Respectable White Ladies, Wayward Girls, and Telephone Thieves in Miami’s “Case of the Clinking Brassieres”

Dr. Vivien Miller
American & Canadian Studies, University of Nottingham

In her landmark study of gender, family life, and domestic containment in the United States during the 1940s and 1950s, historian Elaine Tyler May noted the importance of the consumer, arms, and space races for Cold War Americans: “Family-centred spending was encouraged as a way of strengthening “the American way of life,” and thus fostering traditional, nuclear family and patriarchal values, and patriotism. A “fetishization of commodities” was integral to the new post-war national identity and the “feminine mystique” embodied the resurgence of neo-Victorian domesticity and motherhood. In 1947, journalist Ferdinand Lundberg and psychiatrist Marynia Farnham asserted that it was women’s nature to be passive and dependent. Female happiness was attained through marriage, homemaking and motherhood, while societal disarray was linked to female employment outside the home.

Sociologist Wini Breines notes that a good life in the 1950s “was defined by a well-equipped house in the suburbs, a new car or two, a good white-collar job for the husband, well-adjusted and successful children taken care of by a full-time wife and mother. Leisure time and consumer goods constituted its centrepieces; abundance was its context. White skin was a criterion for its attainment.” The post-war US economy as measured by the purchase of commodities was characterized by a “fetishization of commodities” that reinforced traditional values and gender roles. 

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and consumption of homes and home appliances, cars and vacations, cosmetics and clothes, and televisions and other forms of entertainment, and the proliferation of shopping centres, expanded dramatically, and gross national product rose by 250 percent between 1945 and 1960. By the end of the 1950s, sixty percent of all Americans owned their own homes, seventy five percent of American families owned a car, seventy five percent owned a washing machine, and eighty-seven percent owned a television set.\textsuperscript{5}

However, the virtuous consumerism of the 1950s co-existed with the fraudulent and illegal acquisition of material goods by amateur and professional criminals.\textsuperscript{6} The FBI Uniform Crime Report of 1950 shows that of the 6,309 offenses known to the Miami police department that year, the largest category was for “burglary-breaking or entering” (38.7 percent or 2,447 offenses). Petty larceny, of goods worth less than fifty dollars, accounted for 27.6 percent or 1,742 offenses, and grand larceny for 15.6 percent or 987 offenses (thus 43.2 percent combined). Auto theft, aggravated assault, and robbery accounted for 8.7 percent, 4.4 percent, and four percent of reported offenses respectively. The twenty-nine reported cases of

murder or non-negligent manslaughter accounted for less than one percent. Indeed, throughout the twentieth century, convictions for non-violent property offenses, particularly larceny and burglary, generally outstripped those for murder, manslaughter, and assault in Dade County and throughout Florida, but historical knowledge and understanding of property offenses is relatively limited.

One of the 987 grand larceny offenses involved the theft of thousands of pounds from the Miami offices of the Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company. On Tuesday September 26, 1950, Associated and United Press Association reports of the theft of “at least $100,000” from the Miami telephone company crossed the United States. Verbal confessions by three female employees led police to announce that several women had taken rolls of coins from the company’s counting room over a period of two years. The nature and circumstances of the thefts underlined there were serious shortcomings in Southern Bell’s accounting systems and the possibility that customers were being overcharged as a result. The public utility company was already receiving bad press in Miami because of long-running labor disputes and over the number of “slugs” or dud coins in its pay phones. Yet, it was the manner in which the women had removed the coins – in their brassieres – which captured press and public attention. Indeed, newspaper reports of “the case of the silver falsies,” “the

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7 Table 12: Number of Offenses Known to the Police, 1950, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports*, 1950, 98. By comparison, there were 1,728 offenses known to Miami Beach police: 760 for grand larceny (43.9 percent), 453 for petty larceny (26.2 percent), 381 for burglary and breaking and entering (22 percent) and 100 for auto theft (6 percent). Robbery and aggravated assault together accounted for less than two percent of all reported offenses. There were no reported murders or non-negligent manslaughters in Miami Beach in 1950.
9$100,000 In Silver Stolen,” *New York Times* September 26, 1950, 22.
case of the clinking brassieres,” “the bra bandits,” and “the brassiere brigade” titillated readers of tabloids and more serious papers alike.\textsuperscript{11} This essay uses the “case of the clinking brassieres” to explore female theft in Miami at mid-century and the ways in which gender, race, class, respectability, and youth offered protections and shaped treatment within Florida’s criminal justice system. It focuses on the illegal activities of three female telephone employees, Betty Corrigan, age 24, Marie Orr, age 21, and Billie Ruth McNabb, age 27, their criminal prosecution, and post-conviction relief. These seemingly respectable coin thieves challenged a familiar image of theft as a lower-class crime associated with poverty and economic need, while their blonde hair and white skin (and an idealization of the meanings of white beauty standards), complicated public attitudes in a period when true or serious criminals were racketeers and organised crime operatives. Further, one of the lawyers representing the women was Harry W. Prebish who would become a foremost criminal defense attorney in Florida in the second half of the twentieth century. In court, Prebish portrayed Orr, Corrigan, and McNabb - as did much of the media coverage - as wayward “girls” who had engaged in a series of amusing, rather frivolous, and petty actions rather than as “real criminals.”\textsuperscript{12} Historically, few criminals have left extensive autobiographical or operational details, thus legal documents, court files, and newspapers offer indispensable if skewed information.

\textsuperscript{11} Reporters competed over puns and clever turns of expression. The *Charleston Gazette’s* photo caption on September 27 read: “BIG WEIGHT off their chests. Mrs. Betty Corrigan, 23, (left), and Marie Orr, 21, were released with 12 other persons after confessing carrying away possibly as much as $100,000 in coin-box change from the Southern Bell Telephone Co. counting room in Miami in their brassieres. Hardly abreast of the case, officers continued to search yesterday for a legal angle on which to prosecute the ‘Case of the Silver Falsies’.” *Charleston (SC) Gazette* September 27, 1950, 8.

\textsuperscript{12} A short chapter on the case is included in Stuart McIver, *Murder In The Tropics (Florida Chronicles Vol. 2)*, (Sarasota: Pineapple Press, 2008), 115-119.
on defendants’ backgrounds and activities. Limited public access to surviving Dade County Circuit and Criminal Court records means that tracking individual theft cases through the courts and identifying typical non-violent property offenders in Miami in this period is not straightforward. Many of the details of the clinking brassieres case can be gleaned from the state Supreme Court records, as well as the archives of the Miami Daily News and Miami Herald newspapers. There are of course well-established problems with the accuracy of news reports, reliance on sensational and emotive reporting, and in the selection of crime stories for publication, yet the print media kept the memorable case of the telephone company thefts in the public eye. Grand Jury Reports from the 1940s and 1950s are more readily available, while County Solicitor Robert R. Taylor’s extensive scrap book collection drawn from a range of local and national newspapers and compiled during his term of office (1936-1943), and Lilburn Rayburn’s Crime Commission of Greater Miami scrapbook, 1948-1953 all provide crucial information on the wider context for criminal activities in the pre- and post-war years.

The 1950 U.S. Census showed that Florida had 2.7 million residents. Dade County, with a population of nearly half a million, was the largest county in the state, and Miami, the

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13 Criminal autobiographies and biographies of more high-profile or (in)famous offenders do exist, such as that of nineteenth-century female shoplifter Sophie Lyons: The Autobiography of Sophie Lyons, (New York: Star Publishing, 1913).


county seat, with 247,262 residents, was Florida’s largest city.16 State investment in roads and bridges, expanding sea travel and port facilities, and the growth of domestic and international air travel to and from Miami in the 1940s and 1950s increased commerce and trade to South Florida and spurred a dramatic rise in post-war tourism and migration.17 Miami’s population increased by 57.1 percent between 1945 and 1950, and 42.2 percent between 1950 and 1955, as former military personnel and economic migrants and immigrants took up residence. “Plenty of space, warm weather, and proximity to the ocean are among the reasons for the high rate of settlement in Miami. Real estate promoters and speculators have also played an important role in the area’s growth. Tourists too spread the ‘sunshine gospel,’ and many return to settle,” observed one contemporary political scientist.18 Non-whites comprised 13.2 percent of the Dade County population in 1950 (138,993) and nearly half lived in racially segregated Miami, where non-white residents were concentrated in the Central Negro District, Liberty City, and the Coconut Grove-Coral Gables sections, as many of the burgeoning suburbs were restricted to whites.19 This essay is thus part of a larger project in development which examines the ways in which racial segregation, waged labor, and tourism shape the commission of urban crime and disorder in twentieth-century Miami.

16 “Dade County Total Is Put At 489,838,” Miami Daily News June 18, 1950, 1. Political scientist and associate professor of government at the University of Miami Edward Sofen used more complete census information to provide a figure of 495,084 for the total population in Metropolitan Dade County in 1950, rising to 703,777 in 1955. See Edward Sofen, “A Report on Politics in Greater Miami,” Unpublished Report, Joint Center for Urban Studies of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University, 1961, 4.
19 There was a massive expansion of suburban areas in post-war Dade County, particularly for white incomers and residents, although there were private housing developments for black veterans such as Richmond Heights. For more details see Sofen, “A Report on Politics in Greater Miami,” I:5-7, 11; Shell-Weiss, Coming to Miami, 134; Raymond A. Mohl, “Shadows in the Sunshine: Race and Ethnicity in Miami,” Tequesta 49 (1989): 63-80.
News commentaries, grand jury reports, and UCR information collectively indicate that South Florida, particularly during the December-April winter tourist season, was plagued by pickpockets, street thieves, and robbers who employed varying levels of aggression and violence. Ease of transportation and the increasing mobility of professional criminals were linked to bank robbery, jewel thefts, and diamond smuggling in Miami in this period. Hotel thieves, prowlers, burglars, and check swindlers were also active in the Miami, Miami Beach and Fort Lauderdale resorts. Two white “$50-a-visit call girls” furnished tips to the five male members of a “sex steal” gang reputed to have stolen more than $250,000 in a series of robberies of Miami Beach hotel guests during the 1955-1956 tourist season. Male and female accomplices might also pose as (usually white) heterosexual lovers or marriage partners to avoid suspicion during the surveillance of selected targets, the commission of a crime, or in collecting illegally-acquired items. This was not always successful as in the later 1965 case of a male professional burglar and his ex-Playboy Club bunny female partner.

22 The Pinkerton Detective Agency’s Criminal Rosters for the 1920s-1940s contain arrest information on several hotel thieves and prowlers operating in South Florida, including Semmie Clem Morgan a “Hotel Prowler” from St. Paul-Minneapolis who had been arrested on suspicion of larceny in Miami in March 1945 and swiftly released for lack of evidence but was “ordered out of town.” The roster includes arrest sheets for several female hotel thieves but none with links to South Florida. See Pinkerton’s National Detective Agency, Administrative File, 1857-1999, Box 26, Folder 4: Criminal Rosters; Hotel prowlers and thieves, No. H-89, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
23 “Warrants On Way For Robbery Trio,” Miami Daily News May 31, 1956, 8A; “Blonde, Pal Arraigned In Sex-and-Steal Case,” Miami Daily News June 12, 1956, 4A; “‘Sex And Steal’ Case is Delayed,” Miami Daily News July 18, 1956, 8A; “‘Sex-Steal’ Ring Suspect Jailed,” Miami Daily News June 20, 1958, 1A. News reports nearly always mentioned that one of the female defendants was a platinum blonde.
caught with $150,000 worth of jewels taken from Miami’s Jordan Marsh department store.\textsuperscript{24} Amateur thieves were also active, such as the former maid was charged with the grand larceny of $20,000 from her doctor employer in 1953, and the twenty-seven-year-old black defendant at the Miami Beach Municipal Court who was fined one hundred dollars and sentenced to ten days in the county jail in 1956 for breaking, entering, and stealing one hundred (dead) chickens from the Pickin’ Chicken restaurant on Lincoln Road.\textsuperscript{25}

In his 1939 study of professional thieves criminologist Edwin Sutherland argued that prostitutes, waitresses, cashiers, and hotel employees were the most likely groups of women to become “gun molls” or pickpockets, and traditionally women are deemed to have lacked the intellectual or organizational skills to execute major thefts and crimes of deception.\textsuperscript{26} In a satirical article on female embezzlers in the late 1930s, one female inmate of the Florida State Prison declared, “It is, accordingly, unfair that women embezzlers should be regarded by law and society with the same distaste as men who rifle the cash box. The offender in such cases is not the woman but the dolt [idiot] who puts the kale [money] in her way.” She suggested that whereas male embezzlers understood the consequences of their crimes, and knew how to play the system, women were “a different breed of cats. They lie, stall, freeze up, sass the

\textsuperscript{24} A tip off to police led to their arrest outside the downtown Miami Greyhound Bus Terminal. The stolen jewels had been stored in one of the bus station lockers. A team of burglars had taken $150,000 of jewels from the Jordan Marsh store in January 1965 but it was unclear whether they had been in the locker for all seven months. After a two-hour trial, Pearson was sentenced to five years for receiving and concealing stolen property and Dennison was acquitted. Pearson was also wanted by police in New York and Georgia in connections with burglaries in those states. See “Pair Jailed in Miami Jewel Theft,” \textit{Rome News-Tribune} July 23, 1965, 1 [this refers to their arrest and detention in the Dade County jail, Pearson was unable to post bail]; “Stolen Gems Trial Opens For Pearson and Ex-Bunny,” \textit{Miami News} November 29, 1965, 1B; Milt Sosin, “Five Years For Pearson; Girl Freed In Jewel Case,” \textit{Miami News} November 29, 1965 (later edition), 1B.


judge, crucify their own witnesses, and behave so badly all around that they draw stiff sentences for trifling crime. Women don’t understand money, and when they get hurt fiddling around with it they don’t want to bare their souls to a bunch of prying cops, bondsmen, lawyers and snoops.”

Scholarship on amateur and professional female thieves has tended to focus on the nineteenth century and retail crime, specifically in relation to the drapery shop, bazaar, and department store, and the emergence of the female kleptomaniac as criminal archetype. Women embraced and participated in an emerging culture of consumption as both legitimate shoppers and light-fingered thieves, and made use of feminine clothing such as hoop skirts and mufffs as well as pockets to conceal and transport stolen items. Shoplifting was still considered to be a predominately female form of delinquency in the mid-twentieth century when retail theft generally was also linked to the greater freedom of movement for the customer within the retail space, for example, with the early twentieth-century shift from

clerk-operated to self-service stores throughout the US and the post-World War II rejuvenation of the department store.\(^{29}\)

In March 1946, two “well-dressed” white women in Miami Beach’s fashionable Lincoln Road shopping area were revealed as “professional shoplifters.” Forty-one-year-old Louise Washburn of Bay City, Michigan, and thirty-two-year-old Frances White of Los Angeles were charged with petty larceny after “removing stolen articles” from the Saks-Fifth Avenue department store in large rubber bags concealed beneath their clothing.\(^{30}\) One department store detective quoted in the *New York Times* in 1945 stated that eighty-five percent of shoplifters were women, usually amateur petty thieves but also members of professional organized gangs, who made off with goods worth $80 million each year. He opined that “many of the petty thieves were war workers building a nest egg for post-war plans, others were thrill seekers, and others were socially prominent women covering-up bridge debts,” and estimated that only three percent could be termed “kleptomaniacs” (defined in 1942 as an “irresistible impulse to steal without any real desire for the thing stolen”).\(^{31}\)


\(^{30}\) “2 women Held In Store Theft,” *Miami Daily News* March 19, 1946, 4B.

At the same time, the Miami public and press understood crime and criminals in particular ways in the 1940s and 1950s, as their city was described as having fallen prey to racketeers, gamblers, and high-profile mobsters from New York, Chicago and Detroit.32 “Gambling operations have been one of the chief sources of trouble ever since underworld characters began to follow the wealthy into the Miami area each season,” observed New York Times correspondent Harris G. Sims in 1947.33 Syndicate infiltration of South Florida trade unions and ownership of hotels, nightclubs and the liquor business, supposedly encouraged by Dade County sheriff Jimmy Sullivan, spurred formation of a citizens’ Crime Commission of Greater Miami in March 1948 to bring public pressure on Sullivan and Governor Fuller Warren to wage war on the rackets. The Dade County Bar Association’s Committee on Law Enforcement blamed “lax, inefficient, and inadequate [and underfunded] law enforcement” for making Dade County into “a mecca for criminals.” Prior to the creation of a Metropolitan Police Department, residents of the various municipalities in Dade County were served by a collection of different police agencies, including city police departments, the Sheriff’s Criminal Department, and parts of the State Highway Patrol, which led to on-going problems of cooperation, coordination, and corruption. The City of Miami Police Department was also the subject of numerous complaints of racial harassment and violence.34 Grand jurors in the late 1940s declared that a “war on rackets” should be the priority: “We are thoroughly convinced that the organized gambling racket can be destroyed and its sinister influences

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removed…. [by] a real and sincere desire on the part of those charged with the enforcement of the laws to do so.”

In July 1950 US Senator Estes Kefauver opened his investigation into interstate organized crime in Miami, and local residents learned of the extent of syndicate control and political corruption in Dade County, particularly linked to the Miami Beach S & G Syndicate, from television and radio coverage of the hearings. Thomas Kelly replaced Sullivan as sheriff and was expected to crack down on vice. Anxieties over Miami’s reputation as a playground for America’s gangster class were expressed frequently in the state’s newspapers. Southern Bell had also become embroiled in the controversies. “It has come to our attention that through devious and various means and subterfuges, telephones have been diverted from legal use to bookie operations,” declared the Grand Jury Report of winter 1948. In late 1950 the company was indicted for “being an accessory to gambling operations,” although all fourteen charges were dismissed in January 1951 by Judge Ben C. Willard of the Dade County Criminal Court of Record. Throughout 1951 Governor Warren was engaged in a series of high-profile disputes and disagreements with the Kefauver Commission following his controversial refusal to testify, and had also reinstated Sullivan as sheriff in

April. However, the 1951 Dade County grand jury, newly configured as a more professional “Blue Ribbon” institution, believed that the war on the rackets and more concentrated prevention policies had paid off, thus during the 1951-1952 winter season “for the first time in the history of modern Dade County there was no open and notorious table gambling or bookmaking, except on a brief and sneak basis.” The lighter tone of media coverage of the attractive female coin thieves reinforced the differences between them and male racketeers.

Prior to the creation of Metropolitan Miami in 1957, there was “a patchwork” of twenty-six different communities across Dade County. Marie Orr, her sister-in-law Ruth Orr, and Billie Ruth McNabb, and other family members all lived on S. W. 13th Street in West Miami, one of the fastest growing and predominately white suburban areas of Greater Miami, with a population of nearly four thousand in 1950. Work colleague Betty Corrigan and her husband William lived nearby in Normandy Street. Exposure of the telephone theft “ring” began in West Miami, during the early hours of September 24 when Rita Orr reported to

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41 There was a massive expansion of suburban areas in post-war Dade County, particularly for white incomers and residents, although there were private housing developments such as Richmond Heights exclusively for black veterans. See Sofen, “A Report on Politics in Greater Miami,” I:5-7, Shell-Weiss, Coming to Miami, 131, 134; Howard M. Rose, “Metropolitan Miami’s Changing Negro Population, 1950-1960,” Economic Geography 40/3 (July 1964): 221-238; Dade County Grand Jury Report, Spring Term, 1954 [filed November 9, 1954], 15. West Miami’s population is listed as 3,892 along with 19,668 for Coral Gables in “Dade County Total Is Put At 489,838,” Miami Daily News June 18, 1950, 1.
police that $150 was missing from the house that she and Marie shared. Local West Miami Safety Officer I. Raymond “Ira” Mills investigated, found no signs of forced entry, and promised to return that afternoon with “fingerprint men.” Later that day, City of Miami patrolmen had picked up Marine Sergeant William Albert, Billie Ruth McNabb’s fiancé, in a car with a strong box containing several thousand dollars which she had asked him to remove from the house after Mills left. A Miami detective directed Mills to another house on S.W. Seventh Street where he met McNabb. Later in court, Mills stated that in response to his questions McNabb had made a full and voluntary statement in which she admitted removing money from the Southern Bell building and that the money had been taken from the counting room by her sister, Marie. Marie Orr and Betty Corrigan were met at the house by waiting detectives early on the morning of September 25 following their return from an out-of-town visit. They were taken to the larger police station in nearby Coral Gables and also apparently made full and voluntary confessions. The Miami Daily News reported, “In the well-modulated and courteous tones which telephone company employes [sic] are trained to use, they spilled one name after another.” For the reader this was an easily recognizable reference to the telephone industry’s white lady image.

44 Testimony of I. Ray Mills, 13 November 1950, SC21978, 82-83.
Many press reports on Corrigan, Orr and McNab drew on the enduring socio-economic and racial characteristics of female telephone employees that reinforced public perceptions of high moral character, good manners, pleasant voices, tidy and stylish dress; of respectable women. Labor historian Jacqueline Jones highlights the “premium placed on white notions of female attractiveness” that created “highly stylized images of female beauty” – particularly of pale unblemished skin, blonde hair, blue eyes - that “pervaded advertisements in mass-circulation magazines” throughout the early twentieth century, including those of the Bell Telephone Companies, and dominated movie and later television screens. White female beauty standards “extended into the reception offices and stenographic pools of large businesses” and were associated with telephone operators, even though most customers would only ever hear their voices.47 The Bell System was a leader in both technological development and in female employment; around fifty percent of company employees in the US between 1917 and the early 1970s were women.48

In her study of female labor and technological change in the Bell System, Venus Green demonstrates how the telephone industry championed a “white lady identity” which

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“represented an idealization of white women that entailed demure and ‘ladylike’ behavior, commanding only the highest reverence.” The white lady standard generated employee support for racial exclusivity and inhibited the development of a white feminist working-class consciousness, yet also justified women being paid significantly less than male employees.\textsuperscript{49} Green concluded that female Bell employees accepted their inferior economic status because “[t]he value of the ‘white lady’ identity for the operator was that she did not work in a factory like the immigrants, and she was not a domestic like African American women.” Automation diminished the value of operators’ personal skills and heightened fears over loss of status yet provided continuing support for the white lady standard because “operators relied more on their white exclusivity to maintain what they perceived to be an elite position.”\textsuperscript{50} White female telephone operators’ insistence on racial exclusivity and resistance to the employment of black women was reflected in employment patterns in Jim Crow southern cities such as Miami, in which black women were employed mainly as domestic household workers and as waged laborers in hotel, catering and similar service industries rather than in the white-collar workplace.\textsuperscript{51}

The view that the “white lady standard” stifled the development of a white feminist working-class consciousness is challenged somewhat by the long-running disputes over pay and working conditions, especially as a result of company pressure to quicken the timescale for switching to automated systems. South Florida industrial action was coordinated first by the National Federation of Telephone Workers and Miami Local 107 of the Southern Federation of Telephone Workers, then by the CIO-affiliated Communication Workers of America (CWA) after its formation in 1947. The CWA’s local Miami chapter was made up entirely of Southern Bell workers in the 1950s (Bell had 550,000 employees in the US by

\textsuperscript{49} Green, \textit{Race on the Line}, 62.  
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 134.  
1950 and they contributed heavily to the CWA national membership rolls. These disputes had resulted in a series of lengthy and costly strikes by Southern Bell employees in the nine south-eastern states in which the company operated in the late 1940s, and would continue through the 1950s. There had been significant disruption to telephone services in the Greater Miami area in spring 1947 when 1,400 phone employees walked out, and again in February and May 1950. A recorded message greeted dial calls to “operator” and “long distance” in 1946 and customers were informed that operators were on strike and their calls could not be handled. Supervisory staff and non-union employees took over frontline jobs in the 1947 and 1950 strikes, and handled 6,000 long-distance calls per day rather than the normal 10,000.

One journalist observed in 1957: “Strikes of one sort or another are an annual affair with the Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company” and despite the relative weakness of the CWA in Florida, “an open-shop state,” the disruption to customers was of local political and gubernatorial concern. CWA demands included a thirty-five hour week, better pension and vacation benefits, and shorter apprenticeship periods. Complaints of damage to company property, harassment and assault of non-strikers were reported in the 1950s. During a seventy-two day strike in spring 1955, on at least one occasion, Miami police and fire officers used fire hoses to overwhelm and disperse union demonstrators in front of the downtown Southern Bell offices. See “Federal Pressure Averts Telephone Nationwide Strike,” Sarasota Herald-Tribune March 7, 1946, 1; “Strike Holds Up Work On Miami Phone Building,” Sarasota Herald-Tribune April 8, 1947, 4; “Hope Fades Here For Phone Return; Workers Refuse To Cross Picket Lines,” Miami Daily News May 10, 1947, 1A; “Phone Service Still Functioning Here,” Miami Daily News April 14, 1947, 4A; “Phone workers Set To Strike Here Sept. 17,” Miami Daily News September 8, 1948, 1; “U.S. Moves To Avert Phone Strike After Walkout Is Called For Feb. 8,” Miami Daily News January 31, 1950, 1A; “1,600 In Miami Await Deadline,” Miami Daily News April 25, 1950, 6A, 7A; “Philadelphia Hearing On Pickets Continued,” St. Petersburg Times November 18, 1950, 2; “Bell Crews Halt Brief Strike Here,” Miami Daily News April 8, 1952 (evening edition), 1; “17,000 Phone Men Strike, 300 Here,” Miami Daily News July 1, 1954, 1; “General Walkout Looms as Governors Call Meetings to Settle Phone Strike,” Fredericksburg (VA) Free Lance-Star April 15, 1955, 2; “Quiet Follows Cable Cuttings In Phone Strike,” Miami Daily News April 21, 1955, 3A; “Firemen Hose Crowd In Miami Telephone Strike,” New York Times April 25, 1955, 30; “Phone Strikers Shift Site For Mass Meeting,” Miami Daily News May 5, 1955, 2A; Glen Alter, “Phone Strikers Wait Signal To Return To Jobs,” and “No Fun, But Worth It, Say Strikers,” Miami Daily News May 24, 1955, 3A; “NLRB Hearing To Open Today In Phone Strike,” Miami Daily News August 6, 1956, 6A; “New Contract Ends Phone Strike Threat,” Miami Daily News August 27, 1956,
mid-century but given Southern Bell’s monopoly in Dade County, and as it provided long distance services for all telephone companies in the state, it seems very likely that jurors in the subsequent criminal case against Corrigan, Orr, and McNabb were Southern Bell customers. One of the principal complaints from domestic customers in the Miami area was the length of time – up to a year in some cases – to wait for telephone lines to be installed.53

Fifty percent of Bell employees were female, but ninety percent of operators were women, thus there was a heavy female presence on many picket lines in Jacksonville and Miami the late 1940s and early 1950s. Newspaper reports and captioned photographs offered a portrait of a disgruntled set of workers who were willing to demonstrate their dissatisfaction in “unladylike” ways.54 Recent analyses of clerical and business employee theft suggest that lack of company loyalty, an absence of personal job fulfilment, and perceived wage and promotion inequities are more likely causes than economic necessity.55 Further, women’s

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53 Telephone equipment and lines were actually installed by Western Electric Phone Company, also part of AT&T, but then maintained and operated by Southern Bell. See Jane Wood, “Story Behind The Phone Strike – A Look at Company and Union,” *Miami Daily News Special Report* September 19, 1957, 10A. News of the coin thefts brought threats of greater scrutiny of the company’s books from local and state politicians. See for example, “‘Brassiere’ Case Many Affect Telephone Rates,” *Daytona Beach Morning Journal* September 29, 1950, 6.

54 For example, “No Fun, But Worth It, Say Strikers,” *Miami Daily News* May 24, 1955, 3A.

share of the US labor market had declined from its wartime high of thirty-six percent to twenty-eight percent in 1950 (although this was a temporary interruption to the long-term trend toward rising levels of female waged employment). “In the absence of equal opportunities legislation, postwar employers could hire whom they wished at whatever salary would be accepted, and they demonstrated a strong preference for male workers,” with the result that female wage earners were trapped within the low-paid domestic service and clerical work categories. It is tempting to propose that significant levels of Bell female...
employee dissatisfaction, the long-running labor disputes, post-war anger over gender pay inequities, and Bell women’s long history of overt and covert resistance to company rules and regulations may have informed the illegal actions of the Miami counting room employees, but news reports and court testimony do not provide evidence for this. Nonetheless, Orr, Corrigan and McNabb’s illegal removal of company property undermined any claims they might have to the moral character of white lady telephone employees.

The scene of the women’s crimes was the white-collar workplace. The counting room was on the first floor of Southern Bell’s main office in downtown Miami (at 36 N. E.

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58 “White collar crime” is a term which refers to a range of criminal acts (such as bribery, embezzlement, fraud) that would include employee theft, which is a multi-billion dollar problem in the early twenty-first century. However, in 1950, the term carried a much narrower meaning. In a 1939 speech and his 1949 book, Sutherland offered the first extensive analyses of white collar crime to argue that specific corporate and financial/property offenses should be incorporated into the formulation and development of theories of crime and criminality because they were acts prohibited by criminal law. He contended, “White collar crime may be defined approximately as a crime committed by a person of respectability and high social status in the course of his occupation,” such as male business managers and executives. See Edwin H. Sutherland, White Collar Crime, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949, second edn, 1961), quote on 9, 9n7; Edwin H. Sutherland, “White-Collar Criminality,” American Sociological Review 5/1 (February 1940): 1-12 and “Is ‘White Collar Crime’ Crime?” American Sociological Review 10/2 (April 1945): 132-139; Gerald D. Robin, “White-Collar Crime and Employee Theft,” Crime and Delinquency 20/3 (July 1974): 251-262; Michael L. Benson, “The Influence of Class Position on the Formal and Informal
2nd Street). It measured approximately fifteen by twenty feet, and was separated from the rest of the office by a glass partition and a glass panel door. Inside there were a couple of chairs, a table, two safes, and an automated counting machine. There was only one entrance, and only the female counting room employees had keys to the glass panel door, as well as the combinations for the safes (duplicates were kept in a safe in another part of the building). Money which had been deposited in public pay stations for long distance calls was transported by male collectors, who removed and replaced self-sealing coin boxes at pay stations on designated routes, to the counting room each evening. The “recepticles” were placed in the safes overnight. The following morning, the counting room “girls” removed the boxes from the safe, broke the seals, fed the coins through the machine, bagged the money and filled out the deposit slips ready for the bank.59

Counting room labor was organized along gender lines where female clerks operated the machines, a task which required little mathematical application and no direct involvement in financial transactions with banks or investors. Despite being under (male) supervision, the women were easily able to divert coins from the machines to their person as they stood over the machine and with their backs to the glass and supervisors whose desks were on the opposite side of the partition. Betty Corrigan told Officer Mills: “It was so easy. There was no way to get caught so I started taking it too. The girl that was standing up would wait until she got sixty quarters and she would roll it in memo paper and she would put it in her brassiere. We would carry it out [of the room] and put it in our pocket books. My husband


left the car parked at the company. I would take it down and put it in the glove
compartment.”\textsuperscript{60} Counting room employees’ personal items were stored in lockers outside the
room and the women either transferred the money from their bras when they went on break or
for lunch – as indicated in the women’s statements and later company officials’ testimony in
November 1950 – or they passed rolls of quarters to other female employees in the
restrooms.\textsuperscript{61} As the coin thieves enjoyed legitimate access to the counting room, they were
able to perform the dual contradictory roles of faithful employee and common thief.
However, the interchangeability of these roles undercut the trust that was central to employer-
employee relations. Further, Southern Bell hired those women who conformed to and
represented the white ladylike ideal but the appearance and performance of respectability, as
well as fidelity and company loyalty, were also essential prerequisites for the successful
counting room thief.

The gendered structure of the white-collar workplace enabled the female coin thieves
to execute their lucrative and long running crimes but so did the peculiarities of 1950s
women’s underwear so that the rolls of coins concealed in the coin thieves’ “deceptively
snug” brassieres did not “clink” \textit{per se}.\textsuperscript{62} Flesh was controlled and molded by undergarments
- “a litany of rubber, metal bands, garters, boning, a rosary of spandex and lycra and nylon, a
votive candle of elastic”- to create the distinctive hourglass and desired voluptuous female
shape of that decade. Stomachs were encased in girdles or “minimizers” that were referred to
as “rubber coffins.” Extensive padding was used to make bosoms appear as large as possible,
while “brassieres were wired or boned in such a manner that the breasts were held rigid or

\textsuperscript{60} Testimony of George H. Melvin, SC21978, 63-64; Statement of Betty Corrigan, read by I.
Ray Mills, 13 November 1950, SC21978, 93.
\textsuperscript{61} Testimony of George H. Melvin, SC21978, 62-64.
\textsuperscript{62} Stephen Trumbull, “Hocus-Pocus In Bra Case Ends With Arrests,” \textit{Miami Herald}
September 29, 1950, 1A.
straight, coming to points that accentuated the nipples,” thus “[t]hrough the sweater you could see ridges of a brassiere like targets for gunnery practice.”

Marie Orr said she and another employee Dottie Peverok had started taking a few quarters for “lunch money” each day over a two-year period also (Dottie allegedly had taken out rolls of quarters in her pockets rather than her brassiere), but the scale of the thefts and of amounts taken had increased during the five months to September 1950. Marie told Mills that she and Corrigan generally took between $100.00 and $150.00 each day, and Marie paid Rita Orr five dollars per day to convert the quarters into paper money, although there are no details as to how this was actually done. The strong box with several thousand dollars found in Sergeant Albert’s car suggests that Rita was not utilizing the services of “fences” or criminal receivers in the Greater Miami area, and that there was no systematic plan for “laundering” the coins or converting them into bank deposits or consumables.

After Marie Orr and Betty Corrigan implicated other female employees and family members in the counting room thefts, eleven individuals who were either willing accomplices or who had turned a blind eye were arrested: Marie Orr’s mother, Gladys Orr, age 47; Rita’s husband, John Michael Orr, 21; Rita’s father, George Strickland Winters, 43; and Marie Orr’s

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65 Statement of Marie Orr, read by I. Ray Mills, 13 November 1950, SC21978, 97-98.
boyfriend, William Matthew Albert, 21; Corrigan’s husband, William, 24; former counting
room employee, Bonnie Herbert, 22, and her husband, Larry, 23; McNabb’s boyfriend,
Lennox B. Gaynon, 22; and two other counting room employees, Jean Nolan, 21, and Cecelia
Hay, 20. They were collectively referred to as a “ring,” a moniker for a criminal gang, or the
“Bra Brigade” although this term was also later used to refer to the three main defendants.
There is little surviving information on the background of the fourteen ringers but their
absence from the 1945 Florida State Census suggests they were fairly recent additions to the
rapidly growing population of Greater Miami. William and Betty Corrigan were supposedly
originally from Philadelphia.67 Social historian Melanie Shell-Weiss observes that by “the
end of World War II, over two-thirds of Miami residents were born outside of Florida. The
largest numbers, by far, hailed from Georgia (more than 80,000), followed by New York
(over 26,000), Pennsylvania (roughly 14,300), and Ohio (roughly 12,000).”68

However, all were freed almost immediately after their arrests because Southern Bell
could not satisfy Dade County Circuit Judge George E. Holt that an offense had been
committed. Assistant County Solicitor Michael P. Zarowny was forced to admit, “The only
thing we’ve got is a confession. We can’t introduce that until we establish a crime and we
can’t establish a crime because there is no way to tell if the money was taken, nor how
much.”69 A defendant could not be convicted of a crime she had confessed to if that crime
had not occurred, and at this stage of the clinking brassieres case, the evidence was
presumptive; there were no independent eyewitnesses to the actual thefts, and there was no

67 Stephen Trumbull, “Hocus-Pocus In Bra Case Ends With Arrests,” Miami Herald
September 29, 1950, 1A, 10A; “Salty Sentence Imposed Upon Telephone Girls,” Altoona
(PN) Mirror November 21, 1950, 8; “12 Deny Phone Coin Thefts,” New York Times October
6, 1950, 8.
68 “Dade County Total Is Put At 489,838,” Miami Daily News June 18, 1950, 1; Shell-Weiss,
Coming to Miami, 129.
69 “Technicalities Block Phone Theft Action,” New York Times September 26, 1950, 1;
“Phone Theft Case Balked, Eight Suspects win Freedom,” Miami Daily News, 1 and Stephen
Trumbull, “Legal Ringer Balks Phone Theft Charges; Eight Freed,” Miami Herald,
September 26, 1950, clippings in Miami News Files.
conclusive proof that the coins in the chest belonged to someone else or had been stolen.

Evidence of possession of property whose origin could not be convincingly accounted for was not evidence that it had been stolen. Confessions were therefore left unsigned, everyone denied any wrongdoing, and five female Bell employees returned to work the next morning accompanied by attorney James S. Rainwater, only to be told that they had been fired.

Southern Bell’s district manager, J. M. Phillips, along with County Solicitor Taylor, reassured customers of the company’s intention to “prosecute to the fullest extent of the law those persons involved directly or indirectly in the theft of company pay station receipts” to ensure that “justice is done and to protect the good names of the fine people who constitute our Miami employee body, in whom we have the fullest confidence.” Nevertheless, public confidence in the company and the county solicitor’s office seemed in short supply. One enraged citizen asked whether “our courts and our court officials [are] just expensive jokes and screens behind which thieves, murderers, and gambling gangsters can safely hide?” He demanded that Zarowny either act decisively or admit his incompetence and resign, and called for Southern Bell officials to “be sent back to High School or some Kindergarten school and be given a preliminary course in simple accountancy and the proper handling of cash income.”

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72 *Charleston (SC) Gazette*, September 27, 1950, 1, 8.
Company auditors in Southern Bell’s Jacksonville offices quickly identified a shortfall in the accounts for August 22-23, 1950 and thus provided crucial evidence for prosecutors. Long distance operators’ receipts confirmed there should have been $1,300 in quarters in the coin boxes collected from five routes on that date, but Corrigan and Orr’s initialled bank deposit slips showed they had reported and accounted for $835.25 in quarters. Corrigan, Orr, and McNabb were re-arrested and formally charged with the theft of $464.75.74 The value of the goods stolen determined whether a defendant was charged with petty larceny (a misdemeanor) or grand larceny (a felony), which involved taking money, property, or merchandise of more than fifty dollars in value and carried a maximum prison term of fifteen years.75 At their arraignment at the Criminal Court on September 27, 1950, Orr and Corrigan entered pleas of not guilty to charges of grand larceny, and McNabb also pled not guilty to being a “principal in the second degree” or with aiding and abetting the others.76 Zarnoway was quoted as declaring he would prove that rolls of quarters had been exchanged in the women’s washroom and transferred to McNabb’s brassiere so she could

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74 Brief of Appellee (State), SC 21978, 4; Testimony of W. H. Bailey, SC21978, 36-51; “‘Bra Girls’, 2 Men Surrender At Jail,” Miami Daily News September 28, 1950, 1A and 6A; Stephen Trumbull, “Hocus-Pocus In Bra Case Ends With Arrests,” Miami Herald September 29, 1950, 1A, 10A.


carry the money out of the Southern Bell building. After “a mild tongue lashing” from Judge Ben C. Willard, the three women were free on bail. Southern Bell now claimed that it had lost $18,880 rather than the $100,000 reported earlier.

The women were represented at their arraignment by local attorneys Harry W. Prebish and James Rainwater. Astute and ambitious, thirty-year-old Prebish was already making a name for himself in local politics as a South Miami Councilman 1948-1950 and in the courts. In 1964-1965 he was president of the Florida Criminal Defense Lawyers Association which he helped found. From the late 1950s Prebish would emerge as one of the state’s notable criminal lawyers, defending a series of high profile clients mainly in the Dade County courts, that included a thirty-two-year-old mother of three accused of poisoning her husband with arsenic-based weed killer in 1958, a University of Miami professor accused of “child molesting charges” in 1962, ex-Sheriff T. A. Buchanan on corruption and perjury charges, and two city narcotics officers accused of taking bribes “to protect a known dope seller” both in the 1960s. Prebish also represented twenty-six year old Joseph Shea in early 1966 and

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77 Stephen Trumbull, “Hocus-Pocus In Bra Case Ends With Arrests,” *Miami Herald* September 29, 1950, 10A.
78 “‘Brassiere’ Case Many Affect Telephone Rates,” *Daytona Beach Morning Journal* September 29, 1950, 6; “Miami’s Bra Brigade Asks Change of Venue,” *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* November 3, 1950, 8. Two weeks previously, another female defendant had been reprimanded by Willard. The assertion of a twenty-eight-year-old painter’s wife and mother of two found with more than $100 worth of bets in her purse that she was able to spend one hundred dollars each week on horse racing bets led Willard to retort, “That explanation is an insult to my intelligence.” See “A Question of Mathematics,” *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* September 13, 1950, 1.
secured a not guilty verdict in a court-ordered retrial after Shea had spent six years of a life sentence at Raiford for a murder crime he did not commit.\(^{81}\) Similarly, James Rainwater became a much respected County Court Judge.\(^{82}\)

Prebish and Rainwater petitioned unsuccessfully for a change of venue in early November.\(^{83}\) The main trial opened on November 13, 1950 in the Criminal Court of Record with Rainwater and Prebish for the defense and prosecutors Zarowny and Samuel O. Carson.\(^{84}\) The case was heard by Judge Willard who presided over a myriad of cases from non-capital murders to abortion, theft, bigamy, and gambling during his twenty eight years as

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\(^{81}\) Shea had been sentenced to life imprisonment in 1959 for the murder of a twenty-three-year-old white female airline reservation clerk on the basis of a confession secured by Miami police through “fraud and duress” but deemed valid because it was “voluntary.” The possibility of a grave miscarriage of justice had been investigated by Miami Herald crime reporter Gene Miller, former Miami detective Philip Thibedeau who directed the original investigation into Mary Meslener’s death, and lie-detector expert Warren D. Homes, also formerly of the Miami police department. Mike Zarowny was Shea’s court-appointed defense attorney at the original trial. Mike Zarowny was Shea’s court-appointed defense attorney at the original trial. See Ben Funk, “Nightmare May Fade for Airman,” New York Times, January 23, 1966, H5; “Ex-Airman Is Freed After 6 Years in Jail On Murder Charge,” New York Times February 20, 1966, 26; “Man Absolved of Murder After Serving Six Years,” St. Petersburg Times February 21, 1966, 2B; “Harry Prebish, Well-Known Defense Attorney [Obituary],” Miami Herald February 28, 1993, 4B.

However, in 1967 Prebish, another local lawyer Paul Pollack, and Irving “Red” Weinstein, Pollack’s investigator, were charged with conspiring “to receive, conceal and transport” $1 million worth of heroin smuggled into the US by a Swiss national who had escaped from a Swiss prison where she was serving a term for the murder of her father, and her accomplice. The heroin had supposedly been collected by Weinstein from a left luggage locker in Miami’s Greyhound Bus station and flushed down a toilet. All three were subsequently acquitted. See Verne O. Williams, “Embarrassments Multiply In Handbag Heroin Case,” Miami News October 6, 1967, 1A-2A; Verne O. Williams, “Tale of Missing $1 Million In Heroin Unfolds Here,” Miami News November 22, 1967, 7A; “Miami Attorneys Indicted for ‘Concealing’ Narcotics,” St. Petersburg Times February 3, 1968, 2B; “Attorneys’ Trial In Drug Case Opens in Miami,” St. Petersburg Times April 10, 1969, 3B.


Criminal Court judge, and was known for his “waspish sense of humor.” Indeed, comments on Willard’s cantankerousness and frequent exasperation at defendants and lawyers alike appear in many news reports. In May 1947 he protested, “Far too many complainants are interested in receiving restitution and far too few in prosecuting for justice” and “This practice puts the court in the light of a collecting agency instead of a bar of justice.” Yet, he also approved of restitution as an alternative to imprisonment for select offenders, including a young sailor in 1948 who passed a bad check to a Miami auto dealer to acquire a car to find the wife who had recently left him.

Prebish was no stranger to Willard’s wit. In April 1950, the judge turned down the attorney’s plea for a lenient sentence for a defendant who had wounded his common-law wife and her employer and then attempted to hold-up a Broward County tavern, but had contracted an eye infection while being held in the county jail, with the pronouncement: “‘If I let this man free I would have to let every man free who comes before me’.” Four months later Prebish again asked for leniency for a safe robber who “‘did not smoke, drink or carouse around at night’,” and was a loving husband, father and son. The defendant’s wife and child


86 Quoted in “Whirligig,” Miami Daily News May 10, 1947, 1A.

87 “Check Artist Gets One Year,” Miami Daily News June 16, 1948, 9A, contrasts the differential treatment afforded two men convicted of passing bad checks. Restitution was approved by Willard for the sailor but the older defendant who had obtained two cars with bad checks was sentenced to one year.

88 “Moran Is Given 10 Years In Pen,” Miami Daily News April 11, 1950, 17A.
were in court: “At one point the child began crying in his mother’s arms. Instructing the 
mother to sit down with the baby, Judge Willard advised, ‘Let’s not lay it on too thick’,” and 
sentenced the defendant to eight years at hard labor.\textsuperscript{89} Willard was however censured by the 
Dade County Grand Jury in May 1952 after he dismissed a gambling-related perjury case for 
lack of evidence.\textsuperscript{90}

In many states, women were systematically excluded from jury service until the later 
twentieth century. Lawyers, judges, and politicians claimed they “were detained by domestic 
matters and did not really want to serve on juries; or, if they really wanted to serve, they 
would have made the necessary arrangements to register for jury service.” Women in Florida 
were allowed to volunteer for jury service in 1949, and the state’s volunteer jury law was 
upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in November 1961, in the \textit{Hoyt v. Florida} ruling which 
confirmed that serving on a jury was not a right or duty of citizenship, but a \textit{privilege} and 
thus could be restricted.\textsuperscript{91} Four women were included in the jury pool for the clinking 
brasieres case but Rainwater and Prebish exercised their challenges to ensure none survived 
\textit{voir dire} so their clients faced an all-male all-white jury, and Prebish and Rainwater 
cultivated jurors’ paternalistic sympathies as they sought favorable outcomes for their blonde, 
white-skinned, and fashionably-dressed female clients.\textsuperscript{92}

Testimony from the six main state witnesses took up most of the afternoon of 
November 13. The State offered a reasonably convincing case linking the defendants to the 

\textsuperscript{89} “Just That One Little Voice,” \textit{Montreal Gazette} August 4, 1950, 4.
\textsuperscript{91} \textit{Hoyt v. Florida}, 119 So. 2d, 691, \textit{Hoyt v. Florida}, 368 U.S. 57; Kwolek-Folland, 
\textit{Incorporating Women}, 132-133; Linda K. Kerber, \textit{No Constitutional Right to be Ladies: 
Women and the Obligations of Citizenship}, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998); Chung Huang 
Right of Citizenship or Privilege of Difference?” \textit{Stanford Law Review} 46/5 (2004): 1115-
1160.
\textsuperscript{92} The six male jurors were Paul Usher, Sam E. Rivers, Duglad M. Barr, Harry Nathan, J. L. 
Springer, Meyer Schwartz. See Minutes of the Clerk of Court, SC 21978, 8-9.
missing $464.75 but clearly there were discrepancies in the evidence and paperwork which Prebish sought to highlight. Prebish sought also to show that there were other explanations for the missing money. However, the amount in question was not interrogated by either state or defense lawyers. Orr and Corrigan had supposedly removed $464.75 in their bras on August 23 when they were the only women working in the counting room, but Orr had told Mills that she and Corrigan generally took between $100.00 and $150.00 each day; the physical weight of the coins and the length of the women’s working day meant that it was virtually impossible to remove more. The possible discrepancy of two hundred dollars between the usual amount taken and the amount missing according to company receipts was not discussed in court. Willard dismissed most of Prebish’s objections, including the women’s unsigned confessions being read to the jury by Ira Mills, and ensured that the case moved swiftly along so that by 5pm the State rested. The defense team offered no witnesses of its own while Orr, Corrigan, and McNabb exercised their right to silence, thus none publicly refuted the charges or offered an explanation for their actions.

Yet, from the confessions read out in court, jurors learned that Corrigan had started taking coins in September 1949 and had stolen between $6,000 and $7,000 over a two-year period. Marie Orr admitted to taking $6,500 during the three years she had worked in the pay station department and accounting room. As a consequence, while the defendants might initially have appeared to be impulsive or opportunistic amateurs, the duration of the thefts together with the systematic removal of the coins from the company building meant that they could be categorized as quasi-professional thieves who regularly supplemented their

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legitimate incomes with monies taken illegally (albeit from the same employer). At the trial, Mills confirmed that he had recovered $5,786.90 in paper money and coins from the defendants’ homes and cars.\textsuperscript{96}

The Criminal Court reconvened at 10am on November 14 for Willard to instruct the jurors who deliberated for twenty-four minutes and returned at 10.40 am to pronounce all three defendants guilty as charged but recommended also that the judge exercise leniency. Prebish ordered jurors to be polled; all had voted for conviction.\textsuperscript{97} As a civil suit, brought by Southern Bell, was pending against his clients, Prebish requested that pronouncement of sentence be delayed, thus on November 20 Orr, Corrigan, and McNabb returned to the criminal court.\textsuperscript{98} Previously, Rainwater had announced to the press that the offenders would make “‘full and complete restitution of all money belonging to the telephone company’,” and Judge Holt had ordered all the defendants’ assets to be seized.\textsuperscript{99} Prebish reminded Judge Willard that this had happened. He also suggested that Orr, Corrigan, and McNabb were guilty merely of youthful mistakes rather than being grasping and materialistic thieves who had fallen prey to the temptations of consumerism: “They have given up all their worldly possessions. All they have left is their clothing,’ he said. ‘They are just kids and didn’t realize the seriousness of what they were doing’.\textsuperscript{99} He further reminded Willard and reporters that

96 Testimony of I. Ray Mills, under re-direct from State Attorney Carson, 13 November 1950, SC21978, 104.
97 See Minutes of the Clerk of Court, SC 21978, 12; “3 Brassiere Girls Found Guilty Of Stealing From Telephone Co.,” \textit{Miami Daily News} November 14, 1950, 1.
98 On November 17, eleven members of the “ring” (Betty and William Corrigan; Rita, Marie, Gladys and John Orr; Billie Ruth McNabb, Mr. and Mrs. Bonnie Herbert, William M. Albert and Jean Nolan) were ordered to repay $24,116 to Southern Bell as restitution for the thefts. See “Phone Girls Must Pay; Court Orders $24,116 Returned in Brassiere Theft Case,” \textit{New York Times} November 18, 1950, 18; “‘Brassiere Brigade’ Must Pay $24,116,” \textit{Long Beach (CA) Press-Telegram} November 18, 1950, 2; “‘Bra Brigade’ Must Dig Up Cash for Bell,” \textit{Abilene (TX) Reporter-News} November 20, 1950, 10. Following on from this, at a hearing on December 20, 1950, the defendants were determined to be insolvent. See Minutes of the Clerk of Court, SC 21978, 13-14.
Orr and McNabb were engaged to be married, Corrigan was a young wife, and implied that
the women’s wayward habits would be better reformed through marriage and domestic
containment rather than through unsuitable confinement at the state prison.\textsuperscript{100}

These lower-middle-class female employees took money from the counting room
every day for a considerable period of time, but their lawyers explained their actions not in
terms of what the women were doing – stealing – but in the language of naïveté,
waywardness, and youthful errors of judgement, thus Orr, Corrigan and McNabb were not
clever adult criminals but intellectually inferior “girls.” This language of youthful naïveté and
innocence served not only as an interpretation of the women’s behavior but as a justification
for leniency. However, Willard declared that “a case of this magnitude cannot be tolerated
without punishment” and sentenced the defendants each to one year at hard labor.\textsuperscript{101} Most of
the commentaries on the bra brigade reflected a male voice, and three main defendants’
demeanor and actions were usually portrayed in familiar and formulaic ways; they either
tearfully denied any wrong-doing or appeared “doleful.” When Willard passed judgement,
“Miss Orr clasped her hands tightly together and bit her lip as the sentence was read. Mrs.
Corrigan tugged at her handkerchief while Mrs. McNabb appeared calm with a half smile on
her lips.”\textsuperscript{102}

Prebish presented “without argument a motion for a new trial” but this was denied, so he and Rainwater immediately gave notice of their intention to appeal to the state supreme court, and this was submitted on February 16, 1951. Meanwhile, all three women remained free on bond. On July 31, 1951, the Florida Supreme Court affirmed the convictions and sentences, and Corrigan, Orr, and McNabb seemed destined for transportation to state prison at Raiford. The hub of Florida’s state prison system remained the old, remote, and rural prison farm in Union County, over 300 miles north of Miami, where 2,500 inmates were employed mainly in agricultural work and some remaining industrial operations (a further 1,000 male prisoners were housed in smaller road prisons located in counties throughout the state). Raiford was increasingly volatile, unpredictable, and unstable by the early 1950s. Construction of the Florida Correctional Institution for Women at Lowell had begun in 1948-1949 but it would not be fully occupied or staffed until after Raiford’s “bean uprising” of May 1956. Florida prison officials routinely considered female inmates to be inconveniences and a security threat to the main male cell houses but legislators were slow to approve the necessary appropriations to equip a specialist women’s facility. Thus there was no separate women’s prison in Florida when the bra brigade members were sentenced, and the thirty-eight white women and 104 “colored” female inmates lived in “disordered” and “drab” women’s quarters in “an enclosed compound a few hundred yards from the men’s quarters.”

After the state supreme court denied their appeal, Orr, Corrigan, and McNabb were rescued from a year at hard labor at Raiford by Florida’s embattled governor. In early

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103 See Minutes of the Clerk of Court, SC 21978, 12-13.
September 1951, early November 1951, and again on January 3, 1952, Governor Warren signed sixty-day reprieves that kept all three offenders out of prison. A further thirty-day reprieve was issued with effect from March 1, 1952. Then, a few days later, the governor and fellow state pardon board members granted conditional pardons to all three women which in effect freed them from the threat of imprisonment. There is no record of these offenders ever being processed or recorded by the prison division even though they were convicted felons; they were kept out of the state prison system altogether. It was reported that the State Parole Commission, which would have been responsible for their supervision if released under parole, had opposed executive clemency in all three cases.

During the period when the coin thieves’ applications for post-conviction relief were being considered by the state pardon board, a series of articles by *St. Petersburg Times* reporter Sam Stickney on conditions for women at Raiford had highlighted the plight of another respectable white female offender. Barbara Guptill was a twenty-four-year old University of Florida graduate, originally from St. Petersburg, who was in the first year of her graduate studies in science at Florida State University in Tallahassee in October 1950 when she was sentenced to a prison term of twenty years and twenty days for the second-degree murder of her illegitimate baby girl. The previous August, Guptill had given birth in a university dormitory bathroom, stuffed the baby’s nose and mouth with “cotton and tissue

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paper,” wrapped her in a “*Fortune Magazine* mailing envelope” (which was traced to Guptill), and thrown her into the dormitory trash chute possibly when she was still alive. The body was found the following morning by maintenance staff, police were alerted, and Guptill was arrested a few days later. At sentencing, Circuit Judge W. May Walker “told the tall and slightly heavy defendant” that she was guilty of a “most terrible as well as most regrettable crime.” However, Guptill’s “splendid background” helped persuade the judge that he should “be merciful.” Walker told Guptill that he hoped her sentence would “operate to awaken you so that you can return to society usefully.”

Female correspondents to the *St. Petersburg Times* suggested that “the man responsible for [Guptill’s] trouble should share her punishment” and that her predicament was the result of shame felt by this girl of “good family” and “character” rather than criminal intent. “Any girl of easy morals would have found a dozen ways out of her dilemma,” declared one correspondent. Stickney suggested that Guptill’s youth, education, and good manners set her apart from the other inmates, and implied that her incarceration with African American lower-class white, and therefore mentally defective, sassy and sexually promiscuous offenders, was a harsher and more keenly felt punishment. Stickney’s articles generated public sympathy and support for Guptill, and subsequent calls for her release from

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Representative Fred C. Petersen and Judge Walker who agreed “‘that further incarceration might serve only to destroy the girl also’.”\textsuperscript{112}

There is no public access to Florida’s state pardon records and executive permission to view select files is no longer granted, thus the grounds given in support of state pardon board decisions, as in the Guptill and clinking brassiere defendants’ cases, are not always available. In the latter case, it is possible that the jurors’ calls for leniency at the original trial and the evidence of restitution to the company persuaded pardon board members that the women had been sufficiently held to account, or they may, like Guptill, have benefitted from local political support. Further, Corrigan, Orr, and McNabb had been first-time offenders with no previous criminal records. Prebish had also demonstrated there were significant procedural and evidentiary holes in the state attorneys’ original case, and had asked Judge Willard for a directed verdict on five grounds in November 1950 because the requisite evidentiary burden should have resulted in acquittal rather than conviction, but this was denied. These grounds were the variance between the allegations of larceny and the proof offered; the existence of evidence that suggested there were other explanations for the counting room shortfalls than theft by Orr and Corrigan; that the State had failed to show that the defendants were guilty of grand larceny thus the charge should have been reduced to petty larceny following the admission of the unsigned confessions into evidence; and that the charges against McNabb should have been reduced “because all the assets in her possession had been returned to the rightful owner.”\textsuperscript{113} Such legal arguments may have resonated with


\textsuperscript{113} Statement by Harry Prebish, 13 November 1950, SC21978, 109-110.
Governor Warren who was a well-known Jacksonville criminal lawyer prior at the time he entered the gubernatorial race in 1948. Further, there were no independent witnesses to the counting room thefts, and much of the evidence against the defendants remained presumptive rather than circumstantial. Prebish had highlighted Southern Bell’s inept supervisory, accounting, and auditing procedures during his questioning of the company auditor and District Communications Supervisor. Just as the coin thieves could not properly account for the thousands of dollars of coins in their possession, the company could not definitively say that this money had been stolen or that Orr, Corrigan, and McNabb were responsible, thus the overtones of poor working girl being unfairly targeted by a big corporation were certainly evident to press and public.

           Journalists and criminologists often presented women as subordinates or accomplices to dominant male professional criminals or partners. However, Willard’s decision to allow the coin thieves’ unsigned confessions to be read in court was both instructive and significant, as together with Mills’ testimony this showed that Orr, McNabb and Corrigan were not innocent dupes following the orders of male partners but were fully complicit in and responsible for their unlawful actions. Indeed, Corrigan told Mills that her husband had begged her to stop.\textsuperscript{114} Orr, Corrigan, and McNabb were neither waitresses, prostitutes, hotel clerks, or cashiers, nor were they gun molls but the case of the clinking brassieres raises intriguing questions about how white, lower-middle-class female waged laborers moved in and out of criminal activity and how this fitted with their legitimate lives, particularly as both the defendants’ illicit activities and their domestic lives were sustained by the same kinship network. At the same time they were non-violent property offenders rather than gangsters or

\textsuperscript{114} Statement of Betty Corrigan, read by I. Ray Mills, 13 November 1950, SC21978, 93.
organized crime operatives, and this may also have aided their successful petitions for post-conviction relief.\(^{115}\)

Orr and Corrigan admitted to spending approximately $1,000 each on clothes and were reputed to be “saving” the rest of the money for down payments on houses, cars, and weddings, all of which were emblems of virtuous consumption, thus their crimes were linked to gender, commodity culture, and consumerism in post-war South Florida. However, Orr’s assertion that she and Peverok had taken “lunch money” echoed an older idea that still resonated at mid-century that women in the labor force were covered by a male breadwinner and thus did not need to work, but did so to pay for extras or personal luxuries or for “pin money.”\(^{116}\) Orr’s “lunch money” comment reinforced the notion that the counting room women did not need to steal, thus they were different from lower-class shoplifters or common thieves. In their comments to the press and in court, Prebish and Rainwater had used “white lady” tropes and emphasized the youth, naivety, and waywardness of their clients to underscore their innocence and the unfairness of their convictions. Yet, the counting room thefts by these previously reputable waged employees meant they could have no claims to be respectable white ladies between September 1950 and March 1952, but at the same time the reprieves and subsequent pardons meant they escaped the terms of imprisonment that would have stigmatized them as common thieves.

\(^{115}\) When one Illinois paper informed its readers that “the girls” had been given one-year sentences, the neighboring report entitled “FBI Lists 10 Of Nation’s Most Wanted Criminals” carried the names and crimes of armed and dangerous men who had murdered wives and girlfriends, and/or committed violent robberies, thus the contrast between the two was very evident. “Bra Girls Given One-Year Sentences,” and “FBI Lists 10 Of Nation’s Most Wanted Criminals,” \textit{Daily (IL) Register} November 21, 1950, 8.