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Bibliographic Cover Sheet



Title **Six Women Testify in Texas Phone Suit**

Publication *New York Times*

Date 1977-08-27

Abstract Six women describe sexual encounters with Ashley and Gravitt

Keywords T. O. Gravitt; James Ashley

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SIX WOMEN TESTIFY IN TEXAS PHONE SUIT

Sexual Encounters With Plaintiffs Described by Employees in Trial of Slander Case

Special to The New York Times

SAN ANTONIO, Aug. 27—The Southwestern Bell Telephone Company, under attack for discharging one executive and allegedly driving another to suicide, has defended itself in court with the testimony of six women who told of sexual encounters with the two men.

The women testified this week before a packed courtroom and a jury of 10 men and two women who have been hearing testimony for three weeks in the \$29.2 million lawsuit, filed nearly three years ago.

Since its inception, the case has been the target of speculation about sexual escapades involving company executives and women employees. The testimony in State District Court confirmed the earlier reports in explicit detail.

One woman, a \$22,000-a-year company employee in Dallas, testified about having sexual relations with James Ashley, one of the plaintiffs. Four other women, all employed by the telephone company, testified about sexual advances made by Mr. Ashley.

Top Executive in Texas

The sixth woman, an employment manager for Southwestern Bell in Lubbock, Tex., testified that she had "spent the night" in motels in various Texas cities with the late T. O. Gravitt, once the company's top executive in Texas.

Mr. Gravitt's family contends that the company drove him to suicide by investigating his personal and financial affairs as part of a corporate power struggle aimed at eliminating him from a position of influence within the company. Mr. Ashley, a friend and protege of Mr. Gravitt, contends that he was dismissed from his \$55,000-a-year job in San Antonio for the same reason.

The Gravitt family and Mr. Ashley have sued the company, its parent corporation, the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, and C. L. Todd, the company manager in San Antonio, for libel, slander, invasion of privacy, wrongful death and wrongful discharge.

The company maintains that it had the right to investigate rumors of sexual wrongdoing by Mr. Ashley, who has consistently denied the charges, and that the consequent investigation tended to confirm the original reports.

The key witness was Effie Montoya Rumsey, the Dallas employee, who testified that she had sexual relations with Mr. Ashley on a number of occasions because she feared for her job. He was formerly her supervisor when she worked here.

Mrs. Rumsey, a 32-year-old divorcee, testified that Mr. Ashley hired her in 1971 and that she subsequently had several conversations with him in which he threatened to dismiss her.

'Made Me Feel Obligated'

"The whole course of his conversation was, 'You know who's responsible for your job'" she said. "He made me feel very obligated. 'You owe me' was the context of his conversation."

Mrs. Rumsey also testified about a three-day party at a local motel. The incident, which took place in September 1974, one month before Mr. Ashley's discharge, is one of the central events of the case.

Mrs. Rumsey, who was then married, said she was ordered by Mr. Ashley to attend the party. Besides the two of them, two men and two women were present. The women were company employees.

The men were identified only as "insurance men from Dallas," she said, but evidence in the case has shown that one was a City Councilman from Denison, a community near Dallas, and the other the telephone company district manager in Denison.

Shortly after arriving at the party, she said, "We paired off. I went to one of the rooms in the suite with a man. I had to go to bed with him."

Another witness, Hope Rivera, said she had been invited to the party after passing a "visual inspection" by Mr. Ashley. She supported Mrs. Rumsey's testimony but denied having engaged in sexual relations herself.

'Didn't Turn Me On'

"He just didn't turn me on," she said, referring to the man she met at the party. However, she testified that she had seen Mr. Ashley in bed with a third woman.

In an effort to discredit Mrs. Rumsey's testimony, Pat Maloney, the attorney for the plaintiffs, elicited testimony from her about having sexual intercourse with Mr. Ashley and another telephone company executive on the same day several years ago.

Mr. Maloney's comments and questions raised defense objections that he was being "ugly" and "crude," to which the lawyer replied, "I'm just trying to bring out what a hot potato we've got here."

Mr. Maloney contends that Mr. Ashley was "set up," because one of the women at the party was working with telephone company security agents who were already investigating Mr. Ashley.

The woman, Toby Hughes, was a secretary in the local office of the telephone company and is now employed by an A.T.&T. subsidiary in New Mexico. She testified that, on the night she attended the motel party, Mr. Ashley attempted to have sexual relations with her but she refused. Afterward, she reported what took place to the company's security agents.

Mrs. Hughes also reported an earlier incident involving Mr. Gravitt. She testified that she had once accepted his invitation to have a drink with him at a private apartment, and that she had rebuffed the sexual advances he made there.

Several witnesses, including Mrs. Hughes, testified that they had heard reports that women who attended parties arranged by Mr. Ashley, or who engaged in sexual relations with him, were subsequently promoted, but no direct evidence of such activity has been introduced. The allegation that Mr. Ashley was involved in a sex-for-promotion scheme is one of the reasons for his dismissal, according to the company.

Earlier in the week, Judge Peter Michael Curry refused to grant a mistrial requested by defense attorneys. He also denied motions that A.T.&T. and Mr. Todd be dropped as defendants, although he indicated that he might consider the motions again after the defense rests its case.