



# **The Shooting Salvationist: J. Frank Norris and the Murder Trial that Captivated America**

*David R. Stokes , Bob Schieffer (Foreword)*

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*The Shooting Salvationist* chronicles what may be the most famous story you have never heard. In the 1920's, the Reverend J. Frank Norris railed against vice and conspiracies he saw everywhere to a congregation of more than 10,000 at First Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, the largest congregation in America, the first "megachurch." Norris controlled a radio station, a tabloid newspaper and a valuable tract of land in downtown Fort Worth. Constantly at odds with the oil boomtown's civic leaders, he aggressively defended his activism, observing, "John the Baptist was into politics."

Following the death of William Jennings Bryan, Norris was a national figure poised to become the leading fundamentalist in America. This changed, however, in a moment of violence one sweltering Saturday in July when he shot and killed an unarmed man in his church office. Norris was indicted for murder and, if convicted, would be executed in the state of Texas' electric chair.

At a time when newspaper wire services and national retailers were unifying American popular culture as never before, Norris' murder trial was front page news from coast to coast. Set during the Jazz Age, when Prohibition was the law of the land, *The Shooting Salvationist* leads to a courtroom drama pitting some of the most powerful lawyers of the era against each other with the life of a wildly popular, and equally loathed, religious leader hanging in the balance.

[www.theshootingsalvationist.com](http://www.theshootingsalvationist.com)

## The Shooting Salvationist: J. Frank Norris and the Murder Trial that Captivated America Details

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# **From Reader Review The Shooting Salvationist: J. Frank Norris and the Murder Trial that Captivated America for online ebook**

## **Frederick says**

J. Frank Norris was an enigma. He is so revered in some fundamentalist circles that one of the nation's leading Libertarian speakers and writers, Laurence Vance, named his own son after him. It isn't possible to understand any historical figure by only reading books by people who don't like him, which Stokes clearly does not. It might be a reasonable thing to do to read a book by a supporter just to try to get a balanced picture in my mind. This is an okay book but the bias is so obvious it made me feel uncomfortable reading it.

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## **Tim Chavel says**

My wife bought me this book for Valentine's Day. The cover of my book says, "ADVANCE READING COPY NOT FOR SALE," so I might have an unedited copy.

I never knew that J. Frank Norris killed a man until I heard about this book about a year or so ago. J. Frank Norris was a famous pastor in the 1920's -1950's. He had a church in Fort Worth, TX, that had a membership of several thousand people. This was a fascinating read for me. The author, David R. Stokes, is a pastor and an author. He wrote the book from the perspective that J. Frank Norris should be convicted for the killing. The book has some interesting side notes about history from the 20's. One example is the trial and acquittal of Clara Hamon. Clara had shot and killed Jake Hamon, the "Oil King of Oklahoma." Jake was one of the wealthiest men in the West and he also backed the Republican presidential candidate in 1920, Warren G. Harding. Harding planned to reward Hamon with the job of secretary of the interior. Florence was Jake's real wife, Clara was the "other" woman. Clara's last name was not fake. Jake had paid his nephew, Frank, ten thousand dollars to marry Clara so she would have the "Hamon" last name. In order for Jake to take the Secretary of Interior job, Harding required Jake to get back with his real wife. To make a long story short Clara could not bear losing Jake so she shot him.

There are people who agree with Stokes such as Trevin Wax, who writes a great blog about lessons learned from this book. Then there are others who disagree such as Roy Falls who has several youtube videos about the topic.

If you enjoy history, court cases, or/and religion you will enjoy this book.

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## **Jean says**

The book opens with the ending of the Scopes trial and the sudden death of William Jennings Bryan. Apparently the Fundamentalist Christian movement was at its peak in the 1920s. J. Frank Norris was a Baptist pastor and a social activist fighting to "clean up" Fort Worth had helped obtain the services of Bryan to prosecute Scopes. The First Baptists Church of Fort Worth had a huge membership the church could hold 5000 people and was full for every service. Norris also published a Church Fundamentalist newspaper and

Radio program which brought in nationwide membership and donations. In late 1926 Dexter Eliot (D.E.) Chips, a divorced Lumberman walks into the Church office. He was there to warn Norris against continuing his attacks on the Fort Worth mayor and his political cronies. What exactly happened in that office is a matter of dispute, but what isn't in dispute is Norris shot and killed Chipps. The second half of the book is about the famous trial. It was as famous and notorious as some of today's trials such as Casey Anthony or O. J. Simpson. The author tells a remarkable story filled with religious and political conflict and Stokes does his best to milk it for all its drama. People famous and infamous as well as institution and organization, such as the Ku Klux Klan have faded and disappeared, the modern reader needs a good deal of information to understand what is going on and why it is happening. This kind of background is necessary but it stalls the narrative. Stokes is careful to fit the story in its historical, cultural context. He describes the political infighting in the city of Fort Worth and in the State of Texas in the 1920's. The author used the actual trial transcript and looked at the attorneys strategies; he describes the press coverage of the trial. Norris claims self defense and the State is asking for the death penalty for murder. I will not spoil the ending but you will enjoy the exciting courtroom drama. It is a book that will both keep you reading and teach you something's you may not have known about the opening decades of the 20th century. I read this as an audio book downloaded for Audible. R. C. Bray did a good job narrating the book.

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## **Bob Hayton says**

J. Frank Norris may be the most influential fundamentalist leader that almost no one has heard about. In his day, he was a shoe-in to lead the fundamentalist movement after the passing of the great William Jennings Bryan of Scopes Trial fame. Norris was the fiery, fundamentalist pastor of Fort Worth's largest church. He boasted the largest Sunday School in the world and had his own newspaper and radio station. His flamboyant preaching style and knack for publicity stunts and marketing, were being emulated by countless fundamentalist pastors around the country.

It was the 1920s and the fundamentalist movement was nearly at its peak. J. Frank Norris was already one of the most influential leaders in Evangelical Christianity as a whole. But then something happened in July, 1926, which would change everything. Norris shot an unarmed man in his church office, and that story rocked the country.

The events leading up to this incident, and the incredible murder trial which followed, are the focus of a new book by David R. Stokes, published by Steerforth Press and distributed by Random House. Stokes tells the J. Frank Norris story of his upbringing in a small Texas town, his education and early ministry. He tells the story of Norris' time as pastor of First Baptist Church of Fort Worth, and his separation from the Southern Baptist denomination.

Stokes tells more than just Norris' story, he tells the story of early Fort Worth and its leading citizens: mayor H.C. Meacham, newspaper mogul Amon G. Carter, and the unfortunate Dexter Chipps, who perished in Norris' office that summer day in 1926. He describes the waning influence of the Ku Klux Klan, whose local leader was an influential member in Norris' church. Stokes also surveys Texas Politics of the 1920s and the big influence J. Frank Norris held through his radio station and newspaper. The story of fundamentalism and the Scopes Trial is also explored, as he sets the table for the fast-paced and moving account of the murder trial of J. Frank Norris.

Stokes tells this story in the words of the newspapers, and personal remembrances of the day. One can tell he spent countless hours pouring over microfiche and personal correspondence in preparation for this book. The

tale reads like a legal thriller, yet everything is true to life. Sometimes, it seems, life is stranger than fiction.

Ultimately acquitted, Norris lost the battle of public opinion. And his influence in Christianity and fundamentalism, began to decline. Norris' years after the murder trial are only briefly recounted, as the book focuses more on the murder trial itself.

I found Stokes' treatment of this charged story to be evenhanded and fair. Stokes, a minister himself, shows no favoritism for Norris' side of the story, nor does he partake in fundamentalist-bashing, although this story would certainly afford the perfect opportunity to cast stones. He doesn't step up and comment on what he thinks really happened or opine on how horrid Norris' pastoral example was. Instead he captures the spirit of the man J. Frank Norris, and presents us with the facts as revealed in the trial.

What exactly happened in Norris' office that day in 1926? We may never know. But the story of J. Frank Norris' murder trial has had far-reaching impact. His acquittal allowed him to continue to influence the next generation of fundamentalist leaders, and yet the trial certainly tarnished the image of fundamentalist Christianity.

As one who was raised a fundamentalist of Norris' ilk, who has been in churches founded by Temple Baptist Church of Detroit, which Norris pastored for a time (while at the same time still pastoring in Fort Worth), the tale of Norris is cautionary. His ideals were very man-centered and the emphasis in his ministry was on self-promotion and effort. Norris achieved the notoriety he desired, and even influenced many to follow Jesus Christ. But one has to wonder if the methods he used, while perhaps not murderous, have nevertheless afflicted fundamentalism with a deadly case of man-centered mania. Men like Jack Hyles and even Bob Jones, Sr. took pages from Norris' book as they lead their ministries in an egotistical fashion prizing loyalty from their followers, and advancing the cause through self-promotion and human-centered means.

Norris offers an example of how *not* to lead a church. And for fundamentalists today who are in a season of reformation and renewal, this book will prove to be a text-book example of where fundamentalism went wrong. I hope this book achieves a wide circulation, as the sad story it tells may serve to spur on further reformation and reflection by evangelical and fundamentalist Christians everywhere.

Pick up a copy of *The Shooting Salvationist: J. Frank Norris and The Murder Trial that Captivated America*. You won't find a more fascinating and captivating true story anywhere.

Disclaimer: This book was provided by SteerForth Press via the Amazon Vine Reviewers program. I was under no obligation to offer a favorable review.

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## **Shaune says**

I listened to the audio-book so I can't call it a page-turner:), but it had me riveted.

The author was meticulous in his research but his re-creation of the story using the techniques of a novelist worked really well. You feel like you were there. The main man, Norris, for me is not very likeable but the author explained the events of his childhood that shaped him. The author gives lots of context explaining about Texas politics in the 20s including the ominous role of the Klu Klux Klan, so that a person totally unfamiliar with this era and history is not shut out of the story.

As far as literary -non fiction goes, it's no "In Cold Blood" but I have a feeling that the author probably took

less poetic license than Capote did. It should be noted that this book has been attacked as being biased against Norris. I felt the author was fair to him.

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### **Raymond says**

I have been fascinated with John Franklyn Norris since I learned of his victory against Bugsy Siegel and his <http://www.topohillterrace.com/> Top O' Hill Terrace in Arlington, Texas! I hoped to learn something about Harry Sinclair whose Sinclair Oil Headquarters were in Fort Worth.

I have been to Billy Sunday territory in Warsaw / Winona Lake, Indiana but had not known of Norris until our move to North Texas.

This was a really eye-opening introduction to many well known characters of that era here in North Texas! I really enjoyed this account of the intriguing controversial activities that led to the incredible trial and its conclusion and results.

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### **Greg Wilson says**

Growing up as an independent fundamental Baptist (IFB) and graduating from an IFB college, I was taught that Dr. J. Frank Norris was a hero. He was one of the founding fathers of (Baptist) fundamentalism. He not only was the pastor of one mega church but two mega churches at the same time! This was before (1930's and 1940's) there were mega churches or "virtual" campuses. In the late 1940's the First Baptist Church of Fort Worth Texas and the Temple Baptist Church of Detroit Michigan had a combined membership of around 25,000! The fact that Norris killed a man only added to his fundamentalist street cred. Both the Bible Baptist Fellowship and the World Baptist Fellowship owe their genesis to Norris.

This is a fascinating book about a sensational murder trial. I will not spoil the book by giving you the jury's decision. The author certainly has his opinion of guilt or innocence. You can decide for yourself if Norris was a murderer or not. What I found more fascinating was the personality and pulpit style of Dr. Norris (yes the "doctorate" was honorary in true IFB fashion). Although the author shows some bias, this was not a pastor to emulate. His un-Christlike and un-biblical manner speaks volumes about a movement who would consider this man a hero.

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### **Rebekah Schrepfer says**

The subtitle of the book is "The Pastor of America's First Megachurch and the Texas Murder Trial of the Decade in the 1920s." This is a research project by David Stokes about J. Frank Norris and his acquittal for the killing of D.E. Chipps on the grounds of self-defense. Although the book was an interesting read, I couldn't help but feel that I was getting a one-sided view of the facts. Most of the research was taken from newspapers and books about the city of Fort Worth and its culture and current events of the day. This only proved to me how much a fiery, fundamentalist preacher like Norris stood out and angered the community of unbelievers. Little was reported from the perspective of the congregation or Norris's own family, nor was there a thorough assessment of the southern fundamentalist movement in the 1920s in the same manner that he explored the secular culture of the day. Least helpful to me was Stokes' tendency to bring up any interest the KKK had with Norris, yet he ignored any number of possible explanations not the least of which is the nature of ministry in which pastors find themselves conversing with people of all walks of life. Most helpful

to me were the few transcripts of the actual trial which finally gave me some information from both sides of the story, and yet still the defense's testimony wasn't heard until Chapter 41 of the 46 chapters. What really happened is still a mystery to me.

Reviewed at MostlySensible.

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## **Jeri Massi says**

Fundamentalists whitewash the legacy of J Frank Norris. This historical narrative of one chapter in his tumultuous life will remind many of the temper and ego of Jack Hyles. It is also a masterful work of "setting the record straight" about a man who was a religious huckster and a crafty pulpитеer.

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## **Kurt says**

The story of J. Frank Norris is a compelling one, and one that is certainly relevant in contemporary United States society. A controversial fundamentalist preacher with ties to both Baylor University and the Ku Klux Klan (as a disgruntled Baylor alum, I'm offended by both associations) gains widespread notoriety as a leader of a massive church who is known more for his political involvement than for his Bible teaching. He expands his influence through mass media and seems to invite controversy for matters having little or nothing to do with Jesus Christ. Although the broad description could theoretically apply to figures in the news in this millennium, this particular story takes place in Fort Worth in the mid-1920s, and it focuses on the preacher's trial for murder. It seems that on a given day, a man with connections to the preacher's political enemies enters the church office, possibly drunk, and makes vague threats. The preacher pulls a gun from his desk to shoot the unarmed visitor, and no one even bends down to touch the man bleeding to death on the rug.

This is a story that should be absolutely fascinating, and it almost tells itself. It has religion, violence, politics, surprise courtroom plot twists, a few tangential sordid sexual matters... It should be a great book.

Unfortunately, the execution of the idea doesn't really succeed. Stokes is certainly clear and straightforward in his storytelling, with a brief framing sequence, a chronological presentation, and some logical digressions to give the larger background of, say, Fort Worth and the state of fundamentalism at the time of this story. Stokes uses extensive direct quotes, and even has the clever technique of taking a colorful bit of a quote to use as a title for each chapter. He just doesn't take that level of creativity and apply it to his narrative.

When he isn't sharing direct quotes, Stokes tells the story in a broad-shouldered prose that fits well thematically with the Wild West Fort Worth setting of the tale, but it has the result of seeming artless. Events unfold in a style of, "This happened and then this happened and then the newspapers said this," with almost no analysis from the historian to help the reader understand the importance of any given detail. To his credit, the author is quite good at building up suspense as he guides readers toward a dramatic verdict, and in the last few chapters, Stokes is relentless and funny in his repeated but surprisingly placed reminders that Norris shot an unarmed man. I wish he had chosen to inject more of his own voice into this work.

I think the main problem with this book is the commitment by Stokes to present his subject as a simple



villain. The author is careful to draw out the unsavory connections between Norris and the Klan, and to devote plenty of words to the preacher's selection of Napoleon as a personal hero, but the reader gets almost no other perspectives to balance out the picture. In a scene shortly after the dramatic shooting, a Socialist reporter interviews Norris (for an article that lends its awkward title to this book) and finds him to be one of the most complicated men she has ever met, and my puzzled response to that revelation was my best indication that the book wasn't working for me. The J. Frank Norris in these pages is a one-note villain, curious only in the creative ways he does sneaky things. If Stokes had trusted more in his abilities as a historian, I think he could have allowed Norris some complexity and still trusted that the reader would see the preacher as a villain, and I think if Stokes can flesh out his main character in a future edition, then that book will deserve a place on the shelves of every amateur Texas historian in the country. The version presented here, though, is a little too rough and lacking in style for me to confidently recommend to others.

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### **Micki says**

loved the book. i grew up in that church - my mother grew up in that church as well - during the time of J.Frank Norris. My grandma worked in the church office - so it was awesome to read of many of the stories and incidents that occurred while my mother and aunt were growing up and used to talk about. the book was written by someone who didn't really care too much for the pastor, but it very well written. very rich in fort worth history.

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### **Christy Lockstein says**

Apparent Danger by David Stokes is a true crime look at the 1920s murder trial of America's first megachurch pastor. J. Frank Norris was a controversial figure in Fort Worth, Texas. The head preacher of First Baptist Church was well known for his courting of trouble and links with the Ku Klux Klan. After fighting with city leaders for more than fifteen years, he shot and killed D.E. Chipps, a lumberman, in his office saying that it was self-defense. His trial created national interest and was filled with countless colorful figures. Stokes tells the story of the tension between Norris and the people of Fort Worth over the course of twenty years, laying the groundwork for the murder and trial to come. He occasionally throws in his opinion on the case making it obvious that he believes in Norris' guilt, however the evidence he gives doesn't prove that guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. I wish that Norris had personally interviewed some people associated with the case and included some pictures of the main players. I spent plenty of time on Google Images looking up pictures of the main players. The case is truly fascinating, and Stokes presents the evidence and characters well, but the book suffers for not providing the answer that has lingered for over 80 years: did Norris shoot Chipps in cold blood or self-defense?

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### **Lori says**

Really is fascinating book. Would have rated higher but I felt like at one point I was slogging thru the actual trial due to so much of the court transcripts being included. It would no doubt be a great read for anyone from that area interested in the History of Texas, Fort Worth, early Evangelists etc. I listened to audible.com version.

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**David Stokes says**

Well, I loved WRITING it ;) :)

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**Seth Alcorn says**

Very informative. Very helpful for those interested in fundamentalism in the early 20th century. Overall good read.

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