

## “The Evangelist and the Muckraker”

*When Aimee dived into the Pacific Ocean and emerged on the Mexican desert, thus performing a feat which will not be duplicated until babies grow on walnut trees, she reckoned that the rest of the world was as foolish as she.*

--San Diego Herald, July 29, 1926

The apparent drowning death of famed evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson off the coast of Santa Monica in 1926 shocked the world. Even more stunning was her reappearance weeks later in the Sonora desert. The sensational story she told of her kidnapping and miraculous escape spawned front-page news coverage that lasted for months.

One of the most widely read observers of the McPherson mystery was a 75-year-old newsman from San Diego: Abraham R. Sauer, editor and publisher of the weekly San Diego *Herald*. Sauer’s mocking and inflammatory explanation of the revered preacher’s adventure would lead to his prosecution in Federal court and test the limits of free speech.

San Diego’s radical newsman was born in Marine City, Michigan. As a young man he joined the gold rush to the Black Hills of the Dakota Territory, then moved to Nebraska and learned newspaper work on the Omaha *Daily Bee*. He moved to San Diego in the 1890s and acquired the *Herald*.

Sauer would turn the *Herald* into a provocative medium for personal journalism that attacked the local political establishment at every opportunity. Sauer treated San Diegans to headlines such as “Brainless Mayor and Spineless Council Take Orders from Greedy Merchants” and “Is the Press to be Muzzled, Or Truth a Crime?”

Not surprisingly, the defaming editor was hauled into court repeatedly on charges of slandering the rich and powerful. He would be sued eighteen times for libel—winning each case. But his July 29, 1926 edition of the *Herald*, which covered the McPherson affair in colorful detail, nearly landed him in prison.



Sister Aimee, ca 1920.

Even without the Sauer touch, the story was sensational enough. “Sister Aimee,” age 35, famed Canadian-born preacher of the “Foursquare Gospel,” had disappeared on May 18 while swimming at a deserted beach at Ocean Park in Santa Monica. Her secretary would recall waving to the preacher as she entered the water. But she failed to return--“a victim of the breakers”—everyone assumed.

That night Aimee’s mother, Mrs. Minnie (“Mother”) Kennedy, confirmed the tragedy to a shocked congregation at McPherson’s church, the Angelus Temple in Los Angeles. “We know she is with Jesus,” she told the tearful crowd. “Pray for her.” Donations were then gathered as a memorial, eventually totaling about \$36,000.

Five weeks later, in the early morning of June 23, McPherson reappeared. Found in Agua Prieta, Mexico, across the border from Douglas, Arizona, the evangelist told rescuers a harrowing story of her kidnapping, torture, and dramatic escape from a shack in the desert.

On her return to Los Angeles Sister Aimee received a triumphal welcome home. Thirty thousand people greeted her train at Union Station then followed her car to the Angelus Temple where she thanked her devoted followers.



But soon doubters began to question McPherson's story of abduction. Why did she reappear in unblemished street clothes when she had last been seen wearing a swimsuit? Why did her grass-stained shoes show no evidence of her claimed thirteen-hour trek through the desert? Worse, witnesses began to appear that recalled seeing her in late May in the coastal town of Carmel accompanied by Kenneth Ormiston, a former church employee, who had gone missing at the same time as McPherson.

None of the news stories showed more scorn and irreverence toward the evangelist and her followers than Abraham Sauer's front page of the *Herald*. "She had staged the perfect disappearance," Sauer wrote. "A conniving secretary had aided and abetted her. Her moronic and purblind followers had swallowed hook, line and sinker."

"As the world now knows," the editor judged, "her mother did the ballyhooing while her daughter did the cooing, and while Aimee was being satisfied at Carmel-by-the Sea Mother Kennedy was filling the treasure chest in the City of the Angels."

Sauer's account was a best seller. Copies of the *Herald* were mailed far and wide. A post office worker would later testify in court that he shipped bundles of the four-page newspaper weighing nearly forty pounds each. The single issue sold for \$1 a copy in New York City.

But the lurid description of Aimee's "ten days in a love shack" was too much for the U.S. Postal Inspector in Los Angeles. On August 13, Sauer was charged with sending obscene literature through the mails. At his arraignment defense attorneys argued that the article was "based upon truth" with the editor justifiably criticizing McPherson "for conduct not becoming to her teachings."

The case went to trial the next month. After one Federal jury deadlocked, Sauer was retried. He was acquitted on October 16.

Others were less fortunate. A Los Angeles judge fined four newsstand vendors \$100 each after convictions for selling the "obscene" newspaper. Harry Turner, the hapless publisher of the St. Louis magazine *Much Ado*, was sentenced to two years in Leavenworth Federal Prison for reprinting and mailing the now-notorious July 29 edition of the *Herald*.

While Sauer was defending himself in court, the scandal over Sister Aimee’s month-long disappearance grew. A skeptical Los Angeles district attorney charged her with obstruction of justice in September but lacking hard evidence, dismissed the case before it reached trial.

In October 26, 1927, with her reputation on the mend, McPherson came to San Diego to preach before a packed auditorium at San Diego High School. Three nights of revival meetings followed. “Well, Aimee the Delectable is here,” editor Sauer caustically observed. “Even the memories of her historic dip into the Pacific and her consequent cavorting . . . have gone from the mind.”

Aimee Semple McPherson would continue her ministry into the 1940s, though questions about the mysterious “kidnapping” haunted her reputation. She died on September 26, 1944 from an overdose of barbiturates—an accident, according to the report from the coroner.



Abraham R. Sauer, Editor and publisher of the *San Diego Herald*.  
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