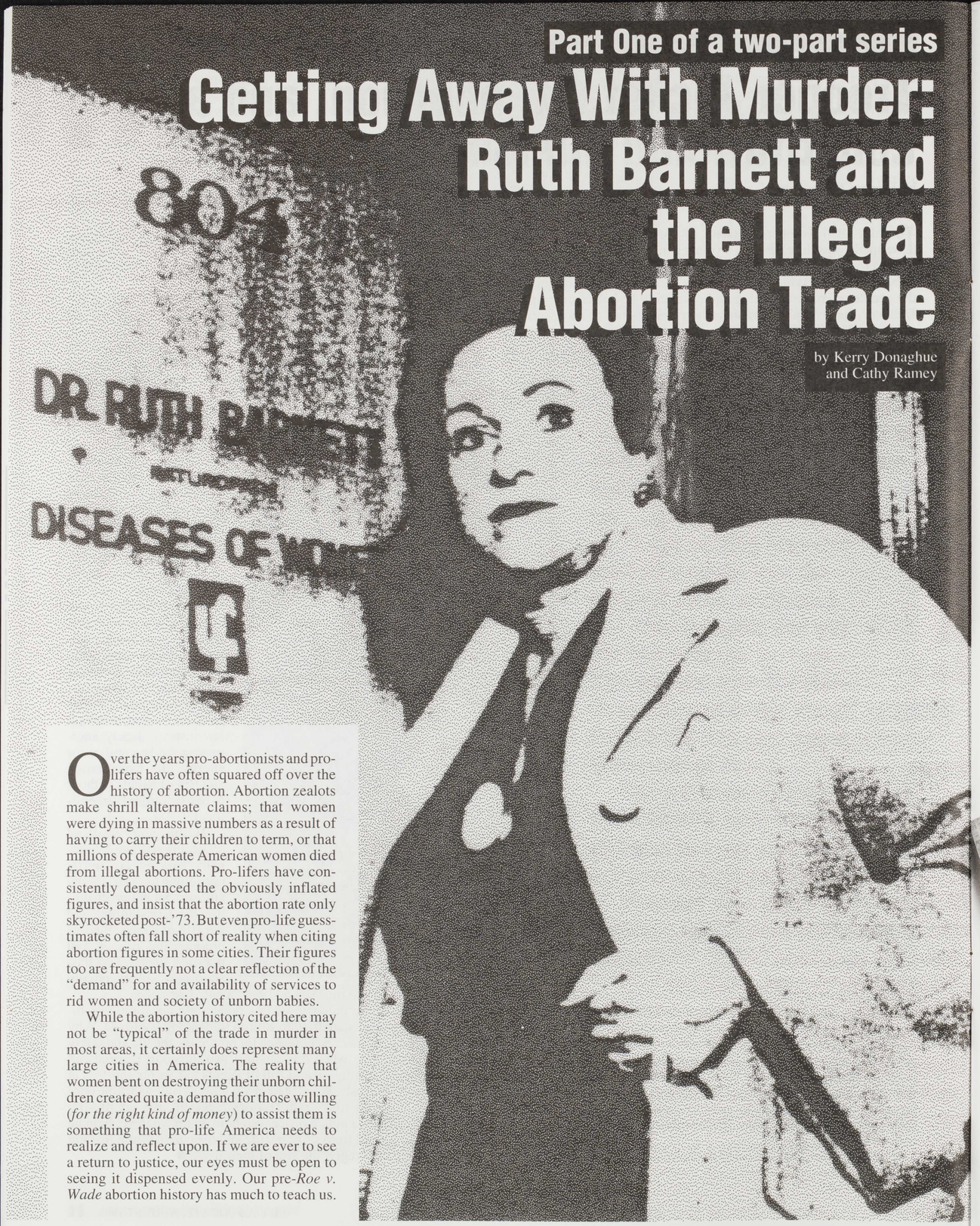
Part One of a two-part series

Getting Away With Murder: Ruth Barnett and the Illegal Abortion Trade

by Kerry Donaghue and Cathy Ramey



Over the years pro-abortionists and pro-lifers have often squared off over the history of abortion. Abortion zealots make shrill alternate claims; that women were dying in massive numbers as a result of having to carry their children to term, or that millions of desperate American women died from illegal abortions. Pro-lifers have consistently denounced the obviously inflated figures, and insist that the abortion rate only skyrocketed post-'73. But even pro-life guesstimates often fall short of reality when citing abortion figures in some cities. Their figures too are frequently not a clear reflection of the "demand" for and availability of services to rid women and society of unborn babies.

While the abortion history cited here may not be "typical" of the trade in murder in most areas, it certainly does represent many large cities in America. The reality that women bent on destroying their unborn children created quite a demand for those willing (*for the right kind of money*) to assist them is something that pro-life America needs to realize and reflect upon. If we are ever to see a return to justice, our eyes must be open to seeing it dispensed evenly. Our pre-*Roe v. Wade* abortion history has much to teach us.

An "abortion capitol" . . .

So, just how accessible were abortions in the pre-*Roe v. Wade* days?

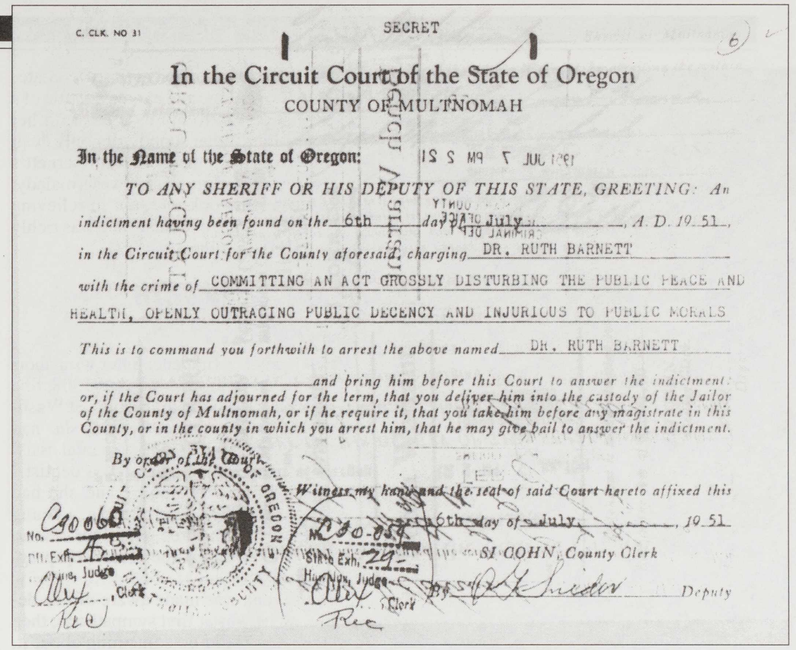
Very much so, at least in some areas like Portland, Oregon, a city which in the 1940's, 50's and 60's became known as the "abortion capitol of the NW." And despite all of the rhetoric claiming that conditions were far worse in an abortionist's office than in a legitimate physician's office, there is abundant evidence to suggest that, in fact, the services and the surroundings were most often identical or better because of the stiff competition.

In an early biography which she co-authored with the help of a newspaper reporter, one abortionist, Ruth Barnett, claims to have performed abortions quite freely in the city for five decades. And she wasn't the only operater in town. At the same time that she plyed her trade in blood, there were easily a dozen others chiropracters, naturopaths, and M.D.'s doing the same.

In *They Weep on My Doorstep*, her biography, she stated that a steady stream of women came to see her. If she is to be believed, sometimes up to fifty women a day. Newspaper accounts from at least one raid seem to support her claim to a steady and high volume of clients.

And the illegal abortion business was profitable too.

News articles record attempts by the federal government to get their piece of the pie, claiming that hundreds of thousands of dollars in back taxes were owed to Uncle Sam. In February of 1952 the IRS put a lien against Ruth Barnett's property. They calculated that she owed them, from her abortion trade, $1,163,255.43 in back taxes, fines, and interest for the years 1945 through 1947. Barnett claims that from abortions alone she made as much as $182,000 a year during the 1940's, and $9 million total during her career. Her daughter, Margaret St. James, was quoted in an *Oregonian* newspaper article after her mother's death, saying that together they *"squandered $10-$15 million dollars."*



C. CLK. NO 31 SECRET

In the Circuit Court of the State of Oregon
COUNTY OF MULTNOMAH

In the Name of the State of Oregon:

TO ANY SHERIFF OR HIS DEPUTY OF THIS STATE, GREETING: An indictment having been found on the 6th day of July, A. D. 19 51, in the Circuit Court for the County aforesaid, charging DR. RUTH BARNETT with the crime of COMMITTING AN ACT GROSSLY DISTURBING THE PUBLIC PEACE AND HEALTH, OPENLY OUTRAGING PUBLIC DECENCY AND INJURIOUS TO PUBLIC MORALS

This is to command you forthwith to arrest the above named DR. RUTH BARNETT and bring him before this Court to answer the indictment; or, if the Court has adjourned for the term, that you deliver him into the custody of the Jailor of the County of Multnomah, or if he require it, that you take him before any magistrate in this County, or in the county in which you arrest him, that he may give bail to answer the indictment.

By order of the Court. Witness my hand and the seal of said Court hereto affixed this 6th day of July, 19 51

SI COHN, County Clerk

Deputy

A copy of the indictment handed down against Ruth Barnett July 6, 1951.

"There were boxes of money sitting around the house," she recalled, since abortion was a cash only business. *"My clothing account was about $5,000 a month."* This was in the 1940's when economic collapse a decade earlier and the war in Europe made it difficult for most Americans to meet their most basic needs.

How "open" were the clinics?

"The duly elected officers of the law, members of the medical profession, and the state board all knew we were in business," Barnett stated. *"Trying to conceal the clinic, or its purpose, would have been as impossible as hiding an elephant in the parlor."*

Even former police detective, 76-year-old Barney Shields, in a 1985 interview, recalled that until the early 1950's the Portland police *"never bothered any abortion clinics. Everybody knew of them. . . and [Barnett] was considered as doing pretty good quality work as far as those people (abortionists) were concerned."*

Her daughter Margaret recalled in the same newspaper feature that everybody knew that abortions were being done and who was doing them. Physicians, cab drivers, bartenders, and even elevator boys knew where to refer a woman "in trouble" with a baby she did not intend to keep.

Was it a "back alley" operation?

Not at all, at least not when it came to "Dr. Ruth" as she was known to clients and members of the vice squad.

"A clinic such as mine was not that at all," she states in her book. *"It was a bright, cheerful place, where women's problems were handled quickly, efficiently, and with dignity,"* as though the business of butchering babies was a wholesome or even legitimate medical practice.

"The clinic was outfitted with marble sinks, gold-plated faucets, waiting rooms with oil paintings and Oriental rugs so beautiful that Dr. Ruth would have friends come in for lunch," according to her daughter.

"Clients had tea" in what Margaret described as *"a lovely recovering room."* And one of the nurses would cook for them, doing such a good job that friends and others would call her meals "Barnett's Blue Plate Special."

And what of the 1864 Criminal Abortion Act which made abortion illegal in Oregon?

Barnett claimed *"the archaic statute,"* instituted less than thirty years before her own birth in 1891, *"had never been considered."* Indeed the authorities all seemed to look the other way, regarding her business as a "necessary evil."

"Ruth Barnett, The Abortionist Queen". . .

Ruth Barnett was clearly the most prominent abortionist in Oregon, and the most prominent female abortionist in the northwest. To legitimately be termed a "Doctor,"