

APworld

Winter 1991

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Courts Reveal the History of Our Times

By
Linda Deutsch

I've spent more time in courtrooms during the past two decades than many lawyers spend in a lifetime — a fact that continues to amaze me. After all, my ambition when I came to AP was to cover Hollywood. I wanted to tell stories of the entertainment industry, its make-believe dramas and glittering stars. That dream came true, but my career quickly turned toward real life drama and characters larger than fiction.

What screenwriter could have invented Charles Manson and his murderous “family?” And who could have dreamed up the bizarre tale of Patty Hearst and the Symbionese Liberation Army?

I'm often asked what led me to specialize in trials. One answer is the lure of stories so dazzling that they distracted me from my original goal and gave me the chance to compose a virtual social history of our times.

As AP's trial specialist based in Los Angeles, I have occupied the front-row aisle seat in countless courts where high-profile cases riveted the attention of the world. Many of the defendants I've covered have moved from the front pages into history books.

A few of the hundreds of California cases I've reported were those of Charles Manson, Angela Davis, Daniel Ellsberg, Patty Hearst, John De Lorean and Raymond Buckey. There were also defendants remembered by their nicknames: “The Hillside Strangler,” “The Freeway Killer,” “The Night Stalker.”

Outside the state, I traveled to Aspen, Colo., for the manslaughter trial of singer Claudine Longet and years later to Phoenix, Ariz., for the impeachment trial of Gov. Evan Mecham. I spent two frozen months in Alaska covering the trial of Exxon Valdez skipper Joseph Hazelwood.

At first glance, these trials seem to have little in common. Yet each was a microcosm of the times in which it occurred. Social historians might look to the courts for clues to how America lives.

The 1969 murder of Sharon Tate and four others and the subsequent trial of Manson and three women followers was a cataclysmic finale to the vi-

olent, drug-wracked 1960s, a devastating coda for the era of “flower power” and “hippies.”

Angela Davis, a black communist professor ultimately acquitted of murder, brought the plight of black prisoners to the forefront in the early '70s, an era in which the Black Panthers and communist-bred revolutionaries emerged.

The 1973 Pentagon Papers trial of Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony Russo laid bare the truth about the Vietnam War and became a West Coast edition of the Watergate scandal. A short time later, I was dispatched to Guam to cover the fall and evacuation of Saigon.

Patty Hearst, heiress to a fortune, was convicted of armed bank robbery in a 1976 trial that raised issues of alienation among young people. It unearthed the seeds of discontent that grew into the Symbionese Liberation Army, the group that kidnapped the young deb. In a story that took two years to unravel, Patty became “Tania,” an underground heroine whose denunciation of her parents gave meaning to a '70s term: “the generation gap.”

The 1984 trial of John Z. De Lorean, the maverick auto maker acquitted of cocaine trafficking, told us about the yuppie '80s. It was a story of fast cars, a beautiful woman, vast sums of money and the drug of choice among the moneyed classes — cocaine. It also exposed flaws in the government's prized new tool — the sting operation.



Look further and you will see that impeached Gov. Evan Mecham was symbolic of an era of crackdowns on political corruption, and Capt. Joseph Hazelwood, acquitted on most charges, nev-

Deutsch interviews actor Marlon Brando after a hearing in Santa Monica on a murder charge against his son, Christian, charged in the death of his half-sister's lover. (Photo: Nick Ut)

ertheless symbolized the Exxon Valdez oil spill, a devastating disaster for the '90s, an age of environmental activism.

My role as a journalist chronicling these decades in court begins back in New Jersey, my home state, where I covered local beats including courts for the Asbury Park Press and Perth Amboy Evening News. I wrote movie reviews and had my own entertainment column before I graduated from Monmouth College and was urged by my newspaper editor uncle (Marvin Sosna of the Thousand Oaks News-Chronicle in California) to seek a career in the West.

Go to Hollywood? I was on my way.

But once I got to California, I found the real world of courtroom drama to be magnetic. The court was another kind of theater where morality plays began and ended every day. It was a place where you could follow a story from beginning to end, put a puzzle together and see its meaning become clear.

As a court reporter in this litigious age, I do find myself writing about movie and TV stars. Joan Collins, Lee Marvin, Carol Burnett, Rock Hudson, Valerie Harper and Mark Harmon are among celebrities who became principal figures in court cases. Marlon Brando granted one of his longest interviews ever in connection with his son's arrest on murder charges. Art Buchwald's plagiarism suit over the Eddie Murphy movie "Coming to America" put my stories on the front page of *Variety*.

And there was the matter of timing. I arrived at the AP in Los Angeles when more big stories led to the courthouse than ever before. In 1968, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated and I was assigned to assist two veteran AP reporters, Harry Rosenthal and Art Everett, in covering the trial of Sirhan Sirhan.

In 1969, the Sharon Tate murders thrust me into the biggest story I had ever covered — a collision of Hollywood and the violent world of a hippie cult leader. I wrote about the grisly murders, followed the hunt for the killers and spent 10 ½ months covering the bizarre, chaotic trial in which Manson and three women were convicted of murder. I continue to cover parole hearings and other developments in a case that still fascinates the world. After Manson, big trials were my specialty. In quick succession, I covered the Pentagon Papers trial and, with Edith Lederer, the Angela Davis trial. On Feb. 4, 1974, I was in the AP bureau when a bulletin from San Francisco reported the Patty Hearst kidnapping. The desk supervisor shouted across the newsroom: "Here comes another trial for Linda to cover."

When people suggest that court reporting is a

static occupation, I tell them about the summer and fall of 1975.

In August, after my return from Guam, I was in Pennsylvania following leads on the missing Patty Hearst when I received a phone call from the Los Angeles bureau. Lynette Squeaky Fromme, a Manson follower, had aimed a gun at President Gerald Ford in a Sacramento park. She was under arrest. How fast could I get there?

I flew all night, arrived in San Francisco before dawn and drove to Sacramento where I quickly found Sandra Good, Squeaky's roommate, and obtained an interview. The two Manson women had

"The court was another kind of theater ..."

written me a letter from their Sacramento home, which I had reported on the AP wire weeks before. So I knew where they were even if the Secret Service would say later they had no idea the young women were in Sacramento.

A few days later, I was in a hotel room awaiting a promised jail-house interview with Squeaky when the phone rang. It was AP San Francisco. Bill and Emily Harris, Patty Hearst's kidnappers, had been captured and it was likely Patty was about to be arrested. I drove to San Francisco at record speed and arrived in time for her arraignment.

But that was not the end. Within days, as I followed pretrial hearings in the Hearst case, President Ford again became the subject of an assassination attempt in San Francisco's Union Square. A former mental patient, Sarah Jane Moore, was arrested, and I had another case to follow.

When young reporters ask about the most important skills for covering courts, I tell them to learn how to dictate well, to take accurate and fast notes without depending on a tape recorder (many courts don't allow them) and to learn patience when trials drift off into tedium. It's not all Perry Mason drama. But the big moments are worth waiting for.

And in those big moments, when all hell is breaking loose, you have to learn to have eyes in the back of your head, to see and hear everything and somehow put it all into a story so that your readers will know not only what happened but what it was like to be there when history was made.

✍️ *Beginning with the trials of Sirhan Sirhan and Charles Manson in the late 1960s, Deutsch has covered some of the most famous and notorious defendants of the past 20 years.*

