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Sister Aimee's Dutch Swan Song: A Study of the Illustrated Sermon

"Sister Aimee," as she was fondly referred to by her adoring fans, was without a doubt one of the most influential preachers in the development of modern-day evangelism. Working tirelessly through the inter-war years, she founded the Foursquare Church, ushering the Pentecostal movement into America. Her innovative use of various media outlets, including her widespread radio broadcasts and her own monthly magazine publications, helped to spur her wide reception and popularity. Additionally, from its opening in January 1923, her Angelus Temple in Echo Park, California presented up to twenty-two services a week, to crowds of around 5,000, for over twenty years under McPherson's leadership. Strategically placed in the heart of Tinseltown, McPherson carefully crafted her own Hollywood image, rising to a stardom rivaling any top names in show business through the twenties and thirties. *Vanity Fair* describes her audiences worshipping "under the spell of the greatest showman of our times, the Bernhardt of the sawdust rail, the Duse of the camp-meeting" (Steele 42). Sister Aimee was a performer, and she knew her craft, incorporating theatrical tools to spread her message and popularity.

On the 24th of September, 1944, this eminent evangelical preacher made her last public appearance in one of her renowned illustrated sermons entitled "The Leak in the Dike," humorously costumed as a Dutch milkmaid, with long blond braids, a pail, and a pair of wooden clogs. From the first of these illustrated sermons performed in the temple on Easter Sunday 1923 until her final public appearance over twenty years later, these lavish, pageant-like sermons built around various themes were performed to packed houses virtually every Sunday, with some of her more popular sermons touring widely. Since her work is widely under-researched by theatre scholars, this essay seeks to claim the rightful place for these services within the canon of popular entertainment, first providing a general background for these variety style performances,

and then looking in detail at her Dutch swan song.

Certainly for the 5,000 attendees at her Angelus Temple Sunday night illustrated sermon, theatrical entertainment was the regular fare, and a key part of Aimee's extraordinary draw. Lines outside the temple would begin forming hours before the event, and inevitably hundreds or thousands were turned away. Beverley Nichols describes in his personal account why he was glad to have heeded the warning to arrive early: "for an hour before the beginning of the service several thousand people had already assembled" (243). Hollywood stars and politicians would regularly attend these weekly shows, a source of great pride for McPherson. [1] She could not help but boast, not only of the numbers of thousands she had saved, but also of the fact that "the Governor of the State and his wife had been regular attendants at all her services—Praise the Lord" (248). Despite the virtuous claims justifying her theatrical practices, McPherson always had a fair number of skeptical critics who would contest that this was simply vaudeville entertainment under a guise of religiosity. Shelton Bissell, in his article entitled "Vaudeville at Angelus Temple," states, "to visit the temple…is to go on a sensuous debauch served up in the name of religion" (126).

What critics did always agree upon was the high entertainment value that came with Sister Aimee's Sunday night appearances, an entertainment value that often hinged on the use of theatrical costume. A vast range of extravagant wardrobes would allow McPherson to play a diverse range of characters from week to week, whether it was an Indian Chief or a Southern Belle (fig. 1). This incorporated a sense of excitement amongst her weekly followers, eager to discover how Sister Aimee would appear next. These appearances also served to pique curiosity *outside* the Temple; postcards were widely circulated following McPherson's popular "Arrested for Speeding" sermon, depicting her as a female traffic officer on a motorcycle, and following her near-fatal plane crash, pictures of her in pilot gear became the fad (fig. 2). McPherson would also often appear on the cover of her *Bridal Call Foursquare* monthly publication in an

attention-grabbing outfit taken from one of these sermons.

Fig. 1. Sister Aimee appears as a Southern Belle for her illustrated sermon, "Slavery Days."

Fig. 2. Postcard based on her famous illustrated sermon, "Arrested for Speeding." Like many of her sermons, this was based on her own headline events, since she had made the news for being pulled over for speeding earlier in the week.

Yet particularly for the first half of her career, McPherson was not typically depicted in the media with such outlandish attire. The general public is more likely to remember her from one of her more traditional preaching outfits. Her first of these trademarks: a conservative white Salvation Army dress. A robe would complement the simple dress, an attempt, however symbolic, never to outdress the crowd listening to her message as she traveled the country. This humble wardrobe would be discarded in the 1930's and replaced with a sophisticated, long, flowing satin white dress, undeniably influenced by contemporary Hollywood style (fig. 3). Still worn over the dress, the cape, now an anachronism, continued her trademark. Sister Aimee's new wardrobe highlighted her self-conscious awareness of her own celebrity status, while adding sex appeal in tasteful moderation. Covering this bride of Christ in a sultry "pure" white, mixed

with the allure of her widely rumored scandalous romps, could constitute the ultimate temptation. Despite her altar cries to the contrary, movements such as this new dress began to represent a turn away from traditionalism and a movement towards the style and attitude of the "new woman," sculpting a Pentecostal glamour to match her Pentecostal fervor.

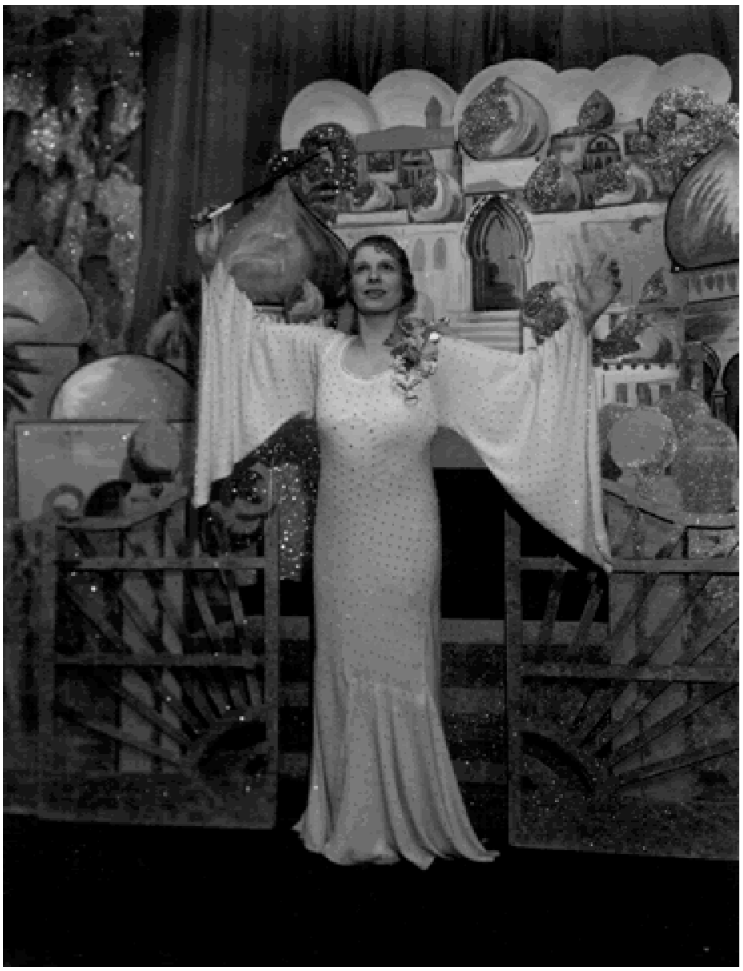

Fig. 3. McPherson takes center stage for an illustrated sermon, fully equipped with her new image. She strikes one of her iconic poses. An identical, oversized image of her hung above the marquee at the Capitol Theatre during her short-lived vaudeville tour in 1933.

Additionally, the sets created on a weekly basis were entertaining highlights of the Sunday night service. Each of these sets would tie into the given theme of the evening's service, depicting scenes ranging from the pilgrim landing to the battle of Troy. A group of highly skilled

volunteers called the "construction gang" led by the head designer, Thompson Eade, produced the sets. Eade, a vaudeville performer from Canada who had converted to Christianity at Angelus Temple, oversaw the entire group of electricians, artists, decorators, and carpenters. He also provided photographs of many of the set designs, retouching some with color, such as the Dutch-themed pageant of September 1944 (fig. 4). Many of these illustrations feature McPherson in costume, and provide a view of the general stage background. A common characteristic of all these sets was Eade's backdrop painting, "suggestive of a drop scene in vaudeville" (Nichols 239). Yet these backdrop paintings were never standardized as they had been on the vaudeville stage, each being intricately crafted on a weekly basis to create the specific setting for Aimee's theatrical sermon and the variety acts presented beforehand. Without the majority of the sermons touring, large-scale prop and set pieces were often included, usually built on a weekly basis but with the occasional item borrowed from a local film studio. Throughout the span of McPherson's twenty-year direction, these sets became more elaborate, often surpassing in sophistication the simple scenic techniques of vaudeville.

Fig. 4. Illustration of McPherson's last sermon. By Thompson Eade, McPherson's head designer. Courtesy of the Heritage Archive, Echo Park, California.

Sarah Comstock wrote about her experience at the Temple, describing the Sunday evening as "a complete vaudeville program, entirely new each week, brimful of surprises for the eager who are willing to battle the throng for entrance" (12-13). Her account in *Harper's Monthly* provides a good example of the cohesion between the theatrical elements that McPherson built around a different weekly theme, a characteristic of these novel religious services. The set was an "ocean background, rolling green waves flanked by rocks," with a "lofty lighthouse" built to the side of the stage. All of the costumes for the evening were based around the same nautical theme, "in sailor effect, navy and white, jaunty caps atilt." She goes on to describe the following acts all based around this theme: First, a Christopher Columbus character recited a Joaquin Miller poem, followed by a Gloucester fisherman in full rubber attire who played "The Mocking Bird" and "The Old Oaken Bucket" on a tin whistle and a set of chimes. Next came a sailor boy quartet, "climbing the mast hand-over-hand, heave-hoing, rocking and rolling." Then a storm set in, orchestrated by an organ solo with lightning-flash visual effects. Before the illustrated sermon, there were "more songs by sailors and sailoresses" until, as Comstock writes, the audience's "appetite for vaudeville is fairly appeased."

Although parallels are drawn to vaudeville by Comstock as well as by contemporary scholars studying McPherson, crafting the variety-style format around strong central themes is more reminiscent of the "revue," a popular entertainment form in the 1920's that developed around the end of the 19th century. These annual spectacles of music, dance, and sketch, such as the Greenwich Village Follies, would be designed around themes, while also drawing from contemporary events and satirizing popular figures. McPherson would similarly draw from recent headlines or personal events to construct the theme for her Sunday services, while also satirizing controversial modern figures such as Darwin or personal rivals such as Upton Sinclair. Of course the similarity is within the format, not the content, of these two forms; the revue was full of material that the evangelical McPherson would object to on moral grounds, most notably the bevy of scantily clad females who would customarily adorn the stage. This is not to say, of

course, that Sister Aimee never played off her own sexual mystique either consciously or unconsciously within her own stage presentations. And although the illustrated sermons were never produced on the lavish scale of the annual revue, as they were created on a weekly basis, the degree of sophistication achieved was a remarkable feat and certainly part of the splendor for the regular attendants at the temple.

Sister Aimee had a strong directorial hand not only in creating cohesion around the various theatrical elements and her sermon's message, but also in manipulating the acts of the evening to her own desired effect. If McPherson, the preeminent master of ceremonies, sensed the interest in any of these performers waning, she was quick to orchestrate a shift to the next act. She undoubtedly developed the fine-tuned sense for reading the audience characteristic of successful popular entertainment performers, presenting another reason for her widespread success. As a regular attendant of McPherson's services, Comstock, in her article "Aimee Semple McPherson: Prima Donna of Revivalism," describes this in action:

> As a director she is incomparable. While others are performing, she never for an instant permits interest to flag; at the first sign of restlessness she steps forward. "All join in with him now! 'Sail on!' " If a young singer's voice proves weak and, therefore, uninspiring, Sister snatches her own tambourine and drives home the rhythm. Let a recitation be dull, she will advance beaming to inquire if it isn't grand. Always she senses, with that swift, uncanny perception of hers, the slightest waning of attention; always, in emergency, she lifts those pink palms, flashes her infectious smile, and breaks into a hymn, catching back her hearers before they discover that they are slipping. (17)

Many first-person accounts of these services testify to Sister Aimee's strong orchestral hand. On another occasion, a throng of newcomers waited in line to shake McPherson's hand, holding up the evening's entertainment. Sister merely improvised a distraction, calling for a "little tune on our lovely organ" to the young organist's surprise. Sister darted a sharp look at the girl, then folding it into a smile, "Let's give our little organist a clap—doesn't she deserve it?" (Nichols 249). The organist, by then ready, played a tune until each of the eager hand-shakers was ushered

off the stage.

Surprisingly the theatrical tools of McPherson's Sunday evening services have been under-researched within the field of popular entertainment. Although they have been documented within theological and religious discourse, they have not been the focus of much detailed study. Matthew Avery Sutton's recent biography provides some insights into these performances, but he focuses on Aimee's more scandalous performances outside the Angelus Temple, such as her Venice Beach disappearing act of 1926. *Sister Aimee* by Daniel Epstein, a biography built more for public than scholarly consumption, provides a few limited, mostly anecdotal, insights into these sermons. [2] A recent dissertation by Rolanda Nicholas-Frazier has framed Aimee Semple McPherson's work within a broader performance studies context, while noting her strong parallels to vaudeville; yet its single chapter devoted to the Sunday evening illustrated sermon, a phenomenon that lasted around two decades, provides an overview that still leaves plenty of room for investigation.

McPherson's inclusion within the canon of popular entertainment seems well-deserved, and not at all to discredit the weight of her importance within theological/religious discourse. Sister Aimee was a widely successful evangelist because she knew how to develop crowds. In this, she follows a long line of theatrical theologians who have bridged the gap between popular entertainment and evangelism, ranging from mysterious healers of the medieval age to juggling friars of the early modern era and beyond. [3] After her bar-bashing days came to an end, even Carrie Nation would take to the vaudeville stage: a type of freak show act, yelling at the audience, "Repent!," while getting food thrown in her face. She would then exit the stage into the audience to sell her own mini-hatchets as souvenirs. Ms. McPherson's own appearance in vaudeville was far more graceful, although not more successful; she appeared on Broadway at the Capitol Theatre in 1933, where her engagement, a notorious flop, was cut short. In a characteristic fashion for her routines, she drew from personal biography, performing her popular

"Story of My Life" illustrated sermon, otherwise known as "From Milk Pail to Pulpit."

Fig. 5. McPherson performs in one of her most popular sermons, "The Story of My Life," otherwise known as "From Milk Pail to Pulpit."

In this sermon, Sister Aimee would dress as a peasant girl, telling of her own humble starts and rise to stardom, her own Eva Peron cry to the masses—although she may seem all glitz and glamour, she has never forgotten where she came from. But this did not go over as well at the Capitol Theatre as it did at the Angelus Temple. She did manage to earn $5,000 a week, considerable funds to add to her ministry, yet the act remained quite a humbling experience for a woman not used to playing to half-empty houses. Speculation has been made as to why her vaudeville stint was such a failure, some historians attributing it to vaudeville's general decline, while others believing the passionate Pentecostal was simply too boring for Broadway.
[4]

From a search of McPherson's archive, one can quickly gather that much information on

these Sunday sermons, especially those in the earlier years, has been lost or was never documented. McPherson's own *Foursquare* magazine occasionally provided reviews and pictures of previous sermons or occasionally transcribed the text of the sermon messages themselves. The Angelus Temple Bulletins, the programs for the weekly services available at the Foursquare Heritage Archive Center in Echo Park, CA, list many of these illustrated services, yet do not provide any detailed information on them. Two hundred and ninety-eight of these sermons are recorded by name and date, representing about a third of the sermons that were actually performed during Aimee's twenty-year span. Pictures of many of these pageant-like spectacles are available, yet many of them remain untraced to particular dates or performances. But perhaps the most interesting discovery is a select few unpublished original manuscripts from the following productions: "Jonah" (26 May 1920), "Story of Troy" or "The Trojan Horse" (9 June 1940), and "The Leak in the Dike" (24 September 1944). These scripts, unlike the sermon transcriptions occasionally appearing in the *The Bridal Call Foursquare* (later to be named the *Foursquare Crusader)*, provide stage directions as well as McPherson's personal notes, offering new insight into how these spectacular pageants played out theatrically.

How did the "vaudeville" and theatrical pageantry play out on the evening of September 24th, 1944? An original outline for that Sunday evening service, found at the Heritage Archive, details the events of the evening, and confirms the variety of entertainment that preceded McPherson's illustrated sermon (appendix A). After McPherson's traditional grand entrance from the balcony, her arms full of huge bouquets of red roses, there were a series of service songs incorporating the congregation, an invocation, and three additional songs. Next, the "musical program" included eleven variety acts. The first song, *Ten Thousand Times Ten Thousand*, was sung by the Foursquare choir of around a hundred members. The various musicians to follow included an Angelus Temple band, a couple of solo vocalists, the "Crusader Trio," an "Octet," and the "Melody Girls." Interestingly, two items are listed as "pantomimes," probably alluding to dramatic skits or reenactments, such as the Christopher Columbus

monologue mentioned in the previous service. Announcements and the offering followed, although Sister was known to circulate the basket again later at whim. The illustrated sermon, "The Leak in the Dike" was presented, culminating in the dramatic "altar call" in which McPherson would cry out for unrepentant sinners to come forward and "find salvation."

McPherson's final sermon told the dramatic story of a young boy who saved his Dutch village, risking his own life in the process, by clogging up the leak in the dike. A detailed look into this sermon illustrates the ways in which McPherson's sophisticated messaging operated out of this simple story and how she utilized her various theatrical tools to create this effect.

Through the opening scene of "Leak in the Dike," the use of symbolic biblical metaphor, a common characteristic of McPherson's Sunday messages, quickly becomes evident. When the curtain rose for scene one, "Introduction to Holland," a Dutch festival was in progress: women carried buckets of water, men carried sacks of wheat to the mill, and children played, while a "watchman" strolled back and forth on the dike. Sister Aimee, dressed as one of the bucket-carrying Dutch women, narrated the story. Setting up the primary metaphor for the sermon through a biblical reference, McPherson compared Holland to the church of Jesus Christ: "Like a ship, it is in the sea, but the sea is not in it. The church, likewise, is in the world, but the world must not be in it!" Sister Aimee went on to explain why Holland was essentially "at sea," and why it had a need for dikes to protect it "from the raging sea but also as a barrier against enemy hordes that from time to time…threatened the brave and courageous inhabitants" (McPherson *Foursquare* 4). The watchman on the wall was related back to Biblical Scripture from Isaiah 62:6, as noted in the sermon's manuscript, "I have set watchmen upon thy walls, which shall never hold peace day and nite." The dike, marked with the symbolic stones, represented the various ways the Christian community was to protect itself from the "torrents" of the outside world. So where did the leak in the dike come from? As McPherson exclaims, "we can apply this leak in the dike to the leak in our Christian experience!" She pinpointed six factors:

Barbarianism ("bloodshed, carnage, lust for power"), Moral and Spiritual Blackout, Slavery ("No more freedom of religion"), Unbelief ("Faith in Bible destroyed"), Modernism ("a falling away"), and Atheism ("no God, except man himself!").

The image of the Dutch girl draws from its own history on the early 20th century stage, having been popularized by the music hall performances of "happy" Fanny Fields as well as in the popular musical comedy *Miss Hook of Holland*. The iconic aspects of the Dutch image, and the association of the Dutch with being hardworking and cleanly, played an important role in shaping the audience's reception. Now outdated, the audience would be familiar with the idiomatic saying, "that beats the Dutch!" characterizing the Dutch with a resilience and hard work ethic. For McPherson this represents a similar type of industry and devotion required of Christians: "The Dutch are a busy folk---scrub, scrub, scrub, all day long! Friends, the church is supposed to be busy too, busy for God" (McPherson *Foursquare* 5). The 1940's audience would also be familiar with the widely popular Old Dutch Cleanser, which featured an iconic image of a Dutch girl on the can. McPherson, in fact, drew upon this directly in her sermon to formulate her argument, "When a certain manufacturer of a cleanser desired a label typical of that which was clean and bright, he did not choose to put on that label the picture of an American, and Englishman, of a Frenchman—but a Dutch woman" (5). This example had a spiritual application as well, as Sister Aimee reminded her audience that "Cleanliness is next to Godliness." Dressed as the iconic image of a Dutch woman, McPherson crafted an image of herself in which she would represent all of these ideals related to proper Christian practice without having to be the heroine of the sermon's story itself.

Fig. 6. McPherson models the Dutch Milkmaid costume in which she made her final public appearance.

A parable was drawn from "The Leak in the Dike," as the challenges that the young Dutch boy faced and the fortitude required for his success paralleled the struggles of the Fundamentalist Christian against the forces of modernity, a message traced through a multitude of McPherson's sermons. First, the young boy enters, "strolling in a carefree way." The leak in the dike then appears, played out live with sand, not water, and the boy "frantically calls for help, but none arrives." He puts his finger in the opening, but as the leak grows larger, he must use his hand to stop it, then his elbow, and then clear up to his shoulder. A storm arises, night sets in, and waves dash over the wall. An angel then appears to bless the brave child. His parents find him the next morning, unconscious, thinking he is dead. Part of Phoebe Cary's poem, "The Tale of Holland," was then quoted directly, while reenacted on stage:

> "He is dead!" the mother cried, my darling!
> And the startled father hears,
> And comes, and looks the way she looks,

> And fears the thing she fears!
> Till a glad shout from the bearers
> Thrills the stricken man and wife:
> "Give thanks, for your son has saved our land
> And God has saved his life!"
> So there in the morning sunshine
> They knelt about the boy;
> And every head was bowed and bent,
> In tearful, reverent joy! (McPherson *Foursquare* 5)

For this concluding scene, the ensemble of Dutch workers from the opening reappeared and knelt quietly around the boy and his parents, while workmen came to repair the dike. The symbolic role of this child became quite clear to the audience, and was explicitly mentioned in McPherson's sermon address, "The little Dutch boy who so valiantly stopped the leak is a TYPE OF FUNDAMENTALIST CHRISTIAN who 'holds the fort' against forces of evil who would destroy the church!" (McPherson "Leak" manuscript 1). Just as the angel did not abandon the child, McPherson hoped to instill a similar faith for the Christian believers that all hope against the turning tide of modernity was not lost.

What are these "forces of evil" to which Sister Aimee's notes refer? McPherson's selection of this whimsical Dutch tale was not frivolous. She specifically selected this Dutch story due to the specific political terrain of current events. Like the peaceful Dutch depicted at the top of the sermon, Holland attempted to remain neutral during World War II as they had during World War I, yet they were invaded by Germany in 1940. In late September 1944, according to McPherson's unpublished script for the sermon, "Tonight's message (is) extremely fitting for the hour!—Holland is about to be liberated!" (2). This would be only weeks after *Dolle Dinsdag* or "Mad Tuesday," when the Dutch began prematurely to celebrate their liberation. Sister Aimee recaps in her unpublished notes some of the latest events leading to the urgency of this message: "Once again, Holland headlines the news of the day! Hard fighting all week. Friday last the BRITISH TROOPS on the land had finally reached paratroops! LAST SUNDAY WE HEARD THE STARTLING news that the allies had landed paratroopers behind the lines." (appendix A). This "startling news" was the surprise drop made by thousands of

solders behind enemy lines, commencing "Operation Market-Garden," the largest airborne operation of World War II.

The question arises: since there is no specific reference to this political/social contextualization within the transcript of the sermon published in her own magazine, was this war reference omitted from the publication, or was it just part of McPherson's notes, not to be included in the actual sermon? Figuring that the audience would be well aware of the events since the previous Sunday, with the *Los Angeles Times* headline article providing a daily play-by-play, the parallels did not need to be mentioned explicitly. Matthew Avery Sutton's 2007 biography provides an example of an illustrated sermon with ambiguous contemporary social/political relevance. In this sermon, entitled "Pilgrim Fathers," McPherson symbolically speaks out against Upton Sinclair who is running for governor in the upcoming election. Yet Sutton reiterates that it would not have been out of character for McPherson to make explicit political reference, as "she already has a track record of creating illustrated sermons based around World War II events specifically, one entitled 'Remember Pearl Harbor' " (237). Within the "Leak" manuscript itself McPherson wrote, "Holland is about to be liberated! LET US, THEREFORE, VISIT, THAT QUAINT COUNTRY" (appendix A). From this word choice it becomes obvious that these were lines of dialogue that McPherson delivered that happened to later be omitted from the version published in her *Foursquare* journal. This indicates a directness implicit in her political messaging, rather than a reliance on ambiguity as provided by Sutton's example.

Furthermore, McPherson would very well have named specific names when describing the "Barbarianism" that widens the leak. She lists the "barbarians" in her manuscript: "Militant countries destroying world peace and security; Trying to stamp out church by force and might! Hitler-banishing Bible, Cross; Heathen Japan-idol worship!" (McPherson "Leak" manuscript 7). A two page outline of stories and jokes included in the 24 September 1944 sermon indicates that

McPherson's explicitness itself may have been part of her popularity. McPherson includes a joke in the unpublished clippings for the service entitled "Can Hardly Wait to Read It:"

> "Have you heard about the new book Hitler wrote, that won't be published until his death?" "No…but I'll bet it isn't any good!" "MAYBE NOT…BUT I CAN HARDLY WAIT TO READ IT!" (McPherson "Leak" stories)

This example illustrates an alternative extreme: the way proper social etiquette of church behavior is being trumped could have been part of her strong entertainment *appeal*. For her longer sermons, there is a degree in which social satire became available as audience members can flock to see who would be the latest target of her carefully crafted not so ambiguous theatrical messaging.

Set pieces and props played an important role in developing symbolism in McPherson's illustrated sermons, and not necessarily to a subtle effect either. These symbolic meanings were often painted in bold letters across the set and prop pieces themselves. For the "Leak in the Dike" set, sacks of wheat labeled "testimony," "works," and "service" were carried by the faithful Dutch men to be ground at the mill. For the second scene, the stones in the dike were marked with specific symbolic names: Faith, Prayer, Joy, Hope, Love, Word, and Works. McPherson found key ways to symbolically represent the Holy Spirit using these theatrical tools. For the "Leak in the Dike," the whole Dutch community was energized by the mill that was propelled through the power of the Holy Spirit, the driving force and focal point behind McPherson's Pentecostal movement. Presumably, the audience could watch the mill turn while Sister Aimee addressed how it works: "These mills operate as a direct result of the winds that blow over the land. So, also, the wind of the Holy Spirit from heaven, moves the great paddles of the Foursquare windmill!" (McPherson *Foursquare* 4). This machine is not energized through some advancement of modernity, but something natural and from God. McPherson described to her audience how one of the four paddles of the mill is emblematic of the Holy Ghost, while another represents "Divine Healing," a related byproduct of the works of the Holy Spirit.

Fig. 7. An example of the "symbolic windmill" used in a sermon in the 1920's. McPherson is depicted in her original Salvation Army outfit. The design elements would become more sophisticated as time passed; here a proscenium arch has yet to be added, and elaborate costuming has yet to become the standard.

Forging this conscious relationship between her services and the works of the Holy Spirit was a crucial component of McPherson's success. I would argue that it is through this focus on the Holy Spirit that she was allowed, as a woman, to publicly represent a symbolic conduit for Christ, empowering her in a way not typically allotted to women by the church. This also empowered her in the sphere of social/political discourse in an uncharacteristic fashion for women of the 1920's and 1930's. Sister Aimee's most popular enactment of the works of the Holy Spirit would come through her popular faith healing services, yet she would always deny that she was in fact a faith healer, claiming rather that it was the Lord that healed people, not herself (Blumhofer 169). This "theological loophole," if you will, created its own "leak in the dike," breaking through the patriarchal fortress of the church to allow a woman to take center

stage and find self-empowerment. Her focus on the works of the Holy Spirit also created a more actively engaged audience, reflecting similarities to popular entertainment forms and moving away from more traditional worship service. The congregation was primed to take on this more active role in the service as they were so led "by the spirit," raising their hands, vocalizing in response, or rushing forward at the end of the service to have Sister Aimee lay hands on them.

Fig. 8. The altar call following the illustrated sermon. Sister McPherson, followed by spotlight, calls forward unrepentant sinners. She wears her "glamour" preaching dress. A figure of Jesus hangs suspended above the stage. [5]

The theatrical techniques and high entertainment value of the Sunday evening services at the Angelus Temple distinguish it from more traditional forms of religious practice, moving it towards a new hybrid form of religion/entertainment, with parallels to the popular entertainment forms of the day. This led many to wonder, however: was McPherson just a fancy quack? Sarah Comstock sums up this debate quite eloquently for the *Harper's Monthly* reader:

> You may believe Aimee Semple McPherson to be a messenger direct from God Almighty to save His erring world. Or you may believe her to be the most unblushing fraud in the public eye today. Some do one, some the other; and there is every shade of opinion between. But the one fact that stands out is that her influence is incredible, that it carries as that of few evangelists has ever carried, that she is today one of the most amazing phenomena of power in the United States, and that the curious would like to know how, in popular parlance, the lady puts it over. (16)

Regardless of what you think or thought of McPherson, her power *was* undeniable. Part of her ability to develop this position of power was due not only to her charismatic personality, but also to her theatrical flair and the success of her long-running illustrated sermons. Ironically, McPherson became a symbol for the modernity she so strongly protested, as she incorporated contemporary technologies into her sermons, and utilized state-of-the-art mass media to convey her messages. Although these methods went under some critical attack by leaders of other Christian denominations, she seemed to offer just enough modernity to satisfy her audiences without going to an extreme that would startle them. Sister certainly did not mind using the devil's tools against him. Even though attending the theatre was a forbidden activity for the core Foursquare members, restricted by the "Crusader Covenant," this did not stop McPherson from putting on her own theatrical productions weekly under the proscenium arch of her own temple's stage. "Religion, to thrive in the present day," Sister Aimee wrote, "must utilize present-day methods. The methods change with the years, but the religion remains the same" (*In the Service* 211). Even as an undying Creationist, Sister Aimee herself knew she would have to evolve, and to spread her gospel and entertain the masses and keep her messages socially and politically relevant, she did whatever it took—even if it included blond pigtails and wooden clogs.

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Endnotes

1. Charlie Chaplin, one of her largest fans, was a regular attendee, allegedly having designed the proscenium arch for her temple stage, as well as having offered his services to the Sister by means of private acting lessons. For his account of her "magnetic appeal," see von Ulm 330.

2. Humorous antics with uncooperative animals have become the source of much "illustrated sermon" lore, which parallels the incorporation of animals within popular entertainment forms of the 1920's and 1930's. Perhaps the most interesting account was that of the macaw perched in the Garden of Eden that cries out "Oh, go to Hell" when the band started up. Whether the pagan

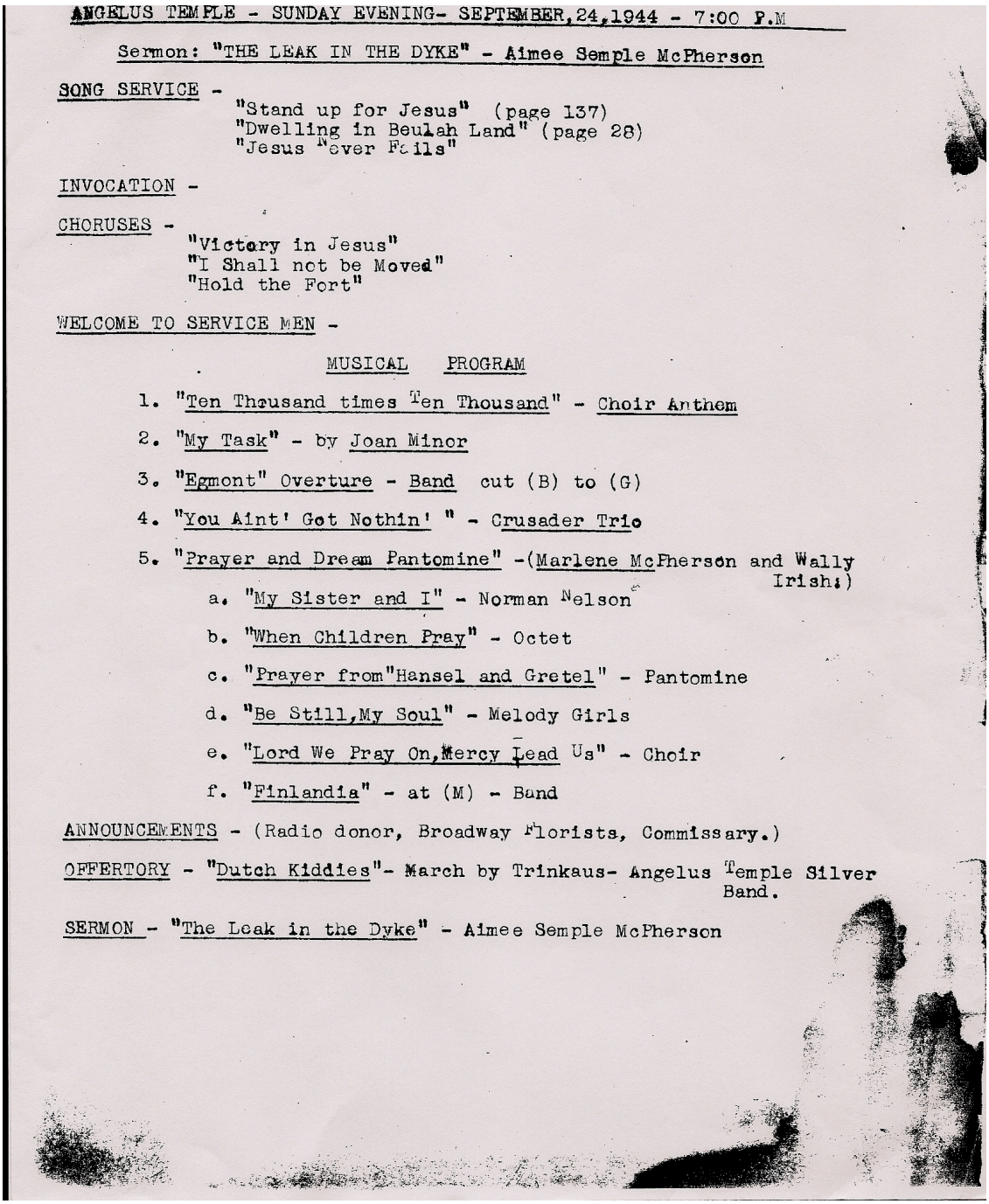
parrot was quickly ushered off the stage, or became a subject of McPherson's proselytizing, seems to vary between accounts (Epstein 254-56).

3. Peter Burke provides some historical background to the role of preachers, healers, and friars in popular entertainment, see "The Transmission of Popular Culture," *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper, 1978), 91-115.

4. For a detailed analysis of all that may have gone wrong on Broadway for the Sister, see Nicholas-Frazier, 367-83.

5. All photographic illustrations throughout this essay are reprinted with permission of the Heritage Department, International Foursquare Gospel Church.

Appendix A: Images from the archives of the Heritage Department, International Foursquare Gospel Church



ANGELUS TEMPLE - SUNDAY EVENING- SEPTEMBER,24,1944 - 7:00 P.M

Sermon: "THE LEAK IN THE DYKE" - Aimee Semple McPherson

SONG SERVICE -
"Stand up for Jesus" (page 137)
"Dwelling in Beulah Land" (page 28)
"Jesus Never Fails"

INVOCATION -

CHORUSES -
"Victory in Jesus"
"I Shall not be Moved"
"Hold the Fort"

WELCOME TO SERVICE MEN -

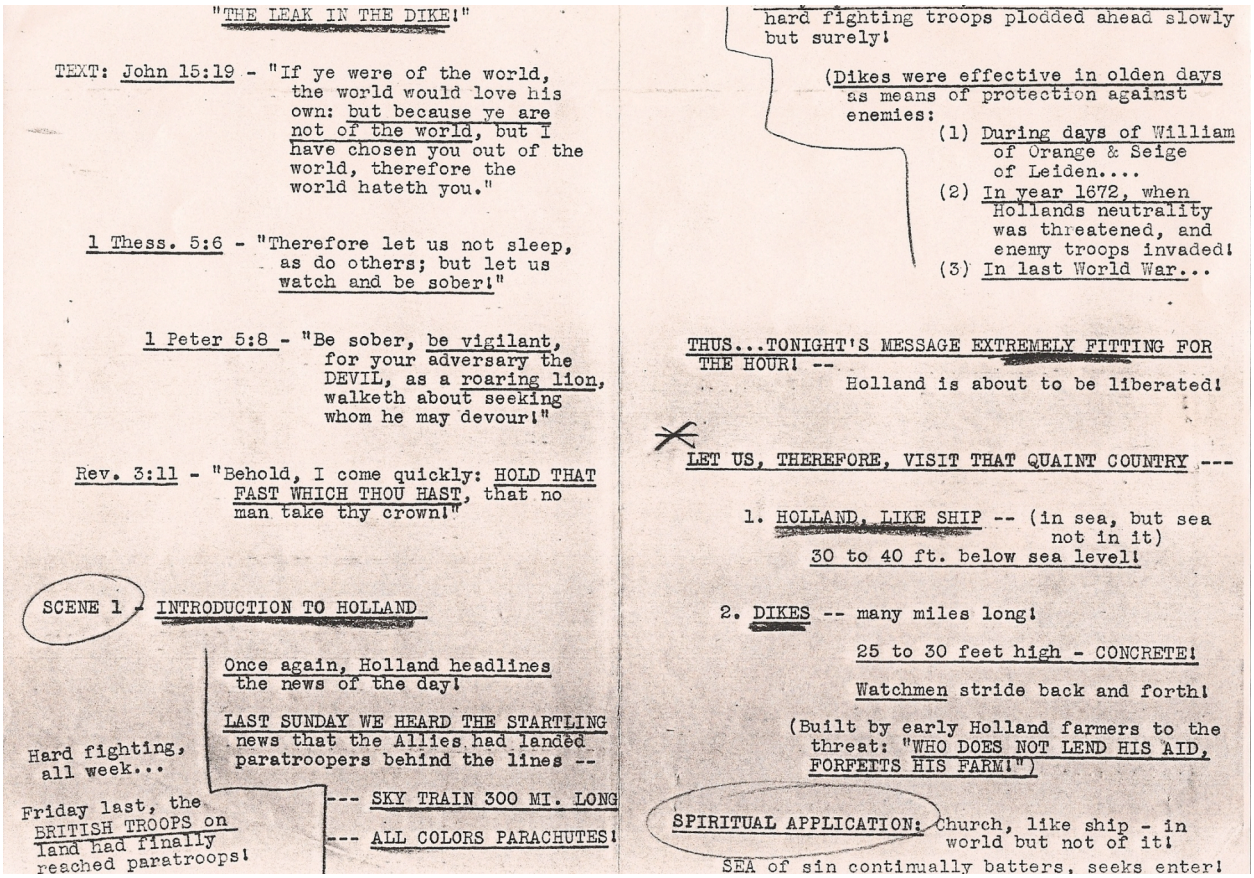
MUSICAL PROGRAM

1. "Ten Thousand times Ten Thousand" - Choir Anthem
2. "My Task" - by Joan Minor
3. "Egmont" Overture - Band cut (B) to (G)
4. "You Aint' Got Nothin' " - Crusader Trio
5. "Prayer and Dream Pantomine" -(Marlene McPherson and Wally Irish:)
   a. "My Sister and I" - Norman Nelson
   b. "When Children Pray" - Octet
   c. "Prayer from"Hansel and Gretel" - Pantomine
   d. "Be Still,My Soul" - Melody Girls
   e. "Lord We Pray On,Mercy Lead Us" - Choir
   f. "Finlandia" - at (M) - Band

ANNOUNCEMENTS - (Radio donor, Broadway Florists, Commissary.)

OFFERTORY - "Dutch Kiddies"- March by Trinkaus- Angelus Temple Silver Band.

SERMON - "The Leak in the Dyke" - Aimee Semple McPherson



"THE LEAK IN THE DIKE!"

TEXT: John 15:19 - "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you."

1 Thess. 5:6 - "Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober!"

1 Peter 5:8 - "Be sober, be vigilant, for your adversary the DEVIL, as a roaring lion, walketh about seeking whom he may devour!"

Rev. 3:11 - "Behold, I come quickly: HOLD THAT FAST WHICH THOU HAST, that no man take thy crown!"

SCENE 1 - INTRODUCTION TO HOLLAND

Once again, Holland headlines the news of the day!

LAST SUNDAY WE HEARD THE STARTLING news that the Allies had landed paratroopers behind the lines --

--- SKY TRAIN 300 MI. LONG

--- ALL COLORS PARACHUTES!

Hard fighting, all week...

Friday last, the BRITISH TROOPS on land had finally reached paratroops!

hard fighting troops plodded ahead slowly but surely!

(Dikes were effective in olden days as means of protection against enemies:

(1) During days of William of Orange & Seige of Leiden....

(2) In year 1672, when Hollands neutrality was threatened, and enemy troops invaded!

(3) In last World War...

THUS...TONIGHT'S MESSAGE EXTREMELY FITTING FOR THE HOUR! --

Holland is about to be liberated!

LET US, THEREFORE, VISIT THAT QUAINT COUNTRY ---

1. HOLLAND, LIKE SHIP -- (in sea, but sea not in it)
30 to 40 ft. below sea level!

2. DIKES -- many miles long!

25 to 30 feet high - CONCRETE!

Watchmen stride back and forth!

(Built by early Holland farmers to the threat: "WHO DOES NOT LEND HIS AID, FORFEITS HIS FARM!")

SPIRITUAL APPLICATION: Church, like ship - in world but not of it!

SEA of sin continually batters, seeks enter!