

Swope Murder Trial: A century later

Alumni get into character for trial reenactment

by ERICK R. SCHMIDT

In June, the UMKC School of Law presented the “100th Anniversary of the Swope Murder Trial: A Reenactment” in conjunction with the Jackson County Historical Society.

UMKC alumni played key roles in the reenactment, including 16th Judicial Circuit of Missouri Judges John Torrence (J.D. '82), Michael Manners (J.D. '76) and J.D. Williamson Jr. (J.D. '65).

The original trial revolved around the 1910 mysterious death of Kansas City real estate mogul and philanthropist Thomas H. Swope and has maintained a sense of romanticism ever since. Dr. Bennett Clark Hyde treated Swope in a time of illness and was accused of poisoning the millionaire. The case is well known due to the involvement of local celebrities, complicated circumstances and, of course, murder.

“It’s an intriguing set of facts,” Williamson says. “It remains a mystery in the sense that there was never a definitive outcome of the case.”

The jury found Hyde guilty of murder on May 16, 1910, and he was sentenced to life in prison. The defense lawyers appealed the case, however, and after a fourth trial, Hyde was never convicted.

The actors didn’t have a script from which to work. Instead, they were given the facts of the case and allowed to use their own tactics to get from Point A to Point B. Manners says the preparation and reenactment was “very similar” to trying cases.

Torrence says he always held interest in the case beyond his career in law. He’s also a history buff who says the case plays an important part of Kansas City’s past.

“It’s helping the community understand something,” he says, “and gives them an opportunity to learn about the history of the community.”



Judge Michael Manners
as James A. Reed

Judge Michael Manners (above) played James A. Reed, a former Kansas City mayor and prosecutor who was selected as a special prosecutor for the case. Manners said that even though the participants dressed accordingly, the role more closely resembled trial law than a school play.

“Ten years ago, I was a practicing lawyer, and I haven’t tried a case in almost 10 years. I feel a little bit rusty. Hopefully I won’t be too bad at it,” he joked before the reenactment.



Judge John Torrence
as Judge Ralph Latshaw

Judge J.D. Williamson Jr. retired (retired, below center) played the politically active and prominent defense attorney Frank Walsh. Walsh often squared off in public forums with prosecutor James Reed (played by Manners). Williamson says he enjoyed playing a man with such a recognizable name.

“This was a case that involved extremely prominent people at the time,” Williamson says. “It didn’t just get local coverage, it got attention nationally.”



Judge J.D. Williamson Jr.
as Frank Walsh



There is a curiosity about the case even 100 years after the fact, says Judge John Torrence (left), who played presiding Judge Ralph Latshaw during Hyde’s trial, which began April 16, 1910.

“It’s a fascinating case full of all kinds of different issues that are part drama, part soap opera, part American history, part human drama and the skeletons in the closets of families,” Torrence says. “It’s all the things we love about these kinds of stories.”



Ralph Monaco as
the ghost of
Colonel Thomas Swope



Ralph Monaco (above) played the ghost of Colonel Thomas Swope, the land developer whose death was at the center of the trial. Monaco led the organization of the event, and many of the participants gave him credit for making the historical reenactment a success.

