

THE WICKED STEPMOTHER?: THE EDNA MUMBULO CASE OF 1930*

by

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of gender and the stereotype of the "wicked stepmother" in the 1930 murder case of Edna Mumbulo in Erie, Pennsylvania. In April 1930, Edna Mumbulo was charged with the murder of her stepdaughter Hilda. It was alleged that Edna deliberately set fire to the eleven-year old girl with the hopes of obtaining the girl's \$6,000 estate and receiving the sole affections of the girl's father. Edna Mumbulo's case was the most sensational murder case in Erie to that date. It is asserted in this article that the facts of the case were seen through the distorted lens of the "wicked stepmother" stereotype. As a result, Edna was convicted of the crime. Eight years later, the presiding judge of the case, with the conviction that there was reasonable doubt, helped secure her release. Using newspaper accounts, court records, family histories, and census data, the author recreates the alleged fire, hunt, trial, and public speculation.

INTRODUCTION

On March 24, 1990, Edna Deshunk Mumbulo died of old age. At age 99, she had not been the oldest resident at the Erie County Geriatric Center, but she may have been the most famous — if they had only remembered. In the following days, Edna's body was taken from St. Vincent's Medical Center in Erie, Pennsylvania, where she had died, to St. Joseph's Cemetery in Perry, New York. There, in the small local cemetery grounds, in a plot freshly dug, despite the frozen ground, Edna was buried.¹

Edna Deshunk Mumbulo was a mystery to those people who surrounded her; to those who came in and out of her life just before her dying days in 1990. She was, likewise, a mystery to the people who she encountered in 1930. Edna Deshunk Mumbulo was not simply a little old lady, frail and sweet. Edna was the Torch Killer of 1930.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Female murderers, like Edna Mumbulo, blended into the American public with great ease. They were not big, hulking monsters like many of their male counterparts, nor were they old, hooked nose witches rubbing their hands with maniacal glee. On the surface, they looked average, non-threatening. Edna Mumbulo was just one such murderer. But, it was that commonness that perplexed the Erie public. Murder was alarming and incomprehensible. The murder of a child, however, was frightening and shocking. It was gruesome. The thought of a gruesome, grisly crime being committed by an ordinary woman elevated the Mumbulo Torch Killings to a new height.²

The literature on female murderers is rich. Likewise, the number of different theories about female killers abounds. One theory, as expressed by Elicka Peterson in her article “Murder as Self-Help: Women and Intimate Partner Homicide,” suggests that low status in society and low social control led to decreased access to social control. In turn, the inability to control one’s life and the inability to tap into resources to assist in the control of life crises prompted some women to resort to lethal violence as a means of restoring a semblance of control to their lives. In effect, Peterson argues that homicide was a last-ditch effort to take back their lives.³ Elizabeth M. Suval and Robert C. Brisson might add to this self-help theory that included in that loss of social control is an absence of economic control. In their work, “Neither Beauty Nor Beast: Female Criminal Homicide Offenders,” they argue that socio-economic deprivation was a contributing factor in women’s homicides. This theory is countered, however, by the work of Eric Dowdy and N. Prabha Unnithan. Their study of Texas female killers suggests that there is little evidence to support the conclusion, at least in Texas, that economic distress motivated the homicide of children.⁴

Much of the literature being produced today focuses on the personal background and characteristics of those women convicted of homicide. In “Convicted Women Who Have Killed Children: A Self-Psychology Perspective” by Susan Crimmins, Sandra Langley, and Henry H. Brownstein, the authors describe 42 New York State cases where mothers killed their own children. Overwhelmingly, they argue, women who kill their children have a background pattern of repeated damage to self. Mothers who kill, they suggest, were consistently subjected to physical and sexual victimization, suicide attempts, and substance abuse. They suffered low self-esteem, relied heavily upon an abusive and dysfunctional spouse, and experienced a sense of self-worthlessness.⁵

Jane Totman’s conclusions were strikingly similar. In her 1978 work, The Murderess: A Psychological Study of Criminal Homicide, she argued that female murderers came from destructive relationships. They may have been mothers, but they came to that role reluctantly. Being a mother was simply an unwanted fate and was perceived as a burden on their personal life and a dramatic and tragic shift from how they envisioned themselves. The frustration with this new burden of responsibility drove some women to no longer see their children as family members in need of care and nurturing, but as obstacles to their personal happiness and irritants. But, these women, because of the nature of their abusive and destructive relationships, could not confide in their partner. They had no one with whom to share their feelings. As a result, Totman suggests, they removed the unwanted child by killing that child.⁶ Edna Mumbulo, Erie’s Torch Killer of 1930, fit this description.

But Edna might equally fit the image of the struggling stepmother, which carries with it the myth of wickedness and cruelty. The literature on the stereotyping of stepmothers is equally abundant as that of female killers.⁷ Negative connotations about stepmothers have been in existence as early as the 15th century.⁸ Those myths remain in existence today. The story of Cinderella locked in a tower on the eve of the Great Ball, Snow White’s poisoning, and Hansel and Gretel’s abandonment in the woods all came at the hands of the “wicked stepmother.” The stepmothers in those fairy tales are depicted as the raw incarnation of “evil” and all that is “wicked.” They are portrayed as individuals “devoid of all human goodness.”⁹ These myths are quickly assimilated into the slate of cultural standards. Stephen Claxton-Oldfield and Bonnie

Butler, in their work “Portrayal of Stepparents in Movie Plot Summaries,” have amply demonstrated the pervasiveness of the negative stereotypes associated with stepmothers in popular contemporary media forms.¹⁰ Yet, contrary to popular myth, most stepmothers are not “wicked” or “evil.” In fact, as Marianne Dainton has noted in her work, “Myths and Misconceptions of the Stepmother Identity,” despite “fairy tales’ depiction of stepmothers as evil hags, real stepmothers look just like real mothers.”¹¹ In the end, the prevalent myth about stepmothers continues to assert that the non-biological mother cannot nurture and care for a child as well as the biological mother. Thus, Edna Mumbulo’s role as “stepmother” may have influenced the public’s perception of her love for her daughter and, as a consequence, her innocence or guilt.¹²

Others have suggested that the stereotype and creation of the “wicked stepmother” myth have gone much further than just labeling women, and have played a central role in the deterioration of those stepfamilies. Gerda Schulman’s landmark work in 1972, “Myths that Intrude on the Adaptation of the Stepfamily,” argued that negative “step” images created additional problems for stepfamilies. Mark Fine’s work, “Perceptions of Stepparents: Variations in Stereotypes as a Function of Current Family Structure,” has further demonstrated the power of negative stereotypes and the expectations of those stereotypes to adversely affect already strained relations between stepchildren and stepparents. Simply put, women internalized the messages and stereotypes about stepmothers long before they entered a relationship that required them to assume the role of stepmother. And, these women’s fear of being linked to that negative image has fostered unnatural relationships and great expectations of “instant love.” The dynamics of a stepfamily have been only further complicated, as many have noted, by the prevalence of the “evil stepmother” stereotype. Thus, the problem of natural jealousies and the ill-feelings of having been separated from the natural mother are further exacerbated by this “stepmother” syndrome.¹³ So, while the Erie public may have unjustly convicted Edna Mumbulo because of her stepmother status, the strains within the family may have been heightened, in part, because of that same stereotype. Those strains, jealousies, and deflated expectations may have compelled Edna to commit the horrific act.

Janet Strayer’s article, “Trapped in the Mirror: Psychosocial Reflections on the Mid-Life and the Queen in *Snow White*,” sums up the problems associated with stepmothers well.¹⁴ “Folktales,” Strayer writes, “are privileged in reducing complex issues to essentials, such as ‘good’ and the ‘bad’.”¹⁵ While those essentials, in some cases, may serve the public in a positive way, the stepmother stereotype has been harmful. The Erie public, having consumed a lifetime of fairy tales and myths, organized the known facts of the Mumbulo case into the “wicked stepmother” framework. In doing so, they condemned a woman to prison.

BACKGROUND: EDNA MUMBULO

Edna was born December 1, 1890, in North Baltimore, Ohio, to George Shunk and Mary Agnes Arbogast. George had been a glassblower for a small company run by Philip Arbogast, Mary’s father. Several branches of the Arbogast family were well-known in southwest Pennsylvania and West Virginia for their glass-making skills. George and Mary met through that industry.¹⁶ Their fourth child was Edna. When Edna was a small child, the family moved from their home south of Toledo to Pittsburgh’s Homewood District. There, as Catholics, they joined the Holy Rosary Catholic Church where Mary played the organ for Sunday Masses and

her eight daughters served as members of the church choir. Around 1906, however, Edna strayed from her faith and fell in love with a local boy named Harold Van Sickle. By her sixteenth birthday, Edna was the mother of twins. Unable to care for the twins, the children were sent off to live with her older sister. Nonetheless, Harold and Edna were married. After only ten months of marriage, however, Harold died. With his death, Edna “had to go to work.” She held various jobs between 1907 and 1909, including working as a bundle wrapper for Kaufman’s Department Store in Pittsburgh and as a freelance dressmaker in the city.¹⁷ In 1910, with nearly the entire family in tow, George, Mary, and Edna moved to the small town of Coudersport in northern Pennsylvania.¹⁸

By the mid-1920s, Edna had relocated from Coudersport to New Berlin, New York. New Berlin is around 50 miles north of Binghamton in the heart of central New York State. There, she found work in the silk mill. One of Edna’s co-workers at the silk mill was Ralph Mumbulo. Very quickly, over the course of 1926-1927, the two formed a friendship. Despite her new job and new friends, Edna was plagued by family problems. Her elderly father, who was closing in on 90 years old, was without home and assistance. “Pap,” as he was called by his children, bounced around from child to child. With his mind rapidly failing, he was increasingly a burden on those family members who cared for him. By 1927, it was Edna’s turn to care for her father. “Pap” lived with her in New Berlin for one year before returning to another of Edna’s siblings in Arkansas. It was during her father’s stay that she and Ralph solidified their relationship.

Their relationship was an “illicit alliance.” Ralph was married. In August, 1927, Ralph was brazen enough to introduce Edna to his eight-year old daughter, Hilda. Hilda’s mother, Edith Chapen Mumbulo, died suddenly in late 1928. In the wake of her death, Hilda received an estate valued at over \$6000, the bulk of which she would receive when she turned twenty-one. By the time the estate papers were formally recorded and the family apprised of the nature of the settlement, the country found itself amid an economic tailspin. The silk mills temporarily closed and both Edna and Ralph were released from their jobs. For several months, the threesome (Ralph Mumbulo, daughter Hilda Mumbulo, and Edna Shunk) “tin-canned” their way across the United States. Ralph took day jobs while Edna continued to find work as a dressmaker. Finally, on November 8, 1929 (just a little over a week after the Stock Market Crash), the threesome found their way to Erie, Pennsylvania.

In Erie, the three set up house in a second-floor apartment at the corner of 6th and Lighthouse on Erie’s East Side. Ralph found work at the Standard Stoker Company in Erie as a welder while Edna designed and made dresses out of their apartment. She also earned extra money (and the trust of her neighbors) by babysitting their children. Together they yielded less than twenty-five dollars per week. The cost of food and rent ate up much of those earnings. Despite the low income, the Mumbulos (as all three were now called) could afford to buy a new Ford automobile. Bought on credit, the purchase of the new Ford will later be viewed with suspicion. Hilda was enrolled in Wayne School and quickly developed friends from among her classmates. Over the course of the next four months, Edna and Hilda endeared themselves to their neighbors.¹⁹

Edna, however, was growing disillusioned over her relationship with Ralph. She had not been able to care for her twin boys twenty years earlier and now, as she approached her fortieth

birthday, she was saddled with the care of an eleven year old girl who was not biologically her own. Ralph worked hard at the forge and she spent her days in the apartment alone or with Hilda. The conditions in the apartment were clean, but crowded. It was, by design, a one-bedroom apartment, but because of Edna's desire for privacy, the sitting room adjacent to the kitchen was converted into a bedroom for Hilda. The family, as a result, was forced to spend their time in the apartment either in their own bedrooms or together in the 8 by 14-foot kitchen. The existing tensions between the three were exacerbated by the crowded living conditions. Moreover, Ralph freely spent their limited money on Hilda. He frequently sent her to the movies and bought her new clothes. Edna, as a result, grew jealous of Hilda. On at least one occasion, Edna threatened to leave Ralph because she believed he thought more of his daughter than he did of her. The tensions between Ralph and Edna were further compounded by their growing economic problems. The bills were adding up — food, rent, the car — and they all needed to be paid. “Pap,” back in Arkansas, needed money. And Hilda wanted more. The problems seemed insurmountable. In the back of both of their minds, however, there was a chance — a \$6000 chance.

THE FIRE

On the morning of March 21, 1930, Edna seized her chance. The second floor of the Pittsburgher Apartments was just coming alive with activity around 5 a.m. when Hilda awoke crying. She sniffed and snuffled and returned to a half-sleep. By six o'clock Edna had risen and begun preparing breakfast for Ralph. Bacon, toast, and coffee were quickly devoured. He ate in big exaggerated bites as he rushed to finish dressing for work. By 6:40 a.m., he was off to Standard Stoker. Edna and Hilda were alone. Had she planned what she was going to do next? Had she thought out all of the implications of her acts? Or was it impulse? From her bedroom, she brought a jug of gasoline that she had purchased the day before. What then ensued remains a mystery. By 7 a.m., the apartment building was engulfed in smoke. Little eleven-year old Hilda was in flames. She was, as a physician later reported, “literally cooked alive.”²⁰ When Nina Hickson, the apartment manager, arrived “there was considerable smoke” pouring from the apartment. The apartment building was in jeopardy. The flimsy composition walls that separated the families were potential fuel to the growing flames. Hickson quickly exited to procure a pail of water. In the meantime, a Mumbulo neighbor, Frank Fisher rushed to what he believed was an empty apartment. As he stood in the doorway, Mrs. Hickson returned with two pails of water. One pail was emptied onto the larger fire and as she was about to dump the second onto the smaller fire underneath a chair, she spied little Hilda standing in the kitchen corner, her underclothes in flames. She doused the young girl and ran back for more water.²¹ As she exited the apartment, she nearly collided with another neighbor, John Blossey. Blossey found Hilda now sitting on a kitchen chair, her nightgown burned entirely off. Hilda was motionless.

“Why are you sitting there?” Blossey asked.

“I can't see to get out,” she replied.

The fire and smoke had blinded the girl. And, as one might suspect, she was traumatized. She was not only traumatized by the fire and its devastating impact upon her, but also devastated by the fact that Edna, who was practically her stepmother, had apparently committed the **[End**

devastating act. Blosssey, afraid to touch the girl's scorched body in fear of inflicting greater pain, led her into the hall. She whispered to Blosssey, in her faint child's voice, "don't let me die."²² Then, little Hilda collapsed onto the floor. By 7:14 a.m., the firemen from Station Number 5 arrived onto the scene, quickly followed by a medic. The remaining embers of the fire were extinguished. But, the firemen found unquestionable traces of gasoline poured all over Hilda's bedroom. Dr. Nathan Shuser, the medic, found Hilda on a neighbor's cot. She was unconscious and was "badly burned about the face and body...." It was apparent to Shuser that her condition was critical so she was promptly loaded into the ambulance and taken to Hamot Medical Center.

Throughout it all, Edna screamed and cried.

"Save my baby! Save my apartment!" she cried.

Sadie Donovan, a neighbor, cornered the woman.

"Are my furs safe?" Edna asked. Donovan was shocked. "Are my furs safe?"

Donovan asked Edna how the fire had started, unaware that the answer stood before her. Edna avoided the questions and tried to push past Donovan for the stairwell. Donovan prevented her descent.

"How did the fire start?" Donovan asked again.

"Mind your own business," Edna replied, "or I'll sock ya' in the jaw."²³ She then shoved Donovan and ran to the street below. There, the tenants of the building gathered beside her. Among them were neighbors Eliza Summerville and Ethel Luther who, once the fires were extinguished, led Edna to Mrs. Hickson's apartment where they knelt in prayer. Sadie Donovan remained on the street, anticipating the arrival of Edna's husband, Ralph.

He arrived around 7:30 a.m.

"Where are they?" he asked. Sadie pointed. He found Edna in Mrs. Hickson's apartment and Hilda in the process of being loaded onto her stretcher. He backed down the stairs slowly as the firemen and Dr. Shuser carried her to the street. As the emergency workers did their business of loading and securing Hilda into the ambulance, Ralph disappeared. Sadie Donovan, her suspicion fully aroused, followed Ralph into the apartment building. She stood in the doorway of the smoke-filled apartment and watched Ralph as he "hurriedly searched for certain papers...." When he realized that he was being observed, he grew indignant.²⁴

"Mind your own business, woman!" he barked. Donovan withdrew, a thousand thoughts rattling in her brain. Ralph scurried about the apartment, quickly rummaging through drawers until he at last found the papers he had been seeking. He then rushed past Donovan in the stairwell and to the ambulance on 6th Street. With the papers tucked into the bib of his coveralls, Ralph jumped aboard the ambulance and, with Hilda, raced to Hamot Medical Center.

The crowds quickly dispersed. A neighbor took Edna from the Lighthouse Apartments and the scene of the crime to one of Edna's relative's home in Wesleyville, Pennsylvania. She would return only once more to the site of the fire and then it was only to pack her bags.

By late morning, on the day of the fire, Hilda was dead. Blossey, the neighbor to whom she had spoken the words — "don't let me die," had failed to help her. The firemen and Dr. Shuser had been unable to save her. She had been burned to a crisp. Her once soft skin was burned pink. Her face was taut with the evaporation of skin moisture. She died of burn trauma at Hamot Medical Center around eleven o'clock in the morning. Between her arrival at the hospital shortly before eight o'clock and her death at eleven, Ralph Mumbulo was not at the bedside of his dying daughter. His last words to her — as he left her that morning — were, "I'll see you in heaven, Hilda." Instead, he visited the offices of the Erie Insurance Company where he inquired as to the status of his life insurance policy on Hilda.²⁵ Ralph never returned to the hospital. He was not present when Hilda died. In fact, at the moment she died, Ralph was still in the offices of the Erie Insurance Company.

The police reports at the time of the initial investigation reported that Hilda had risen from her bed to light the gas stove when suddenly she was engulfed in flames. Yet, there was no evidence of scorch marks or smoke damage in the kitchen where she was alleged to have started the fire. It was, as the Erie Daily Times later reported, "singularly free from smoke." Instead, the fire damage was restricted to Hilda's bedroom. On the right wall of her bedroom, the wall closest to the apartment corridor, a "ghastly smudge" was found on the apartment's "dismal" yellow walls and ceiling. Yet, Assistant Fire Chief Lawrence Scully reported that their efforts to determine the "exact cause were futile."²⁶ Coroner Dan Hanley investigated the fire site and viewed the body of Hilda Mumbulo and then promptly signed an "investigation completion card." The fire was out and the excitement over, or so the Mumbulos thought.

Edna and Ralph reportedly could not stay in the apartment the next day. "The memories of their child's death" were unbearable. Instead, they remained in the home of their Wesleyville relatives. On March 24, Reverend Carl Blackmore presided over the funeral service of Hilda Belle Mumbulo at the Hanley-Schaller Chapel on the corner of 13th and Peach Street.²⁷ The next day, Ralph and Edna packed up their belongings and vacated their apartment. The two drove east to New Berlin to bury Hilda and start anew. As Hilda was buried and friends and family of Ralph gathered around their grieving son, Edna stood emotionless, stoic in the face of the tragedy. Hilda's burial was supposed to be the end of the story. It was supposed to be the closure to a tense and horrific experience. It was not.

THE HUNT AND TRIAL

Back in Erie, the investigation reopened. John Blossey had his suspicions. At his General Electric workplace, he confided to his boss that he thought the fire was deliberately set. He was not alone. The Mumbulo's neighbor, Lester Hatch, went so far as to meet with Coroner Hanley to discuss the nature of the fire and relate to him the behavior of Ralph and Edna during the fire. How was it that the fire was entirely confined to the bedroom if the fire started in the kitchen? Hanley consulted with the local police reports and met with Assistant Chief Scully. The firemen were admittedly suspicious, but the case had been closed so they did not speak up.

Hanley read the police reports and interviews with Edna. In her testimony to the police, she claimed a different story than what she had originally told neighbors and Dr. Shuser. In her report to the police, she claimed that the fire started when she was cleaning a dress in gasoline. The day before the fire, she said, she babysat a neighbor's child and the child accidentally soiled her dress. She bought gas that day to clean it, but did not get around to actually cleaning the dress until the day of the fire. She had, she argued, taken a can of gasoline out of her bedroom and filled a washpan in the kitchen. She then rubbed the soiled dress in the gasoline and, according to her, it immediately exploded in flames. In a panic, she tried to throw the pan of flaming gas out the kitchen window, but a clothesline full of freshly laundered linens hung outside her window. Fearing that she might set the linens on fire, she went through the doorway separating the kitchen and Hilda's room, and threw the flaming pan toward the window there. The window, however, was closed. Hilda, she said, caught on fire as the pan of flames dropped onto her. It was an accident, Edna claimed to the police – a horrible accident. On March 31, dissatisfied with Edna's explanation and the pattern of the fire evidence, Coroner Hanley advocated for a reopening of the case. Investigators returned to the site of the fire and took more detailed notes, mapped out the apartment, and took photographs. Assistant District Attorney Otto Herbst contacted the apartment manager, Nina Hickson, and arranged for the city to rent the damaged apartment in order to secure the investigation site. If there was foul play in the fire, Herbst believed, he could not afford to have the crime scene repaired. The burn damage needed to be preserved.²⁸

The day after the case was reopened, local Erie authorities began searching for Ralph and Edna. Detective LeRoy Search and Assistant City Detective Harry Russell were employed to lead the investigation. By April 2, 1930, the citizens of Erie were fascinated with the speculation about the couple's whereabouts. The Erie Daily Times headline read: "Continue Hunt for Parents." They knew they were not staying in their old apartment or with their relatives in Erie, but the local officials in New Berlin could not find them. Detective Russell went to New Berlin to see for himself. He hoped that he might ascertain clues about their location by visiting with family members there and visiting the site where Hilda was interred. He returned the following day to consult with Assistant District Attorney Herbst and Assistant District Attorney Mortimer Graham. Meanwhile, New York State Troopers scoured the Oneonta Mountains near New Berlin in hopes of locating the two. After nearly a week of hunting for the elusive couple, Herbst was convinced that their flight was evidence of guilt and that enough evidence, albeit circumstantial, had surfaced to merit his swearing out of an arrest warrant. Appearing before Alderman Eugene Alberstadt, Herbst leveled the charge of murder against Ralph Mumbulo and his common-law wife Edna Deshunk.²⁹

By the time authorities caught up with Ralph and Edna, however, they were no longer involved in a simple common-law marriage; they were legally married within the state of Pennsylvania. On April 3, 1930, as Detective Russell searched New Berlin, Ralph and Edna were driving south from the area back into the state of Pennsylvania. They crossed the border and in the small town of Montrose, they were married. Their marriage protected them. For Edna, the wedding not only legitimized their life together over the last two years, but sealed the "lips of her husband." Pennsylvania law prevented an individual from being forced to present damaging testimony against a spouse. Edna had silenced the only individual who may have truly known the intention of the fire. After their wedding, the two drove back north into New York

and to their hometown of New Berlin. By the time they arrived, Russell had already returned to Erie to meet with his superiors about a course of action. Rather than stay with family, who they likely suspected knew about the case by now, Ralph and Edna checked into a local hotel.³⁰

In the meantime, Russell was dispatched back to New Berlin and began inquiring at other locations in the area. On the morning of April 5, he visited the local hotel where Edna and Ralph were staying. The hotel manager escorted him to the couple's room only to find that they had fled (and did so, of course, without paying their bill). Russell knew he was close. The hunt intensified.

After days of hunting for the couple, Detective Russell and Assistant District Attorney Mortimer Graham located Ralph and Edna. The couple was questioned, but let go, as the warrant had not reached the two officers and they had no legal authority to hold them. Nonetheless, the government officials kept a close eye on the two. When the warrant arrived two days later, on Saturday April 5, the Mumbulos were promptly arrested in the town of Edmeston where they had been staying with family. Edna, a bride of only three days, was hysterical when the charges were read. She collapsed several times as she was escorted from the house to the police car. Ralph, when confronted by Chenango County Sheriff Rexford Ormsby, denied his identity.³¹

“I don't know what you're talking about,” he said.

“What are you trying to do, hang a murder on me?”

Once she had calmed down, Edna, likewise, tried to elude the authorities' questioning. “What is happening?! What is happening?!” she cried.

The two were immediately taken to the Chenango County Jail in Norwich, New York. There, Chenango County District Attorney Frank Barnes confronted Edna. She denied all charges to Barnes, but admitted that she had bought gas the day before the fire in order to clean a dress. Barnes calmly took her statement and then, over the phone, translated it to Erie County Assistant District Attorney Otto Herbst. Herbst began to assemble his case against the couple by drawing up extradition papers, assigning his associates a variety of smaller tasks, and making the preparations for his trip to Norwich.

While the Mumbulos were arrested on Saturday, April 5, Herbst did not arrive in the town until Wednesday, April 9. In the meantime, the couple had contacted local attorneys Percy Thomas and Ward Truesdale. They were not formally retained until Wednesday. When they were retained and all relevant authorities had been apprised of the situation, Thomas and Truesdale petitioned for the release of Edna and Ralph. They argued that the accused were not a real threat to society and that they had family in the area with whom they could stay at no expense to the court. Chenango County District Attorney Barnes countered that they were, in fact, threats and that they had proven their unreliability and untrustworthiness in their weeklong flight from the law and their inability to pay the local hotel charge. Municipal Judge Nelson P. Bonney refused the petition for release and so Edna and Ralph remained behind bars.

Over the course of those first days in jail, between her arrest on April 5 and the first hearings on April 10, Edna's mood fluctuated. At times she sat in her cell motionless, stoic-faced, and somber. Then, she broke into fits of tears and stormed the perimeter of her cell. Bordering on collapse, she begged and yelled for a dose of the opiates which had been administered to her since her arrest on Saturday. The jail physician had, in fact, given Edna a sedative each night to help her sleep. The dose was strong enough that after only one minute she was fast asleep. Chenango County officials intimated that Edna's hysteria was the result of her lack of drugs. In effect, the jail physician suggested that she was a drug addict and that she was "craving opiates." Later, however, Dr. George Manly retracted those remarks, but said that something was "preying on Mrs. Mumbulo's mind."³²

On April 9, in a separate room in the county courthouse, Sheriff Ormsby, Chenango County District Attorney Frank Barnes, and Erie County Assistant District Attorney Otto Herbst questioned Edna. Observers later reported that the questioning was, in fact, a "severe grilling."³³ When first asked what had happened on the day of the fire, Edna broke into tears. As she sobbed, she began to tell her version of the story.

"After Ralph went to work, I brought the jug of gasoline from my bedroom into the kitchen and poured about half of it into a pan. While I was rubbing it, there was a sudden flash and flames rushed toward the kitchen window," she sobbed.

"Why didn't you throw the pan of burning gasoline out the kitchen window in your apartment, instead of running through Hilda's bedroom with it?" Herbst asked.

"A string of wash blocked my path," she explained, "so I turned into the bedroom toward the window."³⁴

"Why?" Herbst retorted.

"I couldn't, I couldn't," she cried.

The interrogation team took notes.

"Why is Ralph being questioned? He wasn't even there?"

"Tell me, Mrs. Mumbulo, why didn't you save Hilda?" Herbst asked.

"Don't ask me that! Don't ask me that!" she screamed.

"I loved her as my own and if I had another chance, I'd give my life for her."

"But why didn't you help her?" Herbst pressed.

“I don’t know... I ran out of the room and it seemed to me Hilda ran in the other direction,” she replied. “Why are you doing this?” she asked.

Herbst and the others simply looked at her. By then the four were joined by Dr. Manly. Looking to the physician, Edna asked, “Can I please have some more medicine?”

Herbst responded, “You’ll get all you want when you tell what we want to know.”³⁵

Edna’s hands shook. She turned her head downward.

“I did everything for her,” she said. “Denied myself that she might have good clothes. Provided money for her entertainment and now you say I killed her.”³⁶

She continued to shake, her hands stroking each other in nervousness and stress. Dr. Manly and Assistant District Attorney Herbst watched her hands. There were no signs of burns. No evidence of a sudden flash that must have come close to her hands, which had not only been near the burning pan, but in the gas within the pan. There was no evidence of any burn or scarring.

The interrogation team spent hours asking the same questions and fleshing out greater details about Edna’s relationship with Ralph. Over and over, they rehashed the questions. What took minutes to occur, the sudden instant of the flash and the fire, was played time and time again over the course of the day. All parties involved were exhausted.

While the interrogation team worked on understanding the incident, the assistant district attorneys in both Erie and Chenango Counties began the process for extradition. Official papers were sent to Governor John Fisher in Harrisburg and Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt in Albany. Fisher received the extradition papers on April 9, signed them the following day, and had them immediately sent back to Erie. The attorneys in Erie then sent them to Albany. It was not until April 14 that Roosevelt signed the papers. In doing so, the prosecution was given a green light to transport Edna and Ralph back to Erie.³⁷ In the meantime, however, the city of Norwich, the Chenango County seat, filled with reporters. The Chenango Hotel in Norwich, one reporter noted, was the site of “vigorous gossip” about the case. The Mumbulo Case had captured their full attention. Rumors circulated about the intent of the murder and the details as to how the fire started.³⁸

On April 10, the day upon which Fisher signed Pennsylvania’s extradition request, Edna and Ralph’s defense attorneys filed for a habeas corpus hearing. The Writ of Habeas Corpus process was typically a long affair. Observers expected that this stage alone might take up to three weeks. Assistant District Attorney Herbst, naturally, opposed the writ. He wanted the couple in an Erie courthouse as soon as possible. On April 11, the hearing proceeded with New York Supreme Court Justice Abraham Kellogg presiding. After three days of arguments, filings, and objections, Judge Kellogg rejected the defense’s writ. The defense team quickly prepared an appeal to the writ denial. The submission of the appeal to the Appellate Division of the New York State Supreme Court automatically blocked the extradition process. So, while both Governors had signed the papers for extradition, the court system prevented the execution of that

extradition. The appellate hearing was set for May 13 in Albany. It appeared that Edna and Ralph would have to remain in the Chenango County Jail one more month. Herbst was frustrated at the delays and the costs they were incurring upon the city of Erie. The situation for Ralph and Edna did not look good. To compound their problems, the Buffalo Finance Company repossessed the Mumbulo's new Ford automobile. The company argued that they had violated the terms of their contract by taking it out of the state.³⁹

On April 25, 1930, Edna and Ralph gave up the fight. They withdrew their appeal to the New York State Supreme Court and agreed to extradition. They agreed to voluntarily return to Pennsylvania. On April 28, Detective Harry Russell and Erie Policewoman Elizabeth Jeffs escorted Ralph and Edna from Norwich to Erie. The four boarded the train in Norwich in the morning. A layover in Binghamton, New York, kept them in the state until a little after 3 p.m. As they rode toward Erie, Detective Russell quizzed Ralph. After three hours of persistent questioning, Russell finally gave up. He was unable to secure an admission from the man. In another train car, Officer Jeffs sat shackled with Edna. Edna watched the passing countryside. Around 10:30 p.m., the train arrived, over the Nickel Plate Railroad, at the Erie train station. As the couple stepped off the train, photographers scrambled to get their shots. Flashbulbs lit the dark boarding area.

"Do you still say that you're innocent?" one photographer yelled.

Ralph and Edna both nodded and replied, "yes."

Russell and Jeffs escorted the couple through the station and past a throng of eager onlookers. One estimate suggests that there were over one hundred Erie residents crammed into the Nickel Plate Depot to see the infamous couple. Flash after camera flash made the two killers and their escorts squint as they proceeded past.

Over the course of the week, the Erie Daily Times chronicled the story of the fire and the tale of Edna and Ralph. "The stepmother's story is meager and full of discrepancies," one editorialist noted. Certainly these types of headlines must have played into the imagination of the Erie public. Edna was already, whether consciously or unconsciously, being linked to the "evil stepmother" stereotype.

Yet another daily columnist, Jay James, doubted the prosecutor's abilities. James went so far as to say that bets were "five-to-one" that they would not get a conviction against Edna. The community appeared divided. Some were so appalled at the idea that a woman could deliberately kill a child that they automatically dismissed the case. Others, including Jay James who had reservations about the prosecution's ability to secure a conviction, couched their opinions in the language of the "evil stepmother." Where Edna had consistently been referred to as the "mother" prior to her return to Erie, she was thereafter consistently referred to as the "stepmother." Erie residents, like people elsewhere throughout the western world, had undoubtedly heard the old folktales of the "evil stepmother."⁴⁰ Did the Erie public judge Edna guilty because she was not the biological mother? Did some deem her innocent because they could not comprehend the thought that a woman could commit such a ghastly crime? In either event, Edna's case was already being decided in the court of public opinion.⁴¹ It can hardly be

denied that that public opinion held gendered views of crime — women do not commit crimes, but those that do commit the most horrific crimes and are stepmothers are the most evil of all women. Edna was both a woman accused of a horrific crime and she was a stepmother. It was, however, the court's responsibility to assure that those private opinions did not obscure the facts of the case.

Efforts seemed underway to secure a fair trial. Emanuel Urich, a former boarder of the Mumbulos, was held in Chicago.⁴² His knowledge of the couple and their relationship with the dead child might shed important light onto the case. Detective Harry Russell urged Ralph to speak. "Don't you know that you're getting yourself in deeper by keeping quiet?" he asked. Russell's question seems to indicate his belief that Mumbulo was innocent, but for the sake of love he was protecting Edna. Russell repeated the question. Ralph's only response was that Edna loved the child as if it were her own.⁴³

On April 30, 1930, before Alderman E. Alberstadt, Ralph and Edna were arraigned. The following day, Edna and Ralph's attorneys, Truesdell and Thomas, visited the eastside apartments where the fire had occurred. The Pittsburgher Apartments were open and still occupied. The Mumbulo apartment, however, was closed upon orders of Assistant District Attorney Herbst. The attorneys were frustrated and so returned to their makeshift offices to make the necessary arrangements to get into the apartment. As they did, they viewed the photographs of the apartment taken by K. F. Schauble.⁴⁴

The Grand Jury Hearing was held on the first day in May. Attorney Truesdell asked that Edna and Ralph be tried together. The Erie County Prosecutor saw through the ploy. He later stated to the press that he believed the marriage exemption from testifying was null because the crime was committed before the marriage had been recorded. Nine witnesses were brought to the Grand Jury Hearing. Graham questioned and Truesdell cross-examined. In a surprise move, the prosecution did not seek the charge of First Degree Murder, but rather opted for Murder in the Second Degree. The prosecution, whether by true, heartfelt conviction or pure, legal strategy to insure Edna's incarceration, argued that while she may have had "malice aforethought," she had not intended to take Hilda's life. The charge leveled at Edna was that she had deliberately sought to inflict bodily harm. The defense seemed stunned by the charges. All reports circulating suggested that the prosecution would shoot for the First Degree Murder charge. The defense would have to shift strategies. Alderman Alberstadt held Ralph and Edna without bail and set Edna's trial for Monday, May 19.⁴⁵

Thomas and Truesdell, after their first defeat in the Grand Jury Hearing, handed over the reigns of Edna's defense to local attorney, William Carney. Carney called upon both local and national experts to bolster his argument. A. H. Hamilton was brought in from Ossining, New York. Hamilton had been involved in over 268 murder trials and, the defense suggested, could prove that the friction of Edna's washing could ignite the dress. Critics scoffed at the professional witness and questioned not only the veracity of such an argument, but asked how the fire then got into Hilda's bed.⁴⁶

The sensational case surely meant a sensational trial. The Erie public followed the story daily. There were so many requests about entrance into the trial that the Court decided to issue

admission cards to control the story-hungry crowd. By the middle of May, it was announced that Judge William E. Hirt was scheduled to preside over the case. Hirt was approaching his tenth year as an Erie County Judge. Born in 1881 in Erie, he was quite familiar with the city. He graduated from Princeton in 1904 and joined the law firm of Fish and Rilling in 1908. In 1921, Pennsylvania Governor Sproul appointed Hirt as Erie County judge to fill the vacancy left by Judge Whittlesey. Hirt was "scrupulous about maintaining a non-prejudicial posture."⁴⁷

On May 19, 1930, the Torch Killer Trial began. The publicity of the event and the sensational way that Hilda had died brought hundreds of onlookers to the Erie County Courthouse. Only those with tickets were admitted; the rest remained on the courthouse steps waiting for news as the day proceeded. Around 10 o'clock that morning, the jury selection began. One by one, the two sides debated the qualifications and merits of each potential juror. Only fifteen of the eighty-four possible jurors were brought forward. The defense and state's questioning took longer than expected, but met less resistance as well. Before the end of the day, all of the jurors were selected.⁴⁸

Edna was brought before the bar. Her head lowered, she was reminded of the charges against her and asked what she would plead.

"Not guilty," she said. The judge nodded and she returned to her seat. Ralph sat next to her, but their eyes did not meet.

Before recessing at 4 p.m., Judge Hirt recommended that both parties consider evening sessions so as to expedite the trial. Both the defense and the state agreed to consider it. The first day ended with no surprises.

On the second day of the trial, Assistant District Attorney Graham outlined the State's case against Edna Mumbulo. He made the argument that Edna had planned the act in advance. The murder of Hilda Mumbulo was pre-meditated, he said. She had bought gasoline the day before. In addition, he added, she had moved her valuable fur out of Hilda's room to protect it from the fire she would set the next day. Graham painted Edna as a vicious woman. She was poor and jealous of Hilda. The only thing that stood in her way from achieving both the full affection of Ralph and the material goods she wanted was little Hilda. And so, Graham said, Edna killed Hilda. In clear and systematic fashion, Graham detailed the possible plan. He noted Hilda's estate, hammered back at the premeditation, and then shared with the jury the attempted cover-up by marrying in Pennsylvania. Graham's opening remarks laid it all open. He gave a painful description of Hilda's death. Graham had successfully married the facts of the Mumbulo Case to the stereotype of the "wicked stepmother." The jury did not flinch, but absorbed it all.⁴⁹

The defense tried to counter. "Where was the evidence?" they asked. They did not, however, stroke a chord with those listening. Assistant District Attorney Otto Herbst then introduced a motion to take the jury to the scene of the crime. Defense attorney William Carney did not object so long as the State could prove that the crime scene had not been tampered with. All parties agreed. The State seemed to have the upper hand.

The next day, the State brought forward a series of witnesses. Among them was the Erie City Assistant Fire Chief Lawrence Scully. He gave details about the fire and his department's response to the fire. Graham asked him how the fire started. Scully, perhaps misunderstanding the question, said that the fire had involved gasoline. He was unsure how the gasoline had ignited, however. In cross-examination, Scully told of their discovery of the jug of gasoline. It was half-filled, Scully said. When asked what that meant, Scully responded, "Murderers are not concerned with conserving the implement or medium through which the crime was committed." He also said that Edna had told him that the gasoline ignited while washing a dress.⁵⁰

This was a blow to the prosecution. In effect, Scully believed the half-filled jug might indicate Edna's innocence. Graham and Herbst tried to counter the testimony. "But if it was made to look like an accident, might that not be the case?" they asked.

Time and time again the defense blew little holes into the State's case against Edna. Who really led Hilda out of the apartment? Was it John Blossey or Sadie Donovan? Both those State witnesses testified to saving Hilda. That morning's conflicting testimony was damaging.

In the afternoon things began to turn around. Dr. Lininger, the attending physician for Edna after the fire, testified that he had found no evidence of burns on Edna's hands or any other part of her body. His testimony immediately raised the question, "How could she have carried a pan of flaming gasoline without burning something on her?" He also testified that Edna was very nervous. The defense cross-examined and forced the doctor into admitting that he simply could not see any burns on Edna. Moreover, he stated that it was "perfectly natural for a woman in the condition he found the defendant to make conflicting statements as to what happened at the time of the fire." The failure, from the defense's perspective, was not Edna's, but Dr. Lininger's.

Other witnesses were brought forward. G. E. Gardner, the Justice of the Peace in Montrose, identified both Edna and Ralph as the couple who secured his services for their marriage. Firemen L. J. Stanton, Leo Nagle, R. J. McCall, and Assistant Fire Chief Lawrence Scully shared their versions of the fire. Coroner Dan Hanley admitted that the first investigation of the fire ended without suspicion.

Nothing seemed to be going right for the prosecution. Then, without notice, a young woman entered the courtroom. She was crying hysterically as she approached the defense table. The young woman was Margaret Tanner, Edna's daughter. The two had not seen each other in over two years. The mother and daughter embraced and cried. Judge Hirt temporarily adjourned the court. The story took an improbable twist. Had the defense manufactured the return of Edna's daughter simply to present Edna as a loving and loved mother? Or was it purely coincidental? In either event, the image was clear. Maybe Edna was not a cold-hearted murderer. But, the presence of her weeping daughter convinced few of her innocence. It only served to remind them that she loved her own children, but perhaps not her stepchild.

Attorney Carney, working on behalf of Edna Mumbulo, then went onto the offensive. He argued that Chenango County Sheriff Barnes questioned the couple without offering them attorney services or informing them of their rights. In doing so, he suggested, his client had been

denied her constitutional rights and that any and all admissions made during that time were improperly acquired and thus inadmissible.⁵¹ By the day's end, the trial was up for grabs. "It is difficult," the defense stated in their Memorandum of Brief, "to imagine a case where a conviction of a murderer is sought on such flimsy evidence."⁵² The Erie Daily Times reported that the State's argument was an abysmal failure. "Those witnesses, reputed by the State to be their most important, floundered several times as defense counsel drew statements from them greatly to the benefit of Mrs. Mumbulo." Had Edna slipped away from the law again? Or, was she being tried for a crime she had not committed? Was she being tried because she was a woman? Was she being tried because she was a stepmother? In any event, the conviction which seemed so certain to the State days earlier, was in jeopardy.

On May 21, the third day of the trial, both the prosecution and defense brought forward experts they believed could win the case. The prosecution secured the services of R. E. Lee, head of the chemistry department at Allegheny College and the author of chemistry textbooks.

Assistant District Attorney Graham asked Lee to share with the court his qualifications. He then asked in what ways fires could be ignited. Lee told the court that there were four ways to ignite a fire: by a photo-chemical method, an electrical spark, an open flame, and by thermal effect. Graham knew that the defense's argument was that the fire had started by friction or thermal effect.

"Dr. Lee," Graham asked, "assuming a person is cleaning or rubbing clothes in an open dishpan, such as this exhibit, and in gasoline, would you say it possible by the thermal effect of the friction — only by the thermal effect of the friction — to set fire to the gasoline without burning the hands?"

"No, Sir," Lee replied.⁵³

Graham had been successful in eliciting testimony from the expert that supported the prosecution's argument. Graham also needed to demonstrate that Edna had not only deliberately ignited the fire, but that she carried it and willingly threw it upon Hilda.

Lee's testimony, therefore, continued. Lee testified that according to tests done on the dishpan in question, it was estimated that the pan reached temperatures of 700 to 800 degrees Fahrenheit and that Edna's hands would have begun burning as soon as the pan's temperature reached 400 degrees Fahrenheit. The image painted for the court was clear: Edna Mumbulo had doused little Hilda with gasoline and then, and only then, was the gasoline ignited.

The defense saw otherwise. Truesdell rose to question Professor Lee. Under cross-examination, Lee admitted that the defense claim was not entirely impossible, but "highly improbable." The defense then offered up the testimony of A. H. Hamilton, a chemist. Hamilton testified that a burning pan could be carried and that Edna's apron had scorch marks to prove it. The defense, in effect, argued that the pan had ignited, Edna carried the pan with her apron, and then unwittingly threw the pan at a closed window. The defense never tried to explain how the flaming gasoline splashed back over six feet to catch young Hilda on fire.

On May 22, the trial resumed. In what the Erie Daily Times would later describe as a “merciless barrage,” Assistant District Attorney Herbst questioned Edna Mumbulo. None of her answers seemed to satisfy the government attorney.

“And you left Hilda, the beautiful child, in that blazing inferno and didn’t do a thing to save her?” he asked.

Edna remained silent. Then softly she began to explain. The district attorney’s bitterness subsided as Edna’s hushed voice captivated the courtroom audience. Edna remained on the stand for two hours as she repeated her story over and over again. She told of their times together. She told the court how she treated Hilda as if she were her own. She told of the dishpan, the sudden flames, and the subsequent fire. Her eyes watered, but no tears fell. A long pause punctuated the testimony. Then, both parties rested. The trial was over and deliberations began.

On Friday, in a small room on the third floor of the Erie County Courthouse, the jury deliberated the fate of Edna Mumbulo, the accused Torchkiller of 1930. On the jury’s first ballot, nine voted for a conviction of Second Degree Murder, two voted for the death sentence, and only one held out for an acquittal. In the company of Deputy Sheriff Irma McDonald, Edna paced the halls in anticipation of the verdict. Ralph remained in the courtroom, falling in and out of sleep. His interest in his wife appeared to be waning. Was he convinced of her guilt? Or was he part of the plan? Did he still love her? The deliberations took most of the day and by the end of that Friday, the jurors were already exhausted. The deliberations continued into the night. On the second ballot, eleven voted for Second Degree Murder and the lone juror remained steadfast in support of the acquittal decision. Finally, on the third ballot, the lone juror was broken. All twelve jurors voted in favor of the prosecution. Edna Mumbulo was found guilty of Second Degree Murder. At 3:30 a.m., early Saturday morning, the tipstaff was notified that a verdict had been reached. Judge Hirt was summoned from home and just forty minutes later the verdict was read: "Guilty."

Edna’s face was ashen. She seemed older. She looked blankly at the jury and then the judge. Her sister, Grace Johnson from Wesleyville, fainted. Other sobs filled the courtroom. Ralph and Edna did not look at one another. Walter Smoot, the Chief Deputy Sheriff, approached Edna’s table and stood by her side. She rose. Smoot escorted her into the “cold, gray dawn of the morning” and through the courtyard and into the jail. When she reached her cell, she fell suddenly onto her cot and began weeping. All subsequent efforts and pleas for a re-trial were denied.

Because Pennsylvania State Western penitentiary did not accept women and the Allegheny County Workhouse was for those inmates serving a sentence longer than one year, Erie County authorities began to search for proper prison accommodations for Edna. Eastern Penitentiary in Philadelphia usually took women, but the request for Edna’s incarceration there was denied. In July, Edna was sentenced to 10 to 20 years in prison, but the State still had no place to send her. Finally, in late September, 1930, Erie officials contacted and received approval for Edna to be incarcerated at the Muncy Institute for Women in Muncy, Pennsylvania.

There, it was reported, she would be assigned to the lace-making department to make full use of dressmaking skills. She bided her time. In late April, 1932, the memory of Edna's case was revived in the Erie Daily Times when a reminiscence article was published about Erie's most notorious female criminal. By that date, she had only served 21-months of her minimum 120-month sentence. There was, however, increasing speculation that her sentence might be reduced to seven or eight years.

The speculation was correct. On December 24, 1938, Edna Mumbulo, the "Erie Murderess," was freed from prison. In all, she served eight years and three months behind bars in Muncy. Pennsylvania Governor George H. Earle commuted her minimum sentence to exactly eight years and three months to allow her immediate release. The Erie County District Attorney's office made no objection and, in doing so, Edna was set free. Edna's supporters had argued that over those eight years she demonstrated "model behavior." In addition, they had secured the assistance of the very judge who presided over her conviction. Judge William E. Hirt recommended that she be granted a pardon. He suggested that he had some doubts about her guilt. By January 1, 1939, Edna was again a free woman.⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

Upon release, she and Ralph (for whom all charges had been dropped) moved to the Rochester, New York, area to start over. Over the course of the next two decades, the childless couple bounced around between New York State, Florida, and North Carolina. On occasion, they visited family members in New Berlin and Rochester, but never stayed too long.⁵⁵ In 1965, Ralph died. By the late 1980s, Edna was back in Erie. She found housing in the Erie County Geriatric Center and was assigned a GECAC counselor. She died in 1990 at the age of 99.

The Mumbulo Case of 1930 presents interesting problems to a criminal historian. How and why did she commit the crime? Does her scenario of the events that transpired hold any weight? Yet, how could the jury convict her, knowing that what evidence existed was purely circumstantial? Why did Judge Hirt assert her possible innocence only after the trial had concluded? And, lastly, how does a woman rebuild her life after such a devastating tragedy and her conviction for the murder that came from that tragedy?

The truth may never be known about Edna Mumbulo. She remains as mysterious as the day she hit the local headlines in 1930. It may be difficult to deny, however, that her gender and her status as a stepmother affected both the public perception and court decisions of her case. The idea of a mother killing a child, to many, seemed beyond comprehension. Mothers are supposed to be caring, loving, and nurturing. Stepmothers, according to the myth, are not. Over the entire course of the Spring and Summer of 1930, the facts of the Mumbulo case were twisted and contorted to portray Edna as a cold-hearted stepmother who viciously killed Hilda Mumbulo. She had abandoned her first children, had an "illicit alliance" with Ralph Mumbulo, craved his attention, and wanted lavish gifts. Or so the newspapers said. The reality is, however, that those allegations about her personal life and character remain unsubstantiated. Whether she committed the act or not, she was convicted because she was the living embodiment of the "wicked stepmother." She was, in the eyes of the Erie public, no fantasy. And thus, no fairy tale ending.

ENDNOTES

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⁴ Elizabeth M. Suval and Robert C. Brisson, "Neither Beauty Nor Beast: Female Criminal Homicide Offenders," International Journal of Criminology and Penology 2 (1974): 23-34; and Eric R. Dowdy and N. Prabha Unnithan, "Child Homicide and the Economic Stress Hypothesis," Homicide Studies 3 (1997): 281-290.

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⁶ Jane Totman, The Murderess: A Psychological Study of Criminal Homicide (1978). Other works worth reading include Alex Kirsta, Deadlier Than Male: Violence and Aggression in Women (1994), and Paul R. Wilson, Murder of the Innocents: Child-Killers and Their Victims (1985).

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⁸ Marianne Dainton, "Myths and Misconceptions of the Stepmother Identity," Family Relations 1993 (42): 93.

⁹ William Blackburn, "'Terrible Thoughts': The Instinct of Revolt in Children's Literature," Paper Presented at Annual Meeting of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English, Montreal, 1983.

¹⁰ Stephen Claxton-Oldfield and Bonnie Butler, "Portrayal of Stepparents in Movie Plot Summaries," Psychological Reports 1998 (82): 879-882.

¹¹ Dainton, 95.

¹² Erving Goffman, in Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), notes that stigmatization is the product of the connection (conscious or unconscious) between a "particular attribute" and the myths and stereotypes about that attribute. In effect, Mumbulo was stigmatized as a "bad" person because she was a "stepmother."

¹³ Gisela Labouvie-Vief, "Commentary on Janet Strayer's 'Trapped in the Mirror: Psychosocial Reflections on Mid-Life and the Queen in *Snow White*'" Human Development 1996 (39): 173-182.

¹⁴ Janet Strayer, "Trapped in the Mirror: Psychosocial Reflections on Mid-Life and the Queen in *Snow White*" Human Development 1996 (39): 155-172.

¹⁵ Strayer, 157.

¹⁶ Correspondence with Barbara Ferrar-May, Bill O'Neil, and Kristi Kennison, all of whom are Arbogast Family members, January 2001. Edna consistently gave her name, both at the time of her arrest and in later years to her GECAC counselors, as "Deshunk." Her social security forms and family records, however, note the real spelling as "Shunk."

¹⁷ Erie Daily Times 26 March 1990, p.3B and 1 May 1930, p.27. Church data corroborated by correspondence with Burris Esplen, archivist, Diocese of Pittsburgh, Fall 2000.

¹⁸ Correspondence with Kenneth Hodges, Arbogast descendant, February 2001.

¹⁹ Erie Daily Times, 1 May 1930, p.27; 8 April 1930, p.1; 23 May 1930, pp.1,17; 7 April 1930, p.2; 4 April 1930, p.1; 11 August 1930, p.21; and 2 May 1930, p.1.

²⁰ Erie Daily Times, 9 April 1930, p.8.

²¹ Erie Daily Times, 25 April 1932, Insert Section, p.4; 2 May 1930, p.3; 4 April 1930, p.6; 9 April 1930, pp.8, 29; and 23 May 1930, p.17.

²² Blosssey's testimony found in Erie Daily Times, 8 April 1930, p.2 and 21 May 1930, p.2.

²³ Erie Daily Times, 2 May 1930, p.3.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Erie Daily Times, 4 April 1930, p.6; 8 April 1930, p.1; and 10 April 1930, p.2.

²⁶ Erie Daily Times, 31 March 1930, p.19; 22 March 1930, p.19; and 7 April 1930, p.19.

²⁷ The Hanley-Schaller Funeral Chapel was run by the family of Erie Coroner Dan Hanley. There is no evidence of any improprieties with regard to the Mumbulo's use of that funeral home. Erie Daily Times, 4 April 1930, p.6 and 24 March 1930, p.13.

²⁸ Erie Daily Times, 21 May 1930, p.2; 11 April 1930, p.1; 3 April 1930, p.17; 9 April 1930, p.8; 31 March 1930, p.13; and 8 April 1930, p.1.

²⁹ Erie Daily Times, 31 March 1930, p.13; 1 April 1930, p.15; 2 April 1930, p.15; 3 April 1930, p.17; 4 April 1930, p.1; and 5 April 1930, p.1.

³⁰ Erie Daily Times, 7 April 1930, p.1; 1 August 1930, p.12; and 5 April 1930, p.1.

³¹ Erie Daily Times, 4 April 1930-11 April 1930.

³² Ibid.

³³ Erie Daily Times, 9 April 1930, p.1.

³⁴ Erie Daily Times, 9 April 1930, p.1; 10 April 1930, p.2; 23 May 1930, p.17.

³⁵ Erie Daily Times, 10 April 1930, p.2.

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- ³⁶ Erie Daily Times, 23 May 1930, p.17.
- ³⁷ Erie Daily Times, 7 April 1930, p.2; 9 April 1930, p.29; 10 April 1930, p.1; 14 April 1930, p.1.
- ³⁸ Erie Daily Times, 9 April 1930, p.29.
- ³⁹ Erie Daily Times, 10 April 1930,p.1; 11 April 1930,p.1; 15 April 1930,p.1; 16 April 1930,p.19; 18 April 1930,p.23; 26 April 1930,p.1; 28 April 1930,p.13; 29 April 1930,p.15.
- ⁴⁰ There are a significant number of works on the stereotype of the “wicked stepmother” as noted in the introduction. It should be noted that these stereotypes are not associated with stepfathers.
- ⁴¹ Erie Daily Times, 9 April 1930, p.8; 7 April 1930,p.19.
- ⁴² Erie Daily Times, 10 April 1930, p.2.
- ⁴³ Erie Daily Times, 29 April 1930, p.15; 1 May 1930,p.17.
- ⁴⁴ “Erie County Quarter Sessions Docket, February Term 1930 to November Term 1930,” Book 27, (Erie County Historical Society, Erie, Pennsylvania). See also Erie Daily Times, 30 April 1930,p.17; 1 May 1930, p.1; and 2 May 1930,p.3.
- ⁴⁵ Erie Daily Times, 2 May 1930,pp.1, 3, 19.
- ⁴⁶ Erie Daily Times, 5 May 1930,p.15; 6 May 1930,p.1; 13 May 1930,p.23; 15 May 1930,p.19; 16 May 1930, p.21; and 19 May 1930,p.1.
- ⁴⁷ Correspondence with John William Hirt, descendant of Judge William Hirt, 25 March 2001.
- ⁴⁸ Erie Daily Times, 19 May 1930, pp.1-2.
- ⁴⁹ Erie Daily Times, 20 May 1930, pp.1,23.
- ⁵⁰ Defense Memorandum in Brief, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania vs. Mrs. Edna Mumbulo, Court of Oyer and Terminer of Erie, Pennsylvania.
- ⁵¹ Erie Daily Times, 21 May 1930, p.2.
- ⁵² Defense Memorandum of Brief, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania vs. Mrs. Edna Mumbulo, Court of Oyer and Terminer of Erie, Pennsylvania, p.3.
- ⁵³ Erie Daily Times, 25 April 1932, Insert, p.4.
- ⁵⁴ Erie Daily Times, 24 December 1938, 2 January 1939. By August 1939, D.A. Otto Herbst was dead.
- ⁵⁵ Correspondence with David Mumbulo of Owego, N.Y., great-nephew of Ralph Mumbulo, Fall 2000.

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