



A Deathbed Testimony

Madge Oberholtzer and the downfall of the KKK

By Jessica Erin Fischer, David Heighway, James H. Madison, & Charlotte Ottinger | February 28, 2025

Content Warning: This feature includes mentions of self-harm, sexual abuse, and abduction.

Introduction

Indiana's Long Struggle with the Ku Klux Klan

Hoosiers have always had differences, but seldom more visible than during the era of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. The thousands of men and women who donned robes and hoods were convinced that Catholics, immigrants, African

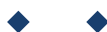
Americans, and Jews were the enemy. Mostly middle-class, Protestant, and native-born, Klan members were not considered a marginal hate group but “good” people. They marched proudly and sang their Christian hymns with fervor as they burned a cross in the night. And they elected Klan men to office, including Indianapolis Mayor John Duval, Indiana Governor Edward Jackson, and a majority of the 1925 General Assembly.

The hard truth about the Indiana Klan is that it was as dark as the night and as American as apple pie. It was not a fluke eruption, an oft-stated claim that makes it easier today to swallow the bitterest pill of our past. For a long time, Hoosiers were silent about the Klan or told bedtime stories fit for children.

There were always decent citizens who stood up to the Klan. At the beginning, in 1922, there were only a few profiles in courage. Most remained silent and fearful or agreed with Klan principles. Only gradually did Catholic organizers, African American leaders, journalists, ministers, rabbis, and other citizens force enough light onto the evil to bring the downfall. The tragic murder of Madge Oberholtzer provided the most visible sign of the malignancy among Klan leaders.

By 1930 the organized Klan was gone, but its misuse of Christianity to divide and its appeal to ignorance, disinformation, and evil are still with us. Century-old echoes of the Klan remain today—the burden of our long struggle.

Perhaps knowing just one tragedy, that of a young woman murdered by one of the vilest men to ever walk the streets of Indiana, will open eyes to the larger meaning of Indiana’s Ku Klux Klan.



Life of Madge

Early Life

Madge Augustine Oberholtzer (November 10, 1896 – April 14, 1925) was born in 1896 in Clay City, Indiana, to German American parents George and Matilda Oberholtzer. In 1901, the Oberholtzer family moved to Irvington, then an affluent suburb east of Indianapolis. Madge and her brother Marshall attended Indianapolis Public School #57 where she developed close ties with her Irvington friends, many of whom were children of prominent Hoosiers such as Hilton U. Brown.

Oberholtzer attended Manual High School. After she showed an interest and talent for the arts, an art teacher at Manual nominated her for a scholarship, which she was awarded to attend classes at Herron Art Institute to study under noted Indiana artists Clifton Wheeler, Otto Stark, and William Forsyth. She graduated from Manual High School in the spring of 1914 and enrolled at Butler University the following fall semester.



Left: Madge (left) and friend in front of the Bona Thompson Memorial Library (now Bona Thompson Memorial Center), ca. 1920s;

Right: Madge (far right) and two others in front of the Disciples of Christ building, ca. 1920s | Credit: Irvington Historical Society

While at Butler, Oberholtzer was an active student, participating in the Butler University Girls Glee Club, Prom committee, yearbook staff, and Lotus Club. She joined the Pi Beta Phi sorority where local alums such as Jessica Christian Brown guided her. Local suffragist Grace Julian Clark also served as a mentor to Oberholtzer.

Madge was "a free, easy-going, rough-and-tumble kind of girl. She was happy-go-lucky, but always feminine...except when she wore overalls in the summer. I never thought of her as being intellectual, but she was intelligent, a very frank, honest kind of girl."

Jean Brown Wagoner, childhood friend of Madge Oberholtzer

Working Professional and Adventurer

In 1917, prior to graduating, Oberholtzer left Butler University to temporarily fill a teaching position in Hagerstown, Indiana. At the end of the term, she returned to Indianapolis where she explored various places of employment including the American Central Life Insurance Company, J. D. Adams Machine Company, and a short period of employment at Eli Lilly. In September 1920, Oberholtzer took a position at the Indiana Department of Public Instruction Teacher Training Department at the Indiana Statehouse where she befriended Ermina Moore.

By early 1923, Oberholtzer had left the Statehouse to work in a more advanced managerial position for Will H. Adams at the Indianapolis office of Acme Motion Picture Projector Company. In September 1923 she took a second job at

Emmerich Manual Training High School teaching a night course called the Commercial Class. Oberholtzer continued to work for Adams but transferred to one of his other businesses, the Modern Finance Company, where she worked until June 1924.



Madge (second from left) and her work friends posing on the steps of Monument Circle, ca. 1920s | Credit: Irvington Historical Society

With the money she had earned, Oberholtzer bought a Ford Model T Coupe and taught herself to drive. In August 1924, she and Ermina Moore embarked on a two-month road trip to California. This was an incredible feat for two young women traveling alone.

Oberholtzer and Moore returned from California in October 1924. By November, Oberholtzer returned to the Indiana Statehouse, this time working as manager of the Young People's Reading Circle (an organization that encouraged reading by offering certificates to students who read books from its curated list) under the Superintendent of Public Instruction. As manager, Oberholtzer handled advertising, promoting book sales, and ensuring the proper distribution of books. The State considered her job an important position in public education and her generous yearly salary of \$3,000–\$4,000 reflected this. It was not long before Oberholtzer began

acting as an informal lobbyist in the interest of bills affecting her work.

More than anything, the California trip illustrates the character of Madge Oberholtzer: adventurous, resourceful, independent and an excellent planner. She had worked hard to save her money to buy her own automobile, to enjoy two months of vacation without income, and to pay for all her expenses without relying on credit. Very few persons in that era could claim such an accomplishment.

Ron Flick, historian

Meeting D. C. Stephenson

In January 1925, Oberholtzer helped her friend and one-time suitor Stanley C. Hill with nametags and seating arrangements for Governor Ed Jackson's inaugural dinner at the Indiana Athletic Club. In return for her aid Hill took Oberholtzer to the inauguration as his guest and arranged for them to be seated across from D. C. Stephenson, the man who had skillfully orchestrated the outcome of the 1924 Indiana elections. Hill's introduction marked the first time Oberholtzer met Stephenson. During the evening, Stephenson asked her to dance, and she obliged.

Stephenson and Oberholtzer had an intermittent social and professional relationship over the short time they knew each other. After the banquet Stephenson repeatedly asked Oberholtzer for a date. Eventually she consented to have dinner with him at the Hotel Washington. After that,

Stephenson called Oberholtzer several times before she relented to another dinner with him at the Hotel Washington, this time in the company of others. When Stephenson learned that Oberholtzer wished to kill a bill in the Legislature calling for the abolishment of the Young People's Reading Circle of Indiana, he worked to obstruct the bill's passage.

In February 1925 Stephenson directed Representative Joseph C. Buchanan to introduce Bill 287, a nutrition bill requiring nutrition classes in all Indiana elementary and high schools. Stephenson planned to publish a nutrition book that would meet the requirements of the class so that he could benefit financially from the sales. According to Stephenson's associate Court Asher, Stephenson intended to hire Oberholtzer to write the book. There is no evidence to show that she was ever aware of Stephenson's plan for the book or her role in writing it.

Oberholtzer did not see Stephenson again until the evening of March 15, 1925, when he summoned her to his Irvington home under the auspices of "important business."

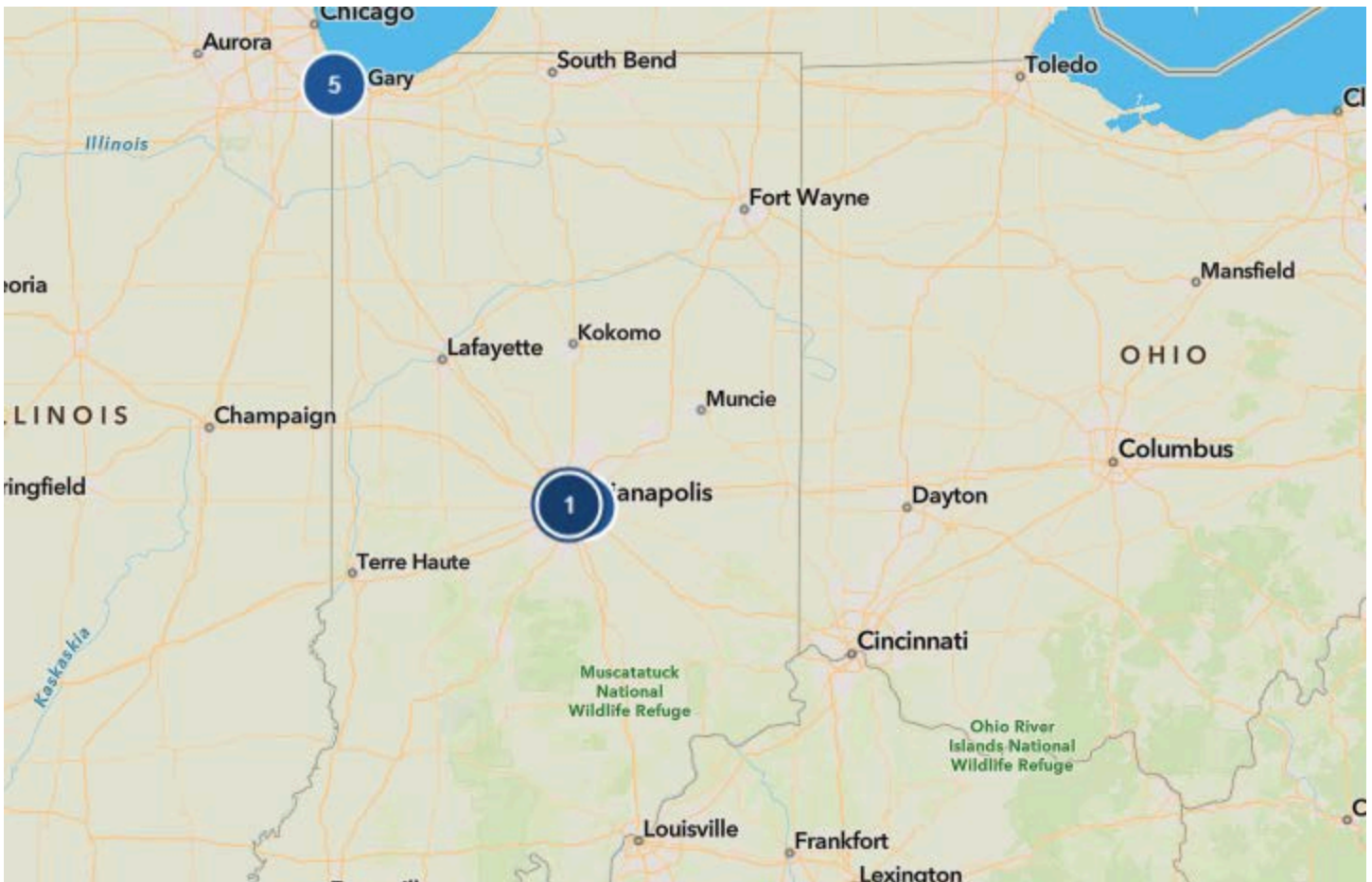


A Terrible Crime

D. C. Stephenson's social and political influence grew throughout the early 1920s, leading to his inauguration as the Grand Dragon of the Invisible Empire for the Realm of Indiana of the ~~Ku Klux Klan~~ during a rally that 10,000–30,000 Klansmen attended in 1923. Stephenson broke with the national Klan in September 1923 and named himself grand dragon of a rival Klan group. During the election of 1925, he supported several political candidates, including former secretary of state Ed Jackson, a Republican, who successfully ran for governor of Indiana.

However, at the same time as his rise to political fame, reports of his abusive behavior toward women began to surface. Stephenson physically abused his ex-wife, exposed himself to his secretary in Ohio (a crime he pled guilty to), and attempted to rape several women including a woman from Kokomo, a hotel manicurist, and a young actress who attended a party at his home in Irvington. In 1925, Madge Oberholtzer became his next victim and the reason for his downfall.

Explore the map below to learn more about D. C. Stephenson's abduction of Madge Oberholtzer.



Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, EPA, NPS, USFWS

100 km Powered by Esri

1 Indianapolis Athletic Club



January 12, 1925

Event planner Stanley Hill introduces Madge Oberholtzer to D. C. Stephenson at Ed Jackson's inauguration banquet at the Athletic Club in Indianapolis. Oberholtzer meets Stephenson socially three more times after this event—twice for dinner at the Hotel Washington and once at a party at Stephenson's home, prior to her rape and kidnapping.

2

Oberholtzer Home



March 15, 1925, 10 p.m.

Oberholtzer arrives at her home in Irvington. Stephenson had called several times while she was away. After she returned his call, Stephenson asks her to come see him that same evening.

3

Stephenson Home



The Indiana Album: Harley Sheets Collection

March 15, 1925, 10:15 p.m.-12 a.m.

Earl Gentry walks Oberholtzer to Stephenson's home where the men force her to drink liquor despite her protests. Stephenson and his men take her to Union Station.

4

Union Station/Train



March 16, 1925, 1-5 a.m.

The Chicago-bound train leaves the station. In a sleeper car on the train, Stephenson rapes and tortures Oberholtzer, leaving her body full of open and bleeding wounds.

5

Indiana Hotel

C. PRIMAS
Pres.

H. C. PRIMAS
Vice-Pres.

J. F. ORR
Treas.

W. J. WHITNEY
Sec'y.

INDIANA HOTEL

EUROPEA MONDAY  MAR 16, 1925 MOND, IND.

The management of this hotel is not responsible for the loss of Money, Jewelry or Valuables; unless deposited in Hotel Safe

THE ALDOR CO., 218 Madison Ave., Chicago, Ill., U. S. A.

NAME	ADDRESS	ROOM	TIME
Mr Kennedy	City	307	Auto
J. S. Debra	Indpls.	313	
Mr & Mrs W. B. Morgan	Franklin	416	
Earl Gentry	Indianapolis Ind	417	
A. R. With	Det	420	
A. J. Aselin	Chicago	309	

A SECTION OF THE HOTEL REGISTER INTRODUCED AS EVIDENCE IN THE STEPHENSON BAIL HEARING YESTERDAY IS SHOWN ABOVE. THE STATE CONTENDS THE SIGNATURE "MR. AND MRS. W. B. MORGAN" WAS MADE BY STEPHENSON, WHO IS ALLEGED TO HAVE REGISTERED AT THE HOTEL WITH MISS OBERHOLTZER. JUST BELOW IS THE ALLEGED SIGNATURE OF EARL GENTRY, WHO IS UNDER INDICTMENT WITH STEPHENSON.

March 16, 1925, 6:30 a.m.-5 p.m.

6:30 a.m. Stephenson and Gentry take Oberholtzer off the train in Hammond, Indiana. Stephenson books Room 416 at the Indiana Hotel under a false name. Traumatized by her ordeal, Oberholtzer asks Stephenson to shoot her, but he refuses.

10 a.m.-5 p.m. Oberholtzer asks one of Stephenson's henchmen to drive her to a store to buy a new hat and some rouge. She secretly buys a box of bichloride of mercury and takes six mercury tablets to commit suicide. When Stephenson and his accomplices discover this, they load Oberholtzer in a car and drive her back to Stephenson's home in Indianapolis.

6

Stephenson's Garage



March 16, 1925, 11 p.m.

Matilda Oberholtzer and Ermina Moore are waiting at Stephenson's house when he arrives with Madge. Stephenson's men lie to them about Madge's whereabouts. After the women leave, the men take Madge to the loft above Stephenson's garage.

7

Oberholtzer Home



March 17, 1925, 11:30 AM–Noon

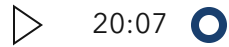
Earl Klinck carries Oberholtzer to her family's home and tells Eunice Shultz, a boarder at the house, that Oberholtzer's injuries are the result of a car accident. Oberholtzer tells Shultz to call a doctor. When Dr. Kingsbury arrives, Oberholtzer tells the story of how Stephenson raped and tortured her.



Deathbed Testimony

Knowing she would not recover, Madge Oberholtzer relayed her dying declaration to family attorney Asa J. Smith, describing in great detail the circumstances leading to her imminent death. Smith worked with Oberholtzer for several

days to record her testimony to be used as evidence in the prosecution of Stephenson, Klinck, and Gentry. On March 28, 1925, Oberholtzer signed the statement in the presence of Smith, Dr. Kingsbury, and two other witnesses.



Madge Oberholtzer's dying declaration as read by Jessica Erin Fischer.

[View Full Transcript](#)



Stephenson on Trial

When there was still hope for Oberholtzer's recovery, Asa Smith discussed a monetary settlement with Stephenson to spare the Oberholtzer family from the burden of a trial. Stephenson offered a mere \$5,000. When it became clear Oberholtzer would not survive, a settlement was no longer sufficient in the family's eyes. Marion County prosecutor Will Remy stepped in and prepared a warrant for Stephenson's arrest. Eight months after Oberholtzer's kidnapping, rape, and torture, D. C. Stephenson was finally brought to justice and sentenced to life in prison.

D. C. Stephenson Trial Timeline



March 28, 1925

Oberholtzer signs a 3,000-word deathbed statement explaining her rape and torture at the hands of D. C. Stephenson.



April 2, 1925

Marion County Prosecutor Will Remy issues a warrant for the arrest of Stephenson for the assault and kidnapping of Madge Oberholtzer. Emboldened by the news of his indictment, more women come forward with reports of sexual assault by Stephenson.



April 14, 1925

Oberholtzer dies, either from infections resulting from Stephenson's bites or from the effects of taking bichloride of mercury.



April 16, 1925

Stephenson enters a plea of not guilty to charges of assault and kidnapping.



April 20, 1925

Stephenson is arrested a second time and charged with the murder of Madge Oberholtzer.



May 25, 1925

Defense attorney Eph Innan files for a change of venue resulting in Stephenson's transfer to the Hancock County Jail.



May 28, 1925

Stephenson's attorney files a motion for bail with Circuit Judge Fred Hines.



June 16-19, 1925

The hearing on bail motion takes place. The defense is allowed to read the alleged dying statement of Madge Oberholtzer.



June 25, 1925

Judge Fred Hines denies Stephenson's motion for bail, a win for the 500 women who rallied by the Marion County Courthouse demanding Stephenson not be released.



June 27, 1925

Judge Hines sets the trial date for July 6th and orders the court to draw a special panel of 100 men as potential jurors.



June 30, 1925

Judge Hines grants a defense motion that Klinck be granted a separate trial. The defense claims the trial should begin on July 6, 1925, ahead of the other defendants. The State later argues against such contention.



July 3, 1925

The defense motion that Klinck be tried July 6th, ahead of the other defendants, is overruled. A separate trial for Stephenson is granted, leaving Gentry to be tried on July 6th, according to the judge's ruling.



July 6, 1925

Judge Hines rules that the State has the right to choose which defendant shall be tried first.

Gentry and the special venire (the group of individuals chosen for jury duty and from whom the final jurors are selected) wait during arguments, ready for the trial to begin.

Prosecutor Remy elects to try Stephenson.

Inman withdraws his motion for immediate trial for Stephenson. Judge Hines ultimately decides not to move forward with any trials at that time and adjourns the special term of court until the regular October term.



July 16, 1925

The defense presents a motion for a rehearing on motion to be let to bail, claiming Oberholtzer committed suicide. The motion is overruled on July 29th.



August 11, 1925

At a special adjourned term of court, Judge Hines grants a defense motion for a change of venue. Judge Will M. Sparks, Rushville, is selected as special judge. Judge Hines adjourns the special term of court, saying no special judge can try the case until the regular fall terms begins.



October 12, 1925

Judge Sparks begins jury selection for the trial of D. C. Stephenson for the kidnapping and murder of Madge Oberholtzer.



October 28, 1925

The jury of 12 men are chosen from an interviewed pool of 260.

October 29, 1925

Testimony before Judge Sparks begins. Charles Cox, for the prosecution, informs the jurors that they will hear from Madge Oberholtzer directly via her dying declaration.

*Clean of soul, but with her bruised,
mangled, poisoned and ravished body,
standing by her grave's edge, with the
shadowy wings of the dark angel of
death over her, [she] will tell you...the
story of her entrapment, of her being
drugged, kidnapped, assaulted, beaten,
lacerated with beastly fangs, and finally,
as the culmination of indignities and
brutalities unheard of in a civilized
community before, how she was forced
by the loss of all that a good woman
holds dear, to take the deadly poison that
contributed to her untimely death.*

Charles Cox, prosecutor



October 30, 1925

After Asa Smith's statement about Oberholtzer's deathbed testimony, Judge Sparks rules that Oberholtzer's dying declaration will be admitted into evidence despite the defense's motion to exclude it from the trial. The judge also allows Will Remy to read the declaration to the jurors.



November 4, 1925

The prosecution rests after providing a series of witness testimonies. This includes Oberholtzer's mother, Matilda Oberholtzer; the boarder at the Oberholtzer's, Eunice Shultz; Dr. John Kingsbury, the doctor who examined and treated Madge; and George Oberholtzer, Madge's father. Another set of witnesses include a porter on the train and a night clerk and bellhop from the Indiana Hotel in Hammond. These witnesses place Madge on the train and later at the hotel. Medical testimony comes from Beatrice Spratly, Madge's nurse, and Dr. Virgil Moon, the pathologist. They provide evidence that Stephenson's actions led to Madge's death.



November 5-10, 1925

The defense presents its case. The defense brings forth several doctors (Dr. Orville Smiley, Dr. J. D. Moschelle, and Dr. Paul Robinson) to testify that Oberholtzer's death resulted from attempted suicide via mercury tablets and not the infections from the wounds Stephenson inflicted upon her. To besmirch Oberholtzer's character, the defense brings in Cora Householder to testify that Madge had been having an affair with her husband. After prosecution objection, Judge Spark marks the testimony as irrelevant and inadmissible. The defense brings forward several other witnesses with ties to Stephenson and the KKK to testify that Oberholtzer and Stephenson had been seen drinking together multiple times prior to the assault.



November 14, 1925

The case goes to jury at 11:46 a.m. The jury returns a verdict at 5:30 p.m. The jury convicts Stephenson of second-degree murder on its first ballot. The defendants Gentry and Klinck are acquitted.



November 16, 1925

The judge sentences Stephenson to life in prison. The state delivers Stephenson to the Indiana State Prison in Michigan City, Indiana, five days later.



1932

The Indiana Supreme Court denies Stephenson's appeal. He is paroled 18 years later in 1950 but returns to prison twice, once for violating his parole (1950) and once for trying to molest a teenager (1961).

Madge Oberholtzer's death at the hands of D. C. Stephenson sparked the decline in Indiana's public opinion of the Klan and individuals affiliated with the Klan. Distrust in the Klan deepened in 1927, when Stephenson leaked damaging information to the newspapers about his involvement in state politics. His charges ended the political careers of Governor Ed Jackson, Indianapolis Mayor John Duvall, and several other politicians and contributed to the 1928 *Indianapolis Times'* Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation of the Klan.



Resources

Further Reading

- Egan, Timothy. *A fever in the heartland: the Ku Klux Klan's plot to take over America, and the woman who stopped them*. NY, NY: Viking, 2023. <https://search.worldcat.org/en/title/1427498029>

- Linder, Douglas O. “D. C. Stephenson Trial (1925).” Famous Trials. Accessed December 16, 2024. <https://famous-trials.com/stephenson>
- Madison, James H. *The Ku Klux Klan in the Heartland*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020. <https://search.worldcat.org/title/1154088324>
- Ottinger, Charlotte Halsema. *Madge: The life and times of Madge Oberholtzer, the young Irvington woman who brought down D.C. Stephenson and the Ku Klux Klan*. Indianapolis: Irvington Historical Society Press, 2021. <https://search.worldcat.org/en/title/1277512345>

Primary Documents

- D. C. Stephenson court documents, Indiana State Library: <https://indianamemory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16066coll69/id/2986/rec/6>
- D. C. Stephenson miscellaneous papers, Indiana State Library: <https://indianamemory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16066coll69/id/2757/rec/68>
- D. C. Stephenson divorce papers, Klan trial, and other documents, Indiana State Library: <https://indianamemory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16066coll69/id/3000>
- D. C. Stephenson Collection, Indiana Historical Society: <https://indianahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/d-c-stephenson-collection-1922-1978.pdf>

Dying Declaration Sources

There are slight discrepancies between various sources in the wording of Madge Oberholtzer’s deathbed testimony. Certain text was redacted before being read to the jury, while other text was not printed in the media due to its graphic nature. The version presented in this feature is a combination of the following sources:

- Famous Trials - [The Dying Declaration of Madge Oberholtzer](#)
- Indiana State Library - [D. C. Stephenson court documents](#)
- Indianapolis Times (June 16, 1925) - [Girl's Death-bed Story Bared](#)

