert

on child sexual abuse. She had a master's degree in social work, had written books and was a frequent speaker at seminars.

"She enjoyed having herself held out as a child therapist and an expert when in fact she doesn't have a license other than a driver's license," Stevens says.

Ms. McFarlane has acknowledged she is a social worker and not a licensed therapist as she was widely portrayed by the press. She holds a certificate as a "welder/sculptor" from an Ohio welding school.

Neither Satz nor Ms. McFarlane returned reporters' calls. Satz no longer works for the station.

Stevens had other questions: He had been told the children's stories were consistent, but he found that just the opposite was true.

One child, for example, said an incident happened indoors; another child said it happened outdoors. One child said an incident occurred while the children were dressed; another said they were nude.

Stevens watched the CII videotapes and concluded that children had been influenced by the manner of interroga-

tion. "The children were so programmed at CII that if a child said 'No, nothing ever happened to them,' the interviewer would then say, 'You're not being a very bright boy. Your friends have come in and told us they were touched. Don't you want to be as smart as them?' What kind of a way is that to interview children?"

Why were allegations of child sexual abuse confined to communities in the South Bay area of Los Angeles County?

When McMartin was closed, parents put their children in other preschools nearby. Similar allegations began to surface. Seven other schools were closed.

Eventually, authorities said, as many as 1,200 students may have been abused. A 17-year-old employee of one school was arrested and tried. The case ended with a hung jury.

But if 1,200 children in South Bay preschools had been molested, "Why is it that it stopped at the confines of the South Bay?" Stevens asked. That is because the South Bay area is where the investigation was centered — and where children who had been contaminated by the interrogation process could be found, Stevens decided.

Why hadn't the parents noticed any signs of abuse?

Most of the parents were upper middle-class, caring and educated, Stevens says. Yet they had never noticed any sign of the assaults described by the children, assaults that would have resulted in bleeding and scars.

"(The children) wouldn't be able to sit down or go to the bathroom," Stevens says. "They would cry, and wake up in the night or there would be blood in the underwear. None of that ever came up."

Parents rationalized that their children did not talk about the alleged abuse because they "were told by teachers that this is what happened at the school, that this was a normal part of the school day," Stevens says.

"But then why is it that not one kindergarten teacher ever said that a child had ever come up to them and said, 'Excuse me, teacher. When do we play naked movie star?' If this happens in preschool, why didn't the kids complain when it didn't happen in kindergarten?"

Children did not spontaneously name people who had abused them, and named them only after their names were introduced by interviewers.

For example, the first 10 children interviewed at CII said Ray Buckey abused them; the 11th child mentioned Peggy McMartin Buckey.

"You figure it statistically, that there is going to be some Peggys and some Bettys within the group. But it wasn't until an interviewer showed a naked doll to a child and said 'Let's make this the Peggy doll' that Peggy Buckey's name came into the case."

Why were investigators in Memphis and Nashville and Newark and Chicago hearing the same stories told in Manhattan Beach?

He concluded the children's stories were cross-germinated across the country by prosecutors, therapists, parents and the news media.

After two years of studying the case, Stevens concluded there was insufficient evidence to persuade him the McMartin defendants had committed a crime.

"People ask me, 'Well, do you think anybody did any molesting?'" Stevens says. "My best answer is, 'I don't know.' The reason I say I don't know is, after sorting through the thousands of documents, I haven't been convinced conclusively that any of this is true."

"It may have happened, but if it exists, it is buried under bungling of the initial investigation, the mishandling of the district attorney's office and the way the children were wholesale interviewed without any precautions that the information not be shared amongst the alleged victims."

Stevens says prosecutors and the police wanted so badly to believe the children that "nobody stopped, took a step back and looked at the big picture and said, 'Did this fit?'"

"Because it doesn't fit. None of it makes sense if you look at it carefully."

Stevens says the parents' phrase "Believe the Children" is fine, but it "can't just be used in a vacuum. We need to say, 'Sure, we believe the children because we want to.'"

"We don't want to believe kids are little liars and children are people, and we want to believe little kids. But at the same time, if you use what a child says as a basis to ruin someone's life, you want to make damn sure that child is telling the truth, and you want to make sure you have evidence to substantiate it. In McMartin, none of that existed."

"... If a child said 'No, nothing ever happened to them,' the interviewer would then say, 'You're not being a very bright boy...'"

**GLENN E. STEVENS**  
Former Co-prosecutor, McMartin case

charges of abuse, despite flimsy evidence.

How Kenneth Lanning, an FBI agent who has followed the cases since they were first reported, now doubts that a nationwide outbreak of the crime ever took place.

How a disputed theory that children don't lie about sex abuse underpinned belief in the cases.

How parents, social workers and law enforcement representatives used improper questions to gather misleading statements from children.

How laws nationally and in various states were changed to help prosecute abusers — and how those changes may have encouraged less than substantial cases to be brought to court.

How "anatomically correct dolls" and other new techniques have become key elements in child sex abuse investigations — even though their usefulness has been criticized.

How allegations of satanism have surfaced in nearly all ritual abuse investigations, and how little evidence

has turned up to support the allegations.

How bizarre tales that first appeared in Jordan, Minn., and Manhattan Beach were spread from city to city by investigators, parents and the news media.

How a book called *Michelle Remembers*, which was supposed to have been factual, was the basis for many of the satanic stories that circulated throughout the country — and how many authorities doubt its credibility.

How many of the stories told by children appear to be "urban legends" — stories that appear in city after city but seem to have no basis in fact, even while generally believed to be true. The story of the vanishing hitchhiker is a well-known urban legend.

The reporters found that more and more people now doubt the validity of most of the stories that led to charges in ritual abuse cases.

Besides the prosecutor they talk to today about the Manhattan Beach case, they also will talk to a prosecutor in

Memphis who withdrew from the investigation of the Georgian Hills Early Childhood Center case — and who later testified for the defense in the trial of Frances Ballard.

Though the ritual abuse cases have their detractors, the cases also have their supporters. The reporters found, in some cases, that there was more than the welfare of the children at stake.

In many cases, parents have sued defendants and the schools where they worked for millions of dollars. Many schools carried liability insurance of up to \$1 million per child. Some insurance carriers are so fearful of a court conviction that they are willing to settle out of court, even in the absence of criminal charges, the reporters learned.

For authorities, the consequences of abandoning or losing a case can also be costly. In some cases in which the accused have been acquitted or freed of charges, they have countersued parents, social workers, police and prosecutors.

Some cases were solid enough to produce convictions, most notably that of a Miami man who abused children at his wife's day care center. There also were convictions in Malden, Mass.; Niles, Mich.; Clarksville, Md.; Bakersfield, Calif., and Memphis.

Even where the defendants have been acquitted, there remain parents who believe their children were molested in a conspiracy of devil worshippers. Many have become crusaders, hoping to prove what the government and costly investigations have been unable to prove.

The reporters also will look at people who have been branded child molesters — but who by this nation's standard of justice must be presumed innocent. They will tell how the falsely accused have lost jobs, been forced to move and had their children taken from them.

Finally, they will explain how the Georgian Hills case in Memphis mirrored many of the problems found elsewhere in the country — and had some problems of its own.

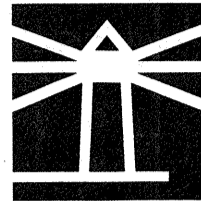
## VIEWPOINT

"Give light and the people will find their own way."

LIONEL LINDER  
Editor

COLLEEN CONANT  
Managing Editor

DAVID VINCENT  
Editorial Page Editor



SCRIPPS HOWARD

The Memphis Commercial. . . . . 1889  
The Appeal . . . . . 1840  
The Avalanche. . . . . 1867  
Consolidated July 1, 1894

### THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

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#### EDITORIALS

**CHILD ABUSE:** Series exposes problems and panic in cases of multiple abuse.

## Shades of Salem

AS news stories about child sex abuse cases unfolded across the nation in recent years, one question kept nagging reporters and editors at The Commercial Appeal: Why were there so many similarities?

Memphis cases, including the one at Georgian Hills Early Childhood Center, made the question all the more insistent.

To find an answer, reporters Tom Charlier and Shirley Downing spent five months researching and writing the series "Justice Abused." The series starts today on Page One.

All crimes that fall into the same category — murders, rapes or armed robberies, for instance — are alike. Authorities can compare the motives and means of premeditated killings in different places. Law enforcement officers use "profiles" to identify possible drug traffickers.

Perhaps that's why the question about oddly similar sex abuse reports was only speculative and intriguing at first — rain on the window rather than a pounding on the door.

Tens of thousands of words about far-flung cases continued to pour into this newspaper's offices from wire services. Our reporters continued to interview investigators, prosecutors and defense lawyers involved in local cases.

Curiosity about what seemed coincidental became a mission to explain a deepening mystery.

Reporters and editors made a critical distinction early on. Child abuse occurs. It probably occurs far more than most Americans think it does. And yet certain cases involving day care centers, schools, churches and other institutions presented a baffling pattern that demanded to be explored separately from the general problem of abuse.

Why did children in widely different parts of the nation tell essentially the same stories about abuse, down to details of color, sound, physical setting and complex, ritualistic action?

Why did the cases so often start in the same way, with one child's single complaint, and then mushroom into numerous complaints, again with similar details?

Why did efforts to corroborate the complaints come up empty-handed so often?

Why did some investigators have second thoughts about the reliability of their evidence and their investigative methods?

Was the pattern that stretched

from Memphis to Seattle one of conspiracy? Or of hysteria?

The first thought of a reporter is to cover the news. Charlier and Ms. Downing wanted to find out what had happened in multiple child sex abuse cases. They wanted to provide information that readers of The Commercial Appeal had not seen or heard.

Another concern, however, followed them through their months-long assignment: What impact would their stories have on children?

Their research notes indicated that media coverage, including newspaper stories, may have been a major source for the accounts of abuse that investigators heard from children and parents and that some investigators elicited from children by suggestion.

Part of their series, they realized, would report a strong possibility that many of the criminal charges came about because children were prompted — and even pressured — to say they were abused. The hysteria explanation was gaining credibility. Several authorities on these cases likened them to the Salem witch-hunt.

Would such reporting undermine legitimate cases and make children more vulnerable to molesters?

This is The Commercial Appeal's answer:

The facts and the testimony that appear in the series have to speak for themselves. Charlier and Ms. Downing have presented information that no other news media source, to our knowledge, has brought together. Readers need to be able to consider the facts and the testimony, along with whatever opinions and whatever other information are available to them.

The series is not intended to minimize the widespread existence of child sexual abuse. It is not intended to intimidate investigators or detract from the vigorous pursuit of credible complaints.

It is intended, however, to shine necessary light into the dark corners of an ugly phenomenon of confusion and panic in which many innocent people have been severely hurt.

Editorially, we draw the same conclusion that some experts have drawn. There has been a witch-hunt. And the causes both of justice and prevention will be better served if mental health professionals, social workers, legislators and law enforcement authorities correct the problems that the series clearly documents.



## Skeptics find legend, not Satan, at the core

### Allegations rife, evidence slight

'Satan factor' in trials **A9**

Small town, big scars **A10**

By Tom Charlier and Shirley Downing  
Staff Reporters

One night four years ago, Robert Currie gazed out his window toward the lights of Los Angeles and decided to do battle with the devil.

Currie, a former television executive and retired mortgage banker, set out to expose the problem of satanic ritual abuse of children as "the biggest thing this country's ever seen," he recalls.

Allegations of satanism — of rites involving mutilation, infant sacrifice and devil worship — have since emerged in more than 100 child sex abuse investigations across the country, including the Georgian Hills case in Memphis.

In four years, though, investigators have found no evidence to support fears that cults are preying on the nation's children.

The Commercial Appeal studied ritual sex abuse allegations in 36 cases and found instead that many of the stories labeled "satanic" or "ritual" have the hallmarks of "urban legends."

"Urban legend" is a term coined by sociologists to describe fascinating and colorful tales that spread rapidly across the nation, usually with little change in detail, but which rarely can be traced to any actual event.

Well-known examples include the person who inadvertently kills a pet while trying to dry it off in a microwave oven; and the child who bites into a razor blade-laden apple given to him on Halloween. Both tales, according to researchers, were launched without any known authenticity.

Once told, usually for entertainment or to drive home a point, such stories take on a life of their own.

Such appears to be the case with some of the stories coaxed from children in sex abuse investigations of the last four

Please see **SKEPTICS**, Page **A8**



## JUSTICE ABUSED

### A 1980s WITCH-HUNT

Part 2 of 6

Battling the devil

## Tales of cult abuse spiral; officials seek foundation

By Shirley Downing  
Staff Reporter

QUANTICO, Va. — In early 1983, Supervisory Special Agent Kenneth Lanning picked up the telephone here at the FBI Academy and heard about one of the strangest cases he'd come across.

Authorities in Massachusetts were investigating a report from a woman who said that as a child, she had been sexually assaulted by a band of devil worshippers "somewhere in the Midwest. She couldn't remember what state."

Lanning, the FBI's chief expert on crimes against children, had never heard anything like it.

By year's end, however, Lanning learned about four similar cases, in different areas of the country, of adults who claimed to have survived abuse by satanic cults during their childhoods.

Then an even stranger thing happened: Children began to tell stories of ritual sex abuse at the hands of devil worshippers. They accused their parents, teachers, camp counselors and pastors of sexual assault and murder.

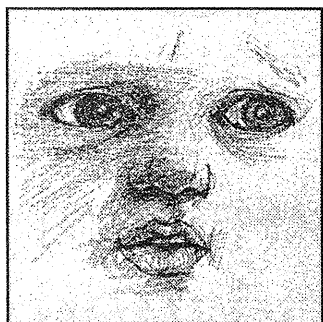
The first accounts came from chil-

Please see **LANNING**, Page **A10**

Since 1983 the nation has seen a dramatic increase in the number of reported cases of child sex abuse. A crime once hushed up had come out into the open.

Along the way, new social therapy theories and criminal investigative methods were rushed into use. As the best-known child sex abuse cases became notorious as much for the accusations children made, evidence now shows a kind of mass hysteria swept the country. Hysteria led some authorities, urged on by frightened parents and credulous members of the press, into a witch-hunt unparalleled in modern times.

Four years after the first cases attracted national publicity, many of the investigations have produced more questions than answers. This series explores those questions and how a social system created to protect the nation's young also has done harm to innocent people and brought about controversial issues that obscure the truth about child sex abuse.



## JUSTICE ABUSED

A  
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From Page A7

## Skeptics

years.

Many of them bore traditional themes of urban legends — sex, religion and horror.

But unlike traditional legends, ritual abuse stories found special channels open during several feverish months in 1984 and 1985 to accelerate their spread. Those channels linked parents' groups and investigators, and they were enhanced by news coverage.

The specter of the devil first surfaced in the case that involved Currie's three sons — at the McMartin Preschool in Manhattan Beach, Calif. There, details of children's stories about the slaying of animals and trips to a graveyard made it onto local television long before seven suspects in the case were indicted.

Currie, in an interview in the antique furniture-filled living room of his Hermosa Beach home, boasted he was the first to put the satanic label on the McMartin case.

Acting as a self-appointed detective, he interviewed most of the alleged victims in the McMartin case, and listened to children tell about airplane flights, visits to churches and other locations, and bloody satanic rituals.

He talked to their parents. He talked to investigators, and with therapists. And he talked to the news media.

Currie appeared on regional television programs as well as the nationally televised Phil Donahue show. Along with Kenneth Wooden, a Vermont publisher and proponent of satanic conspiracy theories, he studied satanism and helped advise ABC on its coverage of the case.

ABC had picked up the McMartin story from its Los Angeles affiliate. In three broadcasts between June 1984 and May 1985, the network's 20/20 program, which claims a national audience of more than 22 million, depicted an expanding shadow of satanism and ritual abuse reaching across the nation.

"Almost every month has brought new stories from all parts of the country, indicating that sexual abuse may be more common than any of us had imagined," said program host Hugh Downs on Jan. 3, 1985, referring to the growth of ritual abuse cases.

Newspapers, magazines and other television programmers provided exhaustive coverage of the ritual abuse allegations. Like 20/20, they placed little emphasis on the lack of telltale bones, bodies or other evidence supporting the stories.

When allegations surfaced from Miami to Sequim, Wash., and from suburban Boston to rural Texas, authorities dragged lakes and conducted massive excavations — usually under the glare of television cameras and headlines.

"We had AP, UPI and the National Enquirer here, even ABC. At one point, it looked like a military landing zone — there was that much interest," said Chief Tom Wilson of the Sheriff's Department in Spencer Township, Ohio. Authorities there conducted a futile search for the remains of a girl named Charity and 50-60 other bodies reported to have been sacrificed in satanic rituals. No bodies were ever found and the girl is still missing.

Each highly publicized case usually produced new allegations.

In the wake of the McMartin revelations, allegations of ritual abuse surfaced at 63 other Los Angeles-area day care centers. Authorities arrested a 17-year-old day care worker at one school, but the charges died with a hung jury.

In Memphis, an investigation of ritual abuse allegations at the Georgian Hills Early Childhood Center led to similar investigations at three other area day care centers. No charges were filed in the other cases, although one school replaced its entire staff.

Following the initial arrests in Miami, authorities there identified 14 other large sex abuse cases in as many days.

Along with the publicity, channels developed between investigators and parents from city to city, opening new avenues for the sharing of information and allegations. In February 1985, two dozen investigators attended an FBI seminar on ritual abuse in Quantico, Va. The FBI hoped to learn why children were telling similar accounts of abuse in different cities.

"I was hearing stuff from 3,000 miles away that was happening in Los Angeles and I was saying, 'There has got to be a common denominator,'" said Glenn E. Stevens, formerly a co-prosecutor in the McMartin case and a participant in the seminar.

At a similar conference in San Jose, Calif., a Bakersfield, Calif., sheriff's deputy who supervised a satanic investigative task force spoke about devil worshippers in his county.

Lt. Brad Darling, challenged by a Bakersfield news reporter who obtained a copy of the taped speech, later admitted he had exaggerated or misrepresented statements about the origins and existence of child abuse cult rings in the Bakersfield area.

Encouraged by the federal government, dozens of other workshops, seminars and conferences dealing with child sexual abuse have been held by parents, social workers, therapists and prosecutors since 1983.

Parents often became featured speakers at workshops and conferences.

In Chicago, a mother told investiga-

## Similar Tales

Some details occurred over and over in children's statements about alleged abuse:

**Tattooed woman or man:** Jordan, Minn.; Bakersfield, Calif.

**Man with limp:** Memphis, Bakersfield

**One-armed man:** Jordan, Memphis

**Molestation/devil worship in church:** Memphis; Bakersfield; McMartin; Grenada, Miss.; Niles, Mich.; and Torrance and Rolling Hills Estates, Calif.

**Tunnels:** McMartin; Bakersfield; Chicago; Niles; Fort Bragg, Calif.; Sequim, Wash.; Niles; Torrance; Rolling Hills Estates

**Animals or children in cages:** Memphis; Bakersfield; Niles; Torrance; Rolling Hills Estates; Clarksville, Md.

**Swimming pools or shark pits:** Memphis, Bakersfield, Niles, Torrance and Rolling Hills Estates

**Burned, cooked babies:** Bakersfield, Chicago

**Stabbed or murdered babies, or children:** Jordan; Malden, Mass.; Memphis; Bakersfield; Chicago; Sacramento; Richmond; Grenada; Niles (resurrected)

**Activities in basement:** Niles; Sacramento; Chicago; Torrance; Rolling Hills Estates; White Plains, N.Y.; Bakersfield

**Assaults during naptime or trips to rest room:** Memphis; Nashville; Cincinnati; Niles; Torrance; Rolling Hills Estates; New Braintree, Mass.

**Children choked, pinched or physically abused:** Nashville, Niles, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates, El Paso, Clarksville, Miami

**Mock marriages:** Memphis, Sacramento, San Francisco

**Barbie dolls:** Memphis, Sacramento, Bakersfield

**Mixed-race molesters:** Memphis, Chicago, Grenada, Niles, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates

**Christmas tree lights:** Memphis, Bakersfield, Chicago, McMartin, Sacramento

**Nude photography:** Memphis, Bakersfield, McMartin, Niles, Malden, White Plains, San Francisco, Chicago, Jordan, Grenada, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates

**Handcuffed or bound with rope:** Bakersfield, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates

**Drowning in pool (babies or animals):** Memphis, Bakersfield, Niles

**Shots in the arm:** Memphis, Bakersfield, McMartin, Niles

**Sticking with pins and needles:** Memphis; Bakersfield; Chicago; Fort Bragg, Calif.; Niles; Clarksville; El Paso

**Foreign objects — beads, combs, crayons, sticks, silverware, screwdrivers — inserted in rectum or vagina:** Memphis, Bakersfield, West Point, Sacramento, Malden, Newark, McMartin, Niles, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates, Clarksville, El Paso

**Kids taken to other homes, schools, barns or locations:** Memphis; San Francisco; Malden; McMartin; Chicago; Jordan; Sacramento; Niles; Torrance; Rolling Hills Estates; Clarksville; El Paso; Spencer Township, Ohio; Carson City, Nev.

**Children taken to mortuary:** McMartin, Grenada, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates, Bakersfield

**Kids riding vans:** Memphis, San Francisco, McMartin, Niles, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates

**Visited cemetery or funeral home:** Memphis, McMartin, Grenada, Sacramento, Niles, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates, Sequim.

**Airplanes:** Memphis, McMartin, South Bay schools, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates, El Paso, Clarksville, Indianapolis

**Boats:** Memphis, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates

**Nude games:** Memphis, McMartin, West Point, Bakersfield, Chicago, Jordan, Niles, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates

**Talked about alligators or sharks:** Memphis, McMartin, Nashville, Niles, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates

**Drinking red or pink liquid that made them sleepy; drugs:** Memphis, McMartin, San Francisco, Niles, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates, Bakersfield, El Paso

**Adults wearing costumes (robes):** Malden (clown), Memphis, McMartin, Bakersfield, Chicago, San Francisco, Niles, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates, El Paso, Indianapolis

**Animal sacrifice:** Memphis, McMartin, Chicago, Grenada, Sequim, Jordan, Miami, Carson City, Niles, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates, El Paso

**Acts of urination and defecation:** Memphis, McMartin, Bakersfield, Chicago, Newark, Niles, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates, Sequim, White Plains, Carson City, New Braintree

**Performing oral sex on teachers or others, animals:** Nashville, Memphis, Bronx, Sacramento, Malden, Bakersfield, Jordan, Niles, El Paso, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates

**Strangers coming to school to molest them:** Memphis, McMartin, Grenada, Niles, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates

**Sadism; bondage or punishing children:** Nashville, Bakersfield, Niles, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates, El Paso

**Drinking or use of blood:** Chicago, Bakersfield, Niles, Carson City, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates

**Eating bodies:** Sacramento, Grenada, Chicago, Bakersfield, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates

**Children shown porn films:** Cincinnati, Sacramento, Niles, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates

**Children being buried:** Niles, McMartin, Memphis, Torrance, Rolling Hills Estates, Clarksville

"Almost every month has brought new stories from all parts of the country, indicating that sexual abuse may be more common than any of us had imagined."

**HUGH DOWNS**  
Program Host  
20/20

tors from several states that her daughter had been tickled in the vagina, punched and pierced with needles, and forced to stab and then eat a dead baby while attending a day care center.

In a New Orleans conference attended by other parents, social workers, therapists and investigators from across the country, a woman told how she survived similar atrocities as a child.

Shirley Landa, a volunteer with a Chicago group that works with abuse cases, attended one such conference and concluded satanic groups were abusing children in similar ways. "I came home feeling there must be some cookbook (used by satanists) out there."

In the 36 ritual abuse cases examined by The Commercial Appeal, stories from children sent some investigators on nearly identical missions.

In McMartin, investigators were told about a boy who saw "an old grandma" play the piano and whose abusers stuck tampons in his anus.

More than 2,500 miles away, a Newark, N.J., day care operator, Margaret Kelly Michaels, is currently on trial facing nearly 200 counts of sexual assault on preschoolers. Among the "repulsively bizarre" acts prosecutors say she committed: playing the piano nude and assaulting children with tampons.

"We had AP, UPI and the National Enquirer here, even ABC. At one point, it looked like a military landing zone — there was that much interest."

**TOM WILSON**  
Chief, Sheriff's Department  
Spencer Township, Ohio

In Jordan, Minn., and in Memphis, investigators checked claims involving a man who walked with a limp.

According to some of the other allegations reported in sexual abuse cases — but uncorroborated by substantive physical evidence — abusers stuck pins, needles and staples in children's genitals, eyes and ears, or anally raped them with swords, sticks and silverware.

In a speech last year to sex abuse investigators in Huntsville, Ala., FBI special agent Kenneth Lanning, the bureau's chief expert on abuse, said many of the ritual abuse stories bear similarities to the "bogeyman" tales traditionally told by adults to keep children in line and then often shared among children.

Lanning recalled what a policeman told him about about a "Stranger-Danger" presentation he had made to children. The policeman, while warning the children never to accept rides from strangers, asked them, hypothetically, what would happen if they did get in a car with someone they didn't know.

"What amazed him is the length and the detail and the depth of the stories these children told: He'd get in the car and (the stranger) would take you to some secret house and take you down in the basement and tie you down to the

floor and rip your clothes off, and rip your nose off and cut your ears off and chop your penis up," Lanning said.

There are other familiar themes in the stories.

In the McMartin case in Manhattan Beach, Calif., and in the Georgian Hills case in Memphis, investigators questioned possible witnesses about reports that priests from both satanic cults and mainstream churches were involved in abuse. McMartin investigators said children told of seeing naked priests and nuns cavorting in a secret room beneath the day care center. No secret room was ever found.

Joel Best, a sociology professor at California State University at Fresno, said that story follows an anti-Catholic theme common in American culture. It dates back to more than 100 years ago, when women claiming to be escaped nuns made paid speaking appearances to reveal the "shocking secrets" of the Catholic Church.

"There's always an audience for that," he said.

Many of the cases involve stories of children being taken away in pickup trucks and vans prior to their abuse.

Those, too, are similar to the stories of mass child-snatchings that have been circulated across the nation for at least 25 years, researchers say. Usually, the abductions are said to have taken place from schoolyards and shopping center parking lots. While there have been isolated incidents of children abducted from such places, the number of false reports far exceed those.

Memphis police often are called to schools in the fall, and spring, on reports that suspicious people in vans have been sighted. Generally, the vans are white, said Robert Raby, director of security for city schools.

There have been unfounded reports of people photographing children, too, said Raby. "We did find one of the photography cases was a real estate agent taking a picture of a house, and another report was traced to a state survey team," he said.

Ritual stories also bear similarities to the "mutilated boy" legend, Best said. In that story, which dates back to at least the 1940s, a boy — either black or white — enters a gas station rest room and is castrated by attackers of another race.

In Memphis, Jordan, Manhattan Beach, Chicago, El Paso and other cities, children said either that they were abused by people of another race, or that they witnessed the murder of a child of another race. In Chicago, white children said they saw a black baby boiled on a stove; in Memphis, white children told of a black baby being stabbed.

In Jordan, investigators said white children indicated they were sexually assaulted by mulattoes — as they did in Memphis and Bakersfield.

The theme providing the framework for the stories — satanism — has accented media images and legends in Western culture for centuries.

Michael Jackson's popular 1983

Thriller video was replete with fright scenes, with characters changing into monsters and romping through a graveyard. While many researchers say such images nourish children's fantasies, investigators in at least two cities, Memphis and Miami, interpreted youngsters' references to the video as possible indications they had been ritually abused. J. Gordon Melton, director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion in Santa Barbara, Calif., has noted the current abuse stories echo satanic myths dating back to the 2nd Century Romans, who accused early Christians of mutilating dead infants during rituals.

Philip Jenkins, an associate professor of criminal justice at Pennsylvania State University, said the concern that satanism may lie at the root of sex abuse cases reflects the renewed belief that evil — not societal ills — is the foundation of crime.

Reports of satanic activity often come in the aftermath of hideous crime, said Albert Fine, a sociology professor at the University of Minnesota. "It allows people to make sense of how these things are going on," he said.

Researchers also say that notorious crimes can provide some of the elements from which legends are derived.

In several cities, investigators reported that children told of abusers dressed as clowns. In at least three cities, Bakersfield, Memphis and Sacramento, they searched for homes distinguished by flashing Christmas lights.

Those events, they say, may harken back to December 1978, when the disappearance of a teenage boy in suburban Chicago led police to John Wayne Gacy, a respected businessman who often dressed as a clown and entertained children in civic functions. In a subsequent search, the authorities found buried in a crawl space beneath Gacy's home the bodies of 33 boys he had sexually assaulted.

Media coverage noted that the Christmas lights on Gacy's house continued to "mysteriously" blink on and off days after he was arrested and jailed.

With all those potential influences on the satanic stories, "I think there's a lot of bogus stuff here," Jenkins said.

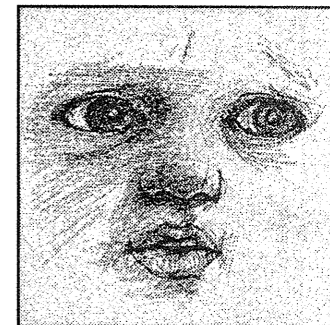
**Yesterday:** The problem  
**Today:** Battling the devil  
**Tomorrow:** Flaws in the system

"I was hearing stuff from 3,000 miles away that was happening in Los Angeles and I was saying, 'There has got to be a common denominator.'"

**GLENN E. STEVENS**  
former  
co-prosecutor  
McMartin case



By Colin Ruthven



## JUSTICE ABUSED

A  
1980s  
WITCH - HUNT

# 'Satan factor' complicates trials

## Links to abuse of children hard to prove

By Tom Charlier  
Staff Reporter

In cases across the United States, evidence of satanic-cult involvement in child sex abuse has been ghostlike — vapor-thin, but fascinating.

In Miami, parents said their children could recite a satanic prayer. In Richmond, Va., police found burn rings on an apartment floor — possibly left by candles used during rituals.

There has been little more than that, however, to support theories of widespread child sex abuse by satanic cults. As authorities have learned during the past four years, the satanic stories more often than not tend to discredit sex abuse investigations.

"It opens a Pandora's box, so to

speak," said Maj. Fred DeFrang of the Clallam County, Wash., Sheriff's Department, who helped investigate an abuse case that has since been dropped.

"If (prosecutors) don't bring it up . . . it looks like they're hiding something. If they do bring it up, it tends to discredit the victim unless they're a strong witness."

In Contra Costa County, Calif., an incest case involving allegations of satanic rituals ended with a hung jury. Jurors later said they agreed the defendant had abused his daughter. But their decision was snagged by their unwillingness to believe the man had committed the acts as part of a satanic ritual.

There have been convictions in at least seven large abuse cases where authorities investigated stories that contained at least a hint of ritualism.

Debra Kanof, who successfully prosecuted a child abuse case in El Paso, Texas, said that because of some of the bizarre stories reported there, satanism may have been a factor in her case. "I never made a judgment one way or another," she said.

The other convictions were obtained in Bakersfield, Calif.; Craig's Park, Md.;

Malden, Mass.; Memphis; Miami; and Niles, Mich.

In Miami, the allegations against Frank Fuster, now serving a 165-year sentence following his conviction for abuse while running a babysitting service, included statements that he killed birds and recited a prayer to the devil as part of a ritual intended to terrify children into silence.

In Malden, at least one child told of infants being murdered and animal sacrifices, with blood from the rituals being buried beneath a sandbox. In Niles, allegations included the killings of animals.

In those and most other cases, however, prosecutors emphasized the sexual allegations.

The existence of Satan worshipers is not disputed.

J. Gordon Melton, director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion in Santa Barbara, Calif., said there are perhaps 30 to 50 groups of satanists in the United States, each with 10 to 40 members.

He said satanists fall within a few general categories: present or past followers of Anton LaVey, founder of the San Francisco-based Church of Satan,

small bands of experimenters, usually teenagers, and individuals who may be psychotic. But child abuse "serves no occult purpose" for them, Melton said.

LaVey followers are largely above-board — sometimes even maintaining police contacts — while the others are more nefarious, with members bound together by drugs and conspiracies, Melton said.

But Sandi Gallant, an intelligence officer with the San Francisco Police Department, contends satanists practice rituals that involve orgies — occasionally using children — animal sacrifice and sometimes murder. The members include less-serious "dabblers" and more highly organized groups.

The members typically study books on the black arts, or evil works. "Then they sit down and devise their own behavior and how they're going to manifest that activity," she said.

"I don't believe there's a cultist under every rock," said Dale Griffis, former police chief in Tiffin, Ohio, who has studied the subject and briefed other officials on it for more than a decade. "(But) I can tell you the activity's going up."

"If (prosecutors) don't bring it up . . . it looks like they're hiding something. If they do bring it up, it tends to discredit the victim. . ."

**MAJ. FRED DEFRANG**  
Clallam County, Wash.  
Sheriff's Department

Part 2 of 6  
**Battling the devil**



## JUSTICE ABUSED

A  
1980s  
WITCH - HUNT

# Families, town divided by wave of accusations

## Parents fought for reunification with children

By Shirley Downing  
Staff Reporter

**J**ORDAN, Minn. — Valley Green Mobile Homes Park sits near the frozen remains of a cornfield, across the highway from the Village of Jordan, with its picturesque church spire and calm, small-town look.

Christine Brown, 26, a former topless dancer, lived in the trailer park. So did James Rud, a trash hauler who sometimes babysat for her children.

In late September 1983, Mrs. Brown's daughter and son and one of their friends said Rud molested them.

In the months that followed, the investigation of child sex abuse accusations in Jordan would produce charges against 24 people. Sixty children would describe abuse in stories involving orgies and murders.

Altogether, 69 people would be investigated as suspects in what officials believed were two interlocking rings of child molesters.

Growing simultaneously with the McMartin Preschool case in Manhattan Beach, Calif., it would be followed by similar cases across the country — in Memphis, Niles, Mich.; Bakersfield, Calif.; Chicago; and Newark, N.J.

A year after it began, the investigation in Jordan would collapse as dramatically as it arose.

For the first time, a state and federal examination of a major child sex abuse case would raise grave doubts about the credibility of the investigation, and the methods it relied on.

It would find serious flaws in the Scott County child protection system. The problems would prove to be a mi-

crocosm of the failings of agencies handling child sex abuse investigations across the country.

It started believably enough.

**C**hristine Brown accused Rud of abusing her daughter, her son and one of their friends. Rud previously had been convicted of child molestation and confessed to the new charges.

In a plea bargain, he named accomplices: a former fiancée, friends and his parents.

To Scott County Prosecutor Kathleen Morris, the activities Rud described sounded hauntingly familiar. Three years earlier, she had won acclaim for the successful prosecution of a local family, the Cermaks, on incest and other child sex charges.

The Rud investigation was expanded. Mrs. Brown's children were interviewed, as were their friends.

Authorities quickly found that unlike the Cermak case — in which teenagers came forward on their own to describe assaults — younger children were more hesitant.

Ms. Morris, then considered an expert in interviewing children, took over.

Before long, accusations and rumors spread beyond the gates of the trailer court, and soaked to the heart of Jordan, population 2,663.

Eventually, 60 children accused their parents and neighbors, preachers, a tattooed man, a man who walked with a limp, even a man who was dead and buried.

Twenty-six children were removed from their homes and placed in state custody.

By June 1984, 24 people — some trailer park transients, but many of them citizens with roots deep in the community — had been charged with

hundreds of counts of sex crimes.

The national news media focused its lens on the small courthouse in Scott County, Minn. Ms. Morris was portrayed as a "gutsy and driven" prosecutor, a "pioneer in the cause of protecting children." Her somber face was featured on the pages of national news magazines.

She became a popular speaker at seminars and workshops, where she advised investigators on the proper way to prosecute child sexual abuse cases.

**B**ut the glow was short-lived. In September 1984, Robert and Lois Bentz, the first defendants to be brought to trial, were acquitted of charges that they had molested their children.

Ms. Morris then dropped charges against the 21 remaining defendants, saying she did not want to harm a continuing investigation of "great magnitude" into children's claims of slayings.

She asked Minnesota Atty. Gen. Hubert H. Humphrey III to take over family court cases to resolve the question of what should happen to the children who had been removed from their homes. Humphrey's office decided to review the entire case.

Controversy grew quickly. Children said they made up stories because they grew tired of questioning by Ms. Morris and other investigators.

Rud said he "felt pressured to fabricate" his accounts so that Ms. Morris would give him a lighter sentence.

Angry parents — freed of felony charges — struck back with a vengeance. They said their children had been "kidnapped" by the state.

They said they had been emotionally and financially bankrupted by the misdeeds of a handful who abused government power and trust. They said their

reputations had been destroyed.

Ms. Morris, who has since been voted out of office, is convinced she was right. "I still believe the children," she said in an interview from the Shakopee, Minn., office where she now practices law. "I don't apologize for what I did in the Scott County cases. I don't regret any of my decisions." She said she feels she let the children down.

Ms. Morris said she was betrayed by Humphrey, whose review went beyond what he had promised.

Humphrey's office — the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension — studied the case with help from the FBI. In a stinging report, the review concluded that while some children in Jordan had been abused, the overall investigation supervised by Ms. Morris was flawed throughout.

Among its findings:

■ Investigators failed to document their interviews with children.

■ Investigators "cross-germinated" children's stories, meaning they spread them from one child to another.

■ Investigators failed to corroborate children's stories.

■ Children, when questioned about their stories, quickly recanted their slaying claims. They said they made them up after they were subjected to repeated questioning.

"Repeated interviewing and discussions about abuse undermine the credibility of children," the team's report stated. "It can cause confusion in both adults and children. With children it raises the additional concern of suggestibility."

■ In many cases, the report said, "children were removed from their homes and isolated from all family contact for prolonged periods, even though the children denied having been sexually abused."

■ "In some instances, children did not 'admit' that their parents had abused them until several months of such separation, marked by continuous questioning about abuse."

■ "In the most extreme cases, these children were also told that reunification with their families would be facilitated by 'admissions' of sex abuse by their parents and other adults."

Investigators said it was quite possible that innocent people had been falsely accused of crimes.

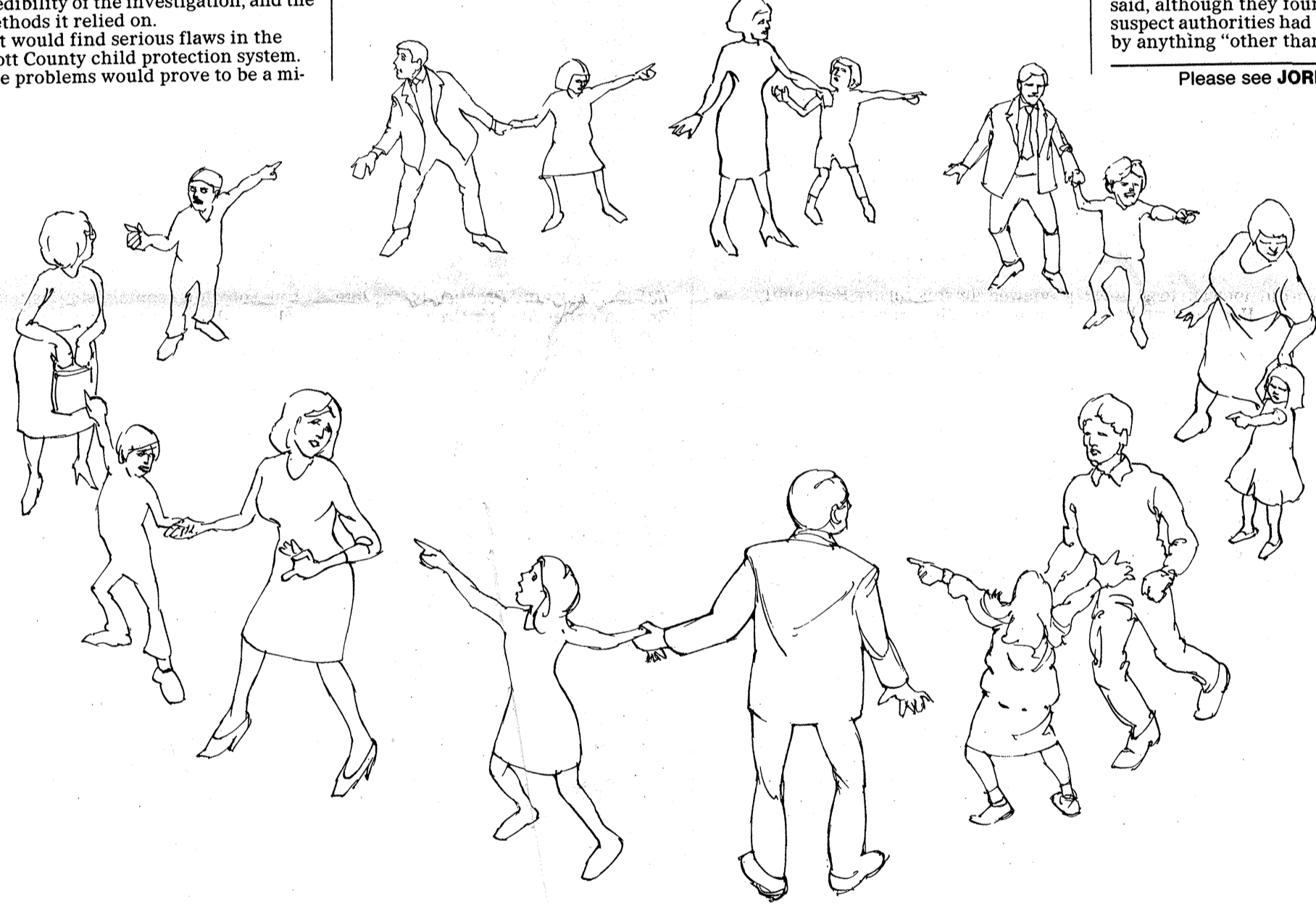
"Something clearly went awry" with the Scott County investigation, they said, although they found no reason to suspect authorities had been motivated by anything "other than concern for

By Colin Ruthven

Please see JORDAN, Page A11

"He said, 'Ma, I told them this great big story about murders and dogs and cats and everything because if they are willing to believe that my mom and dad would do something like that, they are willing to believe anything.'"

**HELEN BROWN**  
Jordan, Minn.  
suspect and mother



From Page A7

## Lanning

dren in Jordan, Minn., and Manhattan Beach, Calif. Then children all over the country began making similar claims.

Since late 1983, Lanning has consulted on more than 100 cases in which children have alleged ritual abuse, mainly in day care centers and preschools, and often involving satanic themes.

During the same time, 60 or 70 adults — mostly women — have come forward with claims that they were victims of cult molestation as children.

Such reports have launched dozens of expensive, wide-ranging investigations throughout the United States and Canada.

But in four years, Lanning said, nothing has surfaced to indicate these accounts of abductions, molestations and murders by devil worshipers are true.

There have been hundreds of arrests, but few convictions. The convictions did not depend on the jury's finding evidence of a satanic conspiracy in order to find evidence of child sex abuse.

In an interview with The Commercial Appeal, Lanning said he was perplexed by the growth of such stories with no evidence to support them.

He describes the reports of satanic ritual abuse as "the most difficult and troubling and baffling" cases that he's seen in 15 years of dealing with child abuse crimes.

Some people believe "there is large-scale abduction of children," Lanning said. "That individuals are going

around snatching little children, keeping them captive, transporting them to other locations where they're being murdered in satanic rituals. Is that possible? I guess it's possible. Is it probable? I don't see any evidence of it. . . .

"Children talk about murders, but there's no bodies found. And I know of at least a dozen locations in this country where major excavations have been done by law enforcement where the bodies were supposedly buried. And they don't find anything. And all the people can tell you is, 'They ate them. They pulverized them in high-temperature ovens.'"

If such activities are going on, they represent "the greatest crime conspiracy in the history of man," Lanning said.

He said the "idea that large numbers of individuals are committing heavy-duty, serious crimes and murders and nobody has broken ranks, no one has gotten jealous, no one's gotten mad, no one's turned against anybody, no one's had guilt feelings over it, no one's turned somebody in — become an informant — that's almost unbelievable."

Lanning said the "adult survivor" cases often involve women with a psychiatric disorder known as multiple personality.

But what about children, some as young as 2 and 3, who describe airplane flights, slain animals, witchcraft ceremonies?

Are youngsters repeating childhood fantasies? Or perhaps "urban legends" — fantastic stories that spread rapidly, but can rarely be traced to an actual event? Are they parroting "bogeyman stories" they've seen on television or heard from their friends or parents?

Or could some of what they're saying be true?

Lanning said all these explanations are possible.

People take sides, he said. They believe it is all true, or it is all hysteria.

Lanning believes there is a middle ground. "Just because you do not believe some murders took place does not mean that nothing happened and this is a totally false report of sexual abuse."

Lanning will not suggest how these cases started or spread. "Nobody knows for sure."

But the emergence of satanic ritual abuse cases has run almost parallel with a federal initiative to stamp out crimes against children.

In early 1983, Congress asked the FBI to focus on solving cases involving missing, murdered and sexually exploited children.

In May that year, the FBI invited law enforcement officers from around the country to a seminar in Quantico to discuss that subject. Participants agreed there should be more sharing of information among investigators.

In August and September that year, the cases developed in Jordan and Manhattan Beach.

In January 1984, the FBI's Law Enforcement Bulletin devoted its 31-page issue to child sexual abuse, specifically pedophiles and child sex rings.

The opening message from then-FBI director William Webster referred to a "clandestine subculture" of child pornographers.

Webster asked for cooperation among law enforcement agencies.

"Our efforts need to be coordinated — not fragmented. Information must be shared — not withheld. . . . Every

child in America is a potential victim of sexual abuse and exploitation."

About 25,000 copies of the FBI bulletin were sent to law enforcement agencies across the country, Lanning said. It was the first such bulletin to go into a second printing.

Coincidentally, alleged victims in many cases that followed were the children or relatives of law enforcement officers.

■ In El Paso, for example, six of eight alleged victims were the children of law enforcement officers.

■ In Memphis' Georgian Hills case, at least eight of 26 alleged victims are related to police and sheriff's deputies.

■ Alleged victims related to police, judges, lawyers or prosecutors figure prominently in cases in Miami; Manhattan Beach; Jordan; Newark, N.J.; Sacramento, Calif.; White Plains, N.Y.; and Bakersfield, Calif.

Defense lawyers have argued that the government and FBI unintentionally helped create an environment of fear and hysteria that gave rise to unfounded charges; that this "sharing of information" helped spread ritual stories from coast to coast.

In an El Paso case, for example, an FBI agent with the local office gave investigators a list of questions they could ask children to determine if ritual abuse had occurred. On the list were references to costumes and video cameras, both of which later surfaced in children's stories.

Others, such as Glenn E. Stevens, the former prosecutor who quit the Manhattan Beach case because of his doubts about its credibility, praise Lanning

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## Jordan

the protection of children. . . . "That legitimate concern, however, must be balanced against the rights of the accused individuals. . . . The best way to protect children is to conduct investigations in a responsible manner, in a way that will lead to discovery of what really happened and lead to convictions, if justified by the evidence. It is in this regard that the Scott County cases founded."

This is what happened in the fall of 1983 and spring of 1984 in Scott County:

**A**fter his arrest, Rud implicated family members, friends and other residents of the trailer court. They were arrested; their children were interviewed.

Some of the children identified Christine Brown, the twice-married mother of five, as one of their abusers. Ms. Brown was charged in November 1983 with 18 counts of criminal sex conduct, and of participating with Rud and other adults in oral sex with several children.

She turned to older sister Helen Brown, a waitress at the Triangle Cafe, for help. "I know she didn't do it," Helen Brown, 37, said in a recent interview.

Helen Brown told Ms. Morris she was going to prove her sister innocent. She and her husband, Tom Brown, mortgaged their house to pay her sister's bail. They filed for custody of her children, who had been placed in foster care.

**B**y January 1984, authorities had identified a second ring they believed was connected to Christine Brown.

On Jan. 11, three days before Helen and Tom Brown were scheduled to go to court for a hearing on the custody of Christine Brown's children, there was a knock at the door.

"I opened it because I didn't have anything to hide and all these cops and people rushed in on me. They said, 'We have a warrant for your arrest.' I said, 'What for?' And they said, 'For child abuse.'"

She looked at the police officers, men to whom she had served hamburgers and coffee at the cafe. She knew them by their first names.

"I said, 'You guys are crazy. There is no way I would do that.'"

She was taken to jail and put in a cell. Her husband was summoned to the jail. When he arrived, he was arrested on the same charges.

When they were released from jail five days later, they asked Dwayne 'Fisherman' Rank and his wife, Dee, to pick them up. The Ranks, both in their 60s, shared with the Browns a mutual interest in citizens band radios.

Helen Brown did not want to go home to an empty house. Her children had been placed in foster care. So they stayed a week with the Ranks.

The next week, about 40 people, including automobile painter Bob Bentz and policeman Greg Myers, both friends of the Browns, spoke out at a City Hall meeting.

"Greg Myers said he knew we were innocent and he was going to find out what was going on," said Helen Brown.

Within the next few weeks, the arrests came in a flurry: first Bob Bentz and his wife, Lois Myers, an eight-year veteran with the police force, was arrested in February; his wife, Jane, was arrested three months later. So were the Ranks.

Charles and Carol Lallak, friends of the Myerses, were arrested.

Jane Myers had babysat for Sheriff's Deputy Don Buchan and his wife, Cindy. The Buchans worried that their children may have been abused, and took them to Ms. Morris to be interviewed.

"The more we got involved in trying to find about the Myers and if our kids were involved, the more we came to realize what the county had against the Myerses was a bunch of bull," said

Buchan.

"At that point, that's when the thing turned around and our kids started getting mentioned by the Myers kids, who were mentioning all the kids that they knew. Ms. Morris talked to our kids more and they claimed that we were involved." The Buchans were arrested.

The final arrest was Terry Morgenson, an employee of the county assessor's office. He apparently is the man who limped.

With the exception of Morgenson, "Everybody was friends and we associated with each other. And anybody that stuck up for anybody else got arrested," said Helen Brown.

The claims swelled to the point that Helen Brown took the family's dog, part dachshund and part terrier, to a veterinarian to make sure she and her husband could prove they had not sexually abused the pet.

That was after defendants found out that suspects on Ms. Morris' list included "man who walks with limp, tattooed man, dog (Bear); cat (Casper)" and a man identified by name who had been dead for several years.

**A**fter the Bentz trial, charges were dropped against everyone except Rud. The team of state and federal investigators stepped in.

Four years later, scars remain. The Browns, Myerses, Ranks and Buchans accuse Ms. Morris of a witch-hunt for the benefit of her career and the news media.

Ms. Morris, who has been voted out of office, was sued by defendants, but a federal judge dismissed the cases in November. At least two of the families have appealed to the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals.

Ms. Morris was investigated by the State Board of Professional Responsibility. A referee recommended that she be reprimanded. She has appealed that recommendation.

Police officers who investigated the case declined comment. "They got us locked in a half nelson, if you know what I mean," said policeman Norm Pint.

More than half the 24 defendants have since moved from Scott County, scattered like buckshot.

As with many of the accused, Tom Brown lost the job he'd held for 12 years with a trucking firm. Former policeman Myers is now a part-time construction worker. Rank, a machine operator in a small factory, is working to pay off the \$50,000 he owes in legal costs. He and his wife have moved from a house into a small, third-floor apartment in a neighboring town.

Buchan still has his job with the sheriff's department, but he has much left to pay on a \$200,000 legal bill.

Bob and Lois Bentz have divorced, largely because of the strain the case had on the family, said Mrs. Bentz.

Christine Brown has moved from the Jordan area, and would not be interviewed for this report. Her family would not discuss her case.

After 14 months in foster care, Helen Brown's children, now 14 and 11, are back home. Helen Brown doesn't mince words.

"The state kidnapped my children," she said. "I have nightmares about it. My kids still have nightmares about it."

Her son was interviewed at least 23 times, she said. The boy said he once was slapped by a policeman when he did not tell the officer what he wanted to hear.

"He said, 'Ma, I told them this great big story about murders and dogs and cats and everything because if they are willing to believe that my mom and dad would do something like that, they are willing to believe anything.'"

She paused. "When my kids were taken from me, I felt like a total failure, and so did my husband. We couldn't protect our kids from something we had no control over: government."

"There is an old saying that the Russians won't even need to fire one bullet because they will take over this country through our kids. That's what it felt like. Communism. Only over there, they take you out and shoot you and put you out of your misery."

forcement officers who challenge information from witnesses and hold it to a higher standard of credibility, Lanning said.

"Investigations should have been done by investigators, and therapists should have done the therapy," he said of the cases he has consulted. "They could have cooperated, but stayed in their respective disciplines."

Some interviewers are wrongly convinced that children don't lie about sex abuse. Lanning said he has found children rarely lie about sexual abuse, but sometimes they say things that are untrue, or they are confused.

In some cases, children have been asked leading questions by parents and investigators and were rewarded with toys, candy, even Cabbage Patch dolls, for giving information.

Some people interviewing children — parents, social workers, police, therapists, whoever — are recruiters "to the brotherhood and sisterhood of the sexually abused," rather than finders of fact.

"There are some people who have what I refer to as a hidden agenda. Perhaps they were victims of sexual assault," Lanning said.

He does not believe that former abuse victims should automatically be excluded from investigating child sex abuse cases, but "they must carefully evaluate their motives and ensure they are maintaining a professional, objective approach."

To bolster children's claims of abuse, some investigators rely on mental health "experts" who have exper-

# Underworld tales of terror echoed through the land

**C**hildren in Sacramento, Calif., and 10 other cities told of witnessing the sacrifice of babies So did Michelle Smith. In Manhattan Beach, Calif., Memphis; and seven other cities, children said they were taken to graveyards.

So did Ms. Smith. Virtually every report of ritual abuse told by children in recent years echoes the abuse Ms. Smith said she endured as a child and reported in her 1980 book, *Michelle Remembers*.

The book quickly became popular reading among investigators and parents — from Los Angeles to Miami — who sought clues into children's current-day claims of abuse. It was one of several influences in literature and culture cited by authorities who believe Satan worshipers are molesting children.

Critics describe *Michelle Remembers* as fiction.

J. Gordon Melton, director of the institute for the Study of American Religion in Santa Barbara, Calif., dismisses it as a product of Michelle Smith's imagination, noting the absence of any corroborative evidence.

Others say it provided a blueprint for stories that erupted in day care centers and summer camps all over the country.

They theorize that adults used information from the book when questioning young and easily influenced children. Youngsters picked up the stories, embellished them and swapped them among their friends. Details of the stories spread rapidly, and were repeated by children alleging abuse across the country.

"Everything seems to come back to that book," says Arthur Lyons, a Palm Springs, Calif., writer who has studied satanism and ritual abuse cases.

Other influences are also frequently mentioned:

■ Satanism as a popular theme in movies, literature and television.

For example, Michael Jackson's 1983 *Thriller* video contained enough macabre elements for investigators in Memphis' Georgian Hills case to ask parents if their children had mentioned it.

Reports about Jackson's music also surfaced in Miami, where children said they heard it playing while they were being assaulted.

■ Books on satanism, including *The Satanic Bible* by Anton LaVey, and *Majick in Theory and Practice*, by the late English writer Aleister Crowley.

■ Literature on child exploitation crimes, such as the book *Children in Chains*.

But it was *Michelle Remembers* that generated the most interest.

After the book's publication, Ms. Smith hit the national talk show circuit, appearing on such national programs as the *700 Club* with her co-author, psychiatrist — and now husband — Lawrence Pazder.

Pazder told *The Commercial Appeal* he has spent about one-third of his time in recent years consulting on ritual abuse cases.

Ms. Smith's trips back to childhood occurred on Pazder's psychiatric couch, where she recalled vivid details of ritual abuse during her early childhood. She told about:

■ Being drugged, with needles stuck in her arms.

■ Traveling in a tunnel, and being taken to another home where she was sexually assaulted by black-robed women who carried candles and chanted. One woman stuck a colored stick in her rectum.

■ A birthday cake on a dresser, and a policeman who came to the door but

did not save her.

■ Snakes, spiders and mice, dead kittens, a teddy bear and a clown.

■ Nighttime trips to cemeteries where she — and even a dead cat — were buried.

■ Being forced to denounce God, drink urine, and defecate on a Bible and a crucifix.

■ Being taken to a house that looked like a church. There was a round bed, and different men were brought there each night.

■ Being put in a cage.

■ Being forced to eat a dead baby.

Versions of these stories have appeared in ritual abuse cases across the country.

Near the book's end, Ms. Smith describes a rash that developed on her skin. She and Pazder concluded it was the devil wrapping its tail around her neck.

"I don't believe the devil comes to Earth and wraps its tail around people, so I tend to discount the book a little bit," Jon Conte, an associate professor in the University of Chicago's School of Social Services Administration, said wryly. Conte has written extensively on abuse cases.

Melton said he doubts Ms. Smith's accounts because it would take "incredible stupidity" on the part of Satan worshipers or any other cultists to commit the acts described in the book and allow the victim to survive and possibly speak out about the abuse.

Memphis investigators and parents have said they read Ms. Smith's book, as well as *Children in Chains*, a 1981 book by Clifford Linedecker, during the Georgian Hills investigation.

A blurb on that book's cover describes it as "a searing indictment of a society that fails to protect its children from prostitution and pornography."

The book theorizes why authorities believe children could be murdered but not missed by parents or police.

It refers to undocumented accounts of children being bought or kidnapped in Mexico and brought to the United States, "primarily for the purposes of killing. An American youngster has a school record and a family. But if a child has been taken off the streets of Guadalajara or Acapulco, it's much easier (than killing an American)."

There are a wealth of stories in any public library on witchcraft, satanism and the study of vampires. Many contain accounts of rituals and folklore, some of which contain similarities to what children have said in much-publicized ritual abuse trials.

One of the books is *The Satanic Bible*. Former police sergeant Jerry Davis, a self-professed expert on satanic crimes who helped investigate Georgian Hills, cites LaVey's book as evidence that satanism is serious business.

But others, such as Melton, say the book is considered tongue-in-cheek — promoting "assertiveness training with a satanic twist." The book advocates self-indulgence and certain rituals.

*Majick in Theory and Practice*, by Crowley, is cited as a possible manual used by devil worshipers. It seems to describe the sacrifice of infants to "liberate" a sort of cosmic energy, with a footnote appearing to indicate that Crowley (1875-1947) killed as many as 150 babies a year.

However, Melton said Crowley's writings are widely misinterpreted. He said Crowley used imagery and metaphors that in fact describe sexual acts — a type of code to bypass censors of the day.

Melton said that when Crowley wrote about killing babies, he was describing masturbation — which "killed" because it doesn't produce offspring.



## JUSTICE ABUSED

A 1980s WITCH - HUNT

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**JON CONTE**  
Associate professor  
University of Chicago

From Page A10

## Lanning

and the FBI for an exhaustive effort to solve a national riddle.

Lanning said he has been as puzzled as anyone about the ritual abuse allegations. He said he did nothing to encourage reports of sex abuse involving Satan worship. Instead, he sought answers.

That's why in February 1985 he was host to another Quantic seminar, this time attended by investigators and prosecutors working on ritual abuse cases in a dozen cities.

Two investigators from the Georgian Hills case attended that session, as well as social workers assigned to a similar case in Nashville.

The 25 participants gathered around a table and shared information and ideas about their cases, said Stevens, who was present.

Based on findings from this session, and consultation with investigators, prosecutors and parents in about 150 cases, Lanning has noted numerous problems in the way abuse investigations are handled:

■ Authorities sometimes rely on therapeutic interviews for the fact-finding upon which they build their cases. Therapeutic interviews are conducted by social workers and mental health therapists, primarily to help children deal with psychological trauma.

Investigative interviews should be handled by properly trained law en-

forcement officers who challenge information from witnesses and hold it to a higher standard of credibility, Lanning said.

"Investigations should have been done by investigators, and therapists should have done the therapy," he said of the cases he has consulted. "They could have cooperated, but stayed in their respective disciplines."

Some interviewers are wrongly convinced that children don't lie about sex abuse. Lanning said he has found children rarely lie about sexual abuse, but sometimes they say things that are untrue, or they are confused.

In some cases, children have been asked leading questions by parents and investigators and were rewarded with toys, candy, even Cabbage Patch dolls, for giving information.

Some people interviewing children — parents, social workers, police, therapists, whoever — are recruiters "to the brotherhood and sisterhood of the sexually abused," rather than finders of fact.

"There are some people who have what I refer to as a hidden agenda. Perhaps they were victims of sexual assault," Lanning said.

He does not believe that former abuse victims should automatically be excluded from investigating child sex abuse cases, but "they must carefully evaluate their motives and ensure they are maintaining a professional, objective approach."

To bolster children's claims of abuse, some investigators rely on mental health "experts" who have exper-

ience in child incest cases, but who lack experience with cases involving multiple offenders and multiple victims.

Some, Lanning says, are quick to interpret common childhood behavior — nightmares or preoccupation with urine and feces — as indications of satanic ritualism.

Interviewers sometimes failed to consider movies and toys, and the influence, motives or background of family and friends when assessing a child's statement.

Children could learn about sexual or ritualistic activity from pornography, from witnessing sex at home or from watching other children being abused, Lanning said.

Movies with seemingly innocent titles but R-rated content may put ideas in children's heads, and words in their mouths. Lanning described a movie he and his son, 12, recently rented.

He thought the movie was about "fluffy gremlins. We go home and pop it into the machine, press play, two minutes later I'm watching a satanic ritual. Guys in robes, an altar, goat heads on the wall, people are bringing up babies to be sacrificed on the altar. I said to my son, 'What are we watching here?' 'Hey, it's a good movie, Dad! It's the Ghoules!' I said, 'Cut it! We're not watching it. Turn it off.'"

He doesn't discount strange stories by children, saying "anything is possible."

Some of the things they have described — urination, defecation, being tied up — are practices of "mainstream" sexual deviants.

Problems develop, Lanning said, when stories are obtained through improper questioning and there is no factual evidence to support the child's

statements.

"Why are children alleging things that don't seem to be true? Why does a child talk about pins and needles and knives and daggers being inserted in their genitals? And you take a child to the doctor and there's not a mark on the kid?"

Children allege murders but no bodies are found, he said.

The child's statement then has little credibility in court.

The goal for investigators, he said, is to build such a solid case against the accused that the alleged molester will plead guilty and the child never has to testify in court, he said.

Lanning fears problems with ritual abuse cases are beginning to make prosecutors reluctant to prosecute other child sex cases. That means child molesters may be getting away with their crimes, he fears.

Lanning said it may be possible that some well-intentioned prevention programs aimed at warning children about missing or sexually exploited children may be missing their mark.

Most missing children involve parental snatchings, or runaways, but children don't know that, he said.

"They're eating their morning cereal. They look at a couple of pictures of kids on milk cartons. They think all these kids have been snatched and chopped up in little pieces."

"I'm not saying we shouldn't have these awareness programs. I'm not saying we shouldn't be trying to locate missing children. But I think we have to consider some other aspects and come up with an explanation for all this. And then we'll be able to move forward."

Part 2 of 6  
Battling the devil



## JUSTICE ABUSED

A  
1980s  
WITCH - HUNT

Part 3 of 6  
**Flaws in  
the system**

### System promotes charges, say critics Good motive goes astray

Legal reforms **A13**

By Tom Charlier  
Staff Reporter

**T**he complaint was child sex abuse. The caller, anonymous.

Massachusetts social workers in New Braintree pursued the complaint. They concluded that children had been molested, sodomized, defecated upon and photographed nude at the Caring for Kids day care center.

In a licensing hearing, the center's operators were cleared: A state chancellor ruled that none of the allegations had happened. No criminal charges were filed.

Victory for the defendants came only after six months of battling the Massachusetts child protection system.

The child protection system, which uses similar methods and follows similar standards nationwide, is composed of social workers, doctors and therapists — and it has been given unprecedented powers.

The Commercial Appeal reviewed 36 ritual sex abuse investigations and found that the child protection system is ill-equipped to filter out unfounded allegations or to handle large investigations.

The newspaper found overwhelming evidence that the system remains staffed by workers who are poorly trained and overburdened as the result of an explosion in abuse reports. The system is riddled with biases that, according to some official reviews, tilt decisions

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**S**ince 1983 the nation has seen a dramatic increase in the number of reported cases of child sex abuse. A crime once hushed up had come out into the open.

Along the way, new social therapy theories and criminal investigative methods were rushed into use. As the best-known child sex abuse cases became notorious as much for the way they were handled as for the accusations children made, evidence now shows a kind of mass hysteria swept the country. Hysteria led some authorities, urged on by frightened parents and credulous members of the press, into a witch-hunt unparalleled in modern times.

Four years after the first cases attracted national publicity, many of the investigations have produced more questions than answers. This series explores those questions and how a social system created to protect the nation's young also has done harm to innocent people and brought about controversial issues that obscure the truth about child sex abuse.

From Page A12

## System

against people suspected of sex abuse. The investigations that resulted have been found to be fraught with error and themselves abusive:

■ In Bakersfield, Calif., a judge declared that child protection social workers "completely terrorized" and "warped" a child for the purposes of maintaining the prosecution's case against alleged sex abusers.

The men and women targeted in this investigation eventually were exonerated.

■ In Coos Bay, Ore., social workers threatened to take a child from her mother if the girl retracted an abuse allegation against a day care operator, wrote a state hearing officer, who described the investigation as abusive to children and the community.

In Jordan, Minn., numerous children were told by therapists that they might be reunited with their parents if they "admitted" they had been sexually abused, according to a report by state and federal officials. A number of adults were implicated in a sweeping investigation of alleged molestation, child pornography and murder. Lois and Robert Bentz, the only two defendants tried in the Jordan case, were acquitted. James Rud, the first suspect in the investigation, pleaded guilty. At least two of the children still have not been returned to their families.

■ In New Braintree, workers and therapists lacked objectivity, filed false reports and ignored evidence that the incidents couldn't have occurred as alleged, a state chancellor ruled. A more balanced investigation, he wrote, would have pointed to the likelihood that all the allegations could be traced to a foster child known to have been abused elsewhere.

Under the laws governing the nation's child protection system, state and county child protection agencies are responsible for investigating abuse claims — including those made anonymously. The agencies then determine if there is reasonable evidence to support the claims.

In cases that are substantiated, usually with the help of a judge or other authorities, an agency can take children from their homes; can have a day care center's license revoked; can label an unconvicted person as a child abuser in state files, and can launch a criminal case.

Often, however, the agencies are missing the mark. A 1981 report by the National Center for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, for instance, estimated that in about half of the cases substantiated by child protection agencies, the child had not been mistreated.

As a result, the relatively new field of child abuse prevention has been punctuated by some "real miscarriages of

justice," said Douglas Besharov, former director of the center.

They have occurred, said LeRoy Schultz, a professor in the University of West Virginia's School of Social Work, because the child protection system operates in such a way that when an allegation of sex abuse is made, "the presumption is, one is guilty — right off the bat."

Child protection agencies, according to officials, are more likely to validate allegations of sexual abuse than they are reports of other types of abuse.

Agency officials say that is because trustworthy professionals — teachers and doctors — are the sources of many sex abuse reports. But factors cited by others include the backgrounds and training levels of social workers.

Critics and supporters of the system alike say most of those workers are well-meaning and diligent.

"I think what they're trying to do is ... what is best for the child," said John Bradford, spokesman for the Alabama Department of Human Resources.

"I really think we're dealing with people who want to do the right thing, make the right decision," said Luiz Natalicio, an El Paso psychologist and critic of the system.

In several large sex abuse cases, investigations often went in dramatically different directions, depending on the individual biases, methods and capabilities of social workers, according to courts and state and federal officials.

In a report on the Bakersfield investigations, state Atty. Gen. John K. Van de Kamp cited the influence of at least one "overzealous" social worker who took over duties normally reserved for law enforcement officials. By the time hundreds of charges were dropped, accusations had grown to the point that one of the alleged molesters was another social worker investigating the case.

In New Braintree, two social workers "conducted almost identical investigations but reached opposite conclusions," wrote chancellor Christopher F. Connolly. He cited apparent biases on the part of the second worker, whose conclusions triggered the department's case against the day care center.

In El Paso, during an initial investigation into alleged abuse at a YMCA day care center, a case worker interviewed parents, children and teachers and made unannounced visits to the facility. The case worker concluded there was no evidence of abuse.

A later investigation involved a different worker, aided by a police officer, who visited parents and informed them that there was reason to suspect abuse at the center. A criminal investigation followed that led to convictions.

Critics note that the training social workers receive encourages them to step beyond the role of objective fact-finders in investigations.

A 1978 handbook, for instance, stated that interviewers' work should "aid the prosecution to establish a case against the perpetrator." Other literature exhorts investigators to act as child advocates and to show children that they believe their disclosures of alleged abuse.

"They're so anxious to support the child — that's exactly the wrong attitude to take if you're an investigator," said Lee Coleman, a Berkeley, Calif., psychiatrist and frequent defense expert witness in abuse cases.

Poor training and a lack of experience among social workers also have been factors in some cases.

According to a survey last year by the National Child Welfare Resources Center at the University of Southern Maine, 75 percent of abuse cases were handled by someone without a college degree in social work — a proportion that has not changed in the past decade. Of those handled by college graduates, only about a third went to staffers who had a master's degree in social work.

By the agencies' own ratings, the survey said, social workers with anything less than a master's degree in social work are relatively ill-prepared for work in abuse cases.

Once they get their jobs, the social workers usually aren't given adequate training, according to the General Accounting Office.

Most states offer in-service training sessions and coursework. Besharov said the workshops and seminars provided by agencies are inadequate to teach workers how to interview children and assess allegations.

In West Jefferson, Ohio, social workers based their conclusion that a day care worker had sexually abused children largely on child interviews that incorporated anatomically correct dolls. According to testimony in a suit filed by the defendant, who was acquitted, the workers had received less than one day's training in how to use the dolls.

A study prepared for the Society for Research in Child Development in Baltimore showed that of the child protection workers surveyed, fewer than half had received any instructions on how to use the dolls, which have become increasingly prevalent in abuse cases.

In the Bakersfield investigations, Van de Kamp stated that eight of the nine child protection workers involved had no training in sex abuse cases.

Low pay and heavy workload often make it difficult for child protection agencies to attract qualified workers.

The survey from Maine showed that starting salaries for social workers vary widely from state to state, ranging from \$6,917 to \$26,520 annually. Even after several years' service, some workers receive only \$10,270 a year.

The workload for those workers has expanded as reports for all types of abuse have tripled since 1976. Reports now exceed 2 million each year. One reason for the high number of reports is that under existing legislation, "abuse" is broadly defined to include corporal punishment and belittling a child, officials say.

Some states — New Jersey, Tennessee

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## JUSTICE ABUSED

A 1980s WITCH-HUNT

# Prosecutors honing edge in duel of reforms, rights

By Tom Charlier  
Staff Reporter

We cannot ever permit emotion-charged issues to erode our basic liberties.

— Judge M. P. Duncan, Texas Court of Criminal Appeals

In northern New Jersey, the judge and jury stayed in one room, the defendant was shuttled off to another, and in a third room sat the children. Via closed-circuit television, the children testified to all involved that they were fondled and sexually assaulted with sticks and silverware.

In El Paso, Texas, a court heard about alleged sex abuse at a YMCA day care center — not just from children, but from parents who recounted second-hand what their children had said to them at home about the acts. The cases were half a continent apart and produced different verdicts — acquittal in New Jersey, conviction in El Paso.

But both incorporated courtroom rules and procedures that would have been unheard-of in the United States only a decade ago.

Outraged by skyrocketing abuse complaints and reports of dismal conviction rates, courts and legislatures across the country have authorized a steady stream of reforms giving prosecutors more leverage and latitude in abuse cases.

Defense attorneys charge that reforms have come at the cost of defendants' rights. They say the measures — taking hold in advance of an epidemic of large sex abuse investigations — have helped stack the deck against people facing an emotion-laden criminal charge that is difficult to fight.

They have launched challenges — some of them successful.

In California, a defendant succeeded in preventing evidence obtained through the use of anatomically correct dolls from being used against him. In Texas, courts ruled that certain videotaped-testimony procedures run afoul of defendants' constitutional rights.

The controversy, say many, strikes at the central difficulty of handling abuse cases in the criminal court system — the age of the children who must provide information, The Commercial Appeal found.

The reforms include the following: ■ At least 33 states have adopted laws allowing children's testimony to be videotaped, or to be broadcast via closed-circuit television.

■ Twenty-seven states have incorporated exceptions to traditional hearsay rules. Typically called "first-outcry," or "fresh-complaint" laws, the measures allow parents or other specified adults to testify about children's statements concerning abuse.

■ Twenty-two states have dropped age guidelines stipulating how old a witness must be to be presumed competent.

■ All 50 states have dropped requirements that children's testimony about abuse be corroborated by adult testimony or physical evidence.

The overriding aim of the reforms has been to obtain evidence from younger children — but in ways that shielded them from courtroom embarrassment and the trauma of having to face abusers. Most challenges to them, predictably, have dealt with defendants' constitutional right to face their accusers.

States, borrowing from legal tradition that dated to English common law, had long held that children below a certain age — usually 10 or 14, years — were presumed to be incompetent witnesses.

Reformers noted that this prevented courts from hearing the accounts of the central figures in abuse cases — the victims.

"If you rule children's testimony out, what you're doing is basically giving adults freedom to sexually abuse children," said Michael Wald, a Stanford University law professor.

Others question how far the reforms should go.

"There are a lot of wrongly accused people out there. There are a lot of malicious or incompetent prosecutors who would abuse the testimony of children for their own careers," said

Philip Jenkins, associate professor of criminal justice at Pennsylvania State University.

One of the most common reforms involved the use of videotape or closed-circuit television to bring children's testimony into court. Most states' laws now allow defense lawyers to cross-examine children during the taping.

The Texas law, one of the strongest in the nation, was struck down because it had no such allowance. An appellate court ruled in July that it deprived defendants of their constitutional right to confront their accusers.

The ruling was roundly criticized by law enforcement officials as denying them an important tool in prosecuting abusers. As a result of the decision, one of the two convictions in a case involving the El Paso YMCA was overturned.

Another practice judged legally suspect is the use of anatomically correct dolls to obtain evidence. The dolls, complete with adult genitalia, make it easier for children to describe acts of abuse, proponents contended.

In an abuse case in California, a state appellate court ruled evidence obtained with the aid of the dolls as inadmissible. The court found that the dolls represent a new scientific technique that has yet to be established as acceptable.

Most courts in other states still allow that evidence.

Equally controversial — but as yet untouched by legal challenge — have been the "fresh-complaint" laws that bend traditional rules of hearsay. Those rules had been designed to protect defendants from being incriminated by hearsay testimony, which generally is considered unreliable and cannot be directly challenged by the defense.

Increasingly, parents and other adults have been allowed to testify as to what their children told them about abuse — again, to cut down on the need for children to take the stand. The statements can be introduced as proof that abuse had occurred.

In some states, the laws allow such testimony only when it concerns a child's initial — and spontaneous — outcry about abuse. In others, therapists and parents are allowed to testify about conversations they had with alleged victims.

Critics charged that with the law, no one can be sure if abuse allegations are made in accurate, objective statements from children.

"I think they gotta kill it (the hearsay exception)," said critic Wallace Mlyniec, director of the juvenile justice clinic at Georgetown University.

"I can't think of anything more unfair than to be charged with a crime and to let a statement in that I can't test through cross-examination."

Katrin Frank, a Seattle lawyer who formerly headed an abuse shelter, said the laws increase the chances of an innocent person being convicted. The children's statements can be taken out of context, misinterpreted or misrepresented by adults, she said.

In the absence of videotape and other reforms, courts across the country have allowed young children to take the stand. Widely adopted rules permit them to sit in the lap or hold the hand of a parent or other person while testifying.

Before the U.S. Supreme Court now is an appeal from an Iowa man convicted in an abuse case after two girls testified behind a one-way mirror. He contends that the mirror — used so the girls couldn't see the defendant while testifying — had a prejudicial influence on the jury.

Usually, a child's testimony is allowed after a judge conducts a hearing to ensure the youngster knows the difference between the truth and a lie and understands the need to be truthful. Some defense lawyers argue that the testing isn't comprehensive enough.

"They weren't asked if they understood whether other people could get in trouble if they lied," said Juliane Balliro, a Boston lawyer who represented day care workers convicted in a case in nearby Malden.

Ms. Balliro also said the court would not allow her to have experts determine whether the children were competent to testify.

Courts have granted wide berth to expert witnesses called by prosecutors. In some cases, including the Georgian Hills case in Memphis, judges have allowed mental health professionals to give their opinions as to whether allegations are true.

"That's a jury's function," said Mlyniec. "Quite frankly, I don't think a psychologist is any better at telling whether someone is being truthful than you and I are."

The effect of these and other reforms has been a "large diminution of rights normally given to defendants," said Barry Zwillman, an Irvington, N.J., lawyer who successfully defended a case involving a camp counselor.

Kim Hart, a national board member of the group Victims of Child Abuse Laws, said the laws are "just an easy way to get an easy win" for prosecutors. VOCAL is a national group composed of people who claim they have been falsely accused of abuse.

Reformers deny that the legal changes infringed on defendants' rights. In fact, they say, any imbalances in abuse cases are tilted in defendants' favor.

"I think these reforms have given prosecutors some more tools to tip the balance in more of an even way," said Howard Davidson, director of the American Bar Association's child advocacy center, which prepared many model laws for states.

Prosecutors have noted that skilled defense lawyers have little trouble confusing and discrediting small children on the stand. Also, authorities estimate that more than 85 percent of the time, sexual abuse leaves no physical evidence — making prosecution even more difficult.

In a 1985 study, the National Institute of Justice reported that fewer than 10 percent of all abuse allegations led to criminal prosecutions.

"The unfortunate result is that many suspects are released without the imposition of justice. They not only escape any penalty, but have the opportunity for further abuse of their initial victims or other children," wrote James K. Stewart, the institute's director.

That study is not universally accepted. Differences in the way that abuse statistics are defined and compiled from state to state and county to county render it impossible to make such assertions, say many.

"I've seen numbers in California that range from 10 percent to 60 percent," Wald said. "I think we just don't have any idea."

Proponents of the reforms acknowledge the constitutional and emotional concerns raised by the reforms. For instance, the cross-examination process sometimes requires defense lawyers to become the courtroom "bad guys," said Janet Kosid, former legal technical assistance director for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

Lawyers on both sides acknowledge that abuse cases create an emotional climate that can affect juries.

"There is a perception in some quarters that the defendant is guilty until proven innocent," said Richard Ginkowski, a longtime Wisconsin prosecutor who edited the ABA's guidelines for child victims and witnesses.

In El Paso, a mistrial was declared because of certain irregularities and because a juror stated her wish to have an appellate court judge the case. The juror was quoted as saying she thought the defendant was innocent, but voted for conviction because she didn't want to be labeled as one who "condones child abuse." A second trial resulted in conviction.

"It's very hard for a jury to deal with on a rational basis. It becomes sort of a community witch-hunt," said John Langford, a defense lawyer in the El Paso cases.

The intensity of public outrage over sexual abuse has been reflected in drastically increased jail sentences.

Florida and North Carolina, for instance, have approved mandatory life sentences for people convicted of sexually abusing children.

In large abuse cases where there have been convictions, new legal mandates have reaped some of the longest sentences meted out by the courts that tried them. In the Bakersfield "sex-ring" cases, sentences of up to 405 years were imposed.

In El Paso, a woman was sentenced to life plus 311 years before her conviction was overturned.

"If you rule children's testimony out, what you're doing is basically giving adults freedom to sexually abuse children."

MICHAEL WALD  
Stanford University

Part 3 of 6  
Flaws in  
the system

By Colin Ruthven



## JUSTICE ABUSED

A  
1980s  
WITCH-HUNT



# Legal soundings hit same depths from case to case

**I**n child sex abuse investigations throughout the United States, more than the stories have been similar. The reporting and dissemination of allegations and the methods of investigation in many of the cases have followed the same general patterns — although their outcomes have not.

Here are nutshell profiles of four major ritual abuse cases; four more will be presented tomorrow.

**B**AKERSFIELD, Calif. — Between 1982 and 1985, the Kern County Sheriff's Department uncovered several alleged child molestation rings. In three of the last cases, deputies arrested almost two dozen people — more than 100 others were suspected — and accused them of abusing children in sex orgies and satanic rituals.

Juries sent some of the accused to prison for the longest terms in California history, largely based on the unsubstantiated testimony of children as young as 3.

This is how it began: In 1982, eight people were arrested in the first molestation case, the "Kniffen-McCuan ring."

The complaint was made by two girls after they had gone to live with their stepgrandmother, a woman so paranoid about sexual molestation that she had to be confined to a mental hospital, court records indicated.

In May 1984, two couples were convicted of molesting their own and each other's children, and received prison sentences of 240 to 268 years. Two other defendants skipped town.

Charges were dropped against two other defendants, who sued the county.

The case was significant in that it led to the formation of a group of sheriff's deputies, social workers and attorney general's office employees who began to investigate child sexual abuse cases.

One of the most controversial cases involved the Pitts and Dill families, whose members were natives of Arkansas and Oklahoma. That case surfaced in February 1984.

Seven people, convicted of molestation, child pornography, conspiracy and assault charges, were sent to prison for 285 to 405 years each.

Two defendants fled before trial. A 13-year-old girl whose testimony helped convict relatives has since said she lied because of pressure from investigators.

"I told them nothing had happened, but they kept after me and after me and after me, over and over and over. So I finally said something had happened so they would stop bugging me about it." That case is on appeal.

In June 1984, deputies arrested Johnny Gonzalez and his minister, Will Thomas, on charges that they molested two girls, ages 5 and 6. Both said they were innocent.

By early 1985, 19 other children — all in foster care and out of contact with their families — told nearly identical

stories of ritual abuse after being repeatedly questioned by investigators. Sixty youngsters named 80 suspects and said 29 infants were killed. Seven people were arrested on felony charges.

Defendant Leroy Stowe, a hospital worker who said he did not know the other people who had been accused, was the only one among the seven to go to trial.

He was convicted on the testimony of children, but the conviction was overturned on appeal. The court's ruling stated Stowe's conviction may have been a "travesty of justice."

Thomas, the minister, was released from jail after nine months when he pleaded no contest to a charge of child endangerment and a separate charge of unlawful sexual intercourse with his 17-year-old fiancée.

Gonzalez, after 2½ years in jail, pleaded no contest to one count of child endangerment in a bargain in which the district attorney's office dropped more than 300 molestation charges against the five other defendants.

Gonzalez is seeking the return of his children. All the children allegedly killed were found to be alive.

At least five children have since recanted their stories of Satan worship and child killings.

Convictions are on appeal. A state review criticized every government agency involved in the investigations.

It found the welfare department and the sheriff's office were unable to perform the most basic investigatory duties in child molestation cases, and that much of what children said about satanic rituals was not believable. "No physical evidence was found to substantiate such claims while much was found to disprove them."

The sheriff was voted out of office. Many of the formerly accused are suing their accusers. Others are trying to get out of prison.

**C**HICAGO — On April 5, 1984, Beth Vargo went to pick up her 4-year-old daughter at the Rogers Park Jewish Community Center's day care center on Chicago's North Side. As she stood at the bottom of the stairway, she heard the girl tell janitor Deloart Parks to leave her alone.

Mrs. Vargo questioned her daughter when they got home. The child said Parks tickled her in "the vagina."

Mrs. Vargo met with school officials but was not happy with their response. She talked with a therapist, who recommended she call the Department of Children and Family Services. The investigation began.

On April 18, police, social workers and a therapist met with 120 parents and asked them to fill out a questionnaire that would indicate whether children had been molested.

Children were referred to a private, nonprofit sexual abuse treatment center for diagnosis. An employee of that agency, Allen Friedman, designed the interview format and conducted most of the interviews with 88 children, as-

sisted by a social worker and detective. (Almost a year later, Friedman admitted that he had exaggerated his training in child sexual abuse and his previous work experience. He also was criticized for showing youngsters coloring books with cartoons of animals with sex organs.)

About one-fourth of the 88 children made 246 allegations involving Parks and a dozen teachers at the school.

Within a week after her first disclosure, Mrs. Vargo's daughter told her about nude picture-taking sessions.

Mrs. Vargo and other parents grew increasingly alarmed. Some met with newspaper and television reporters. They rejected state therapists and sent their children to therapists of their choosing.

Practically all the accusations came from children in at least five families. As time progressed, parents revealed that their children had told them increasingly bizarre stories.

Mrs. Vargo said her child reported teachers stuck needles in her eye and made children pray to the devil.

She said children were kept in a "jail" at the school while waiting to be molested; they were forced to kill a baby and watch as teachers dismembered the infant and threw it in the garbage.

"She went on to report that a black male infant was cooked in a pot on the stove and served to the children," Mrs. Vargo wrote in a diary.

The school director had a dead baby in her desk, Mrs. Vargo said her daughter had said.

The girl said a tall, blond woman with an accent — she called her Emika — "tied her up, beat her, put her in a garbage can and bit her."

Mrs. Vargo reported the statements to her daughter's therapist and investigators.

Children of two of Mrs. Vargo's best friends made similar accusations.

When other arrests were not forthcoming, parents complained about a botched investigation.

They contacted the governor and appeared on the Oprah Winfrey and Phil Donahue TV shows. Mrs. Vargo launched a letter-writing campaign.

Meanwhile, a second group of parents rose in support of Parks and the teachers.

Within weeks, children began to name parents who supported the day care center as having been involved in the molestations.

Parks was acquitted in a trial. None of the others was arrested, and a state investigation found no evidence that other day care workers had abused children.

Mrs. Vargo attends national child abuse conferences, and hopes to write a book about the case.

**S**ACRAMENTO, Calif. — In 1982, Gary Arthur Dill was working in the El Torrito restaurant. He was married and had four young children.

In 1983, the family moved to Fresno and the Dills separated. The wife moved to Vallejo to live with her mother, Doris Bell.

On April 22, 1984, one of the Dill daughters told her grandmother, Mrs. Bell, that one of her sisters was simulating sex with a brother.

Mrs. Bell talked to the children. The older ones denied anything, but one girl began to make disclosures about sexual abuse.

Mrs. Bell kept a journal. After questioning the child for weeks, in June 1984 Mrs. Bell reported to a social worker that the children had been molested. Dill and John Holman, his roommate, were arrested. There was insufficient evidence to prosecute.

Mrs. Bell had the children interviewed by a doctor on videotape; she complained to the state attorney general about the lack of action from the Sacramento district attorney's office.

Mrs. Bell began to investigate on her own, and made allegations about "snuff" films (movies, generally pornographic, in which people are actually killed while the camera is rolling).

She accused four men who worked in the restaurant with Dill. They were arrested in January 1985. Bail was set at \$500,000 each.

The Dill children talked about cannibalism, sex abuse and the killing of children in a basement.

A group of social workers and therapists believed the children, but some doctors didn't.

In court, the children testified that their grandmother told them what to say.

The judge dismissed charges, saying they resulted from "inhumane interrogation techniques" used by their "severely mentally ill" grandmother.

The men were released from jail.

**S**EQUIM, Wash. — There's a supermarket and a barn along the highway leading out of this disheveled little town at the foot of the Olympic Mountains — profound, if ordinary-looking, landmarks on the way to the day care center that Cora Priest operated out of her cinder block home.

The grocery store is the workplace of three women who sent children to the highly regarded day care center, which had been operating for more than 20 years. The barn was among areas searched by authorities looking for evidence that children had been abused in satanic rituals.

Since the first allegations concerning the day care center surfaced in April 1986, supporters and accusers of Mrs. Priest, 63, and her son Ralph, 37, have played out something akin to a bitter political campaign.

Investigators, meanwhile, searched and dug, and interviewed scores of children.

The case stalled last year when Clallum County prosecutor David Bruneau convinced a local court to drop — at least for the time being — charges of indecent liberties against the Priests.

At about the same time, he asked for the resignation of his deputy prosecutor on the case, Debra Conklin-Taylor.

The case surfaced after an area woman placed her 2-year-old granddaughter in the day care center for the first time. After the two-hour stay, the grandmother noticed a redness in the girl's vaginal area.

Medical tests found no evidence of abuse, but word spread among parents of possible problems.

Suspicious focused on Ralph Priest. Two weeks after the visit by the 2-year-old, he was arrested and jailed under \$100,000 bond.

Some four months later, after Priest and his mother had been charged, Ms. Conklin-Taylor told television reporters that the case had strong satanic overtones.

By that time, children had told of a pig being killed in a bathtub, eyes being plucked out of children, and hands reaching up from couches.

One girl told of an incident in which she and Priest stabbed a horse while riding it and licked the blood.

Kim O'Neal, the deputy prosecutor in charge of the case, acknowledged a lack of physical evidence in the investigation.

Charges could be refiled, she said, if compelling evidence surfaces.

"Quite frankly, I don't think a psychologist is any better at telling whether someone is being truthful than you and I are."

### WALLACE MLYNIEC

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