The Mad Gasser of Mattoon

How the Press Created an Imaginary Chemical Weapons Attack

The mass media are often influential in spreading episodes of mass hysteria to the public at large. This is no more evident than in the famous case of the Mad Gasser of Mattoon.

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Without question the two most famous episodes of "mass hysteria" and social delusion of the twentieth century were the 1938 Martian invasion panic and the 1944 case of the "mad gasser" of Mattoon. Yet few realize that both incidents were products of a chemical and biological weapons scare that parallels present-day American terrorism anxieties. While the Martian scare has been exaggerated in terms of the extent of those who were frightened or panicked (Bartholomew 1998), Princeton University psychologist Hadley Cantril found that 20 percent of those he interviewed assumed that the radio announcer in the bogus broadcast had misinterpreted what he was seeing and the "Martians" were actually members of

a German poison gas raid. One typical respondent stated: "The announcer said a meteor had fallen from Mars and I was sure that he thought that, but in back of my head I had the idea that the meteor was just a camouflage . . . and the Germans were attacking us with gas bombs" (Cantril 1940, 160).

During the early 1930s Americans were preoccupied with the threat of chemical and biological terrorism as many books and articles addressed the topic, especially gas warfare (Kenworthy 1930; Lefebure 1931; Hart 1933). In *The Air Menace and the Answer*, Elvira Fradkin (1934, 1) described America during this period as experiencing the "poison gas scare." Many magazines also addressed the subject (Moore 1933; Phillips 1933; St. John 1934). The League of Nations published many documents addressing the issue, and proceedings of the many conferences held on the topic appeared (Fradkin 1934). German aggression in Europe and increased publicity of the dangers of chemical and biological weapons were essential backdrops that rendered the Martian radio play more plausible as a German gas attack. A similar context helped to create the case of the "mad gasser" of Mattoon—once again with the sensationalizing of the American mass media. In fact, the media have often been implicated in fomenting mass hysterias and social delusions.

The Media and Mass Hysteria

The mass media are often influential in creating, spreading, and ironically even eventually ending mass hysteria. In most cases the media neither create the initial incident nor help to spread it, but exacerbate the outbreak once it is underway. Most mass hysteria reports in the scientific literature occur in schools and factories and involve the rapid spread of transient, benign illness symptoms among members of closely knit groups in enclosed settings (Sirois 1982; Bartholomew and Sirois 1996). Such cases are typically triggered by a few well-known factors: rumors, anxiety, and an exaggerated threat that is either real or imagined.

The media typically exacerbate these episodes by reporting public reaction to the hysteria diagnosis, which is often met by fierce opposition from victims, their friends, relatives, community members, and leaders (Cartter 1989). Physician Joel Nitzkin received physical threats after diagnosing a mass hysteria outbreak in a Florida school (Nitzkin 1976; Roueche 1978), while historian Elaine Showalter more recently retained the services of a bodyguard after stating her view that Gulf War Syndrome has a hysterical basis (Wessely 1999, personal communication). The initial diagnosis of hysteria is always going to be ambiguous since it takes time for all probable causes to be eliminated and negative test results to come back. In the interim, the participants typically express their views in the form of emotionally charged public meetings that are reported by the media and letters to the local press which often report misinformation (Hocking 1990).

Occasionally social protest movements are formed that thrive on media publicity surrounding a hysteria episode (Philen et al. 1989). While epidemic hysteria can never be confirmed with negative medical and environmental test


First Gas 'Victim' Blamed
Wave of Hysteria in Mattoon

MRS. BERT KEARNEY soothes daughter, Dorothy, 4, a victim of mysterious Mattoon malady blamed on a 'gas madman' and which has struck terror through the thriving central Illinois city. Another daughter, Carol, 2, watches.

Aline Kearney consoles her daughter Dorothy. Both reportedly became ill after smelling a sickly sweet odor. Her other daughter, Carol, looks on. She was unaffected and sleeping in another part of the house (Source: *The Chicago Herald-American*, September 17, 1944, p. 3).

results, it has several distinct features, the confluence of which almost certainly indicates the presence of psychogenic symptoms. These include: no plausible organic basis; symptoms that are transient and benign; occurrence in a segregated group; presence of extraordinary stress; rapid onset and recovery; symptom spread by sight or sound; and dispersion down the age-scale beginning in older or higher status persons.

In relatively rare instances involving the spread of mass hysteria (or social delusions involving the spread of a false belief but no illness symptoms) to the public at large, the media usually play an instrumental role, amplifying small, isolated events involving few people into full-scale episodes affecting hundreds or thousands. Eventually, the same media typically help to extinguish the very episodes they initially fostered by reporting accounts that discuss their psychological nature, often ridiculing those who persist in holding such beliefs. The media

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played a key role in the "miraculous" appearance of the Virgin Mary in Puerto Rico in 1953 before more than 150,000 people. The radio and press were not only responsible for the throngs of participants but also conditioning them to expect a spiritual event (Tumin and Feldman 1955). Medalia and Larsen (1958) concluded that the Washington state press were instrumental in spreading claims that atomic fallout from highly publicized Pacific bomb testing in 1954 was pitting windshields near Seattle. Jacobs (1965) also noted the key press role in his examination of erroneous claims that a maniacal slasher was roaming Taiwan in 1956. Bartholomew and Howard (1998) found that press speculation about claims of the world's first piloted heavier-than-air flying machine triggered a massive wave of imaginary airship sightings around the world between 1896 to 1913 in the United States, England, and New Zealand (see "The Airship Hysteria of 1896–97," by Robert Bartholomew, SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, 14[2], Winter 1990). During another sighting wave in the Pacific Northwest in 1947, newspaper reporters coined the term "flying saucer," sparking a global spate of similar reports (Strentz 1970). More recently, the press has been blamed in spreading psychogenic illness symptoms by publishing false accounts of poison gas attacks in tense ethnic conflicts in both Palestine and Kosovo (Radovanovic 1995).

As the police sped off to each new call about a mad gasser incident, armed citizens and farmers quickly followed.

The "Phantom Anesthetist" of Mattoon

The case of the mad gasser began about 11 P.M. Friday, September 1, 1944, as Aline Kearney lay in bed reading the newspaper. She was a young housewife whose husband was driving a cab that night in Mattoon, a small city of about 17,000 residents in eastern Illinois. They had a son and two daughters, including three-year-old Dorothy Ellen, who was sleeping in their bed. Also staying with the Kearneys was Aline's sister, Martha Reedy, whose husband was in the war. Suddenly, Aline smelled a sweet odor that made her sick. She was not able to move, her legs paralyzed. At some point, Dorothy Ellen also became sick from the odor. Mrs. Kearney yelled for her sister, who said she smelled the odor coming from an open bedroom window and contacted a neighbor, Mrs. Earl Robertson, who called police. The police searched and found nothing. Mrs. Kearney recovered in about thirty minutes. Her husband heard of the incident and rushed home, arriving about 12:30 A.M., upon which he said he saw a prowler at the bedroom window. Police were again called but found nothing. The whole family then left to stay with a relative elsewhere that night.

Mattoon's only major paper, the *Daily Journal-Gazette* (hereafter referred to as the *Gazette*) reported the incident on page 1 the next evening with a six-column headline, "'Anesthetic Prowler' on Loose." Two subheads under the headline added, "Mrs. Kearney and Daughter First Victims" and "Both Recover; Robber Fails to Get Into Home." Typical symptoms in this and other reports that were to follow included lightheadedness, paralysis, upset stomach, and vomiting, and followed the perception of a sickly sweet odor. All either recovered that night or the next day. On the night of September 5, Mrs. Carl Cordes picked up a small folded cloth on her porch, saw a wet spot, smelled it and was overcome by an odor. "It was a feeling of paralysis," she told the *Gazette* (September 6, 1944, p. 1). "My husband had to help me into the house and soon my lips were swollen and the roof of my mouth and my throat burned. I began to spit blood and my husband called a physician. It was more than two hours before I began to feel normal again."

For the next week, more and more reports of gassings were reported. Other newspapers began picking up on the story by September 6, and almost daily reports in the *Gazette*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Herald-American*, *Champaign News-Gazette*, and (Springfield) *Illinois State Journal* heightened awareness of the mad gasser nationwide. Joining the hunt for the mad gasser were the Illinois State Police, which sent five squad cars and ten officers, two FBI agents, and groups of armed citizens roaming the city. A group of fifty armed farmers, members of the Anti-Theft Association, also roamed the city. Meanwhile, the harried Mattoon police, headed by skeptical police chief C. Eugene Cole, received veiled criticism from a September 8 *Gazette* editorial about their initial doubts that a prowler existed.

As the police sped off to each new call about a mad gasser incident, armed citizens and farmers quickly followed. Police Commissioner Thomas Wright began ordering officers to arrest the chasers. One woman intending to protect herself loaded her soldier-husband's shotgun and blew a hole in her kitchen wall. Another sighting of demon-like eyes at a woman's bedroom window turned out to be a cat. A woman in the midst of a movie theater audience screamed that she was hit by gas although no one around her was affected! A few suspects were questioned, including a high school student playing a prank on a woman, but no arrests were made.

By September 14, gassing reports had stopped for good. In all there were at least three dozen reported victims, more than 100 if seventy in a roaming group claiming to be hit by the smell of gas are included. No prowler was ever identified or arrested, no physical evidence presented (the Cordes's cloth tested negative at a state crime lab for poison gas residue), and there was no medical substantiation of a gas being used. In fact, none of the victims ever reported having eye problems from the alleged gas, despite the fact that if it was a poisonous gas, the eyes would certainly be affected.

Memory Reconstruction and Embellishment

The Mattoon *Gazette* practically created the entire mad gasser scare. We know that the first few gassing reports were not

taken seriously by police. This was noted in a September 8 *Gazette* editorial criticizing police who had not taken Aline Kearney seriously. Nor did they place much credence in the three reports that quickly followed by residents who reported "gassings" only after learning of the Kearney case. According to the *Gazette*, police concluded that these early reports were "just imagination." They did not begin to become concerned until about September 5, after Mrs. Cordes found the strange cloth on her porch. But this police skepticism is not reflected in the early press reports in the early stages. On Saturday, September 2, the *Gazette* carried the first report on the incident: "Anesthetic Prowler on Loose." Not only was the gasser's existence treated as absolute fact, but there was an implication that there may be more gassings to follow. The sub-headline read: "Mrs. Kearney and Daughter First Victims . . . Robber Fails to get into Home."

Sensationalism by the *Gazette* prompted a series of retrospective gassing reports that supposedly had occurred before or during Mrs. Kearney's "attack." In reporting these cases, there is no hint of police skepticism or of the possibility of the gasser being imaginary. Only after reading or hearing of the *Gazette* story did several local families report similar home attacks. Mrs. George Rider said that the gasser had struck her Prairie Avenue home about the same time Mrs. Kearney and her daughter were made ill. At about the same time, a few blocks from Mrs. Rider, a woman and her children awoke and began vomiting. It was later assumed that the gasser had been there. Mr. and Mrs. Orban Raef of Grant Avenue said that the night before Mrs. Kearney was gassed, they were asleep at 3 A.M. when fumes came through the bedroom window. Both awoke and experienced "the same feeling of paralysis" and felt unwell for about ninety minutes. Curiously, friends staying at the house and sleeping in another room reported no ill effects. Finally, Mrs. Olive Brown on 22nd Street told police that several months earlier, she and her daughter had been gassed, but did not report the incident thinking no one would believe them. These incidents were mentioned in the next *Gazette* article about the gasser on September 5 ("'Anesthetic Prowler' Covers City"). The newspaper was not printed on Sundays and holidays.

Smith (1994, 35) states because there were gassing reports prior to Mrs. Kearney's on September 1, and they occurred late at night, it is "very unlikely that word of the incidents could have spread so quickly. As they were not reported in the newspaper until two days later, they simply had to be real events." Smith (1994, 39) himself admits that, "I am a physicist, not a psychologist." He makes no mention of studies on the fallibility of human memory and perception (see Loftus and Ketcham 1991). These earlier reports are dubious. At the time of the supposed gassings, no one reported these incidents to police, bothered to contact friends or relatives to share their concern or even fled their house. Imagine that you suspect someone has sprayed poison gas into your home, making you and your family ill. You experience dizziness, burning lips, vomiting, and partial limb paralysis. It was well-known that poison gas could cause permanent disabilities or even prove lethal. And what do these pre-September 1 "gas victims" do? They remain in the house and soon go back to sleep without telling a soul! This behavior only makes sense if, after learning of the mad gasser, these "victims" began redefining recent ambiguous incidents during which they had noticed a strange smell and embellished upon it.

This brings to mind a story discussed by UFO investigator Philip Klass (1974, 283–284). Early on the evening of June 27, 1959, the Reverend William Gill and a small group watched an illuminated object in the sky near Boianai, Papua New Guinea. They became excited after thinking they could see human-like figures waving back at them. The exchange of waves continued and a flashlight was turned on and off toward the "craft," which seemed to respond by moving in a pendulum fashion. With the object still in view, and having witnessed what he was certain was an alien spaceship for only about thirty minutes, what did Father Gill and the group do at this potentially historic juncture in history? He and the entire group went to dinner! They resumed watching at 7 o'clock. This makes for an exciting story, but human memory does not recall events as they happened, but as we *think* they happened. Often the details get changed after the fact. It brings to mind the saying, "The older I get, the better I was." If we had been convinced an alien craft were hovering nearby, we would likely have called the police and every friend and relative, and told them to get there—fast. Such stories sound exciting after the event, but logic and common sense suggest otherwise. We certainly would not have gone to dinner.

Press Reconstruction

Let us re-examine the report by Mrs. Kearney in the *Gazette* on September 2. Despite being quoted at length, neither she nor her sister mentioned any prowler. Her sister mentioned only an open window. Mrs. Kearney is quoted saying that her sister contacted the neighbor, Mrs. Earl Robertson, who called police. The newspaper then indicated that Mr. Robertson searched the yard and neighborhood "but could find no trace of the prowler. Police also searched without success." After being notified of the incident, Mr. Kearney arrived home about 12:30 A.M. and saw a prowler who was "tall, dressed in dark clothing and wore a tight fitting cap." He gave chase but the "prowler" escaped.

Not until Mr. Kearney arrives is any person identified as being at the bedroom window. In the article's lead and a following reference to Mrs. Kearney's parched and burned lips from "whatever was used by the prowler," the unidentified newspaper reporter conjectures that there is a prowler spraying gas through the bedroom window. After quoting Mrs. Kearney, the reporter then refers to Mr. Robertson, the police, and Mr. Kearney, who is reported as seeing a man at the window. That sighting, though, was for the *second* incident. Apparently, all involved assumed or reinterpreted the first incident as one caused by a prowler spraying an anesthetic substance.

The "anesthetic prowler" was thus a creation of the *Gazette* by combining the first incident involving Mrs. Kearney's paralysis and an odor with Mr. Kearney's alleged sighting of a prowler in the second incident. A close reading of this initial

public report shows that no one involved is quoted as saying that an "anesthetic prowler" was seen. That phrase is an invention of the headline writer. In addition, the "anesthetic prowler" now conveys the impression of retrospective rationalization, which was also evident in the next three reports of a "prowler" by the previously mentioned Rider, Raef, and Brown families. The *Gazette* then immediately added fuel to the fire by suggesting that there would be more victims; the subhead under that first headline was, "Mrs. Kearney and Daughter First Victims." The headline was "'Anesthetic Prowler' *on Loose.*'" The other newspapers soon followed with coverage, and the whole country was being made aware of the "mad gasser of Mattoon."

Context: The Poison Gas Scare

By the fall of 1944, with an Allied victory seeming inevitable, the fear of gas attacks was evident. Even though poison gas was not known to have been used in World War II for fear of retribution that could devastate civilians, during the year of the "gassings" in 1944, there were no less that 112 articles in *The New York Times Index* under the heading "chemical warfare." Dozens of popular and scientific periodicals around this time also discussed the poison gas peril in publications such as *Newsweek*, *Popular Science*, and *The American Journal of Public Health* (Lindley 1943; Scott 1944; Sanders 1945). As the tide of World War II turned increasingly in favor of the Allies, so did concern that desperate German commanders might resort to gas warfare (Marshall 1943). In fact, the Allies were so concerned that the Germans might use poison gas during their June 6, 1944, D-Day invasion of Normandy that they had a plan to retaliate within forty-eight hours with two bombing raids of 400 planes each, all loaded with chemical weapons designed to hit selected targets (Brown 1968). Gas warfare expert Frederic Brown (1968, 244) states that D-Day was the "most dangerous period for German [gas] initiation"—a credible threat that was widely discussed in the press during latter 1944. The mad gasser appeared just two and a half months after D-Day.

There was even discussion as to whether the United States should be the first to use gas. This view received a firestorm of criticism by many readers and commentators, fearful that the Axis powers would think that the use of gas was imminent, and initiate a first strike. Following editorials favoring the idea of using gas first in *The Chicago Tribune*, *The New York Daily News*, and the *Washington Times-Herald*, Norman Cousins (1944) branded their editors as "incredibly irresponsible."

About the time of the first gassing report in Mattoon by Aline Kearney, newspapers in Champaign, Chicago, and Springfield carried wire service articles about gas use. The August 30 *Champaign News-Gazette* included a page 1 article: "Believe Nazis Prepared To Use Gas." On August 31 the *Chicago Herald-American* had one on page 2 ("Report Nazis Plan Poison Gas Attack") and another report in the September 1 issue on page 2 ("Allies Ready If Nazis Use Gas"); and an Associated Press article in the (Springfield) *Illinois State Journal* on September 1 ("Unlikely Gas To Be Used In War") appeared on the day of Mrs. Kearney's alleged gassing. The article stated: "If Nazi extremists bent on ruling or ruining should employ gas against civilian populations in a bitter end resistance, the Allies would be in a position through air strength to drench German cities. . . . Recurrent rumors that the Germans are preparing to initiate gas warfare bring no official reaction here."

While Mattoon's *Gazette* did not carry news of the potential German use of gas, knowledge of the threat, whether perceived as domestic or foreign, would have been widespread. Many state newspapers were read by Mattoon citizens, as Johnson (1945) pointed out, and the gas fears were almost certainly discussed on radio and by word-of-mouth. In addition, during that same time, a Nazi prisoner had escaped from Camp Ellis in the Mattoon area and was reportedly seen in the city ("Hunt Escaped Nazi Here," *Gazette*, August 31, 1944). He was captured the following night in another city. If this were not enough, at the same time there was a wave of robberies in Mattoon ("Two Homes Entered," *Gazette*, August 31, 1944; "Robbery Wave Continues," *Gazette*, September 1, 1944).

The Shift Toward Terrorism

The "mad gasser" was triggered by a confluence of factors: sensational press coverage, ignorance of human perceptual fallibility and memory reconstruction, fear of Nazi poison gas attacks, an escaped Nazi in the city, and a robbery/break-in wave. It is essential to understand the overall context of what happened in Mattoon within the social and historical context as it was experienced by Mattoonites and reported by the media at the time. People of the period lived under the specter of massive poison gas attacks on civilian targets. While certainly unusual, given the war-scare context, the case of the mad gasser of Mattoon is not so bizarre after all. Indeed, during the twentieth century a strange odor was the most common trigger of epidemic hysteria in both job and school settings (Olkinuora 1984; Bartholomew and Sirois 1996). It was a sign of the times, which were dominated by occupational safety legislation and environmental fears.

Episodes such as the "mad gasser" may be set to recur. In Japan during 1995, the use of Sarin nerve gas on the Tokyo subway by the Aum Shinrikyo cult killed twelve people. It also triggered a wave of mass collapses from pseudo-attacks after commuters detected strange smells (Wessely 1995). Since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, America has experienced an upsurge in reports of mass hysteria and social delusion. In one case, a man was subdued by police after squirting a mysterious spray at a Maryland subway station. Thirty-five persons in the vicinity were treated for symptoms ranging from nausea to sore throats. The substance turned out to be a common window cleaner (Lellman 2001). Similar episodes of mass psychogenic illness prompted by the chemical and bioterrorism scare were reported from California

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first human immigrants to North America, who did not farm and whose major artifacts are stone spearheads, literally hunted most of the continent's large animals of all kinds into extinction, inflicting serious damage on the ecology of the continent that remains to this day.

Flannery tries to be upbeat, but his assessment of North America's future is disturbing. European colonization has only exacerbated the damage done to the continent's ecosystems. He believes that large animals must be reintroduced to restore "balance" to ecosystems. He also warns that North Americans are rapidly consuming the continent's fresh water and exhausting its soil. Global warming could well bring dramatic changes in heat and cold distribution in North America, with tropical and subtropical invaders from South America and elsewhere finding new homes in the North, and large areas of the interior continent being given over to desert scrub.

Flannery's book achieves the impressive goal of placing human society within a larger geological and ecological framework by studying human archaeological evidence in the same way that other species are studied, and showing that historically climate change seems to affect humans the same way it affected plants and other animals. Fagan's book documents the concrete impacts of specific climatic events on specific areas of human activity in historical times. Taken together, these books offer a sobering science-based reminder that while humans may be unique animals on this planet, we are still ultimately subject to the same climatic forces that have affected animal life here for millions of years. The weather is not the province of gods, but of lawful natural processes. As our climate changes, our ability—or inability—to recognize, adapt to, and perhaps even influence those processes may well turn out to be the key issue that shapes the future of humans on Earth. □

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(Becerra and Malnic 2001) to the Philippines. In the latter case, a flu outbreak coupled with rumors of a mysterious "airborne virus" prompted thousands of college students to deluge local physicians (Villanueva et al. 2001; Reuters 2001). Like a chameleon, epidemic hysteria outbreaks mirror the times, thriving on fear and uncertainty.

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