



“A Disgusting Episode”: Lois Pantages and the Death of Juro Rokumoto, 1929–1930

BY PAUL R. SPITZZERI

AS THE ROARING TWENTIES sputtered toward its end and the Great Depression loomed, much of Los Angeles was riveted in late 1929 by the nearly simultaneous separate trials of theater mogul Alexander Pantages, who was charged with the sexual assault of teenage dancer Eunice Pringle, and that of Pantages’ wife Lois, who was tried for manslaughter after an automobile crash that led to the death of Juro (Joe) Rokumoto and injuries to members of the Rokumoto family and another family, the Kawaguchis.

The couple were at the acme of wealth and power, but that largely came to a sudden end with the criminal proceedings. Alexander was initially convicted but was granted a new trial on appeal to the state Supreme Court and then secured an acquittal in 1931. Lois’ proceeding was significant for the issues of race, class and disparate treatment it surfaced — issues that have taken on renewed salience in recent years.

Lois Mendenhall was an Oakland-born violinist who toured the west coast as a teenager and it was likely during a performance that the musician met Pantages, a Greek immigrant who opened a primitive theater in the Yukon Territory during the great gold rush at the end of the nineteenth century. Pantages went on to operate

Juro Rokumoto, who was riding with his family in this Ford, was killed when their auto collided with a Stutz Coupe, driven by Lois Pantages, on Sunset Boulevard at Serrano Avenue in Hollywood. A doll belonging to one of the Rokumoto children is seen lower left. *Photo: Oct. 3, 1929, Herald Examiner Collection/Los Angeles Public Library.*

dozens of venues in many areas of the western United States.¹ The couple married in 1905 and lived in a large house in Seattle, where Alexander first made a mark and one of the theaters in his circuit was named the Lois. They moved by 1920 to Los Angeles, where, after operating a theater on Broadway for about a decade, a palatial theater opened on Seventh Street.² In 1929, as Alexander was building the latest opulent venue in Hollywood, the couple owned a substantial residence in the exclusive Los Feliz neighborhood of Los Angeles and had a beachfront second home in Santa Monica.

It was at the latter residence that, in mid-June, 1929, Lois entertained some friends and then, with one of them as a passenger, headed back to her Los Feliz home. Lois Pantages dropped off the friend and headed home. But at the intersection of Sunset Boulevard and Serrano Avenue, her luxury Stutz hit the homely Ford driven by

1. References to Lois Mendenhall’s musical career date from as early as the “The Model of Youth,” *Oakland Tribune*, Feb. 19, 1897, 6. The violinist performed professionally until marriage and for some years afterward. She also performed at private concerts, clubs and other organizations.

2. Regarding the marriage of Lois Mendenhall and Alexander Pantages, see “Oakland Violinist Is Married In Seattle,” *Oakland Tribune*, Mar. 13, 1905, 2.

Rokumoto, a Japanese-American man who resided in a modest dwelling with his wife Teruko (née Murakami) and three children a couple of blocks from the Pantages dwelling.

The collision caused severe internal injuries to Rokumoto. Six others in the vehicle, including Teruko and daughters Grace and Mary, and Kiku Kawaguchi and her children Chiyo and George, were also hospitalized, though all recovered quickly.³ Juro's condition, however, worsened and, after several days, he died. A coroner's inquest found that the cause was complications of the wounds received in the crash.⁴

Lois, who was also hospitalized with a broken nose and scalp lacerations, was first cited for driving while intoxicated. Los Angeles District Attorney Buron Fitts quickly added a second-degree murder charge after Rokumoto passed away.⁵ Moreover, it was reported that witnesses were prepared to testify that Pantages was drunk and hit at least one other car while ignoring bystanders' calls for her to stop driving.⁶

The Pantages family's wealth allowed them to promptly hire several defense attorneys who argued that Lois' health was so precarious that legal procedures like the arraignment and the preliminary hearing had to be delayed. The lawyers also introduced theories that another vehicle forced Lois to veer into Rokumoto's car, that the latter tried to make a left turn without signaling as the collision occurred, and that death was due to the improper administration of anesthesia before surgery for the broken pelvis and hip he suffered in the crash.

The trial was notable for the illegalities that occurred. For example, a bail bondsman and ex-Sheriff's deputy faced charges of bribery for seeking to induce a police officer who responded to the crash scene to forget the testimony he had given at the coroner's inquest that Lois was intoxicated.⁷ A witness informed the court about receiving two phone calls warning against testifying and suggesting the witness leave Los Angeles before the trial began.⁸ Finally, the notorious pastor, Robert "Fighting Bob" Shuler, broadcast on his radio show that Alexander Pantages tried to intervene in Lois' case while Shuler continued to attack the theater mogul concerning the then-pending assault case regarding Eunice Pringle. Shuler was convicted on a contempt of court charge for his utterances and received a 30-day jail sentence.⁹

3. "Mrs. Pantages Arrested," *L.A. Times*, June 17, 1929, Pt. II, 1.

4. "Man Injured in Auto Crash Dies," *Hollywood Daily Citizen*, June 19, 1929, 2; "Fatal Crash Verdict Open," *L. A. Times*, June 23, 1929, Pt. II, 2.

5. "Death Laid to Mrs. Pantages," *L.A. Express*, June 25, 1929, 3.

6. "Fatal Crash Verdict Open," *supra*.

7. "Bribery Charges Will Be Tried," *L.A. Express*, July 13, 1929, 12.

8. "Threats Cited By Contractor," *L.A. Times*, Aug. 1, 1929, Pt. II, 2.

9. "Poor Bob — He Couldn't Go To Jail," *L.A. Record*, Oct. 15, 1929, 1.

For the preliminary hearing in her case about a month after the crash, Lois arrived at the municipal court in a wheelchair, emphasizing her fragile health. Nonetheless, the court rapidly found that there was enough evidence to send the case for trial in the superior court, where Judge Carlos S. Hardy convened the trial in early September. That proceeding lasted much of that month and saw Lois Pantages taking the stand, a strategy not usually employed by the defense.

The tearful defendant admitted hitting a few autos before crashing into Rokumoto, but adamantly insisted that there had been no drinking at the Santa Monica beach house. Moreover, Pantages' lawyers claimed, Rokumoto improperly tried to make the turn in front of the Stutz, leaving no time to avoid a collision. Beyond this, the defense averred, Lois Pantages veered out of the driving lane because another vehicle had honked its horn. Yet the other driver denied this, testifying that Lois Pantages passed to the left and drifted into opposing traffic. Still, the other driver affirmed, Rokumoto had failed to signal when beginning his left turn.

Another witness testified that several blocks south of the accident scene, Lois Pantages' vehicle stalled. When offering to help restart it, the witness received "an avalanche of abusive language" and a whiskey odor wafting from Pantages, who then sped off. In response, Pantages claimed that after dropping off her friend, a mechanical-armed traffic sign had moved position to "Go" — hence her quick departure.¹⁰

The same witness, at the preliminary hearing, noted that Pantages hit a parked car, barely missed swiping another vehicle and swerved through traffic before the witness had to stop at a red stop sign and lost track of the defendant. A police officer, likely the one who was the intended target of bribery, told the court that "her breath was alcoholic" and that Pantages was found to be intoxicated, though no tests existed at the time to measure blood alcohol.¹¹ Her daughter Carmen and future son-in-law John W. Consideine, a United Artists Studios manager and producer, testified that Pantages was not drunk when they visited her at the hospital.¹²

10. "Wealthy Woman Tearfully Fights Murder Charges," *L.A. Express*, Sept. 17, 1929, 1.

11. "Rich Woman Drunk, Says Eyewitness," *Pasadena Post*, July 31, 1929, 1.

12. "Pantages Enigma Solved," *L.A. Times*, September 17, 1929, Pt. II, 1.



Lois Pantages at the time of her trial. *Public domain.*



Juro Rokumoto, his wife Teruko, and children, victims of a collision between Mrs. Pantages' car and the one in which he and his family were riding. Photo: Circa 1922, *Herald Examiner Collection/Los Angeles Public Library*.

The doctors and nurses who treated Rokumoto attested that his death resulted from the injuries he received in the crash. But Lois' defense lawyers blamed the doctor attending to the patient and called to the stand witnesses who claimed that the victim was terrified of operations and anesthetics and wanted to be taken to a Japanese hospital. Yet, a doctor from the treating hospital stated that Rokumoto was aware he needed surgery and calmly assented to it. The coroner who conducted the autopsy testified that his death was due to shock related to the inflicted injuries.¹³

Significantly, several defense witnesses admitted in answer to prosecution questions that they were contacted by representatives of Alexander Pantages or by Lois' counsel before they appeared. The prosecution considered perjury charges against two of them.¹⁴

Once the case went to the jury, immediate divisions surfaced, with some panelists ready to acquit Lois, while the rest were divided concerning whether to convict on the second-degree murder charge or to find Lois guilty

on the lesser charge of manslaughter.¹⁵ Moreover, it was reported that two jurors came to fisticuffs over which charge to find.¹⁶ The jury ultimately found Lois Pantages guilty of manslaughter. As the court clerk read the verdict, some jurors looked as if they had been crying, perhaps because of the intense emotion involved. Lois was led out of the courtroom in a nearly prostrate condition and was reported to be gravely ill for days afterward.¹⁷

During the sentencing phase, defense counsel told Judge Hardy that Lois Pantages would simply not survive imprisonment at San Quentin State Prison, which then held female inmates. The probation officer recommended that she serve her sentence in the county jail. Yet ultimately, Judge Hardy sentenced her to ten years probation. Alexander Pantages also paid the Rokumotos and Kawaguchis \$78,500 as part of a settlement under the terms of which the victims dropped eight civil suits they had filed. The judge noted that the defendant "had led a Christian life," had no prior felony convictions, was involved in welfare causes, and that there was no proof that she was intoxicated when the crash occurred. This sentence, he said, should not be construed as lenient or inappropriate and the "the fact that she has wealth and position should not discriminate against her."¹⁸

In response, District Attorney Fitts wondered "if the court would have reached the same decision had the defendant been Joe Rokumoto instead of Mrs. Pantages" — an accusation, however veiled, that Judge Hardy had indeed handled the case differently because of Rokumoto's race. Fitts also noted that, in a recent case, the same judge had denied probation to a young woman convicted of drunk driving.

The judge responded, again insisting that he did not consider Pantages' wealth or position in sentencing. "I believe the same justice should be given those who live east of Main Street as those who live west of Main Street," he said.¹⁹

Lois Pantages was on probation for only about a year when, after petitions from her lawyers and allies and as Christmas 1929 approached, Judge Hardy nullified the probation agreement, restored the matter to his calendar, entered a not guilty plea for Lois, and ordered the case dismissed. The reversed conviction infuriated DA Pitts. "Sometimes I wonder what's the use," he vented to

13. "Expert Medical Fight Under Way Over Death Cause," *L.A. Express*, Sept. 18, 1929, 1; "Re-grill Witnesses In Pantages Case," *L.A. Record*, Sept. 19, 1929, 1; "Pantages Case Defense Ends," *L.A. Times*, Sept. 19, 1929, Pt. II, 1.

14. "Woman Assailed as Killer in Hot Appeal to Jurors," *L.A. Express*, Sept. 20, 1929, 1.

15. "Arguing Fate of Mrs. Pantages," *L.A. Record*, Sept. 25, 1929, 1.

16. "Mrs. Pantages Convicted; Free On Bail," *L.A. Express*, Sept. 26, 1929, 1.

17. "Mrs. Pantages Ill, Fights Prison," *L.A. Record*, Sept. 26, 1929, 1; "Mrs. Pantages Guilty of Manslaughter Charge," *L.A. Times*, Sept. 26, 1929, Pt. II, 1.

18. "Probation to Mrs. Pantages; \$78,000 Awarded Victim's Kin," *L.A. Express*, Nov. 8, 1929, 1; "Mrs. Pantages Granted Probation Of Ten Years," *L.A. Times*, Nov. 9, 1929, Pt. II, 1; "After Mrs. Pantages Was Freed," *L.A. Record*, Nov. 9, 1929, Extra ed., 2A.

19. "Mrs. Pantages Granted Probation Of Ten Years," *supra*.

reporters. “It is a disgusting episode, a travesty on justice,” he said, calling the judge’s reasonings “so flimsy they are sickening.”²⁰

No longer a convicted felon, Lois Pantages claimed that her health had improved. Moreover, no longer an embarrassment to her children, she was able to attend the nuptials of son Rodney and accompany the newlyweds on their honeymoon. And with their mother’s criminal conviction reversed, the Pantages progeny presumably no longer felt outcasts in Los Angeles society.

Neither Pantages lived long after their trials. Alexander died in 1936 and Lois in July 1941 when, emerging from a swim and climbing into the family yacht anchored at Avalon Harbor on Santa Catalina Island, she suffered a fatal heart attack.²¹

The society in which the Pantages family moved was, of course, exclusively wealthy and white. They were also celebrities, which meant that the media focused on Lois and Alexander. Lois’ victims — Juro Rokumoto, his widow Teruko, their children and the Kawaguchis — were largely forgotten even though their suffering and losses were far greater and lasting.

Information about the Rokumoto family is limited, but we know that Juro was a native of Hiroshima; he married Teruko Murakami in San Francisco in 1913. The family resided in Riverside, where Juro was a hotel janitor, before relocating to Los Angeles in the early 1920s. They lived in what is now Koreatown and in Boyle Heights before moving to their house near the accident scene.²²

With the money from the Pantages settlement, Teruko opened “Alien Land Ownership” guardianship accounts with the Bank of America. It appears these were established for the acquisition of property to be held in trust for their minor children until they turned 21 or until 1941, when the accounts were set to expire. Of course, at the end of that year came the bombing by Japan at Pearl Harbor and the United States entry in World War II. Orders requiring internment of Japanese Americans in concentration camps established in several states followed in April 1942. What happened to the Rokumotos during those terrible years and to any property they had accumulated as a result of the Pantages settlement is not known.

20. “Mrs. Pantages Freed By Judge,” *L.A. Record*, Dec. 23, 1930, 1; “Mrs. Pantages Cleared By Judge Hardy,” *L.A. Express*, Dec. 23, 1930, 1; “Mrs. Pantages’s Stigma Erased,” *L.A. Times*, Dec. 24, 1930, Part II, 1.

21. “Lois Pantages succumbs in heart attack,” *L.A. Daily News*, July 19, 1941, 2; “Many Mourn Widow of Pantages,” *Hollywood Citizen-News*, July 19, 1941, 9; “Lois Pantages Dies on Yacht,” *L.A. Times*, July 19, 1941, Pt. I, 1.

22. Information about the Rokumoto family includes the marriage listing for Juro and Teruko, “Marriage Licenses — San Francisco,” *San Francisco Call*, June 3, 1913, 10.



In December 1929, Judge Carlos Hardy nullified the 10-year probation of Mrs. Lois Pantages, entered a plea of not guilty on her behalf and dismissed the indictment, thus wiping out her manslaughter conviction. Pantages, second from right, is seen here with daughter, Carmen at an unidentified event. Photo: Dec. 28, 1930, *Herald Examiner* Collection/Los Angeles Public Library.

The Rokumotos, as well as their friends, the Kawaguchis, were relegated to minor characters amid the laser-focused media attention on Lois Pantages. As District Attorney Buron Fitts noted, it is certainly worth asking whether the criminal justice system would have treated Pantages differently had Juro been white. As it was, the near invisibility of the Rokumotos and the Kawaguchis is another reminder of the marginal existence Asians and other people of color occupied in late 1920s Los Angeles and in America broadly. ★

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23. Paul R. Spitzzeri, “‘Shall Law Stand for Naught?’: The Los Angeles Chinese Massacre at Trial,” (2008) 3 *California Legal History*, 185–224.