

*sent to Dennis, columnist for N & O.*

February 3, 1993

Dear Dennis:

As a faithful reader of your News and Observer column, I would like to comment on your 28 January musings about "What happened in Edenton?" I believe we are sending innocent people to prison, but I don't believe it is because of mass hysteria. All the actors in this tragedy, the children, the parents, the jurors, the therapists, firmly believe they are doing right. In the absence of physical evidence of sexual abuse and of an adult eyewitness, the case rests on the testimony of the children. Why would they testify to abuse if it didn't happen?

The children first denied that they had been abused. It took many therapy sessions, over many weeks, before they agreed with their parents and the therapists on the abuse. As long as the child denied it, the parents and therapists interpreted the denial as proof of the abuse: the child was so traumatized he/she couldn't even talk about it! Thus more therapy was administered. There was no way the child could ever convince the parents and therapists that it hadn't happened. In this drawn out and emotionally charged process, the children learned that by admitting to sexual abuse they would please their parents and the therapists. And they did, and became convinced that they were telling the truth. In the therapy sessions with the sexually explicit dolls, the children also learned the vocabulary and knowledge of sexual acts that they used in court. Children who turned out not to be impressionable in the therapy did not testify.

Why did parents suspect sexual abuse at Little Rascals, and why do jurors believe the children's testimony, though the same children have testified to fantastic events that no one believes? For the past two decades, the public has been exposed to newsreports on sexual abuse of children. Parents and jurors in East Carolina are no exception. (What these parents and jurors perhaps don't know is that child abuse studies show that the offenders are most likely to be family and other kin, not strangers and day care staff). Sexual child abuse is believable because it does happen. Once rumors about it circulated in Edenton, apprehensive parents looked for behavioral symptoms in their children. They might not know, or perhaps ignored, that touching genitals, masturbation, and the like, are part of normal child development in the pre-school years. A child who manifested these behaviors and some others like bedwetting was assumed to act in this "peculiar" manner because of sexual molestation at Little Rascals. These children were then taken to therapy, with results that we all know.

The jurors come from the same communities as the parents. They believe the children because they know there is child abuse about, and because they do not have a clear understanding of the therapy process (although some jurors from the first trial have since expressed doubts about their verdict). But there are no monsters and there is no mass hysteria. If there is a dark side, it is the state prosecuting on such evidence. What would make me change my mind? Some evidence, any evidence that does not result from children who had been in therapy and counseling. It is conceivable that one staffer at Little Rascals sexually molested children. But that seven engaged in some perverse compact - for there would have to be collusion between them for it to be covered up - in a building wide open to the public, is beyond the bounds of credulity. For the sake of justice and the seven wrongly accused whose lives have been irreparably damaged, one hopes that the Little Rascals case will unravel, as similar cases did in California a few years ago, when the next accused are put on trial.

As ever,

Anthony Oberschall