

# Leila W. Roller v. The Minneapolis Journal

(1890)

On June 7, 1889, Minneapolis police raided the home of Madame Leppla, 829 Twentieth Avenue South in Minneapolis. There they found several naked women and men who scurried to escape. The Leppla home quickly became known as a "house of assignation"—in other words, a house of prostitution. The arrests made headlines. This from the *Minneapolis Tribune* :

## VERY SENSATIONAL ARRESTS.

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Police Capture Four People Said to Be  
Very Well Known.

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At about midnight last night Sergt Krumweide and Officers Gustafson and Johnson made a raid on the gilded palace of sin kept by Mrs. Leanora Leppla at 829 Twentieth avenue south, and the result was a startling revelation.

On entering the house a party of six was found, three men and three women. Two of the men and two of the women had removed all of their clothing, and one of the men rushed from the house and ran two blocks before he was captured by Officer Johnson.

All of the parties, with the exception, perhaps, of Mrs. Leppla, the proprietress, were said to be well known people of high social standing. The men occupy high positions as state and county officers. One of the women is said to be the wife of a well known and highly respected, physician, the other occupying a leading place in social high life. The party were not submitted to the indignity of riding in the patrol wagon, but hacks were procured and they were conveyed to the central station. A messenger was at once dispatched for judge Emery.

No one was allowed to see them, and the police would not give out any names. At 2 o'clock the judge had not arrived.<sup>1</sup>

Eventually two women and two men arrested at Mme. Leppla's were arraigned. From the *Minneapolis Tribune*:

### THAT MIDNIGHT ESCAPE.

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#### The Principals in a Disgraceful Affair Forfeit Their Bail

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The principals in the midnight raid made by the police on the house of assignation kept by Mrs. Leonora Leppla, on Twentieth avenue south near Ninth street, were with the exceptions of the housekeeper, released by an order of Judge Emery early yesterday morning, after depositing \$25 as guarantee money to appear in the municipal court at 9 o'clock. The names given were J. H. Darling, S. C. Harling, P. H. Jones, Belle Walker and Alice Wood. When court opened, however, none of them appeared and the bonds were declared forfeited.

Mrs. Leppla was arraigned for keeping a house of prostitution, but waived examination and had her case set for hearing June 12 under \$500 bonds, which she furnished.

Judge James Schoonmaker, formerly on the municipal bench in St. Paul, proved to be one of the men arrested. He appeared before Judge Emery later in the day and after explaining the matter his bail was ordered refunded. He stated that he was wholly unaware of the character of the house and had gone there to see another lawyer on some important legal business. He had just entered the place when the raid was made. Judge Schoonmaker is a gentleman and has the very best reputation both in this city and St. Paul.<sup>2</sup>

On September 18, 1889, Mrs. Leppla pleaded not guilty.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 8, 1889, at 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 9, 1890, at 4 ("Mrs. Leppla's Guests Jump Their Bail and Escape").

<sup>3</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, October 19, 1889, at 8. Mme. Leppla's case was called for trial and continued to the next term several times. When it was called for trial on May 6, 1890, the

During the raid Sergeant Henry Krumweide knocked Mme. Leppla over. She then sued him for \$2,000 in damages. The case was tried before Judge Smith on February 11, 1890, and the jury returned a sealed verdict that night.<sup>4</sup> The next morning the verdict was announced for the defendant; however, according to the *Minneapolis Tribune*:

Just as the case was decided, a well dressed, middle aged man hurried up the stairway, drew Officer Krumweide aside, showed him a photograph of a lady, then asked:

"Was she one of the women found in the house in June last?"

The officer glanced at the cleanly cut features, the wealth of hair, the large, fascinating eyes, and replied that she was one of them. The gentleman is a prominent young business man of St. Paul, who, it is said, had reason to expect that his wife was in the Leppla house last June with a male attendant. Now that he has proof of this he will bring a suit for divorce and the whole matter will very likely be revealed. At the time of the raid one of the women arrested said it would simply be a case of "cold lead" if her husband discovered her episode.<sup>5</sup>

Armed with this damaging information, Peter P. Roller, "the well dressed, middle aged man," then sued his wife Leila Roller, the woman in the photograph, for divorce, and the cases were tried before Judge Lochren in early October 1890. Because they were filled with salacious allegations, they were covered closely by the local press. From the *Tribune*:

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country attorney agreed to a continuance. The paper reported: "Mrs. Leppla, it is said, is now engaged in other business, and the county attorney feels that as long as this is the case he does not feel called upon to push matters." *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 7, 1890, at 8. Eventually there were no more articles about the case being called for trial and it must be assumed the criminal charges were dismissed (although the attorney for Mme. Leppla in her personal injury suit against Sgt. Krumweide "admitted" in his opening statement "that she had been convicted of running an assignation house." *Minneapolis Journal*. February 11, 1890, at 6. This probably referred to a previous conviction, one before the June 7, 1889 raid.).

<sup>4</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, February 11, 1890, at 1, 8. The evening *Minneapolis Journal* quoted extensively from the examination of witnesses who testified for the plaintiff, including L. A. Merrick, "a prominent young attorney of Minneapolis" who was present during the raid. February 11, 1890, at 6 (this story was published before the jury returned a verdict).

<sup>5</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, February 12, 1890, at 8 ("Lena Leppla gets Nothing from Krumweide").

There was some disgusting evidence regarding a disease for which Roller was treating on his return from one trip. He charged his wife with the responsibility. Tile raid on the Leppla house and the plaintiff's alleged gentlemen friends were not brought into the case yesterday morning. . .<sup>6</sup>

On Friday, October 3rd, Judge Lochren granted Leila Roller a divorce. From the *Tribune's* front page story:

Mrs. Leila W. Roller was yesterday granted a divorce from her husband, Peter P. Roller, and one of the filthiest cases ever tried in public in Minneapolis is over. Attorney Leftwich had finished summing up the case for the defense on Thursday evening, and when court convened yesterday.

Attorney Michael opened the argument for the plaintiff. He dwelt upon the fact of the plaintiff's violent temper, and her lack of responsibility when excited, holding that Roller should not have aggravated her. He also referred at length to the insulting letters Roller had written to his wife and the attempt to blackmail the reputation of Mrs. Hughson. He said, turning to Roller:

"I know Mrs. Hughson, and I say to you that she is a lady. I say to you, Peter P. Roller, that you are a scoundrel, and that you have attempted the most damnable scheme to besmirch the character of a good woman."

. . .

Judge Lochren, in remarking upon the case, went over the various assaults and quarrels, and generally decided that they were all committed without sufficient provocation. He passed over the letters, which, he thought, justified the comments of the counsel upon that fact. Passing to the manner in which the man had gone to the infant child and tried to form its mind against the mother, he hauled Roller over the coals unmercifully. He stated that he knew of nothing more degrading than

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<sup>6</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, October 1, 1890, at 7 ("Notorious Roller Divorce Case Finally Comes to Trial").

such an act, and the man who would make such a deliberate attempt was not fit for proper consideration.

"All things considered," he concluded, "I think I shall grant the decree."

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"How do you feel this morning, Mrs. Roller?" asked Mr. Leftwich, as she left the room. "How dare you speak to me, you dirty little pup?" was the evasive reply.

And a few hours later she sauntered leisurely down Fourth street past the office of the evening paper which she has sued for libel. On the steps stood Frank E. Nimocks [Mrs. Roller's alleged paramour] and they went down street together."<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile another suit brought by Mrs. Roller was pending in Hennepin County District Court. Here she claimed she was libeled by the *Minneapolis Journal* for reporting that she was present during the raid of the Leppla whore house in June 1889. From the *Tribune* :

Evening Journal Is  
to Be Sued for  
\$25,000.

Mrs. Leila W. Roller, of St. Paul, has brought a suit for \$25,000 against the Journal Printing Company, of this city, and the papers will be filed in the district court tomorrow. The complaint sets forth that the plaintiff is and for many years continuously last past has been a citizen of the United States and of the State of Minnesota, and for many years immediately prior to the commencement of this action has lived and resided a portion of said time in the city of St. Paul and the remainder in the city of Minneapolis, and during all of this time had a wide and extended circle of friends and acquaintances in both cities and other places in this state, and has at all times lived an upright, virtuous and respectable life, enjoying the respect of all

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<sup>7</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, October 4, 1890, at 1.

who know her. She is the wife of P. P. Roller, and mother of a child now living in St. Paul.

During the month of June, 1889, the petition continues, one Mme. Leppla did and for long prior thereto had kept and maintained in Minneapolis a house of assignation, and in the month of June, 1889, police officers of that city raided the house and arrested among the inmates two women whose names to plaintiff are unknown and who were in the house for unlawful and immoral purposes. That the defendant well knowing these facts did on the 11th day of February, 1890, compose and publish in said paper under bold headlines and in a conspicuous place a defamatory article bearing the headlines:

"No balm for madam. The jury finds for ex-Sergt. Henry Krumweide. A St. Paul man's discovery. He finds that his wife was one of the two women arrested during that historic raid."

That the Leppla woman in said article mentioned is same name as hereinbefore referred to, and this plaintiff is the person in said article referred to is the wife of a young businessman of St. Paul, and further on in said article mentioned as the wife of said P. P. Roller therein mentioned. That said defendant in composing, publishing and circulating said article intended to be and was understood to charge that this plaintiff was one of the two women above referred to and the same was understood by those who read the article. That the publication of this article was meant to charge the plaintiff with immoral conduct as under the laws of the state would entitle her husband to a divorce, and that she, by reason of such arrest, had left the state. All of which has subjected her to scorn, contempt and hatred and that the publication of the article is false and defamatory and she was injured in her body and mind and suffered greatly in her reputation and good name. She asks for \$25,000 with interest from date of the complaint, together with costs and disbursements of in this action.

Johns, Michael & Johns, of St. Paul, are the attorneys of the complainant.

The article in the *Journal* was printed on the sixth page and is about half a column in length, it says, in brief, that P. P. Roller, of St. Paul, general agent for the Home Insurance Company, was in the Hennepin county court house during the trial of the Leppla case and became convinced that one of the women seen in her house on the night of the raid was his wife.

Sergt. Henry Krumweide, when shown a picture of Mrs. Roller, identified it, the article says, as one of the two women. Mr. Roller thereupon commenced preparations for a suit for divorce. Mrs. Roller had instituted proceedings for divorce a few months previously, but her husband is represented as having said that the discovery made by him would give him the divorce and not his wife.<sup>8</sup>

Mrs. Roller's libel case was called for trial on Monday, October 27, 1890.<sup>9</sup> And so, just over three weeks after her notorious divorce, she was back in District Court for another headline-producing trial. The first day was reported in the *Tribune* :

### IN THE COURTS.

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Mrs. Roller Sues the *Journal*  
for \$25,000—The Details  
Spicy.

. . .

The case of Leila W. Roller against the *Journal* came up yesterday with a struck jury. Many have supposed that this

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<sup>8</sup> *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, March 9, 1890, at 5. Here the *Tribune* paraphrases Mrs. Roller's complaint, which quotes the story in the February 11, 1890, edition of the *Journal*. That particular edition was printed and circulated *after* the jury returned its verdict. The *Journal's* February 11th article with the alleged libelous words is not on microfilm at the Minnesota Historical Society and so cannot be reproduced here; the story on microfilm at the MHS was in an early edition, printed before the jury returned with a defense verdict. At that time a newspaper such as the *Journal* printed several editions during the afternoon and evening, and in each was added recent developments in previously published stories.

<sup>9</sup> The *Roller-Journal* case was tried to a "struck jury." The struck jury was abolished by 1891 Laws, c. 84, at 157-158 (effective March 20, 1891).

case would be dismissed, though upon what ground that opinion has been based would be hard to say. The case is a suit for damages against the paper for printing a statement to the effect that Mrs. Roller, who it will be remembered recently obtained a divorce from her husband on the ground of cruel and inhuman treatment before Judge Lochren, was in the Leppla mansion at the time the police made their now famous raid upon that institution. The account was published in connection with the suit of Madam Leppla against the officers who made the raid. She is prepared to prove that she was not in the house at the time.

The case came up before Judge Hicks and as there were but six of the jurors present, there was a wait of considerable length.

Mr. Roller appeared first on the scene, looking more a back number than ever, and the former wife, the once pretty Leila, took a seat in the room soon after, looking slightly improved in feature, but with the same jacket and hat, with the same coquettish feathers that had appeared on the stand in the former sensational divorce proceedings.

The attorneys finally agreed to fill the list of jurors from the regular panel, and the case opened up at about 11 o'clock.

Mrs. Roller was placed on the stand and stated that at the time of the publication she was in Chicago. She was there from Jan, 22 to Feb. 11, working for a Mrs. Bishop. The publication had made her ill when she had seen it, and she suffered considerably. Her examination was short, and then Mr. Miller presented the case to the jury.

He rehearsed the story of the raid upon the Leppla house and the subsequent action of the madam against Officer Krumweide. He stated that in giving the article publication the paper had but stated the facts when it stated that a picture had been shown to the officers, and they had said that it was the photograph of one of the women arrested there.

Sergeant Krurmweide was the first upon the stand, and he rehearsed the scene of the raid, almost positively identifying Mrs. Roller as the woman he had seen there. Officers Johnson and Gustafson, who had assisted in the arrest, also testified



that in their opinion she was the same person. Krumweide was allowed to go to his home and bring in the photograph which Roller had showed him, and he had kept.

Assistant City Attorney Hall told what he knew of the trial at which the picture was shown by Roller, and of his telling Reporter Park the circumstance.

R. E. Park then told how he had become acquainted with the facts, and testified as to Mrs. Roller's general reputation. Mrs. Smith, a boarding house keeper, did the same, and finally Mrs. Roller was again called. The circumstances surrounding the episode of the Nimocke picture in the watch was again brought up, and many other of the circumstances of the divorce suit. The object was to prove her of bad character. Attempts were also made by the plaintiff to learn the names of the people arrested during the raid, but without success.<sup>10</sup>

The account of the first day from the *Globe*:

## THE LEPPLA HOUSE AGAIN.

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Mrs. Leila Roller and Her Libel  
Suit Against the Journal.

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The famous raid upon the Leppla house of assignation on Twentieth avenue south was recalled yesterday when the libel suit of Mrs. Leila W. Roller, the divorced wife of P. P. Roller, against the Journal was called for trial before a struck jury. The suit is brought to recover \$25,000 damages for an article in the Journal intimating that Mrs. Roller was one of the ladies arrested stark naked when ex-Sergt. Krumweide made a descent upon the house.

Mrs. Roller is prepared to prove that she was not in the house at the time. In opening the case John M. Miller, attorney for the paper, used the following language:

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<sup>10</sup> *The Minneapolis Tribune*, October 28, 1890, at 6.

"If my worthy friend on the other side had lived in the city of Minneapolis he would have known that the woman sitting there is not one to come before a Hennepin county jury and ask for damages—a woman who has born such a reputation, as we shall prove, that it would make a respectable woman blush to be seen with her after dark."

Ex-Sergeant Krumweide was the first witness. He said that he entered the house by means of the window and arrested six people; one of them was identified as Mrs. Roller. She was entirely naked except a chemise, which she had thrown over her shoulders. He lent her his overcoat to cover herself with. He noticed particularly that she had one front tooth which had been filed.

Upon being asked if he knew any of the other women, he said:

"Well, that there case got me into lots of trouble. I got bounced from the police force on account of that, and I don't like to say."

He was forced to answer.

Sergeant Gustafson was the next witness. He positively identified Mrs. Roller as one of the women arrested. There was a bright light, and he had ample opportunity to study her appearance. He also said that he chased one naked man up the street, but did not give his name.

Mrs. Roller took the stand late in the afternoon. She said that since her divorce she had been a resident of Chicago, where she worked at shorthand and typewriting.<sup>11</sup>

The next day testimony concluded, the jury instructed and a verdict returned. The *Tribune's* account of the second day of trial:

### Leila Roller Gets the Worst of It in the Verdict Yesterday.

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<sup>11</sup> *St. Paul Daily Globe*, October 28, 1890, at 3.

Mme. Leppla was called to testify in the Roller libel suit yesterday morning, and stated positively that Mrs. Roller was not one of the women at her house during that eventful night. She had only seen her once, and that was when she came to her house to ask her if she would testify to such fact. She grew rather heated under Mr. Miller's cross-examination and showed a bad temper, referring to her case against Krumweide.

James Schoonmaker was next called, but didn't respond. Plaintiff's attorney rose and stated that he held a subpoena for him, and would have to ask that an attachment be issued against him unless he could be found. It was urged that the case be continued until 2 o'clock until he could be found, but Judge Hicks ordered a recess for 10 minutes instead, while Mr. Michaels went through the court house to find him.

Mr. Schoonmaker was finally found and took the stand. He stated that he was in the court much against his will, and asked that the questions be as brief as possible, as he did not wish to be mixed up with it any more than possible.

He stated that he was a member of the Ramsey county bar. He knew Madam Leppla; saw her on the 7th day of June, 1889.

"Do you have any objection to stating what you went there for?"

"I don't think it is material. I was there on business."

"Who were arrested that night?"

"Three women."

"Who were they?"

"Madam Leppla and two others."

"Describe them."

"One was a small woman with light brown or auburn hair. The other was a larger woman with light brown hair."

"Mrs. Roller, stand up and take off your coat, Now Mr. Schoonmacker (sic), is this one of the women?"

"She is like the larger one, only that the hair was light."

"Is she the smaller one, as is claimed by the officers?"

"No, sir there is no question about that, she is not the woman."

"Judge," asked Mr. Miller, "wouldn't you be better able to tell, if she was dressed now as she was then, or rather undressed?"

"These women were dressed when I saw them. It was just before they were taken to the station."

"You didn't see any naked women, then?"

"No, sir. I saw a naked man between two doors."

"When did you leave the house?"

"About 10:30."

"Court was not in session then, was it?"

"No, sir, it was not."

"How long is it since you ceased being a judge?"

"My term expired last spring."

"How is your memory for faces, judge," asked Mr. Michaels.

"I can say that it is almost perfect."

Mrs. Roller was again called and stated that on the night of the raid she was at home, where she roomed, with Mr. and Mrs. George Glass, 1015 Third avenue south. Their son George had come home late that night, and told the family that there had been a raid in South Minneapolis. He had been with Joe Mannix, a reporter on the Pioneer Press, who had told him that three women had been arrested and that one of the men arrested with them was Harry Allen.

She said that she had been to the Leppla place but once, when she went to ask if the madam would testify as to her not being there. She was not there at the time of the raid. There was a long tilt between the defendant's counsel and the witness in an attempt to mix her up in her testimony. In that they had some little success.

Officer Gustafson was again called. He was asked if he had seen Judge Schoonmaker on that evening. He said the judge was the man who had been chased two blocks. He said that they had covered up the faces of the women, and the judge could not have seen them. On cross examination he said that he knew white from black when he saw it. He admitted that he didn't see the arrest himself.

Officer Johnson stated materially the same as his brother officer. He was the one who had chased the judge and caught him. The women, he said, were so disguised that the judge couldn't have seen them. The judge, he said, wasn't naked. He hadn't been in the house long enough to get his clothes off.

Ex-Sergeant Krumweide was again placed on the rack, and stated that the judge had no opportunity to see the women's faces.

Judge Rea then summed up for the defense and Attorney Michael followed for the plaintiff. The jury went out at 4:30 p. m., and returned in a short time with a verdict for the defendant.<sup>12</sup>

The *Globe* also reported the story:

### GOT NO VERDICT

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#### Mrs. Leila W. Roller Loses Her Libel Suit Against the Journal.

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Mrs. Leila W. Roller is in the consomme with her libel suit against the Journal, for after a short deliberation yesterday the jury brought in a verdict for the defendant.

Yesterday morning Mme. Leppla was put on the stand. She testified that she never saw Mrs. Roller but once before, and that was three weeks after the house was raided. Mrs. Roller came to her to ask her if she would testify that she was not in the house.

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<sup>12</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, October 29, 1890, at 8. This item appeared on the editorial page of the *Tribune* the next day:

Mrs. Roller came to grief in her libel suit. Even the Journal's lurid local writers could not damage her.

This doesn't seem to be a good fall for speculative libel suits against newspapers.

*Minneapolis Tribune*, October 30, 1890, at 4.

Judge James Schoonmaker, of St. Paul, who was in the house at the time of the raid, was next called. He stated that he was in court against his will and asked that the examination be as brief as possible, as he did not want to be mixed up in the matter any more than necessary. He said that Mrs. Roller was not one of the women who were arrested. He did not see any naked women, but did see one naked man.

Sergeant Gustafson said that the judge could not have seen the faces of the women, for when he was brought into the house the women were veiled. Officer Johnson testified that he was the one who chased the judge and caught him. He wasn't naked for he hadn't been in the house long enough to get his clothes off.

Judge Rea summed up for the defense and Mr. McMichael (sic) for the plaintiff.<sup>13</sup>

Editorialists at the *Journal* shall have the last words:

### Libel Suits.

One day last week a libel suit against The Journal was dismissed by the plaintiff. Yesterday another was concluded with a verdict for the defendant, the jury being out 15 minutes.

These results are significant. In either case was any explanation or retraction requested. The plaintiffs apparently did not want a denial or retraction by the paper, but wanted money. Any reputable paper is always ready to make all possible and reasonable of amends if it has injured anyone by

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<sup>13</sup> This article was printed twice in the *St. Paul Daily Globe*, October 29, 1890, at 6 & 8. The next day the *Globe* printed this gossip:

A certain Republican candidate for a state office came near figuring in the salacious Roller libel case the other day, and just why he wasn't summoned to testify as to whether the plaintiff for damages against the Journal was present at the notorious Lepla resort on the night it was raided is one of those things that are due to certain mysterious influences that exist in Hennepin county about election time.

*St. Paul Daily Globe*, October 30, 1890, at 6.

the publication of derogatory statements that prove upon further investigation to have been untrue. The law of newspaper libel was not made to enable the vicious to extort money from newspapers and those disposed to make that use of it are rapidly finding it out. The courts as well as the public recognizes the fact that the danger of publicity is one of the strongest deterrents against crime and that the exposure of crime and injustice when decently and appropriately made serves an important good purpose.

The result of these two cases, the only suits to which The Journal has had to make answer for a long time, shows, too, that much greater care is taken in handling the news of the day than the public generally gives the newspapers credit for. Much of the news published is necessarily personal, and the papers are required by their readers to be plain spoken, and truthful in their reports. In an afternoon paper, especially, it is necessary to handle many columns of matter—enough to make a big book—in a few hours. The newspapers are generally entitled to credit for care and accuracy and a desire to be fair and when they do happen to make mistakes, to an opportunity to correct those errors.<sup>14</sup>

And so ended another libel lawsuit against a metropolitan newspaper in Minnesota. There would be more such suits in the 1890s—many more.

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Related Article

“The Criminal Libel Trial of Rebecca J. Taylor” (1896).  
(MLHP, 2021)

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<sup>14</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, October 29, 1890, at 4.