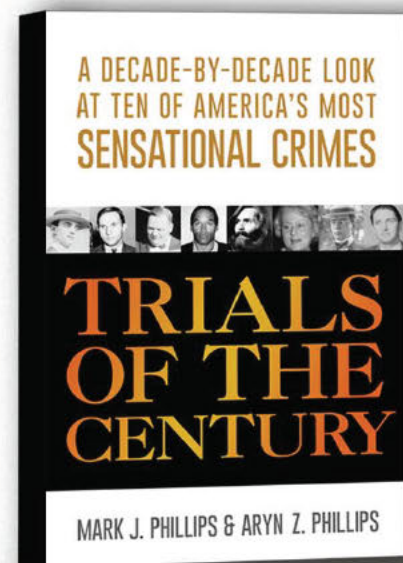


The Trial of Charles Manson: Fifty Years Later

By Mark J. Phillips and Aryn Z. Phillips

Writers, attorney Mark J. Phillips and Aryn Z. Phillips, are co-authors of the highly-regarded book, *Trials of the Century: A Decade-by-Decade Look at Ten of America's Most Sensational Crimes*, published by Prometheus Books in 2016. This article is a book excerpt, edited for space requirements and to comport with *Valley Lawyer* guidelines.



LAST MONTH MARKS FIFTY years since the sensational Tate/LaBianca murders and the passage of time has not diminished the place they occupy in the American psyche, even for those too young to have experienced it firsthand.

The summer of 1969 had been blisteringly hot in Los Angeles, the kind that most residents would prefer spending at the beach, laying by the pool, or sitting beneath blasting air conditioning units.

Among those just trying to beat the heat were young Hollywood starlet Sharon Tate, entertaining a few friends at her posh home in the hills above

Hollywood, and Leno and Rosemary LaBianca, a Los Feliz couple returning home from a day spent at Lake Isabella, a popular vacation spot 150 miles outside the city.

Less concerned with the heat were their killers, who invaded their homes and murdered them in the strangest and most grotesque of ways. This cabal of youths, no older than local college kids, lived on a ranch not far from the city as members of a cult calling themselves the "Family."

Enter Charlie Manson

They had been sent to kill innocent strangers by the persuasive,

mysterious, and terrifying Charles Manson, whose apprehension and trial combined into a grotesque milestone event of the 20th Century.

In 1969, Charles Manson was in his mid-thirties. He was small, only 5'2" and slim, with petite facial features and dark brown hair that he wore long and wild, down to his shoulders. His face would soon become one of the most recognized in America.

Born November 12, 1934, in Cincinnati, Ohio to sixteen-year-old Kathleen Maddox, he never knew his birth father; the name Manson was adopted from one of Kathleen's later husbands. He spent his early years



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bouncing around different foster facilities and getting in trouble.

Paroled and rearrested several times, Manson was thirty-two years old when he was finally released in the spring of 1967. He had been institutionalized for a total of 17 years.

He had missed out on the birth of the counterculture movement while he was locked up, but he liked what he saw when he was released. Moving north to Berkeley, he sang, played guitar, and panhandled on the streets.

His darkly unique brand of thinking combined Beatles lyrics, passages from the Bible and Dianetics, and, being a persuasive orator, he explained it all in a charismatic and dramatic fashion.

Before long, he had attracted many willing followers, both women and men in their late teens and early twenties, and the Family was born.¹

He packed his followers into an old bus and took to the road. Eventually, they settled at the Spahn Ranch, a decrepit and isolated spread outside L.A. that had, in its former days of glory, been a filming location for movies and television shows.

His philosophy, while still loosely based on Beatles lyrics and the Bible, had grown and developed over the years. He believed that the world was on the brink of an apocalyptic race war, which he called Helter Skelter. Blacks would win the this war, he claimed, and wipe out the white race. They would hand over the reins of power and Charles Manson would rule the world.²

The revolution was supposed to start with blacks committing heinous crimes in wealthy white neighborhoods of Los Angeles, but no such crimes were occurring. Manson became anxious, upset at Helter Skelter's slow progress, and decided to get the revolution started himself.

The Evil Assignment

On the night of Friday, August 8, 1969, Manson gathered some of his most loyal followers and instructed them to

dress in dark clothing and find their knives. Among those chosen was twenty-one-year-old exotic dancer Susan Atkins, twenty-one-year-old Patricia Krenwinkel from Los Angeles, and twenty-three-year-old Charles Watson, called Tex, a former high school athlete, college dropout, and Manson's right-hand man.

The final member of the cabal was twenty-year-old Linda Kasabian, a relative newcomer to the Family; she had only been living with Manson for a month, but was asked to join the mission because she was the only member of the Family with a valid driver's license.

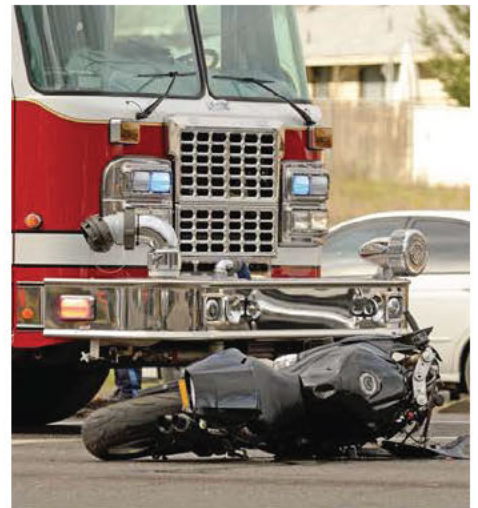
The four set out from Spahn Ranch and drove to a home on Cielo Drive in Benedict Canyon, the area above Hollywood and Beverly Hills. The house belonged to Rudi Altobelli, and was being rented by movie director Roman Polanski and his beautiful wife, twenty-six-year-old actress Sharon Tate.

The Polanskis had spent much of the summer in Europe, so the house was being tended to by their friend, twenty-five-year-old Abigail Folger, heiress to the Folger coffee fortune, and her boyfriend, thirty-two-year-old Wojciech "Voytek" Frykowski.

Tate had returned from Europe a few days prior and was staying at the house with Folger and Frykowski until Polanski returned home. Manson had been to this house before, and chose it because he knew it would be isolated.³

The group arrived at the house after midnight, cut the telephone lines, climbed the gate, and slaughtered everyone inside. Afterwards, they got back in the car, changed clothes, tossed their bloody garments and knives over the side of the canyon, and drove back to Spahn Ranch.

The murders were not discovered until the next morning when the housekeeper, Winifred Chapman, arrived and telephoned the police. The arriving officers found themselves at a crime scene unlike any other they had seen before.⁴



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News of the murders spread quickly, and investigations began immediately, but back at Spahn Ranch, Manson was unhappy with how the events of the previous evening had unfolded, and prepared his team to strike again that night. This time, they were joined by Leslie Van Houten and by Manson himself. He settled on a home in Los Feliz belonging to Leno and Rosemary LaBianca. Manson entered the home alone, tied up the couple, and returned to the car. Watson, Krenwinkel,

and Van Houten then entered, murdered the LaBiancas, and hitchhiked back to Spahn Ranch. Manson, on his way home, stopped for milkshakes.⁵

The bodies of the LaBiancas were discovered the following evening. The police, upon arrival, found a scene equally, if not more shocking than the one at the Tate residence.⁶

It took a long time for Los Angeles Police Department to connect the two murders to the Manson Family, or even to each other. The Tate murders were

believed to be a drug deal gone bad.

The LaBianca detectives were operating under the suspicion that the murders had been the result of an upset robbery. Two months after the murders, neither set of investigators had made much headway.

Arrest and Trial

Manson had since moved the Family to Barker Ranch, a remote and isolated homestead near Death Valley. The ranch was raided in early October and twenty-four Family members, including Manson, were arrested on a wide variety of charges and were being held in jail in Inyo County, about five hours outside of Los Angeles, still unconnected to the Tate and LaBianca murders.

During the raid, Inyo County law enforcement had come across two young girls attempting to flee the Family, one of whom implicated Susan Atkins in the murders. Atkins was questioned, booked for suspicion of murder, and moved to Sybil Brand Institute. Talkative in jail, Atkins told her cellmates about life with Manson and eventually that she had killed Sharon Tate and her guests, and that her friends had killed the LaBiancas.⁷

Interviews with Atkins exposed the involvement of Watson, Krenwinkel, Kasabian, Van Houten, and Manson. When a grand jury returned after deliberating for only twenty minutes, they delivered indictments for murder against all five. The prosecution would have to prove not only that the accused had committed the murders but that Manson, indicted under conspiracy laws, had used his powerful control over his followers to get them to perpetrate the murders for him.⁸

The trial of Manson, Atkins, Krenwinkel, and Van Houten began on June 15, 1970, at the Hall of Justice in downtown Los Angeles before Judge Charles Older (Watson fought extradition from Texas where he had fled, and was tried separately the following year). Jury selection took

five weeks. Over the next twenty-two weeks, Prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi called 80 witnesses and introduced 320 exhibits. Witnesses included Family members and neighbors of the victims, the Polanski's maid who first discovered the carnage, representatives from the Medical Examiner-Coroner's Office and various branches of law enforcement.

The star witness was Linda Kasabian, who had not entered the residences or participated in the murders, and who testified under an agreement of immunity. For 17 days she gave an account of life with the Family.

She made it clear that Manson was in charge and dictated much of daily life, stating that "the girls worshiped him, just would die to do anything for him." She spoke at length about Manson's feelings on race, his belief in Helter Skelter, his obsession with the Beatles, and gave a very detailed account of the two nights of carnage.

Through the testimony of witnesses, Bugliosi matched the knives and guns used at the crime scenes to those at Spahn Ranch, connected the bloody clothes found on the hillside to the defendants, verified the fingerprints found at the Tate residence as belonging to Watson and Krenwinkel, and established the whereabouts of the defendants on that fateful August weekend, all of which corroborated Kasabian's testimony. He elicited details of Manson's philosophy, connected him to the words written at the crime scenes, established that Manson felt he had to take Helter Skelter into his own hands, and introduced countless examples of his domination over the Family members.

Finally, on Monday, November 13, 1970 the prosecution rested.⁹

To the astonishment of all present, the defense rested immediately, declining to call any witnesses or present any evidence. Atkins, Krenwinkel, and Van Houten instantly

stood, shouting and insisting that they be allowed to testify. Judge Older called a conference of the defense attorneys, who informed him they had rested because they feared that if they called their clients to the witness stand, they would take full responsibility for the murders in order to save Manson.

Before they were given the opportunity, Manson insisted on speaking himself. Older removed the jury before allowing him to do so, and Manson gave a rambling, incoherent,

two-hour speech. When asked by Older if he wanted to repeat his statement in front of the jury, he declined.

After a brief suspension, closing arguments, and jury instruction, the jury began deliberation on January 15, 1971. After nine days, it returned and announced that it had found Manson, Atkins, Krenwinkel, and Van Houten guilty on all counts.¹⁰ After another eight weeks of testimony, the jury sentenced all four defendants to death on March 29, 1971.

In addition to being the longest and most costly criminal trial in American history up to that time, the Manson trial was also one of the strangest. Family members held a vigil outside the courthouse for the duration of the trial, passing out flyers and shouting at passersby. Manson behaved bizarrely through the entire trial.

On the first day, he arrived at the courthouse having carved an "X" into his forehead and his followers outside explained that he had "X'd himself from your world" (he later turned the X into a swastika).¹¹ He interrupted witnesses and made wild outbursts to the judge, jury and spectators. He threatened people and once lunged at Older with a sharpened pencil. Older constantly had

him removed from the courtroom and placed in a side room where he could hear, but not interrupt, the proceedings.

His followers were equally outrageous. When they saw the X carved on his forehead, they did the same to theirs. During the penalty phase, Manson shaved his head and the girls followed suit.

The Stuff of Nightmares

The antics of Manson and his followers might have been laughable had they not been truly frightening.

Bugliosi began getting hang-up phone calls at home, even after he changed his unlisted phone number, and he was followed by Family members when he left the courthouse. He had an

intercom system installed in his home that would instantly connect him to the nearest police station and had a bodyguard accompany him for the remainder of the trial.¹² Judge Older had a driver-bodyguard and wore a revolver under his robes.¹³


The trial was also one of the most ardently followed and highly publicized trials of all time. Not only Angelinos but people nationwide obsessively listened to, read up on, and talked about the case, the victims, the defendants, the attorneys, and the trial proceedings.

The reasons for this obsession were manifold. The case exuded celebrity. At every turn there was a nationally identifiable name. The crimes were some of the scariest in recent memory, perhaps in the last century. They were the stuff of nightmares.

On top of everything else, there was Manson, who by himself was a terrifying character who had warped the minds of America's youth and convinced them to kill for him.

So afraid were people of Manson that the case was commonly referred to as "the Manson case" rather than "the Tate case" or "the LaBianca case" or any other victim, as most cases are.

Until his death in prison in 2017, Manson remained as outrageous as he was at his trial. He never apologized nor showed remorse.

Laurie Levenson, professor at Loyola Law School, aptly said "I think Manson will haunt us forever."

¹ Jeff Guinn, *Manson: The Life and Times of Charles Manson* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013) 95-96.

² Bradley Steffens and Craig Staples, *The Trial of Charles Manson: California Cult Murders* (San Diego: Lucent Books, 2002), 50-51.

³ Vincent Bugliosi, *Helter Skelter* (W. W. Norton, 1974) 24, 55-60.

⁴ Bugliosi, 27, 61.

⁵ Bugliosi, 358.

⁶ Bugliosi, 68-70.

⁷ Bugliosi, 117-127.

⁸ Steffens, 40-45.

⁹ Bugliosi, 412-503.

¹⁰ Steffens, 87.

¹¹ Bugliosi, 412.

¹² Bugliosi, 473-474.

¹³ Bugliosi, 404, 487.