

The Sweet Trials

About

The *Sweet* trials, murder cases from Detroit in 1925 and 1926, offer a glimpse into urban life and racial tensions in Michigan during the mid-1920s. This is the era when the Northern system of *de facto* segregation solidified.

The trials and surrounding events feature compelling characters, including those of national significance such as the “Great Defender” Clarence Darrow and then-Judge Frank Murphy, who later became a Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

Historical Photos: Primary Source Analysis..... 2
In Their Own Words: Reader’s Theater.....3–6
Additional Resources 7



[Michigan K–12 Social Studies Standards](#)
8 – U6.2.1 | USHG 6.1.3, 6.1.4, 6.2.3, 6.3.1, 6.3.2, 7.1.1, P1.1, P1.2, P1.4, P2.1, P2.4, P3.1, P3.2

Primary Source Analysis

Activities

1. **Watch** [Great Michigan Read: The Sweet Trials and Detroit in the 1920s](#), and discuss to check understanding and to unpack public policy issues.
2. **Explore** images linked in [Detroit and the Sweet Trials](#) (PDF). Which images are particularly compelling? Do they lead to more information?
3. **Analyze** one or more photos in small groups using [Document Analysis Worksheets](#) and the process suggested by the National Archives.
 - Meet the document.
 - Observe its parts.
 - Try to make sense of it.
 - Use it as historical evidence.

Detroit and the Sweet Trials

In 1925, Dr. Ossian and Mrs. Gladys Sweet, an African American couple, moved into an all-white neighborhood in Detroit. Because they expected a violent welcome from the local "improvement" association, the couple armed themselves and others to defend the home.

On September 9, a man standing amidst an angry mob that gathered nearby was shot and killed. The Sweets and nine others in the house were arrested and stood trial.

Clarence Darrow defended the accused and Judge Frank Murphy presided over the trials. Was it murder or self-defense?

What was 1920s Detroit like? Who participated in the trial? Find images from these collections:

- Archives of Michigan
- Detroit Historical Museum
- Detroit Public Library
- Library of Congress
- Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University

The National Archives offers helpful [Document Analysis Worksheets](#) for interpreting primary sources.

Federal Map of Detroit and Environs, 1930 courtesy Archives of Michigan

Michigan Supreme Court Learning Center



Reader's Theater

Activities

1. **Watch** [Great Michigan Read: The Sweet Trials and Detroit in the 1920s](#), and discuss to check understanding and to unpack public policy issues.
2. **Read** the character descriptions and assign roles.
3. **Perform** the reader's theater script. Individual practice is encouraged, since appropriately dramatic reading will heighten the experience.
4. **Discuss** the performance:
 - How did your understanding of events change by hearing the words spoken by people involved in the case? How did it feel to say those words?
 - What compelling questions about the 1920s does this story raise for you? What supporting questions about the specific case would you want to investigate?
 - What meaning does this historical event have for your life today?

Extension Activity

- **Write** a journal entry or essay, using additional sources.



Reader's Theater

Characters

- NARRATORS** Readers who offer background information. A total of 13 narrators are marked, but the lines can be consolidated to create fewer roles or read by pairs or trios to expand the number of participants.
- NEIGHBOR** A member of the Waterworks Park Improvement Association, an all-white organization that wished to prevent persons of color from living in the area. The lines describe the association's goals as outlined in its bylaws.
- JURORS 1-2** Members of the community who decide the facts of the case, including the verdict.
- MRS. SWEET** Gladys Sweet, the 24-year-old wife of Dr. Ossian Sweet and mother of young Iva. By her steely determination, she convinced her husband to move into 2905 Garland Street, despite the threat of violence from those living in the neighborhood.
- DR. SWEET** Dr. Ossian Sweet, a 30-year-old medical doctor who had attended prestigious Howard University and traveled to Europe for medical training. Having grown up in Florida during the Jim Crow era, he understood the threat of racial violence, but he wanted a better home for his family. (First name pronounced: OH-shun, like the word "ocean.")
- MR. SWEET** Henry Sweet – Dr. Sweet's younger brother, a college student.
- JUDGE** The Honorable Frank Murphy, one of Michigan's most famous judges and politicians of the first half of the 20th century. He was an Irish-American, known for his good looks and charm. In 1925, he was 35 years old and recently elected as a progressive judge in Detroit Records Court. He later became Governor of Michigan and Justice of the United States Supreme Court.
- MR. DARROW** Clarence Darrow, a 69-year-old Midwestern lawyer known as the "Great Defender," champion of the working class. He dazzled the nation with his courtroom skills in high-profile cases, including the *Scopes* trial in 1925. The NAACP sponsored his work in the *Sweet* cases.
- PROSECUTOR** An attorney representing the "People of the State of Michigan" in a criminal case. Assistant Prosecutor Lester Moll later became a judge in Wayne County.

Reader's Theater

Script

- NARRATOR 1:** In 1925 Dr. Ossian and Mrs. Gladys Sweet, an African-American couple, moved into an all-white neighborhood in Detroit. Because they expected a violent welcome from the local “improvement” association, the couple armed themselves and nine others to defend the home.
- NARRATOR 2:** The Sweet’s experience was not unique, especially as the KKK’s strength surged in the North. In the mid-1920s the KKK had political influence in Detroit and elsewhere.
- NARRATOR 3:** People of color who looked for housing outside defined areas often faced resistance. Fears of white residents were based on negative racial stereotypes and the possibility that property values would fall if neighborhoods integrated.
- NARRATOR 4:** Like the Waterworks Park Improvement Association that opposed the Sweet family, neighborhood organizations sometimes used violence to maintain the *status quo*.
- NEIGHBOR:** I live nearby on Garland Street, and I’m a member of the improvement association. I want to keep our streets clean, cooperate with the police to maintain law and order, and keep our community respectable by finding and supporting ways to restrict who can live here.
- NARRATOR 5:** On September 9 – soon after the Sweet family moved in, an angry crowd gathered near the home. A man was shot and killed. All 11 adults inside the house were arrested and stood trial.
- JURORS 1–2:** Was it murder or self-defense?
- NARRATOR 6:** Under police questioning, Mrs. Gladys Sweet stated:
- MRS. SWEET:** I think it is my perfect right to move where I please.
- NARRATOR 6:** During trial Dr. Ossian Sweet explained:
- DR. SWEET:** When I opened the door and saw the mob, I realized I was facing the same mob that had hounded my people throughout its entire history.... I knew what mobs had done to my people before.
- NARRATOR 6:** In custody, Mr. Henry Sweet – Dr. Sweet’s younger brother, admitted:
- MR. SWEET:** I didn’t do anything until the stones began coming in on me. I tried to protect myself. I fired the rifle. The first time in the air. I fired again in the crowd ... to frighten them so they would leave us alone.

Reader's Theater

Script (Continued)

- NARRATOR 7: Judge Frank Murphy, who presided over the trials, was concerned about securing a fair trial for the defendants. He wrote to his mother:
- JUDGE: Above all things I want them to know that they are in a court where the true ideal of justice is constantly sought.... I want the defendants to know that true justice does not recognize color.
- NARRATOR 8: But was the shooting justified? The state's public peace law – sometimes called “the riot act” – required authorities to break up crowds that assembled “unlawfully, riotously, or tumultuously.” The police had been present but done little to disperse the crowd.
- NARRATOR 9: Defense lawyer Clarence Darrow made this argument to the all-white, all-male jury:
- MR. DARROW: The danger of a mob is not what it does, but what it might do.... The State claims there was no mob there that night. Gentleman, the State has put on enough witnesses who said they were there, to make a mob.
- NARRATOR 10: Notes explaining the public peace law reminded readers that in 1860 the Michigan Supreme Court decided in *People v Pond*:
- JUDGE: Private persons may forcibly interfere to suppress a riot. If they cannot otherwise suppress the rioters or defend themselves from them, such private persons may justify homicide in killing the rioters, as it is their right and duty to aid in preserving the peace.
- NARRATOR 11: Assistant Prosecutor Lester Moll told to the jury:
- PROSECUTOR: It is not whether you have any prejudice. It is not whether you are intolerant. It is not whether you are uncharitable, unsympathetic or sentimental. It is not whether Dr. Sweet and his associates had a right to move into a home of their own; it is what happened there on the night of September 9th. Was there justification for a shooting?
- NARRATOR 12: There were actually two trials: one for the entire group arrested in the Sweet's home and a second against Henry Sweet, the only defendant who admitted to firing his rifle.
- JUROR 1: In the first trial, we, the jury, could not come to a unanimous agreement on whether the Sweet's and their codefendants were guilty. It was hung jury.
- JUROR 2: Prosecutors tried again but did not convince us of Henry Sweet's guilt. We found him not guilty. He was acquitted.
- NARRATOR 13: While the defendants rejoiced at the outcome, the trials did not resolve all Detroit's racial tensions. However, the *Sweet* trials did signal a lessening of the virulent racism that peaked in the mid-1920s. It also laid foundations for later civil rights activists.

THE END

Additional Resources

Michigan Humanities Council, [Great Michigan Read: *Arc of Justice*](#)

Scroll down to find:

- Reader's Guide
- Teacher's Guide
- Intro Video

Background information, author interviews, historical photos, suggested resources, and activities for students from elementary to adult.

[Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights and Murder in the Jazz Age](#) by Kevin Boyle

City of Seattle, [Types of Racial Inequality](#)

State Bar of Michigan, [Michigan Legal Milestones: Ossian Sweet Trial](#)

