

Allison Kwan

Dr. Hanson

HSUR, C

4/6/06

### Aimee Semple McPherson

Many people have heard of Patty Hearst, but very few have heard of Aimee Semple McPherson, an Evangelical preacher who was also kidnapped under suspicious circumstances. She was born on October 9, 1890, in Ontario, Canada, with the name Aimee Elizabeth Kennedy. She married twice, thus earning herself the names Semple and McPherson. In 1913, she started out on her Canada and US preaching tour, traveling around both countries. Aimee was a unique preacher, because there were hardly any women Evangelical preachers, let alone ones who wore makeup and jewelry in the pulpit. Aimee always seemed to be a flashy and flamboyant woman who liked to show herself off. She became very popular in the 1920's, but not everyone loved her. She publicly denounced many Ku Klux Klan members and famous politicians, and received several death threats. This was the atmosphere preceding her most famous episode.

On May 10, 1926, McPherson went missing, and was supposed to have drowned while swimming at Ocean Park, Los Angeles. After searching for her body, they discovered a note that read: "Help. They took me to cabin in Bouquet."<sup>1</sup> Because of the note, the police began a frantic search to find McPherson, and her mother even offered a \$25,000 reward. But on June 23, 1926, McPherson was brought out of Arizona after walking through the desert all night. She claimed to have been taken to a shack in Mexico after being lured into a car by a woman pleading for help with a sick baby. McPherson

was then drugged, and awoke in a shack in Mexico. But there are some flaws in her story. McPherson was found in the desert in a full dress splattered with mud, although she was last seen in her bathing suit. She also claimed to have walked 20 miles through the desert, but when she recreated her route for the police, her trek was only about 10 miles long.<sup>2</sup> But although she had some holes in her story, she still was treated as a hero on her return for having escaped her kidnappers, until more evidence surfaced.

On July 6, McPherson was summoned to appear before a jury in Los Angeles. On the day she disappeared, McPherson was seen in a hotel with a suitcase with her initials on it. She had also been seen with Kenneth G. Ormiston, “a former radio operator at her temple”, at a cottage in Carmel.<sup>3</sup> The Assistant Prosecutor, Joe Ryan, also testified that McPherson’s shoes and articles of clothing showed no signs of the 20-mile hike across the desert.<sup>4</sup> It seems all the evidence points to the conclusion that Aimee Semple McPherson’s kidnapping was a hoax. In the end, McPherson and her mother only were charged with obstruction of justice. Soon after the episode, McPherson fell out of favor with the press, and faded from the spotlight, and then from memory.

---

<sup>1</sup>“New Hunt Started for Mrs. M’Pherson,” *New York Times* (4 June 1926): 6. Available from: Proquest, New York Times Historical Collection, Menlo School Lib. <<http://library.menlschool.org>> (accessed 27 March 2006).

<sup>2</sup>“Woman Evangelist Escapes Abductors,” *New York Times* (24 June 1926): 1, 5. Available from: Proquest, New York Times Historical Collection, Menlo School Lib. <<http://library.menlschool.org>> (accessed 27 March 2006).

<sup>3</sup>“Ormiston Linked to Mrs. M’Pherson,” *New York Times* (1 October 1926): 25. Available from: Proquest, New York Times Historical Collection, Menlo School Lib. <<http://library.menlschool.org>> (accessed 2 April 2006).

<sup>4</sup>“Shoes are Evidence in M’Pherson Case,” *New York Times* (5 October 1926):31. Available from: Proquest, New York Times Historical Collection, Menlo School Lib. <<http://library.menlschool.org>> (accessed 2 April 2006).