

The Sorrows of Young Elmer

A favorite ploy for exposing the lamentable benightedness of America's bourgeois citizenry, resorted to by suburban schoolkeepers and related tin pot intellectualoids whose cosmopolitanism is intimately bound up with their subscriptions to *Intellectual Digest* and *Psychology Today*, is to relate some horror story about a recent survey according to which only 3 percent of the nation's graduating high school seniors can actually identify the United Nation's first secretary-general or perform some other bit of utterly useless pedantry. As these tony dolts see it, America has sunk to the civilizational level of Guatamala if herds of students do not know the names and addresses of senators, representatives, supreme court justices, and other grandees of power and influence. Knowing such stuff is a sign of civic vigor and intellectual acuity, and I expect that these exaggerated school marms put it down as a very auspicious omen that the news media, today, abound with superficial reportage about everything from the futile showboating of some dubious political ne're-do-well to those few but genuine episodes of statecraft, which still occur in the great Republic.

In fact, today—unlike, say, the 1920s or the 1930s—our newspapers are so obsessed with their own strikingly sophomoric view of politics, that wisps of it drift even into the sports page, the entertainment section, and of course the women's page. Nowadays political high jinks is the transcendent concern of every ambitious young reporter, and that is why I personally shed a tear for young Elmer Wayne Henley, drop-out and admitted accomplice in the butchering of twenty-seven Houston children.

Had young Elmer followed his singular libidinous vibrations in the 1920s or the 1930s his celebrity would have been instant and enduring. With luck he would have inspired an affecting ballad in Woody Guthrie or an *ad hoc* committee headed by Theodore Dreiser and the Greenwich Village geniuses. If the Dreiser crowd were sedulous enough in puffing young Elmer into a cause, it is a certitude that sometime off in the glorious 1960s young Elmer, now passed off as the pathetic victim of American injustice, would become the subject of a Hollywood melodrama and the source of bounteous emoluments for some artsy Hollywood producer and afterhours radical. But because young Elmer chose to be a swinger in the 1970s his legend will slip quietly from the headlines, for his is an embarrassment to some and a bore to others.

Now of course the avocation of mass murder has always had its disadvantages, even in the 1930s. And, though Elmer's celebrity would have been assured in the 1930s, so too would have been his fate. Quite simply, and the humane pettifoggers notwithstanding, young Elmer would be granted his con-

stitutional day in court...thence his moment in the chair. With a flip of the switch he would be put out of his misery, and he would not have had to share his headlines with a 1930s edition of Sam Ervin, say Theodore Bilbo. Finally, as he set forth on his mysterious journey to the land of harps he would be secure in the knowledge that he loomed large in the conversations of his countrymen. For the uncomplicated Americans of yesteryear recognized a twisted monster when they saw one; neither were they too jaded nor too enlightened to be appalled and outraged by atrocity.

Today the Dreisers have prevailed, and though we do not as yet have an *Ad Hoc Committee To Free Young Elmer*, we do have searching essays from the *Los Angeles Times* and the Associated Press, which reach to the heights of McKuenesque poetry. These bogus specimens of *belles lettres* are the proud creations of moral idiots and romantic ignoramuses. Nevertheless, they are typical of what young Elmer can expect—in brief: 1) a sincere attempt to understand the roots of his sufferings, 2) the marshalling of a regiment of mountebank psychiatrists to attest to his misfortunes, 3) an elevated lecture or two on the primitive state of American society from some moron ACLU lawyer, 4) internment in a secluded calaboose or nut house, and 5) leisurely oblivion. In a decade or so the Dreisers of this world will discover that young Elmer has been devoting his waking hours to composing a new international language of bird calls or to teaching abandoned pigeon chicks to fly. They will spring him, and he will enter upon a quiet life of good works. Alas and amen.

The luckless young Elmer will fade from the American consciousness with the swiftness of a Manson or a Speck. He will as quickly evanesce from the headlines as Mr. Richard Whitman or Mr. Juan Corona. For the contemporary American newspapermen have tarried too long from their political gardens. Some of them have devoted weeks to Elmer's case and that is about the longest any of them can refrain from turning their noses to Washington. What is more, the political nuances radiating from this counterculture prodigy are discommoding in the extreme. So it is back to politics for them all. The journalistic buzz which surrounded the ghoulish doings of Lizzie Borden or John Dillinger or Pretty Boy Floyd will never accompany the ghost of our Elmer. He is a victim of his times.

Not only is the modern American press going to deny him notoriety, it is going to overlook the wickedness of his achievement. He will be portrayed as complicated, sensitive, troubled, victimized, and possibly creative. He might even be portrayed as a youth deeply troubled by war and urban sprawl, but never will a pundit portray him as evil.

For there is in the capacious treasury of American folklore an alluring myth according to which creatures like young Elmer are seen as something quite opposite from the evil wretches civilized men know them to be. They are victims—victims of a suffering situation, Kenneth Minnogue might say—and possessors of all sorts of spurious and ironic characteristics which inspire earnest literary efforts in third-rate reporters, which thrill demented readers, and which set wings flapping amongst the cuckoos of reform. According to this myth, the alleged murderer is, as I have suggested, the possessor of many ironic qualities, most of which make his alleged crimes a bit more fascinating and bourgeois America a bit less respectable.

Thus young Elmer's bemused confession had hardly been uttered before the Associated Press bilged forth with an idiotic article by some frustrated creative writer entitled: "Who is Elmer Henley? Youth's Life Has Been An Uphill Struggle." May my tongue curl into a tight little ball if that was not the title of what must now be certified as a classic rendering of this great American myth! With the care of a master craftsman the author has stuffed into his story every idiotic variation of the myth, including the claptrap about how the alleged criminal's life has been fraught with imponderable ironies.

Our AP poet begins his fable by contrasting young Elmer's grisly achievements with an obviously contrived personality profile drawn supposedly from his neighbors' reminiscences. Accordingly, we are given glimpses of the fabulous young Elmer as "the considerate elder of the family, trying to fill an absent father's role, going to his brothers' school to check on their progress." He is "reflective," a man whose "memories were his own," and who sought a change of cell because the boorish prisoners "were abusing him." Naturally he is "intelligent," "always gentle," and "always polite." No less an authority than his minister, the Rev. Matt Chambers, is summoned to scotch those readers inclined to snicker: "he was not different from any boy.... He had a deep sense of responsibility and felt he was a breadwinner." So there you are! Elmer Henley, future astronaut!

In a haunting conclusion our AP poet once again nudges our consciences, "Who Is Elmer Henley?" If it is any help I might add that the enigmatic young genius so bent on service and self-improvement was arrested for assault with a deadly weapon in 1971 (age 15) and for burglary and theft in 1972 (age 16). The year after that he was assisting the authorities in exhuming the remains of twenty-seven children, many of whom he had admitted to torturing and murdering.

My heart overflows with lachrymal juices for this ambitious young man. Even now as his abbreviated fame wanes, an insensitive press refuses to note the authentic wickedness of his achievement. To the contrary, it cruelly runs him and his colleagues through the Great American myth mill and leaves them encrusted with bourgeois decency

and merchantable paradox. As the *Los Angeles Times* suggestively chronicles: "after Elmer was jailed in the mass murder, he [Elmer's lawyer] talked to him one day on the telephone about meeting his mother in the courtroom the next day. He said 'Will I be able to kiss mama?' " What irony! What pathos! What bosh! It goes without saying that the dastardly authorities refused this tender request. Oh it is a perverse world we live in. All of its heroes are behind bars. All of its idealists are victims. It is almost as if society's "leading citizens" and "authorities" were conspiring against benevolence, for not only do signs of an essential sweetness beep beep from young Elmer, but likewise they emanate from the homosexual electrician who tutored him, as the intrepid reporters of the *Times* of Los Angeles were quick to perceive. From their

researches they found he was always "polite, quiet and pleasantly harmless." Most intriguing of all, he was "nice to children." So once again the subtle intellects of American journalism are telling us that that which is obvious is illusory and that which is illusory is reality. Young Elmer and his kind have been wronged. Politics is where wrongs are righted, and with that the whole mob of sophists gambols back to Washington.

Obviously, the Dreisers are at the controls. The fact that the Americans of today do not enter upon vast national discussions about the deeds of young Elmer only makes life at the controls all the more blissful. The clod reporters who fashion literary pastiches around the grim deeds of vile miscreants only make Dreiserian rhetoric all the more plausible (one reporter actually described Mr.

Dean Corll's life as a "modern American tragedy"). All the flummery about human rights, no matter how contrived and removed from human existence, merely makes it all the easier for these self-styled progressives to snatch young Elmer from the hangman and tuck him away under the supervision of social scientists, psychiatrists, and social workers, until such time as he can be graduated into civil society. And here is another reason why I shed a tear for young Elmer. He is about to receive the same heartless treatment that Americans visit upon their college students. Millions of college students suspect that this is a fate vastly more unpleasant than the electric chair. And every intelligent American knows that it is a less healthful experience.

R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.



Lessons in Free Enterprise (I)

What follows is the first of four columns by the associate editor of the Wall Street Journal on the practice of business in America.

In the mid-1920s Calvin Coolidge stirred the wrath of political liberals when he declared, "The business of America is business." Yet what he said was true in 1925 and it remains true today, even though the role of business in this relationship is often badly misunderstood.

Government capitalizes on the misunderstanding. At the moment the government is operating a vast network of regulations and regulators, all of it devised to keep wicked businessmen from raising prices. Washington gets away with this approach because the average citizen doesn't blame the government for boosting meat prices by flooding the economy with too much money: he blames the butcher.

When the government tries to tell all the butchers and other businessmen what they can charge for their products and services—and what they can pay their workers—it takes on a staggering task. At last count there were something like 12 million business enterprises scattered around these United States.

The enterprises vary widely in type and size. About three-fourths of them are proprietorships, owned lock, stock, and barrel by the entrepreneur. He gets all the profits, absorbs all the losses, and

takes all the responsibilities. He is the business.

The average proprietor is a very small businessman; he may be the chap who owns the shoeshine stand in the office building lobby or the fellow who sells hot dogs from a pushcart at the corner. At any rate, he takes in about \$25,000 a year and has a net profit of around \$3,500.

How does he live on such a tiny take? He may not try to for very long. Proprietorships come and go, even as men's dreams. They are easy to set up; often nothing more is required than to start doing business. They disappear when the owner retires, dies, or finds he can't make a go of his enterprise.

Or a proprietor may decide to take on a partner. A friend or a neighbor may have money to invest, or maybe he knows how to boil a better hot dog. Partnerships are relatively rare. There are about 900,000 of them, compared with more than 9 million proprietorships. The average partnership is nonetheless much busier than the average proprietorship: it takes in more than \$90,000 a year and has a net profit of close to \$12,000.

The average is boosted by the fact that partnerships are popular among accountants, lawyers, and other professional men, and among businesses where skill and personality count for more than capital. A young accountant can get a start in his field by joining an

established partner; the older man gains because he can give the new partner the less interesting work.

Partnerships also are common in finance; about half of the member firms of the New York Stock Exchange are partnerships. The view is that public confidence is enhanced by an impressive array of partners, since the public knows that each partner can be responsible for all of the partnership's debts—to the extent of losing his house, his car, and even his motorcycle. One of the largest partnerships is Brown Brothers Harriman & Co., a private bank with assets not far from \$500 million.

A large drawback of both proprietorships and partnerships, from the businessman's standpoint, is the high degree of risk. Not every businessman is so enamored of his abilities and ideas that he is willing to gamble everything on them. Another problem is lack of continuity; if even a single partner dies the partnership is dissolved.

Enter the corporation. "A corporation," in the words of Chief Justice John Marshall, "is an artificial being, invisible, intangible, and existing only in contemplation of law." Corporations often long outlive the men who set them up. Best of all, from the businessman's standpoint, he risks only what he puts into the corporation. What's his outside the corporation remains his, no matter what happens to the business.

At latest count there were nearly 1.8 million corporations in existence. On the average they were much bigger than proprietorships and partnerships. The average corporation takes in more than \$1 million a year and has a net profit of nearly \$50,000. Corporations naturally include the giants of industry, but they also include many small enterprises: in one recent year 276,000 corporations had annual sales of less than \$10,000.

Taxes help to explain the attraction of incorporation even to small businessmen. Proprietors and partners pay taxes

(continued on page 29)