



State of Tennessee  
Department of State  
Tennessee State Library and Archives

Georgia Tann/Tennessee Children's Home Society  
Investigation Scrapbooks, 1950

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COLLECTION SUMMARY

**Inclusive Dates:**

1950

**Scope & Content:**

Composed of two scrapbooks containing newspaper clippings related to Georgia Tann and the investigation into the Tennessee Children's Home Society initiated by Governor Gordon Browning. It is unknown who collected the materials. The newspaper clippings all date from 1950. The majority of clippings are from Tennessee newspapers including: *Nashville Tennessean*, *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, *Knoxville Journal*, *Nashville Banner*, *Chattanooga Times*, and *Knoxville News Sentinel*. There is one newspaper article from *The New York Post* and one from *The New York Times* as most of the children were placed in New York and California.

The Tennessee Children's Home Society operated orphanages in various counties in Tennessee in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. It was the oldest child-placing agency in the state as it was chartered as a private non-profit corporation in 1897. The main office was located in Nashville. In 1913, the Secretary of State granted a second charter to the agency and it began to send field agents out into all portions of the state. It established branch offices in Memphis, Knoxville, Chattanooga, and Jackson.

The Shelby County arm of the Tennessee Children's Home Society is best known for the "Babies for Sale" scandal that rocked Tennessee in 1950. Under the direction of Georgia Tann, it kidnapped infants and children and illegally adopted them out to wealthy families--typically in other states. Some of the children went to famous movie stars such as Joan Crawford, June Allyson, and Dick Powell.

Georgia Tann became the Executive Secretary of the Memphis Chapter (Shelby County Division) of the Tennessee Children's Home Society about 1922. Her father, George C. Tann, had been Chancellor of the Second District of Mississippi

for twenty-seven years. It was said that he took a strong interest in the well-being of orphans and that is what led Miss Tann to child welfare work. Before relocating to Memphis, Tann worked with social work organizations for children in both Mississippi and Texas. In Mississippi, she worked for the Mississippi Children's Home Society, before being asked to leave due to her dubious child-placing methods.

In Memphis, Tann ran a black market baby-selling/adoption ring. She was accused of seizing children and selling them to whoever would pay the exorbitant fees she set. It was reported that Tann pocketed about 80 to 90 percent of the adoption fees for the children she placed.

Perhaps more troubling than Tann selling babies for profit is that she was also blamed for the deaths of many children. Some individuals even dubbed her a "serial killer." During her tenure, Shelby County had the highest infant mortality rate in the nation. The 1951 investigation report to Governor Browning gives the following details:

*While the financial transactions of Miss Tann were shocking enough other facts came to our attention which disturbed us even more. We found that on many occasions babies had been taken from their mothers at the hospitals when only a few hours old and placed in nursing homes in and about Memphis where they were without medical care. Many of these children died. Not only that, but the children placed in the Memphis' home, itself, were not properly cared for and many children died while there as a direct result of violations of physician's orders. Doctors would prescribe formulas and medicines which were completely disregarded on orders from the director of the Memphis home.*

Tann was a highly respected member of the community and evinced a lavish lifestyle. She had friends among all the prominent families and received support from legislators and local politicians alike. Tann also obtained help in her adoption schemes from Shelby County Family Court Judge Camille Kelley. Judge Kelley oversaw many of Tann's adoptions without properly complying with state laws. Kelley reportedly received payments from Tann for her assistance. However, the 1951 report to Browning by the State of Tennessee Department of Public Welfare would somewhat exonerate Kelley of the bribery charges. It stated that the department made no "charge that the Judge of Juvenile Court profited in any way" but "that she failed on many occasions to aid destitute families and permitted family ties to be destroyed when they might well have been preserved."

The Memphis branch of the Tennessee Children's Home Society lost its endorsement from the Child Welfare League of America in 1941 when the League discovered that Tann had been destroying paperwork associated with her adoptions. When questioned about this practice, Tann indicated that documents related to adoptions were shielded by state privacy laws and that the Society was not violating any laws by destroying files. Judge Sam Bates cited that the

“Tennessee Children’s Home Society had been dropped from the Child Welfare League of America because of its repeated failure to have homes of foster parents investigated prior to the placement of children for adoption, because Tennessee Children’s Home Society had failed to study the children and their heritage before placing them for adoption, because of the failure of the Society to select proper homes for the children placed for adoption, because the foster parents had been permitted to select the child of their choice rather than placing the children in the home best suited for the child, because the home had engaged in advertising children for adoption and had encouraged hasty placements in disregard of the childrens’ [sic] right to protection from commercial advertising, and because the Society had engaged in interstate placement of children at long distances from the situs of the Society which prevented careful home findings and suitable supervision pending adoption.” Judge Bates was also “of the opinion that Tennessee Children’s Home Society had failed to follow the advice of its medical advisors in many respects which had resulted in the unnecessary loss of life of many children which had been placed with it for placement for adoption.”

In 1950, Browning launched a state investigation into Tann and her arrangement of questionable adoptions. The newspaper snippets in the two scrapbooks reflect this examination. Clippings in the scrapbooks exhibit sensational headlines such as: “State Probes Million-Dollar Baby Market;” “Babies Carted Off At Midnight, Says Former Foundlings Nurse;” “State Investigator Says Force, Persuasion Used In Memphis Baby Racket;” “‘Farmed-Out’ Children’s Plight Revealed in Baby Profit Case;” “Baby Crime Probe Turns on Camille Kelley;” “Charge Miss Tann Falsified Records of Adoption Babies;” “Movie Stars Bought Babies at Memphis, State Charges;” and “Doctor Charges Baby ‘Deathtrap’ Memphis Home Losses in Diarrhea Flurry Declared ‘Hushed Up.’” An article from the September 12, 1950, edition of the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* had the following to say about the investigation:

*Governor Browning last night began an investigation of a reported \$1,000,000 black market in babies by the Shelby County Division of the Tennessee Children’s Home Society.*  
*The Governor said he instituted the investigation after receiving numerous reports that the Memphis office of the children’s agency was selling babies for profit.*

In spite of the investigative findings, no one was ever held accountable for the cruelties committed against these families as Georgia Tann died of uterine cancer just three days before the state filed charges against the orphanage. Shortly after the investigation began, Judge Kelley announced her retirement. She died in 1955 without being prosecuted or being made to answer for her involvement.

**Physical Description/Extent:**

2 volumes

**Accession/Record Group Number:**

2017-011

**Language:**

English

**Permanent Location:**

I-C-3

**Repository:**

Tennessee State Library and Archives, 403 Seventh Avenue North, Nashville, Tennessee, 37243-0312

**Administrative/Biographical History**

Beulah George (Georgia) Tann was born on July 18, 1891, in Philadelphia, Mississippi. She was the daughter of Beulah Yates (1868-1963) and George Clark Tann (1858-1932). Miss Tann graduated from Martha Washington College in 1913. She was the “Executive Secretary” of the Memphis Chapter (Shelby County Division) of the Tennessee Children’s Home Society from the early 1920s through 1950. Georgia Tann died in Memphis, Tennessee, on September 15, 1950. She is buried in Hickory Cemetery in Newton County, Mississippi.

**Organization/Arrangement of Materials**

The arrangement of the collection is chronological.

**Conditions of Access and Use****Restrictions on Access:**

No restrictions.

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## **Index Terms**

### **Personal/Family Names:**

Browning, Gordon, 1889-1976  
Kelley, Camille McGee  
Tann, Georgia, 1891-1950

### **Corporate Names/Organizations/Government Bodies:**

Tennessee Children's Home Society -- Corrupt practices -- History  
Tennessee. Department of Public Welfare

### **Subjects:**

Adoption -- Corrupt practices -- Tennessee  
Child welfare -- History -- Sources  
Children -- History -- Sources  
Human trafficking -- History -- Sources  
Infants -- Mortality -- History -- Sources  
Maternal and infant welfare -- History -- Sources  
Public welfare -- History -- Sources

### **Geographic Names:**

California -- History -- Sources  
Memphis (Tenn.) -- History -- Sources  
New York (State) -- History -- Sources  
Shelby County (Tenn.) -- History -- Sources

### **Document Types:**

Clippings (information artifacts)  
Scrapbooks

## **Acquisition and Appraisal**

### **Provenance and Acquisition:**

The Georgia Tann/Tennessee Children's Home Society Investigation Scrapbooks were donated to the Tennessee State Library and Archives by Chuck Brown with the Tennessee Department of Children's Services in February 2017.

## **Processing and Administrative Information**

### **Preferred Citation:**

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### **Processing Information:**

Processing was completed by Lori D. Lockhart, March 2017.

### **Existence and Location of Copies:**

Mf. 2068

## DETAILED COLLECTION DESCRIPTION

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### CONTAINER LIST

<b>Contents/Item Title</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Box</b>	<b>Item</b>
Scrapbook	1950	1	1
Scrapbook	1950	1	2