

Dr. John Brinkley: Quack Doctor, Radio Personality, and Politician

Jason C. Gilliland

“What a little tinkering with his character, a little more honesty here, a little more intelligence there-would have made him a real leader of men.”¹ William Allen White, the famous newspaperman from Emporia never was an ardent fan of Dr. John R. Brinkley. During much of the 1930s, White, along with other news writers, newspaper owners, medical journal writers, radio men, and other various commentators, engaged in a campaign to destroy the famous “rejuvenation” doctor. Others considered Brinkley to be the greatest doctor in North America, if not the world. Brinkley indeed, could have improved on his honesty and his character. However, he was not unintelligent or backwards. On the contrary, he was one of America’s first true media moguls. He had a true savoir-faire for self-promotion and understanding for the awesome possibilities of mass media marketing. Brinkley saw potential in new technologies and devised new methods to exploit them to their fullest. He used both good and bad press to further the world’s knowledge of himself and his work. He pioneered mass advertising by utilizing America’s modern postal system, newspaper advertisements, pamphlets, radio, and recorded media. With the same zeal that he exuded in his medical practice, he unintentionally became an innovator in radio broadcasting, modern American political campaigning, mass media advertising and “get rich quick” schemes. Much of what we are familiar with today in the world of “as seen on TV”, quack medicines and cures, contemporary political campaigning and the modern day country music industry, can be traced, in part, back to Dr. John Brinkley, the goat-gland doctor.

In this paper, I will look at Brinkley’s rise and fall through the lens of the media, and explore his use of it for self-promotion and as an advertisement tool. I will also look at how the media reacted to Brinkley and how those in the media who did not support him, helped lead him to his eventual downfall.

¹ William Allen White, *Emporia Gazette*, May 28, 1942.

A Brief History. John Romulus Brinkley (he would later change his middle name to Richard, the same as his father), was born July 8, 1885, in North Carolina. He was the illegitimate child of John Richard Brinkley and Sarah Candace Burnett, the niece of Brinkley's wife, Sarah Mingus. Burnett died when Brinkley was five years old and his father five years after that. In 1907, Brinkley married Sally Wike, a former classmate and they had three children who grew to adulthood. They divorced in April, 1913, Sally keeping the children. Brinkley briefly posed in Greenville, Tennessee as an "electric doctor," a 'doctor' who used electrical devices to treat patients or in Brinkley's case, blue colored water. He eventually went to jail for practicing medicine without a license and writing bad checks. After his brief stay in jail, he ended up in Memphis, Tennessee. While there he met Minnie Jones, whom he would later marry.

During World War I, Brinkley briefly worked as a field surgeon in the Army Reserve Medical Corps. Ironically, it was a typographical error in a newspaper that set Brinkley on the path to his destiny. After Brinkley was discharged from the Army Reserves, he spotted an advertisement in the *Kansas City Star*. The town of Milford, Kansas, population 2000, was in need of a town physician. A typesetter at the *Star* had accidentally added an extra zero to the town's population which was only 200.²

Brinkley opened a 16-room clinic in Milford in 1918. According to his biography, Brinkley was approached by a local farmer who complained that he had lost his "manly vigor." Brinkley legend, which was mostly self-authored, tells of Brinkley joking with his patient that his problems in the bedroom would cease if he had "a pair of those buck glands in you." "Well, why don't you put 'em in?" asked his patient.³ The farmer then offered him one hundred and fifty dollars to perform the operation, which Brinkley did. Later on the farmer's son told the *Kansas City Star* that Brinkley had offered to pay the farmer a substantial fee if he would allow Brinkley to carry out his

² R. Alton Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2002), 27.

³ Gerald Carson, *The Roguish World of Doctor Brinkley* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 33.

experiment.⁴ As word of mouth circulated, more and more people began to request this unique new operation. When Brinkley advertised that the farmer and his wife had given birth to a baby boy (named Billy after the goat), even more patients began showing up in Milford. Now Brinkley was promoting his operation as a cure for over twenty ailments. Brinkley's clientele also included some of Hollywood's most famous actors, politicians and business men from all over the globe. He was quickly became famous and a household name.

Brinkley was invited to visit Los Angeles in 1922 by Harry Chandler. Chandler owned the *Los Angeles Times* and KHJ, a local radio station, of which there were relatively few in the world at that time. Chandler had invited Brinkley to Los Angeles to perform his operation on himself and some of his editors. Brinkley was not licensed to practice medicine in California, one of many states that did not recognize his eclectic degree. Eclectic medicine was a style of medicine that utilized herbal medicines, chiropractic therapy, and various folk remedies to heal patients. Chandler however, managed to pull some strings and got Brinkley a thirty day permit to practice medicine in California. Chandler told Brinkley that if the operation was a success, Chandler would give him free publicity that would further his fame and clientele. If he failed, Chandler would ruin him. Chandler was thrilled with the results. He paid Brinkley his \$500.00 fee but suggested that he should raise the price for such a wonderful operation, so Brinkley did. From then on, Brinkley would ask for \$750.00.⁵

Like Chandler, Brinkley saw the potential in owning a radio station. He initially claimed that he just wanted one to entertain his guests at his hospital. Soon, however, he began advertising his operations and his own special surgical talents over KFKB, his Milford radio station. With each new idea his fame and fortune reached new heights. Brinkley operated one of the most popular radio stations in America. He gave medical speeches and advertised his operation and medicine from his group of affiliated pharmacies. Brinkley's radio

⁴ Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Life: Quacks, Yodelers, Pitchmen, Psychics, and Other Amazing Broadcasters of the American Airwaves* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 20.

⁵ R. Alton Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 46.

station broadcast a wide range of information and music including classical and country music performances, French lessons, and farm commodity reports. Another popular feature on the station was his Medical Question Box. Radio was still a relatively new entertainment medium in the 1920s. Most radio stations' programming mirrored the tastes of the stations' owners, not its audience. Brinkley saw the potential growth of radio's popularity and tailored his programming for his targeted audience: rural Americans who appreciated his station, the entertainment it offered, and potentially looked to him for their medical needs. All of this publicity and Brinkley's outlandish claims caught the attention of the American Medical Association and their up and coming "quack" hunter, Morris Fishbein. Fishbein would gain acclaim as the member of the AMA who tracked down, researched, and exposed medical quacks and frauds.

By 1930, Brinkley was at his peak, and then the bottom began to fall out. Diagnosing patients over the air waves was a dangerous public nuisance, but the AMA had no authority to censure him. They began to look at Brinkley's medical practice more closely. The association began a campaign to discredit him and enlisted the help of the *Kansas City Star*. This brought Brinkley to the attention of the Kansas Medical Board, which would eventually hold formal hearings to decide whether or not to revoke Brinkley's medical license, which they did. Soon afterwards the Federal Radio Commission held hearings and revoked his broadcasting license as well. Brinkley, unfazed, planned his next venture. He decided to run for Governor of Kansas. Brinkley ran both in 1930 and in 1932, losing both times, although there is some debate about the results of the 1930 election.

At this point, Brinkley moved his practice to Del Rio, Texas and built a new radio station just across the border in Mexico. His new station was christened XER and later XERA. Brinkley continued his unique blend of advertisements, health talks, music, astrology, and psychics. By this time, Brinkley no longer performed goat-gland operations. The Doctor now specialized in prostate operations, although he would forever be known for his goat gland work, due to his extensive use of advertising and self-promotion. Brinkley however, could not escape his nemesis at the AMA.

In 1938, Morris Fishbein attacked Brinkley in a series of particularly critical articles in which he questioned Brinkley's career and medical credentials. Brinkley sued Fishbein for libel and

\$250,000. The trial began in March of 1939. The jury found for Fishbein and Brinkley was legally labeled a “charlatan and a quack.”⁶ Soon after, due to the court’s decision, a deluge of wrongful practice lawsuits were filed against Brinkley which cost him millions of dollars in payments to former patients and out of court settlements. In 1941, Brinkley filed for bankruptcy, and the Mexican government shut down XERA due to pressure from the American government. The U.S. Postal Service began investigating him for mail fraud due to his mass usage of advertisements, pamphlets and form letters all of which made questionable medical claims. Brinkley suffered three heart attacks and one of his legs had to be amputated, due to poor circulation. He died on May 26, 1942 before he could be brought to trial for mail fraud.

The “Brinkley Effect.” In today’s high tech, media-saturated world it has become commonplace to see a public figure in the newspaper, hear them on the radio, buy their books, and see their pictures plastered everywhere. The field of public relations did not really exist before the 1920s. The radio and advertisement industries were both relatively new fields. Much of what we take for granted today in the world of media, was created, tested and implemented during the 1920s. Brinkley sensed the possibilities and put an advertisement in the *Kansas City Star* to hire a promotional expert to help him promote his operation. This ad man explained to Brinkley that he needed to use newspaper articles, advertisements, and direct mailing to make his name known.⁷ Brinkley wasted no time and quickly began to implement these suggestions. He mailed out pamphlets and books to describe his hospital and medical prowess, and increased his presence on the radio. Brinkley and his public relation team made sure that his name and his operation were constantly in some newspaper or magazine.

By 1920, Brinkley had performed many of his “rejuvenation” operations and was quickly obtaining a reputation for his work. The chancellor of the University of Chicago Law School, J.J. Tobias, by chance read an article about Brinkley’s operations and decided that

⁶ Eric Junke, *Quacks & Crusaders: The Fabulous Careers of John Brinkley, Norman Baker, & Harry Hoxsey* (Lawrence: The University of Kansas Press, 2002), 33.

⁷ R. Alton Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 34.

he could benefit from such an operation. Tobias traveled to Milford and received the operation, which he deemed a great success. He prepared a statement for the press which was published in the *Chicago Herald Examiner*. This article brought Brinkley more renown and more importantly business.⁸ Brinkley quickly realized that he could increase awareness of his medical practice by utilizing free press of this nature. However, his plans were not to come to fruition in Chicago. Brinkley wanted to build a hospital with biological research labs and a four year school to teach his technique to prospective "Brinkley" doctors. Another Chicago newspaper, *The Chicago Tribune*, interviewed several prominent Chicago physicians who gave Brinkley the thumbs down and said his operation was impossible and a sham.⁹ While this put an end to his dream of a sprawling Chicago medical complex, it did not stop the public from wanting to believe, or Brinkley gladly giving them, what they wanted.

In another article in the *Chicago Herald Examiner*, from Feb 8, 1920, Brinkley was portrayed as a medical savior. During this period he began to implant goat glands into women as well. "More than 1,000 letters from persons who see the star of hope in the Brinkley discovery lie unanswered in the doctor's office." According to the article, Brinkley, his staff, and several extra workers sorted through and classified letters that he had received. Brinkley said that out of all the letters received, there "was little or no hope for more than half the number [of women who had written to him]." Brinkley said that the most remarkable thing about these stacks of letters "is the proof offered by them that there are so many women in the world who are unable to bear children and that these women are willing to make any sacrifice to become mothers." Brinkley claimed that he could not help many of these women because they had been deprived of the chance to have children due to hysterectomies. This would become a common theme throughout Brinkley's career. He would often claim that he could not help a certain percentage of his patients due to the malpractice of mainstream doctors, and that if patients would only have come to him sooner, he could have saved them time, money, and pain. Although written by Steve O'Grady, a staff writer for the paper, the article has Brinkley's guiding touch all over it. It uses typical Brinkley methods for sizing up, and selling to his intended

⁸ R. Alton Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 35.

⁹ Gerald Carson, *The Roguish World of Doctor Brinkley*, 45-47.

audience. "One would not guess that there were so many women in the world who so crave the halo of motherhood...." Dr. Brinkley pointed out that the letters, with an occasional exception, were written by women of character, refinement and high intellect. "This sex misery is not to be found among the so-called poorer classes. It exists with the more cultured element of our population."¹⁰ Brinkley was making it clear to prospective patients that they needed to be able to afford his treatment before wasting his time. The article concludes that if more doctors would embrace this "revolutionary theory", this "Brinkley theory", he could lessen their workload. Brinkley would "do the best he can to meet the demands...to take immediate care of all the patients who are clamoring for attention."¹¹

As Brinkley historian, Gerald Carson wrote in his book, *The Roguish World of Doctor Brinkley*, these types of articles were the result of what may be called "the Brinkley Effect". Brinkley took every opportunity to further public awareness of himself, his operation, and his increasing fame and profit potential. Times were good and the money was coming in. In 1921, Brinkley went to New York where he bought Minnie a new Stutz Bearcat automobile and a fur coat. "We are prospering, because our keynote is service."¹² This mass infusion of media awareness also effected Milford. On a good day at least five hundred people showed up in Milford, crowding into the only

restaurant in town. Many would sleep in their cars, and many pictures can be seen with cars surrounding the Brinkley Hospital grounds. During 1928, the Brinkley Hospital grossed \$150,000! Brinkley had city water installed, made Milford an electric-light town and said that he would eventually pave the highway to Junction City.¹³ Brinkley truly excelled at using every method at his disposal to increase his fame and fortune, keep those around him happy and supporting him.

One of the best examples of how Brinkley manipulated the press came from an unsigned full page article in the *New York*

¹⁰ Steve O'Grady, "Thousands Seek Babies by Goat Gland Operation," *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, February 8, 1920.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Gerald Carson, *The Roguish World of Doctor Brinkley*, 82.

¹³ Carson, *The Roguish World of Doctor Brinkley*, 77.

Evening Post from 1926. A huge goat head takes up most of the top of the page. One of the horns spells out "Preaches Fundamentalism" while the other horn spells out "Practices Goat Gland Science." The subtitle of the piece is "How a Famous Surgeon Combines Old-Time Religion and New-Fangled Operations on a Strange Medico-Gospel Farm." On one side it shows Brinkley holding the Billy Goat Baby and on the other side it shows Minnie holding a white goat and a black goat. The article states that Brinkley held a degree from the University of Pavia, in Italy. This was true, but the degree was later revoked by Benito Mussolini, although Brinkley would claim it for the rest of his life. Across the street from the Brinkley Hospital, Dr. Charles Draper, a fundamentalist preacher (hired by Brinkley) gave sermons against evolution and the need to follow the Bible. Naturally, the reader was invited to Milford to meet "the most unusual scientist-fundamentalist in the whole world, Dr. John R. Brinkley of Milford, Kansas, who saves souls with the word of God and repairs human bodies with glands from lively goats."¹⁴

Brinkley kept several public relations men on staff at this point. One in particular, H. Roy Mosnat, specialized in keeping Brinkley's name in the newspapers. Minnie once said that it was Mosnat that "got Dr. Brinkley into that 'crooked' work."¹⁵ In a set of articles from 1921 to 1924 in the *Junction City Union*, claims were made that Brinkley transplanted an eye from one rabbit to another. Helping the blind was of the greatest importance to Brinkley, according to the article. Brinkley also was working on a cure for cancer, which if he could perfect, "To Kansas will come the honor of a cancer cure."¹⁶ While newspapers and radio broadcasts helped Brinkley to advertise, he also took advantage of another mass advertising medium, the United States Postal Service.

Brinkley inundated his radio listeners with advertisements for pamphlets and books that detailed his modern and luxurious hospital, his groundbreaking operation, and his skills as a surgeon. Once received by prospective clients, there usually was a questionnaire to fill out with information about their health issues. There were often

¹⁴ "Preaches Fundamentalism-Practices Goat-Gland Science," *New York Evening Journal*, February 8, 1920.

¹⁵ R. Alton Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 45.

¹⁶ Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 45.

questions about the potential patient's financial health as well. Once received back at the Brinkley Hospital, Brinkley would then bombard prospective patients with a barrage of form letters, coupons for free books or discounts on operations. He mailed out pamphlets and books "at no obligation", except for a small fee of a few dollars to cover printing and shipping costs. This example of one of Brinkley's form letters is from 1940, when Brinkley was in Arkansas. However, it was typical of letters he would send out throughout his career.

Dear Mr. Brooks: Have you thought of trying our \$250.00 prostate work.... Of course, I cannot say that we would accept you for the \$250.00 work until after you were here and had our complete examination which will cost you \$60.00 if you do not stay; but only \$50.00 if you do stay. The hospital rates are \$35.00 Weekly.... It is your health or your funeral.... You cannot take your money with you when you die.... Let me hear from you at once. Sincerely yours, J.R. Brinkley, M.D.¹⁷

Brinkley sent out similar letters to people who wrote in for information, then their name would be added to a mailing list. If he received no response, he would mail out additional letters, each one written in more harsh language, asking the recipient why they had not written back or if they were wasting his time.¹⁸ Brinkley often worded his letters to make his clients believe that it was necessary for them to get treatment quickly at his hospital. They were in a race against time only he could help them avert. The Brinkley advertisement campaign, alongside more positive newspaper coverage, helped Brinkley become famous. However, not all of Brinkley's press was positive. In the coming years, newspapers, radio broadcasters, and others would be instrumental in both Brinkley's successes and his downfall.

At first, the negative press was minimal compared to the positive. However, in 1923, the *Kansas City Journal Post* and the *St. Louis Star* begin a series of articles about eclectic schools in Kansas City, Chicago, and St. Louis. Several schools were found selling degrees for up to \$1,000.00 to people whose attendance to classes

¹⁷ Dr. John R. Brinkley to R. Miles Brooks, 16 May, 1940. John R. Brinkley Papers, Kansas State Historical Society.

¹⁸ R. Alton Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 74.

were minimal. "Doctors" with similar degrees would get licenses through reciprocity licensing in other states.¹⁹ The article in the *Kansas Journal Post*, "Brinkley Asked about Diploma Deal," stated that Brinkley was asked by the prosecutor's office to come to Kansas City to "throw what light" he could on the operations of the medical diploma mill, run by one Date Alexander. According to the article, Brinkley outshone his fellow alumnus in both fame and fortune. It goes on to say that Brinkley also owned a "big radio broadcasting station" and had talent in running it, and that "anyone who can play or sing gets a chance." The article continued by saying that because of his lack of pedigree, the nature of the operation, and the cold reception in Chicago, Brinkley went back to Milford because of the seclusion it offered. *The Post* stated that Brinkley had the townspeople of Milford in his pocket. The family that ran the post office was backed by Brinkley, who raised the monthly pay from \$20.00 to \$120.00 a month and built a new post office to accommodate the deluge of letters Brinkley received. The town also benefited from the Brinkley Hospital, which *The Post* estimated received forty to forty-five patients a month. *The Post* article also noted with some incredulity that "After the first 'write-up' in *The Journal-Post*, many people from the town of Milford discontinued *The Journal-Post* and Dr. Brinkley barred it from the hospital."²⁰

Brinkley found great success during this time period, and believed that his fortunes would continue to grow. He received thousands of letters a day with people asking him a wide variety of medical questions and treatment options. "I was getting three and four and five thousand letters a day," Brinkley would later say. "...Why not have a Medical Question Box reading and responding to inquirers' letters over the air... It was an immediate success." Brinkley selected a few of his listeners' letters and prescribed over the air waves of KFKB what he thought they should do. Usually he recommended "special" medicines that one could only get from his pharmacy in Milford, and later from a Brinkley Pharmaceutical Association member pharmacy. Naturally, the prices were inflated and the pharmacies were raking in the money. Brinkley also made a cut from the medications. People complained to the AMA after getting

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

²⁰ "Brinkley To Be Asked About Diploma Deal," *Kansas City Journal-Post*, October 30, 1923.

sicker when taking Brinkley's prescriptions. The AMA's hands were tied, as they could only inform the public at this point of Brinkley's practices. They were however, keeping files on Brinkley's activities.

The AMA was not the only group concerned with the growing popularity and thriving business of Brinkley. Business began to dry up for local pharmacies. In response to numerous protests, Brinkley started the Brinkley Pharmaceutical Association, which was in effect, a huge money racket. Patients came to a Brinkley pharmacy and asked for a prescription based on what Brinkley prescribed to them or other patients with similar symptoms over the radio. The local pharmacists were pleased as they were reporting, in some cases, a \$75-100.00 a day increase in profits. In an interesting move, which did not pay off in the long run, Brinkley made Percy Walker, a Topeka druggist, the president of the Association. Walker was the brother-in-law of William Smith, the Attorney General of Kansas.²¹

Patent medicine manufacturers were also displeased with his success. Shortly after the formation of the Brinkley Pharmaceutical Association, they began writing letters of protest to the *Kansas City Star* that Brinkley was ruining their business. They told the *Star's* owners that if someone did not do something soon, that they would have to pull their advertisements from the paper, which were a major source of income for them.²² Brinkley began prescribing over the radio with the Medical Question Box. Fishbein and the AMA's concern for the public's well-being and their focus on the negative side of Brinkley's activities convinced them that someone needed to protect the public.²³ Fishbein began to publish articles in the AMA's journal, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* about Brinkley. He was joined by the *Kansas City Star's* ace reporter, A.B. McDonald.²⁴ Besides influence from Fishbein and the AMA, the *Star* might have had other ulterior motives for critical articles about Brinkley. In 1927, KFKB and WDAF, a station owned by the paper, both applied for 5,000 watts of power. At this time, KFKB was the

²¹ R. Alton Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 76.

²² Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 83.

²³ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁴ Eric Junke, *Quacks & Crusaders*, 11-13.

strongest with 1,500 watts. KFKB was awarded the increase in wattage, WDAF was not. Another interesting fact connected to this incident is that, Sam Pickard, a Kansas State University alumnus and acquaintance of Brinkley, was working in Washington, DC for the FRC when Brinkley's application was approved.²⁵

Both the *Star's* campaign and the AMA's prodding influenced the Federal Radio Commission's decision to revoke his broadcasting license, and the Kansas Medical Board's decision to look into revoking Brinkley's license to practice medicine.

Coverage of the Federal Radio Commission and Kansas Medical Board Hearings. In a June 14, 1930 article, *The Wichita Eagle* reported that the Federal Radio Commission decided that very day to close down Brinkley's radio station by a vote of three to two. According to the article, Commissioners Robinson and Sykes voted to place the station on probation "with the stipulation that it discontinued broadcasting individual prescriptions." Commissioner Robinson pointed out that if the commission was going to take away Brinkley's license, "it had better go right down the line.... Westinghouse, General Electric, Henry Field of Iowa and many others do the same thing." The other three commissioners, Saltzman, Lafount and Starbuck, voted to take the station off the air completely. The article continued by saying that "Attorneys for Dr. John R. Brinkley tonight prepared to carry to the highest court in the country the Milford hospital owner's efforts to enjoin the Kansas Board of Medical Registration and Examination from proceeding on a complaint seeking revocation of the certificate authorizing him to practice medicine and surgery in this state."²⁶ Brinkley was allowed to continue to broadcast pending appeal. In an article from February 2, 1931, *The Wichita Beacon* reported the denial of Brinkley's appeal. "The Radio commission's refusal to renew the license of Station KFKB at Milford, Kansas, was upheld today by the District of Columbia court of appeals." It continued by saying that the Farmers & Bankers Life Insurance Company of Wichita was in negotiations to buy KFKB from Brinkley which it eventually would.²⁷ Farmer & Bankers Life relocated the station to Abilene, Kansas where it operated for many years until it

²⁵ R. Alton Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 83.

²⁶ Associated Press, "KFKB Is Ordered Off Air," *Wichita Eagle*, June 14, 1930.

²⁷ Associated Press, "Court Upholds Act Silencing Brinkley Radio," *Wichita Beacon*, February 2, 1931.

was sold. Eventually the equipment and expertise wound up in Wichita, Kansas where it became popular country station KFDI.²⁸

On April 29, 1930, the *Kansas City Star* reported that authorities in Kansas were seeking to serve Brinkley a citation to appear before the Kansas Medical Board.²⁹ In another article, this one written by A.B. McDonald from May 2, 1930, the *Star* claimed to have had received many letters from druggists refusing to fill his over-the-radio prescriptions on moral grounds. The druggists argued that any reputable physician would examine their patients, learn their past medical history, and then diagnose them. Brinkley however, "would not be bothered with such trifling details." The article also described how Brinkley advised listeners not to go to a doctor who would perform surgery, but to instead take one of his prescriptions. "Any Doctor that would cut into you for that should be in the penitentiary." McDonald goes on to say that Brinkley's chief aim was to create "distrust and suspicion of all doctors, except himself...." Dr. L. Dawson of Ottawa, Kansas, told McDonald that local doctors and druggists were not trying to "strangle Brinkley," but they felt he was a danger to the health of the people of Kansas. Dawson also stated that members of the Kansas medical profession disapproved of Brinkley's unprofessional methods. "... If he were proceeding along scientific paths, if he was in any manner constructive in his work, the profession would not be opposing him."³⁰

On May 4, 1930, McDonald, in an article entitled "Brinkley Plots," claimed that Brinkley, in a "desperate effort to head off testimony", was sending out his men to "persuade" former clients into giving positive testimony in the hearing over his medical license. "Desperate, He Sends out Agents to Get Affidavits to Block the Medical Board," the article read beneath the title.³¹

Brinkley's upcoming medical board hearing was not the only issue causing him trouble at the time. On April 10, 1930, Fishbein

²⁸ R. Alton Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 103.

²⁹ Topeka Branch, "A Quackery Brand: The Complaint Against Dr. Brinkley Is a Review of His Professional Life," *Kansas City Star*, April 29, 1930.

³⁰ A.B. McDonald, "A Giant Racket," *Kansas City Star*, May 2, 1930.

³¹ A.B. McDonald, "Brinkley Plots" *Kansas City Star*, May 4, 1930.

wrote an editorial in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in which he described Brinkley as "a charlatan of the rankest sort."³² Junction City physician William S. Yates distributed the article in and around Geary County, in efforts to discredit Brinkley.³³

On May 7, 1930 summons were served to Fishbein and Yates. Brinkley sued the two men for libel. Fishbein was in Topeka to give a speech on the topic of "medical quack and charlatans." Fishbein, who that very afternoon had been served with papers for the \$500,000 libel suit against him, never mentioned Brinkley by name. He talked about charlatans and quacks in general. He tells the audience how they operated and how they all have a radio station because "when the charlatan gets on the air the people are helpless. They must take the filth and the rot along with the entertainment. The radio should be regulated by the government for the protection of the people against the quack and the charlatan and not for their exploitation." He did, however, mention Brinkley after the speech was over as he was answering questions from the audience.³⁴

In a different article from May 8, 1930, McDonald stated that "Physicians and surgeons of Kansas, in convention here, are indignant at the arrogance and effrontery of Dr. John Brinkley, the Kansas goat-gland quack in suing Dr. Morris Fishbein."³⁵ With the upcoming medical board hearing and the libel lawsuit, Kansas doctors at last found the opportunity to publicly unite against Brinkley.

On October 8, 1930, the case of *John R. Brinkley v. Morris Fishbein* and William Yates, No. 6949, was tried in the Geary County courthouse. He eventually dropped the suit on a technicality and his upcoming hearing in front of the Kansas Medical Board.³⁶

Now with the state medical board hearing looming in the background, newspaper articles became more negative. May 13, *The Kansas City Star* reported, "Brinkley's Deliberate Open-Faced Quackery Almost Unbelievable."³⁷ On May 26, *The Star* printed an

³² R. Alton Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 84.

³³ *Ibid.*, 85-89.

³⁴ Staff Reporter, "Expose of Quackery," *Kansas City Star*, May 8, 1930.

³⁵ A.B. McDonald, "Doctors' Ire Up," *Kansas City Star*, May 8, 1930.

³⁶ Gerald Carson, *The Roguish World of Doctor Brinkley*, 130.

³⁷ A.B. McDonald, "Amazes a Nurse," *Kansas City Star*, May 13, 1930.

article entitled "The Charlatan in Big Business" in which a former Brinkley secretary told an investigative reporter of Brinkley's mail order methods and how he hired a former patient, not to write paid testimonials but work in the advertisement department for thirty dollars a week. "Imagine such a charlatan getting away with a scheme of that sort." On June 13, 1930, the Kansas Supreme Court "handed down a decision in which it denied J.R. Brinkley, alleged rejuvenation specialist, an order restraining the state medical board from taking action next Tuesday to revoke his license." The article gave a list of charges being brought against Brinkley. They ranged from gross immorality to selling liquor during prohibition. "These charges grew out of the alleged goat gland operation... and out of the charge that he was prescribing over the radio and was engaged in unprofessional conduct in so doing."³⁸ "Come-on Experts", from July 17, 1930, tells the testimony of one John Zahner. Zahner spent \$500.00 on a "Brinkley" operation the previous November. He recounted how he was rushed through the hospital examination, and how the doctors and even Minnie pressured him into getting the expensive operation. Brinkley and his colleague, Doctor Osborne, operated and removed part of his prostate. When the incision would not heal, Zahner went back and was told by Osborne that he needed to go to a shoemaker and bind a rubber heel to the cut. Zahner went to a regular doctor who discovered a stone in his bladder the size of a pigeon egg as well as that only a small piece of his prostate had been removed.³⁹ In another article, "Sworn statements and affidavits by former patients and others relating unfavorable results of operations performed at Dr. John R. Brinkley's hospital were read today at the Kansas Medical Board's hearing on a complaint seeking revocation of the physician's license to practice in this state."⁴⁰ In "Edgerton Raps Dr. Brinkley", E.S. Edgerton, the head of the Kansas Medical board testified that in his professional opinion, Brinkley's operation "has no value...no good can come from the transplanting of goat glands into human patients."⁴¹

³⁸ Universal Press, "Deny Brinkley Appeal For License Stay," *Wichita Eagle*, June 13, 1930.

³⁹ Topeka Bureau, "Come-On Experts," *Kansas City Star*, July 17 1930.

⁴⁰ Associated Press, "Patients Tear Into Brinkley," *Wichita Eagle*, July 18, 1930.

⁴¹ Associated Press, "Edgerton Raps Dr. Brinkley" *Wichita Eagle*, July, 17, 1930.

Brinkley was not without his supporters, and many testified in the hearing. For example, in "Doctor Brinkley's Character Lauded by Home Town Men", it described how three men who knew Brinkley when he was young and living in North Carolina, testified positively on his early life and character.⁴² In another article, this time from the *Kansas City Star*, E.S. Davis, from Meridan, Kansas told reporters that "One Operation Cured Half a Dozen Ailments.... Heart Trouble, Kidney Trouble, Aches, Even a Rupture, Disappeared Overnight.... Well In Just One Day."⁴³ A similar article appeared in *The Wichita Eagle* on July 24. "Former patients testified today they had received benefits from treatment and operations at his Milford, Kansas hospital which in some instances were said to have involved implanting of goat glands in their bodies."⁴⁴

At the end of the hearing, Brinkley stunned the medical board. He invited them to his Milford hospital to witness one of his operations in person. A delegation of twelve doctors went to Milford as official spectators and reported their findings to the entire medical board. They witnessed the entire operation, from the removal of testicles from a goat to their implant into a human male patient. Then Brinkley preformed a second operation that took longer than usual because of complications. The committee testified on their findings, which basically stated that the operations were useless and potentially dangerous, due to the possibility of infections. One unnamed member of the board did say that although the operation offered no benefit to the patient, it was "as skillful and deft a demonstration of surgery as he had ever seen witnessed."⁴⁵ It did not take the Kansas State Medical Board long to revoke his license saying, "The licensee has performed and organized charlatanism...quite beyond the invention of the humble mountebank."⁴⁶

Brinkley for Governor. "I get fat off my enemies.... The harder they hit me, the higher I bounce."⁴⁷ Most men would have

⁴² Associated Press, "Doctor Brinkley's Character Lauded by Home Town Men," *Wichita Eagle*, July 19, 1930.

⁴³ Topeka Bureau, "He Lauds Brinkley", *Kansas City Star*, July 24, 1930.

⁴⁴ Associated Press, "Former Patients Rally To Aid of Doctor Brinkley," *Wichita Eagle*, July 24, 1930.

⁴⁵ R. Alton Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 112-113.

⁴⁶ Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Life*, 27.

⁴⁷ Eric Junke, *Quacks & Crusaders*, 2.

given up and faded into obscurity after facing the trials and tribulations that John Brinkley went through. After losing both his radio station and his right to practice medicine, Brinkley looked for a new way to combat his enemies. "Why, I think I'll go back up to Kansas and get on my radio and get myself elected governor."⁴⁸ Brinkley never thought he had a chance of winning his run for governor. However, he did feel that he could use the opportunity to put his case in front of the people of Kansas and tell them a few things about their elected officials in Topeka and the *Kansas City Star* newspaper.⁴⁹

In 1930, Brinkley ran for governor in the Kansas gubernatorial race. With the primaries over and with general elections only a little over a month away, he ran as a write-in and called himself "The People's Candidate." He explained to listeners, "You often hear about the efficiency of the two party systems, because the Republicans watch the Democrats and the Democrats watch the Republicans. Vote for me and you'll get double protection. They'll both watch me."⁵⁰

Kansas was in the middle of the Great Depression, and many Kansans looked to the state government for relief. As one *Kansas City Star* editorial theorized, people had come upon hard times, "through no fault of their own." When Brinkley lost his medical and broadcasting license, and preached daily on the radio how he was being persecuted, perhaps many voters felt a kinship with him.⁵¹ Even more likely, his popularity stemmed from the fact that Republican candidate Frank Haucke and Democrat candidate Harry Woodring were politically inexperienced and favored running the state government the same as it had been run in past administrations.⁵² Political journalist and Brinkley supporter W.C. Clugston wrote that Kansans were ready to throw off the yoke of the two-party political system and were ready for something new.⁵³ Emporia editorialist William Allen White stated that the people were not voting for Brinkley the man or Brinkley the goat-gland doctor, but for the promises he

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁹ R. Alton Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 121.

⁵⁰ Eric Junke, *Quacks & Crusaders*, 18.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

made. Brinkley's promises and platform appeared to meet the needs of many Kansans during the Great Depression.⁵⁴ Brinkley combined religious fundamentalism with a persecuted martyr complex, and the warmth and trustworthy intelligence of a country doctor. Brinkley's political style was as entertaining as the radio broadcasts he made, and just as modern. Brinkley began traveling to political speeches in his plane, dubbed "The Romancer" or by limousine. In a scene that would come to define Brinkley's run for governor and influence modern American politics, Brinkley flew "The Romancer" over the field of Cash Davis, a farmer from Augusta, Kansas, and Brinkley supporter. The plane landed close to the on-looking crowd. With his Bible in tow, Brinkley stepped out of his plane with his Van Dyke goatee, his tortoise shell glasses, his diamond rings, and his immaculate white suit. Perhaps presaging modern times, he awed his crowd much in the same way a modern television evangelist would his congregation.⁵⁵ Brinkley gave political talks several hours each morning on the radio, and arrived to rallies with typical Brinkley panache. Brinkley changed the way Kansas political campaigns were run.⁵⁶ He was a game changer, and his opponents took notice.

To help run his campaign, the *Wichita Beacon* sent H.G. Hotchkiss, a publicist who worked for the *Beacon* and its owner/publisher, Max Levand who supported Brinkley.⁵⁷ Brinkley historian, R. Alton Lee noted in his book, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, that Hotchkiss thought Brinkley relied too much on his radio advertisements "...and did not realize the tremendous impact Brinkley was making with this significant innovation."⁵⁸

What issues exactly did Brinkley stand for and what was his platform? He wanted free textbooks for schools, free medical service for the poor, pensions for the elderly and the blind, and pensions for those who were unable to work. He wanted a manmade lake in every county in the state. He pleaded to his constituents that they should buy products made in Kansas. Brinkley also promised to abolish "unnecessary boards and investigative bodies, organizations, such as

⁵⁴ Francis W. Schruben, *Kansas in Turmoil, 1930-1936* (Columbia: The University of Missouri Press, 1969), 43.

⁵⁵ Eric Junke, *Quacks & Crusaders*, 18-19.

⁵⁶ R. Alton Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 122.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

the Kansas Medical Board. One of his election campaigns was "Clean Up, Clean Out, and Keep Kansas Clean."⁵⁹ Brinkley's platform was very perceptive of the political climate of the 1930's, especially considering that he was a political novice. His platform predated a Californian politician of the same era, Dr. Francis Townsend's, very similar plan by three years and social security by six years.⁶⁰ He ran his campaign as a Kansas doctor who was being persecuted for being on the outside of the medical and political machine, and who had the citizens of Kansas's best interests in mind. A Milwaukee newspaper said that although "the old wooly days of Populism" were no longer in Kansas, Brinkley was still a torch carrier for the movement.⁶¹

Three days before the election, the Kansas Attorney General (the same Attorney General who prosecuted Brinkley at his medical license hearing) altered the rules for write-in candidates on the ballot. The name of a write-in candidate had to be written in a specific way. Any deviation from this pre-determined spelling would discount the vote. In Brinkley's case, it needed to read "J.R. Brinkley." Immediately he flooded the radio waves with commercials telling his loyal listeners the correct spelling of his name. He even passed out pencils that said "J.R. Brinkley." Approximately 50,000 votes were discounted due to the changes in the law. It was later suggested in various newspaper articles, and even by Harry Woodring, who won the election, that if those votes had counted, Brinkley would have won.⁶² The official election results had Woodring receiving 217,171 votes, Haucke 216,920, and Brinkley 183,278.⁶³ Brinkley ran again for the same office in 1932 as an independent candidate and lost. His platform, for the most part, remained the same.

Brinkley and Radio. Radio was the medium in which Brinkley's influence could be felt the most. When Brinkley first built and operated KFKB in Milford, radio was a relatively new technology. Most stations played various styles of uplifting music and news reports. Advertising was frowned upon by many in the world of

⁵⁹ R. Alton Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 122.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁶¹ Eric Junke, *Quacks & Crusaders*, 35.

⁶² Francis W. Schruben, *Kansas In Turmoil, 1930-1936*, 42.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 38.

broadcasting; it was not considered a profitable way to utilize the new technology. In 1924, seventy-six percent of all existing radio stations refused to take corporate sponsors.⁶⁴ Brinkley saw the great potential in radios vast air waves for advertising and getting his message across to a large number of people. According to historian Francis Chase, Brinkley was “the man who, perhaps more than any other foresaw the great potentialities of radio as an advertising medium.”⁶⁵

KFKB began broadcasting in September, 1923. Brinkley had two guiding principles in his initial running of KFKB. First, he would have no advertisements (this would later change as he realized the potential goldmine he had) and secondly, there would be no recorded music, only live musicians and entertainers. Brinkley felt that his listeners deserved the best.⁶⁶ Initially, Brinkley wanted to have three basic programming concepts: personal travel talks, advise on child-rearing for mothers and literature discourses by Kansas State University professors.⁶⁷ As R. Alton Lee pointed out, Brinkley was one of the first to have medical talks on child care on the radio.⁶⁸ Brinkley understood that his female audience was very important, and strove to make them loyal listeners. He believed that for many of the men who might want to be treated for “lack of sexual vigor”, there was a frustrated wife at home who might influence him to come to the Brinkley Hospital. On occasion, he also performed gland transplants on female customers. In a strange way, Brinkley was very modern in his views concerning the sexual needs of the American housewife. It was not just about the husband; Brinkley was an equal opportunity doctor, as long as he was paid for his services. Or perhaps, he knew enough about male and female sexual psychology to manipulate men and women into getting his operation. This idea deserves further study, but is outside the scope of this paper.

Brinkley was often ahead of his time. In modern times, internet based college courses and tele-courses are an integral part of the collegiate experience. In the 1920s however, it was unheard of. Again, Brinkley was an innovator. A Kansas State University student, Sam Pickard contacted Brinkley and they worked out a new idea. At a

⁶⁴ Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Life*, 4.

⁶⁵ Eric Junke, *Quacks & Crusaders*, 12.

⁶⁶ R. Alton Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 63.

⁶⁷ Gerald Carson, *The Roguish World of Doctor Brinkley*, 48.

⁶⁸ R. Alton Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 74.

great cost to them, Pickard and two other students purchased a phone line that went from the university into Milford. They set up a receiver at the university and Brinkley broadcast whatever came from the Manhattan side of the phone line over KFKB's airwaves. Teachers could give French lessons or other course material over the radio, which students could listen to at home and be tested on at a later date. The college offered college credit for these first "distance learning" classes.⁶⁹ Pickard later went to Washington, DC to work for the FRC but left before Brinkley's radio license hearing.

According to Gerald Carson, when Brinkley sold KFKB and opened XER (later XERA), he branched out with some new advertising ideas. The station offered many new and exciting products, sure to make the listeners life better and more exciting. One could send in a dollar and a handwriting sample, and a handwriting expert would answer three questions and send a book that would help answer all of life's questions. Or there was a business opportunity: Gas Saver was looking for agents to sell its product which claimed to help increase gas mileage in cars. There was a high-school correspondence course. One could also buy autographed pictures of Jesus, or a wind-up doll of John the Baptist, which walked around until its head fell off.⁷⁰ Research for this paper led to the discovery of everything from hair tonics, home garden kits, healing crystals, cold remedies and more. Only a brief sampling is included here to give the reader a taste of what was being advertised on Brinkley's radio station.

Before the Great Depression "hillbilly" music enjoyed a limited popularity, mostly with poorer country people who lived in Arkansas, Kentucky, Kansas, and other rural states. During the Great Depression, the market for "hillbilly" records dried up and performers began to find it difficult to get their music heard. Brinkley believed that his listeners might appreciate this type of music, so he started to invite musicians on XER to entertain his listeners. Many acts got their start on XER and a partial list is a who's who of early country music. The Carter Family, Leonard Slye (Roy Rogers), Gene Autry, Red Foley,

⁶⁹ R. Alton Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 70-71.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

Eddie Arnold, Hank Williams, Tennessee Ernie Ford, Little Jimmie Dickens, and many more got their start on XER or were featured on the station many times.⁷¹ In many ways, Brinkley introduced a wider audience to country music because his station was heard all over America (at an eventual 1,000,000 watts, it was the largest station in the world and could be heard as far away as Russia). Throughout his career, Brinkley adjusted the format of his radio programming to fit his current situation. However, Brinkley always attempted to cater to a more rural audience. It was this same audience that he surrounded himself with throughout his career. He built hospitals in their communities, and marketed and sold his medical procedures to them. Throughout the years, many stations, disk jockeys, and station owners used Brinkley's programming savvy as a reference to run their own stations.

Conclusion. John R. Brinkley will forever be known as the goateed doctor from Milford who performed goat-gland operations. This reputation is due to the quality and quantity of his advertising. His life was much more fascinating than that simple epitaph however, and his influence on modern day America deserves to be studied in greater detail. Years after the death of Brinkley, Lawrence Fishbein wrote in the *Journal of American Medical Association*: "The centuries to come may never produce again such blatancy, such fertility of imagination, or such ego."⁷² Although not the most ethical, respectable or trustworthy individual, John R. Brinkley was the epitome, in many ways, of the modern individual. He capitalized on changes in technology and society, and in the process created or refined many of the techniques that are still used to this day. His influence can still be felt today in everything from "quack" and natural medicine to modern country music and political campaigning. Whatever one's opinion of Brinkley, it is clear that he is an important figure in twentieth century American history.

⁷¹ Lee, *The Bizarre Careers of John R. Brinkley*, 161.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 243.