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Political Responses to the Satanic Panic in Texas

In 1989, Texas was gripped by a “Satanic Panic” following a discovery of a mass grave in Matamoros, Mexico. The grave filled with 15 dismembered bodies were discovered from a routine missing-persons investigation of Mark Kilroy, a Texas college student who disappeared on spring break. What followed is a tale of ritual sacrifice that exploded in the media during the same time that anti-ritual legislation was being created by Texas officials. I took a journalistic approach toward the anti-ritual legislation and answered the questions who, what, when, where, why and how of the process. During that time, I contacted the Texas official offices of Senator Zaffirini and Senator Whitmire, whose staff worked diligently to provide me with the materials that I needed. I also worked with the state reference librarians who were quick to respond to my questions.

During my investigation, I uncovered that Abilene Police officer, Lee Reed, asked Senator Zaffirini for a bill, S.B. 30, that law enforcement could “work with” dealing with a growing problem in Texas with ritual abuse and murder.

According to the Fort Worth Star Telegram story titled, “Lawmaker proposes study of cult activity,” stated that “Increasing focus has been placed on diabolic cults since the Matamoros murders,” and “With the Matamoros group in mind, members of these cults and the crimes they engage in are not to be tolerated in a civilized society. Grabbing the minds of young people, these cults have turned their members into mindless creatures who commit horrific crimes for pleasure and profit.”

Senator Buster Brown, R-Lake Jackson, asked the Senate Criminal Justice Committee to conduct hearings and prepare a report by 1991, when the legislature meets again in regular session. Brown said testimony is sure to bring out concerns about religious and speech freedoms. “We want to be careful that we don’t infringe on the first amendment right of freedom of religion, keeping in mind that the U.S. Supreme Court has distinguished between a person’s right to believe, which is absolute, and a person’s right to act on that belief, which is limited.”

The purpose of S.B. 30 was to help police officials to determine the scope of the “Satanic” problem and to collect and report the data.
In 1993, Senator Whitmire proposed Committee substitute senate bill (CSSB) 1067 which would streamline the penal code, merging like offenses and eliminating some offenses. Which means the new bill would reconfigure the severity of offenses, based on factors such as intent of the person and the interests of the state, whether the crime would involve a victim, and the value of property taken or damaged. The new “person offense ranking” would be used to determine whether a defendant, person accused in a court of law, could be considered for a certain proceeding that defer prosecution without an adjudication of guilt, which means a person has been formally convicted of a crime by the court. Capital murder would be the only offense within its category.

The bill was in effect by September of the same year which struck the language from S.B. 30 from the penal code.

The Office of Undergraduate research provided me with a platform to share my findings with others as well as finance much needed documents provided from the state reference library and police department records. I plan to further my research as I study the Fall River Satanic Murders in Massachusetts from 1979 to 1980 to uncover potential legislation that stemmed from the early “Satanic panic” timeline.