

*Crime in the City of Angels:  
Two Views of the Past*

BY SABRINA CORSA

Whether you're interested in historical events, high-profile trials, legal anecdotes, or celebrity scandals, you'll find them in Michael Trope's book, *Once Upon a Time in Los Angeles – The Trials of Earl Rogers*. On the other side, *For The People – Inside the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office, 1850-2000*, highlights the role of the DA, providing a captivating look inside some of the most notorious criminal cases to haunt the dockets of the Los Angeles courts since the mid-nineteenth century.

Do you know the origin of the name "Griffith Park?" Or, that the man who donated that land to Los Angeles shot his wife in the head while they were vacationing at a Santa Monica hotel? Did you know that the LA Chief of Police was criminally charged in 1915 based on allegations of illicit conduct with a seventeen-year-old girl?

You can read about these and other high-profile events in Michael Lance Trope's recent publication, *Once Upon A Time in Los Angeles – The Trials of Earl Rogers*, a fascinating account of Rogers' rise and fall as one of California's preeminent criminal defense attorneys of the early 1900s.

Trope begins by sketching Earl Rogers' life and his ultimate demise as a penniless drunk in a Los Angeles boarding house. He then proceeds to recount some of Rogers' most colorful cases, including various murder trials, the San Francisco graft trials, the Los Angeles Times bombing case, and the Clarence Darrow bribery trial.

Each chapter covers a separate trial, making the book read like a collection of two-minute mysteries, with such colorful titles as *The Case of Catalina Cardsharp* and *The Case of the Dead Woman's Diamonds*. The chapters unfold unpredictably, and Trope has included excerpts of testimony that reveal classic cross-examination techniques and clever trial tactics.

I recently caught up with Trope at Jerry's Deli in Los Angeles to talk with him about his book and how the project developed.

Trope first learned of Earl Rogers in 1988 when, as a new lawyer, he happened to see the obituary of a woman named Adela Rogers Saint Johns, born in 1894. The obituary indicated that she was raised by her father – a single, rather eccentric alcoholic who also happened to be one of the most infamous lawyers in Los Angeles during the early 1900s. Trope was intrigued by St. Johns' memories of accompanying her

father to the county jail and courthouse, but was skeptical of her claim that her father had pulled a gun in court during a high-profile murder trial.

A curious Trope set out to conduct his own research into Rogers' conduct during the trial of *People v. Boyd*. Poring through 1902 newspaper articles, Trope stumbled across a Los Angeles Times headline that read, "Buffalo Bill's hottest show was a tame performance compared with Earl Rogers in the Boyd trial yesterday. It was so effective that he drove the jury under the table and the audience out the fire escapes."

Having confirmed St. Johns' account, Trope dove into further research on Earl Rogers. He sifted through numerous microfiched newspapers at the downtown Los Angeles public library. Focusing on Rogers' trials, Trope was pleased to discover that the court proceedings were often covered by several daily publications. Journalists frequently competed for business by providing the most detailed accounts of trial proceedings, Trope explains. Nearly verbatim transcripts were regularly published in various newspapers, allowing a present-day historian to cross-check the accounts.

The Los Angeles Superior Court's archives also provided a wealth of source material on Earl Rogers. Case files contained copies of transcripts and pleadings – in fact, Trope found a motion that had been signed and filed by Rogers in 1903.

Over the next decade, while maintaining his private law practice, Trope continued his research into Rogers' life, gathering material one case at a time. Trope eventually selected about fifteen of his favorites, and ultimately compiled the collection that would become *Once Upon a Time in Los Angeles*.

A history major during his undergraduate years at the University of Southern California, Trope describes the experience of researching and writing the book as an "intellectual fantasy." "I've always enjoyed getting close to the source to distinguish between reality and myth," he explains.

Trope set each case against a historical backdrop that allowed him to recount subtly the history of Los Angeles during the early 1900s. Significant events such as the great fire, the San Francisco earthquake, the developing labor movement, the growth of city government and its vulnerability to corruption play a role in his stories. "I don't think many people know that the Chief of Police at the time was charged with statutory rape, or that Griffith shot his wife in the face," Trope notes.

If Trope had to select a favorite case, it would be the one that led him into the project, *People v. Boyd*, or *The Case of the Catalina Cardsharp*. The defendant was in a desperate situation, with little evidence in his favor. “Rogers’ instincts during closing allowed him to do the only thing he could have done to show reasonable doubt, and he did it. He showed strategic intellectual brilliance and dramatic flair as a showman. And he showed courage – because it takes courage to pull a gun out in front of a jury to save your client from going to the gallows!”

But what Trope learned most from Rogers is that “no matter how important it is to be passionate about your case, you must also be well-prepared. And Rogers always knew his subject matter – often times even better than his experts.”

The same period of LA’s criminal justice history covered by Trope is included in *For The People – Inside the Los Angeles County District Attorney’s Office, 1850-2000*. Authored by Michael Parrish, with a foreword by California State Librarian Kevin Starr, *For The People* is part of a collaborative project by the District Attorney’s Crime Prevention Foundation.

The cover of this large-format book is eye-catching to say the least – a glossy collage of photographic images highlighting significant pieces of Los Angeles’ modern legal history. Who can forget O.J. Simpson’s white Bronco cruising the freeway, followed by a long, wide trail of LAPD patrol cars; Reginald Denny lying in the street beside the red cab of his truck; Robert Kennedy struggling to get up after being shot at the Ambassador Hotel; Rodney King on the ground, surrounded by LAPD officers; accused murderer Barbara Graham peering over her shoulder from the defense table; wild-eyed Charles Manson staring into the camera?

The book begins with a touching introduction from former District Attorney Gil Garcetti, who reveals a rather ironic turn of events in LA’s history. Who would have known that the young cop and the young street gangster he arrested would go on, each in his own way, to impact local government? That cop was former Mayor Tom Bradley. And the gangster? The soon-to-be father of Gil Garcetti. This introduction is followed by Starr’s eloquent foreword, which connects the city’s criminal underside with the social and cultural history of Los Angeles.

With Chapter One, Parrish takes the reader back in time to the days of rancheros and alcaldes, detailing the emergence of the criminal justice system in Los Angeles amidst an increasing population and rising crime rates. The book recounts early courthouses, the first public defender, the first female prosecutor, Clara Shortridge Foltz, and notorious cases like the lynching of Michel Lachenais.

What follows are an additional twelve captivating chapters with such titles as *Crimes of the Heart*, *Family Violence*, *In the Limelight*, and *Gangs*. Focusing on infamous crimes, Parrish often relays a touching and intimate view of the victims while exploring the evidence presented at trial, the challenges faced by the prosecutors, and the public sentiment at the time. Throughout, the pages are adorned with scrapbook-like images of headlines, newspaper articles and photos that capture the history, mood and media attention surrounding each case.

*For The People* is a wonderful book to read alongside *Once Upon A Time In Los Angeles*. Sympathetic to the defense, Trope’s book reads like a series of detective stories unfolding in a sometimes suspenseful manner. Parrish’s volume, meanwhile, is written from the angle of the prosecution and reads like a colorful encyclopedia. The two books present distinct historical perspectives on the City of Los Angeles and its development from “cow town beginnings,” and provide a fascinating comparison of the scandals surrounding former Police Chief Charles Sebastian, Clarence Darrow and the Los Angeles Times bombing.

With a display of trial strategies and courtroom tactics amidst great storytelling, Trope’s book makes a great gift for an aspiring litigator. And with its dramatic photos and vivid case summaries, *For The People* is a well-designed and beautiful compilation that will look handsome in any law office or court reception area. But, more importantly, these publications are great reads for yourself, even if you have a busy schedule like most scholars and lawyers. Both can be enjoyed one chapter at a time. But don’t be surprised if, like me, you have trouble putting them down!

*Michael Trope is an attorney with Trope & Trope in Los Angeles, maintaining a general civil practice. From 1989 to 1990, Trope tried cases as a public defender before resuming his private practice. Prior to practicing law, he spent twelve years as a sports agent, representing more than one hundred athletes, including a number of Heisman trophy winners. Other works by Trope include a novel, Necessary Roughness, based on his experiences as a sports agent, and a 1987 documentary film entitled Players and Pawns, examining the racial integration of sports in South Africa.*

*Michael Parrish is a journalist and writer whose work has been featured in such widely circulated publications as the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, Worth, Outside, InvestmentNews, and Microsoft Investor. At the Los Angeles Times, Parrish worked as a reporter and writer for over ten years, and served as the founding editor of the Los Angeles Times Magazine from 1985 to 1989.*

*Continued on page 13*

*Blazing New Trails*  
Continued from page 3

committees. His years with Aid For AIDS were also quite successful in the fundraising and development arena. We are fortunate to have someone with his background helping to advance the Society's goals.

Meanwhile, I have been assembling a panel of nationally-recognized litigators and scholars for a continuing legal education panel at the upcoming state bar meeting in Anaheim. The program, entitled *Righting History's Wrongs: WWII Reparations Cases*, focuses on a series of cases alleging art theft and slave labor that are making their way through the state and federal systems in California and may ultimately be taken up by the United States Supreme Court. The program is scheduled for Friday, September 5th. We anticipate a full audience, so please indicate your interest in attending when you preregister for the state bar meeting.

On Saturday, September 6th, we will hold a Board of Directors meeting followed by an informal late-afternoon reception. We cordially invite those of you new to the Society to come meet not only the directors and fellow members, but especially the Justices of the Supreme Court.

Finally, I would like to take a moment to thank Dr. Benjamin Field for providing the CSCHS with the opportunity to publish his book, *Activism in Pursuit of the Public Interest: The Jurisprudence of Roger J. Traynor*, jointly with the University of California Institute for Governmental Studies. Members at the Judicial level and above will receive a copy of the book as a benefit of 2003 membership, and we invite those at the Associate level to upgrade their membership to receive this fine work.

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*Crime in the City of Angels*  
Continued from page 10

Once Upon a Time in Los Angeles – The Trials of Earl Rogers is available through the publisher, Arthur H. Clarke Company, P.O. Box 14707, Spokane, WA 99214-0707, and through retailers.

For The People is available through the publisher, Angel City Press, 2118 Wilshire Boulevard, #880, Santa Monica, CA 90403, and through retailers.

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*President's Corner*  
Continued from page 3

Supreme Court becomes a standard part of California schools' social studies curriculum. And the Society is moving forward to create a web site that will provide an unparalleled resource for Society members, scholars and the public at large interested in the history of our state's judicial system.

These and other projects will require even broader support from the legal community. Consequently, in the next few months, we will be approaching law firms throughout the state – many of which have given crucial assistance to the Society in the past – offering them the opportunity to participate in the Society's renaissance by providing either general support or support of specific projects. And we believe law firms will appreciate the value of such participation, both because of the worthiness of the Society's endeavors and because the Society's higher profile will make more meaningful the public recognition they will receive for their support.

At a time when the economy is anemic and many nonprofit organizations are suffering as a result, the California Supreme Court Historical Society is fortunate to be entering an era of tremendous productivity. For that, I extend my gratitude and my deepest respect to the thousands of California lawyers who have made that possible.

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*Clara Shortridge Foltz*  
Continued from page 8

and their children are all here today.

One of Clara Foltz's great-grandchildren, Truman Toland of Cincinnati, is an artist, and painted a picture of Clara when she was a young lawyer just starting out. This is the picture that has hung in my office for some time. Today the Toland family and I present it to the County of Los Angeles, to the people who administer and those who seek justice in this courthouse, to all who would dedicate themselves to the high ideals in the life of Clara Shortridge Foltz.

Professor Babcock's biography of Clara Shortridge Foltz is forthcoming from Stanford University Press. Additional information about Foltz can be found at <http://www.stanford.edu/group/WLHP>.