



The DEMONS of Edenton

ARE DAY-CARE CENTERS STOCKED WITH PERVERTS PREYING ON CHILDREN? **LISA SCHEER AND EDWARD CONE** VISIT A SOUTHERN TOWN TORN APART BY THE LATEST "RITUAL ABUSE" SCANDAL

Historical markers stand like sentries along the clean, tree-lined roads of Edenton, North Carolina, honoring the past of this former colonial capital. Many of the names carved into the worn tombstones of St. Paul's Episcopal Church can still be found in the local phone directory, with separate listings for the summer cottages of the privileged families at nearby Nags Head. To the casual observer, incursions from the modern world seem limited to a few fast-food stores and some charmless tract housing that has pushed its way into the peanut fields outside this coastal town of 5,000.

But five years ago, Edenton's genteel veneer was shattered by a widening series of allegations that a ring of sexual abusers had been preying on the children at the Little Rascals Day Care Center, which catered to the town's elite. What followed was a plague of hysteria, suspicion and guilt, pitting friend against friend, with people accusing women of unthinkable acts and women accusing themselves of putting their children in harm's way. Feeding on the deepest of maternal fears, the ongoing story touches on highly politicized issues of mothers and child care and women working outside the home.

Reports of day-care "ritual abuse"—the catch-all term for sadistic multiple-offender, multiple-victim sex crimes against children—first came to light in 1983 with the McMartin case in Manhattan Beach, California, and have greatly multiplied since. Most of these trials have ended with acquittals or been overturned on appeal. No conclusive physical >



Paradise Lost: Little Rascals day-care center owners Elizabeth Kelly, top, and Robert Kelly, above, central figures in the child-abuse trials; below, a Queen Anne-style home in the serene neighborhood of many of the Little Rascals parents.

evidence has ever been found to prove the existence of ritual abuse in day care. The motives put forward for such abuse range from satanic cults to the production of child pornography; none have withstood scrutiny. And no one can adequately explain why women, who commit perhaps 5 percent of other pedophile crimes, make up 40 to 50 percent of those charged in such cases.

The seeds of this contemporary witch-hunt were sown in the spring of 1988. At a three-day conference in the Outer Banks town of Kill Devil Hills, area law-enforcement and social-service workers gathered to be briefed on the dangers of child molesters operating in day care. The seminar was sponsored by a counseling group and led by Judith Abbott, a sex-abuse therapist with a master's degree in social work, who would become the most aggressive of the therapists assigned to interview the Little Rascals children. Featured at the conference was Ann Burgess, a psychiatric nurse and

Audrey Stever was devastated. She telephoned her husband and two other mothers whose children attended Little Rascals. The call shook Debbie Swicegood, who began to recall how her own son had cried a lot in mid-December and how he'd complained of chronic earaches for which his doctor could find no cause. What was even more disturbing, as she later testified, was that his bottom had on occasion "looked sore and red." In late January, Brenda Toppin and the Chowan County Department of Social Services began their investigation by visiting the homes of children named by Stever's son.

Toppin recorded her early interviews, but, astonishingly, she taped over them and discarded her written notes after typing up synopses. A pleasant woman with shoulder-length gray-blond hair and conspicuous green contact lenses, Toppin tells visitors to the modest Edenton police station that this was standard procedure for the town's small police force, which never owned more than several tapes at a time.

Standard or not, it was a huge blow to the

At least seventy children, most of whom were between three and five years old, were sent to four therapists recommended by the state that spring to determine the extent of abuse. The allegations that emerged included bizarre descriptions of forced sexual and sadistic acts, including throwing children from boats into shark-infested waters. It is worth noting that not one of the parents who sent their children to independent therapists came forward with any charges of sexual abuse.

According to court records, one of the state-recommended therapists, Judith Abbott, showed a five-year-old girl drawings of satanic symbols (a horned mask, inverted crosses and a peace symbol described on the drawing as the "Cross of Nero") in an effort to uncover instances of devil worship. "Mr. Bob" was wearing one of those, the child said, according to a note Abbott wrote on the drawing of the mask. The same child had begun her therapy complaining that Mr. Bob gave hard spankings; after biweekly sessions for six months, she was "remembering," according to Abbott's typed therapy notes, "oral penetration by a penis, vagi-

WHAT FOLLOWED THE EDENTON ALLEGATIONS WAS A PLAGUE

author of a book called *Child Pornography and Sex Rings*. Local District Attorney H.P. Williams, who would co-prosecute the Little Rascals case, and Edenton police officer Brenda Toppin, who would be the first law-enforcement officer on the scene, were among the participants.

Nine months after the conference, in January of 1989, charges of sexual abuse surfaced against Robert Fulton Kelly, Jr., who ran a plumbing business and owned Little Rascals with his wife, Elizabeth (Betsy) Twiddy Kelly. The charges came from the three-year-old son of Audrey Stever, owner of a local dance studio and a casual friend of Brenda Toppin.

"Around Thanksgiving of 1988, we noticed both of our sons were having nightmares and bed-wetting," Stever remembers. "At night, my three-year-old would ask, 'Do I have to go to Miss Betsy's tomorrow? I can't. My tummy hurts. I have a headache.'"

There were other disturbing signs. "One evening while undressing at bath time he said to me, 'Stick your finger in my butt.' I noticed his rectum looked red and swollen," she recalls. "I thought he'd got pinworms."

At the urging of Brenda Toppin, Audrey Stever began to question her son. In mid-January, the boy haltingly told her that he didn't like Bob Kelly because, "Mr. Bob plays doctor, and he sticks something in your butt." The child said several of his friends at day care had been involved in this game.

OF HYSTERIA—PEOPLE ACCUSING WOMEN OF UNTHINKABLE ACTS

orderly investigation of the case. "I happen to believe that in most of these cases, there's a core of truth and usually that's what comes out in the early disclosures," says Kenneth Lanning, F.B.I. Supervisory Special Agent at the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime in Quantico, Virginia, and the nation's top cop on child sexual-abuse cases.

By early February, Toppin and the Department of Social Services were convinced that they'd uncovered enough abuse to bring in District Attorney H.P. Williams. Bob Kelly was barred from Little Rascals while the investigation proceeded. At this point only a handful of families believed that he was guilty. "Edenton is a very social town," Audrey Stever observed at Bob Kelly's trial. "Bob...and Betsy's family...were very well known and people wanted to support them...because of that."

But as the Southern winter turned into spring, a constant round of telephone calls among parents fanned more rumors and panic. Mothers read new meaning into their children's bruises, and tantrums once written off as routine were looked at in a new and frightening light. Parents shared stories of visiting Little Rascals at unannounced times and finding the outside doors locked; in retrospect, others remarked on Bob Kelly's frequent presence there when he should have been tending to his plumbing business.

nal penetration by a brown felt-tipped marker and witnessing the murder of human babies." Abbott explains the delay in eliciting this material by saying that the children had been terrified into silence. "When you break down the child, you own their spirit," she says. "It's like Helter Skelter, Charles Manson."

Betty Ann Phillips, a Little Rascals employee whose own three-year-old son attended the center, visited Judy Abbott in the spring of 1989 at the suggestion of Brenda Toppin. Although Phillips had seen nothing suspicious at the day-care center, she became caught up in the panic, even asking a psychologist if there was any way she herself could have been a participant in the abuse without remembering it. But Phillips was deeply disturbed by what she felt was Abbott's badgering style in trying to elicit instances of abuse: "I didn't feel like Judy was giving [my son] therapy. I felt like she was just there to question him," Phillips testified at Bob Kelly's trial. Yet she'd been afraid to withdraw her son from therapy. "He told me Judy wanted to know if I was a good or bad person. I was scared that they would have arrested me, too."

"We know from research that any kind of consistent questioning of children is enough to bring out statements that never happened," says Maggie Bruck, Ph.D., an expert on child suggestibility and a professor of psychology at McGill University in >

Montreal. "Children are absolutely battered in these interviews because they are repeatedly asked very leading questions."

Marjorie Hollowell, a thirty-nine-year-old high school teacher whose husband is a football coach at the high school, was originally one of Bob Kelly's staunchest supporters. But after her son visited a therapist in early April and underwent days of intensive questioning by his mother, he excitedly disclosed to her that "Mr. Bob stuck his finger in my fanny and put my mouth on his peenie." That weekend Hollowell telephoned other parents to say that she, too, now believed in Bob Kelly's guilt. It was a pivotal moment. One man convinced by Hollowell's call was the scion of one of the town's oldest and best-connected families. "They messed with the wrong people," the

Privott's bail was later set at over \$1 million; he would spend over three years in jail. Betsy Kelly's bail was eventually set at \$1.8 million; she was to spend two years in a four-person concrete cell in Raleigh Women's Prison before bail was finally lowered to \$400,000 and she could be reunited with her daughter. Her family has mortgaged everything to raise the money for her defense. Two other women spent a year or more in prison before they could make bail. All those charged have maintained their innocence; none have accepted the prosecution's offers of plea bargains.

By early 1990 a staggering 225 indictments had been filed in the names of twenty-nine children against the seven defendants. The children also implicated twenty-three other citizens, including an

chain-smokes in the spotless kitchen of her house in an upscale Edenton subdivision. (She has since moved to South Carolina, in part because of the stresses of the case.) She shows a visitor page after page of diaries detailing the bedtime grilling sessions with her daughter, who finally "disclosed" ten months into the process. "I was obsessed," she says. "I'd say, 'You have to tell Mommy what happened. You have to.'" Guilt over leaving her daughter at Little Rascals still hounds Baker almost five years later. "I wasn't even working," she says. "I used the time my daughter was in day care to go out antiquing."

At Bob Kelly's trial, Grace Bean, an elegant, restrained woman much envied in Edenton society, described her own anxiety over leaving her son to go back to a teaching job after she and her husband had stretched themselves

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father would later say. "We called the

state representative, the mayor—we got straight to the governor, straight to [Attorney General] Lacy Thornburg."

In late April, after appealing the state's revocation of its license, Little Rascals closed its doors. On June 14, Bob Kelly was arrested and held on bail of \$2 million. That same month some of the parents filed a civil suit against Betsy Kelly, alleging that she must have known that abuse was taking place.

In August of 1989, North Carolina Deputy Attorney General William P. Hart entered the case. A stocky Rochester, New York, native whose sartorial style runs to white shirts and conservatives ties, Hart looks the part of the dispassionate, no-nonsense prosecutor. But he is emotionally involved in the Little Rascals case to a startling degree. Last year he married Patricia Kephart, the mother of a Little Rascals child, whom Hart had become romantically involved with during his prosecution of the case. "If anything, it's made it more difficult on me," says Hart of his entanglement in the investigation.

Over the long summer of 1989 and on into fall, the indictments metastasized to include another man, Willard Scott Privott—who as owner of a local video store and a golfing friend of Bob Kelly was believed to have provided the link between what was now perceived as the Little Rascals sex ring and the world of child pornography—and five women, including Betsy Kelly, four of whom had worked at the day-care center.

Some twenty parents rallied at the Chowan County Courthouse the September day that Betsy Kelly and Scott Privott were arrested. One mother burst out sobbing in the courtroom. Scott

CORE OF TRUTH," SAYS THE NATION'S TOP COP ON RITUAL ABUSE CASES

unnamed "black man," a "fat lady," an Edenton gas-station attendant and "the sheriff," none of whom were indicted. In July of 1991, with Hart running the prosecution, Bob Kelly, 45, was convicted of ninety-nine counts of sexual abuse and sentenced to twelve consecutive life terms. Earlier this year, Little Rascals cook Kathryn Dawn Wilson, 27, was found guilty of five counts of sexual abuse and sentenced to life in prison. Both verdicts are being appealed. This winter, Betsy Kelly, 38, goes on trial. She faces charges of sexually abusing sixteen children (including forcing sex acts between children, terrorizing children with threats, and producing child pornography). The Little Rascals case has already become the longest and most expensive criminal prosecution ever undertaken in North Carolina.

Marjorie Hollowell edges her white Jeep Wagoneer into the sparse traffic on Broad Street, Edenton's main drag. She drives past the historic houses of the local gentry, including many parents of Little Rascals children, and the more modest houses of her own neighborhood.

Soft-spoken and earnest, Hollowell remembers how her obsession over her son's well-being overrode any skepticism she had about the charges. "I was then and am now less interested in finding out what happened to him than in knowing he'd be all right," she says. "I was so afraid. I thought, He's my only son, beautiful, bright, and he's going to be ruined forever."

Lisa Baker, a tall, pretty woman who has recounted her ordeal to an audience at a ritual-abuse awareness group, nervously

too thin buying a new house. "[My son] didn't like my going to work, and I would have rather been at home with him, too," she said. "He would come in the house and lie down on the floor and start screaming and fussing at me."

"There were some very definite [behavioral] changes" after he started at Little Rascals, Grace Bean testified. "There were a lot of things we should have recognized that we didn't," said her husband, Chris Bean. "[He] was our first child. To be perfectly honest, we didn't know anything about raising children."

Maggie Bruck points out that we "do change interpretations and perceptions of past events to be consistent with what a fear actually is." To discount child abuse would make a parent feel quite guilty, she says. "It means possibly putting your child's life in jeopardy—the child wouldn't get therapy and would grow up damaged."

"In these cases we're dealing with psychologically primitive material," says psychiatry professor William Kenner, M.D., at Vanderbilt University. "What children are talking about—these tales of sexual and sadistic abuse—are what rolls around in the bottom levels of parents' unconscious. This is very disturbing material."

Adding to the pressure on the parents who didn't subscribe to the doctrine of a sex-abuse cult was the insular nature of Edenton society. Joseph B. Cheshire V, Betsy Kelly's attorney, says the believers in town remain so hostile to heretics who profess any disbelief over the charges that he no longer feels comfortable vacationing at nearby Nags Head. "Good," says one prominent Little Rascals father. "I almost killed myself last summer running that extra >

distance past his house every night, just so he'd know that I knew he was there."

Marjorie Hollowell, who had continued to use the day-care center until her son's disclosure, recalls the social isolation of being a holdout among the growing number of believers. "I remember going to the Golden Corral for dinner and seeing some friends at another table," she says. "One of them had gotten a new haircut, and I complimented her, and nobody said a word."

Some parents will say in private that they feel the case has been overprosecuted, but none will admit it on the record. Even some of the prosecution's own witnesses question the scope of the prosecution. "I still worry that the wrong thing happened," says

I suspect, are the techniques that so-called therapists, so-called social workers and so-called investigators have been using over the last ten years to elicit and create the accounts provided by children."

But another big difference, of course, is the sheer numbers of parents who now entrust their children to the daylong care of strangers. It's no wonder that, saddled with complex feelings of guilt and anxiety, parents are highly vulnerable to fears about the physical and emotional well-being of their children. And while ritual-abuse cases have been seized on by fundamentalist political and religious groups eager to return women to home and hearth, a number of upper-middle-class communities with

ingful. Now her attorney, Joe Cheshire, in a surprise move, has upped the ante by withdrawing his motion that the trial be held in a metropolitan center far from Edenton.

Bill Hart argues that a fair trial would be impossible in Edenton. "The peculiar nature of this rural county, the interconnectedness of the people," he says, would inevitably skew the jury.

Cheshire, natty in a red bow tie and fashionable glasses, stretches and fidgets as Hart drones on. Later on, Cheshire explains that he has decided "the best chance I've got in the world now is to do it right here, where a whole bunch of people walked by that day-care every day, saw those children running

up and down the street while they were sup-

A THERAPIST SAYS THE CHILDREN HAD BEEN TERRIFIED INTO SILENCE.

Desmond Runyan, M.D., an associate professor of social medicine and pediatrics at the University of North Carolina whose clinic physically examined fifty of the children for signs of sexual abuse in the summer of 1989. "I am reasonably convinced that five or six children were right. The kids told me about two perpetrators, Bob Kelly and someone they called the mean man. I never heard any of the allegations about females."

Believers in ritual abuse have spawned a kind of national industry. Organizations like Believe the Children, a Chicago-based advocacy group, spread the message of ritual abuse to a broad audience. The National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse in Alexandria, Virginia shares information about expert witnesses and prosecution tips on "multi-victim" child-abuse cases in seminars and newsletters around the country. Credulous books and videotapes on the subject sell briskly to equally credulous consumers.

"We have mental-health professionals out there still looking for the tunnels where children were alleged to have been abused in McMartin," says Ken Lanning. "These people begin to network and train other therapists and investigators so they can contaminate cases all over America. The atmosphere is almost revivalist."

Inspired by the work of Roland Summit, M.D., an associate professor of psychiatry at UCLA and author of an influential 1983 treatise that urged active intervention by interviewers, an army of child-abuse investigators around the country have been given license to press children to agree that they have been sexually abused.

"We didn't get these day-care panics until recently," says Richard Ofshe, Ph.D., a social psychologist from the University of California at Berkeley. "The big difference,

"WHEN YOU BREAK DOWN THE CHILD, YOU OWN THEIR SPIRIT"

a very different ethos have been caught up in ritual-abuse frenzies. One half-conscious idea that often surfaces in such cases is that harm is more likely to come to children when the caretakers are "others" of a different class or background.

In Edenton parents and prosecutors bandy about unsubstantiated tales of one Little Rascals defendant's experimentation with lesbianism in college and alleged sexual abuse as a child. One defendant describes the parents as "a lot of yuppie rich folks. We shopped at Rose's, K mart, the lower-class stores," she says. A state-recommended therapist ascribes day-care worker Dawn Wilson's alleged involvement in the sex ring to class warfare. "This was excitement and it was power," she says. "[Dawn] was able to pull some tricks on some upper-class families."

The parents gather early, closing ranks along the benches on the right side of the small Chowan County courtroom in Edenton. There is plenty of space to spread out to the left of the aisle, but that's where Betsy Kelly will be sitting. Hard stares size up everyone entering the courtroom. "These children are just ruined forever...ruined," mutters one grandmother to a reporter, and it's hard to know if she blames abuse or the ongoing circus of prosecution for the damage. Finally, Betsy Kelly walks through the double doors with a handful of supporters. Dressed in a prim blue dress and wearing the fish sign of Christ around her neck, she is devoid of expression as she walks past her former friends to face the judge.

At issue this muggy early-summer day is the venue of her trial. It is a skirmish before the set-piece court battle this winter, but every conflict in this case is tense and mean-

posedly being sexually molested."

The parents are horrified that Betsy Kelly will be tried here in their own front yard. "I don't know how the families will endure it," says Marjorie Hollowell.

Everyone sits forward as Superior Court Judge D. Marsh McLelland renders his decision. There are audible gasps as his soft voice announces that the Little Rascals case will be coming home to Edenton.

Like the missing-children scare of the 1980s, the day-care cases speak to some deep-seated fears in society. "The history of mass hysteria is usually a reflection of whatever anxieties are in the culture at that time," says Dr. Kenner. Certainly the heightened awareness of child sexual abuse and the social changes the American family has undergone provide ample opportunity for fear-mongers.

The public failures and high-pressure tactics of the ritual-abuse lobby have inspired a backlash among people who perceive the prosecutions as witch-hunts. "People who sincerely believe in ritual child abuse have got to start accepting responsibility for the damage they are doing with these cases," says Ken Lanning, voicing his concern that less-sensational but far likelier instances of child sexual abuse may be called into question. Indeed the media response to the Little Rascals case has disregarded the plausibility of Bob Kelly's guilt in the storm of skepticism over the rest of the charges.

But whatever doubts arise among the general public, one group will always be susceptible to scare tactics. When the protective instincts of parents are mobilized by sexual threats to their children, it's easy to imagine that other Edentons almost certainly lie ahead. □