

Mr. Social Security: The Conn Man Chronicles

Good evening. My name is Duncan Cavanah, and I am a lawyer. I say that with a similar level of pride as if I was to announce to this esteemed group that I was currently employed as a baby seal clubber or the operator of the Tilt-A-Whirl at the state fair. For in my opinion, admitting that you are employed as a lawyer is something that should come with a significant dose of humility. Of course, there are certainly respectable and even brilliant men and women who grace my chosen profession. In fact, as I scan the room.... well maybe not this room specifically, but certainly similar rooms in other, more distant locations. Anyway, the point is, in theory, there are individuals practicing law in this country in whom all of us should hold great pride. Individuals who elevate the perception of the legal profession above its most common use, as a punchline in cheesy, and in my opinion, very demeaning and offensive jokes.

On that subject, what is the difference between a vacuum cleaner and a lawyer on a motorcycle? The vacuum cleaner has the dirt bag on the **inside** of it.

But I digress. With all of our chosen professions, there are luminaries who stand out, and like a high tide raises all boats, these individuals heighten the overall level of respect of the profession. The man that I intend to detail in this paper, unfortunately, is not one of those guys. Tonight, we delve into the mysterious world of one of Kentucky's native-born sons. Tonight, we detail the rise and fall of Eastern Kentucky Social Security disability attorney, and overall bizarre guy, Eric C. Conn.

It was 1962, and coal was still king in Pike County Kentucky, when Eric Christopher Conn entered the world. Very little is known about his childhood. But we do

know that as he approached adolescence, his wealthy mother and father were gunned down in cold blood in the street as they left the local movie theater hand-in-hand with young Eric. Actually, now that I think about it, that's Batman's origin story. My bad. There may be occurrences of note that took place in his childhood, but I did not find any of them on the Internet, so let's just assume that everything went well.

After completion of his undergraduate studies at Morehead State, Eric C. Conn graduated from the Ohio Northern University College of Law in 1988. He served a brief stint in the Army, which included service in Operation Desert Storm, although only after the shooting had stopped. Upon completion of his service, Conn returned to Eastern Kentucky with his sights set on a career in law. His legal career began in about as humble a manner as any law practice could. In 1993, his mother and father gifted him a small parcel of land in Stanville, Kentucky and a used mobile home, which would serve as his first law office. Stanville boasts a population of 520 souls, making it the most thriving metropolitan area of Floyd County, Kentucky...probably.

So operating out of a used trailer in a town of 500 people in one of the poorest counties in the state (Floyd County's median income is just over \$15,000 annually), Eric C. Conn had his work cut out for him. But he did have a vision. This vision centered around social security disability (a staple of Eastern Kentucky law practice since the decline of the coal industry), and a shameless willingness to market himself.

Conn first created an alter ego for himself, branding himself "Mr. Social Security." (Incidentally, a film version of his tale was scrapped when test audiences voted "Mr. Social Security" as the least compelling of the Avengers.) He created this moniker

despite the fact that he had no special designation of expertise in social security disability, or any other area of the law for that matter. But he was willing to promote himself. He invested heavily in advertising, slapping his name, picture and self-given title on every object that would hold still long enough. He began hiring young women to appear at events like the famous Pikeville Hillbilly Days dressed in Eric C. Conn low-cut T-shirts. These girls were billed "Conn's hotties," and milled around car shows, festivals and county fairs with a cardboard cutout of Eric C. Conn in tow to allow his fans to take pictures with all of them. (*Conn's hotties pic*)

The advertising, though bizarre, proved effective, and Conn began to develop a steady social security disability practice. As Conn's practice grew, and he began to generate significant income, his marketing ferocity only increased. First with an Appalachian saturation of neon yellow and green billboards which dotted every significant thoroughfare in Eastern Kentucky. (*billboard photo*) Always wanting his name and image to be synonymous with Social Security, the billboards had the added touch of an Eric C. Conn dummy, referred to by locals as Manne-Conns, perched suicidally at the precipice of each sign. As an aside, in the later years of Conn's practice, these Manne-Conns frequently turned up missing, for which Conn would offer a \$10,000 reward.

But as remarkably strange and wonderful as the billboards and Conn's hotties advertising campaign was, nothing quite matched the level of his television pursuits. Some commercials featured monkeys as Social Security employees. Another offered a cringe-worthy social security-based rap video. The rap video, incidentally, features what may be the worst line in rap history as Conn appealed to potential Spanish-speaking

clients with his alleged fluency with the language. "This gringo speaks the lingo." Another Eric C. Conn commercial was shot to be shown in 3-D, which, of course, was not overly effective since most people do not lounge around in their living rooms wearing 3-D glasses on the off chance that they might have a hankering for some three dimensional television lawyerin'. **(3-D commercial)**

So was all the marketing effort worth the trouble? Without question. From his humble roots, Conn built a thriving practice where he employed up to 40 people. In a poor County in a poor state, Conn established a Social Security disability empire. Conn's lucrative practice allowed him to pay \$1.5 million in cash for a 10,000 foot Pikeville estate. He bought a fleet of luxury cars and traveled the world in private planes seeking pleasures in exotic locales. And as often happens, money served only to help showcase and highlight Conn's bizarre personality. Conn installed a mini-Statue of Liberty on his office grounds, then later paid half a million dollars to have a 20 foot replica of the Lincoln Memorial (the largest replica in the world) built in the parking lot. **(picture)** Bear in mind, Conn still operated his office, now surrounded by ornate replicas of American icons, out of his original trailer, which had now been joined by additional trailers to accommodate the size of the practice. It was a regular patriotic trailer park of justice.

In 2010, Conn spent an estimated \$50,000 shooting a music video to the tune of Man of Constant Sorrow from the great film *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?*. The video featured bluegrass legend Ralph Stanley, Miss Kentucky USA and the Obama girl, Amber Lee Ettinger, a woman who had achieved internet fame singing a tribute to the future president during his campaign. This video was designed to entice President

Obama to appoint Conn to the Social Security Advisory Board, which thankfully never happened. More importantly, it featured another outstanding display of Conn's lyrical genius as he once again highlighted his bilingual abilities. "A superhero without a cape... He learned Spanish off of a tape." (*Video clip*)

And to what use did this superhero without a cape put his Spanish-speaking ability that he learned "off of a tape?" Aside from authentically ordering food from his favorite Pikeville Mexican restaurant (I'm certain his waiter was impressed), it seems he predominately used it to facilitate his love life. Conn was enthralled with exotic foreign women, as evidenced by the fact that two of his three wives were natives of Columbia. He was not overly lucky in love. He separated with two of the three women, both Colombian, within one week of marriage. The third somehow lasted a whole nine months. All of these marriages took place while Conn was in his 40s. The women were 22, 21 and 18 respectively. He also had a very public relationship with an adult film star named Raven Riley which ended predictably badly. Note to our membership...don't Google her, especially at work.

Money, cars, exotic young women, a veritable buffet of borderline racist and incoherent television ads. It was all coming up aces for Eric C. Conn. But was it all coming a little too easy? The first indication of trouble was in 2002, when Conn was forced to resign from the US Court of Appeals Veterans Claim's bar. That particular court found that some of Conn's tactics were questionable, and rather than potentially face further inquiries or prosecution, Conn simply agreed to keep his shady self out of their courtroom. I'm sure none of the judges in this room can think of any local lawyers with whom they would like to reach a similar arrangement.

Bigger problems arose in 2011, when two women who worked in the Huntington West Virginia office of the Social Security Administration, an office which oversaw voluminous Eric C. Conn disability filings, reported on irregularities they had observed. These irregularities connected Huntington Judge David Daugherty and Mr. Social Security himself, Eric C Conn. The whistleblowers, Jennifer Griffith and Sarah Carver, provided information to the Wall Street Journal, which ultimately published a report in 2011. This report indicated that Judge David Daugherty, one of several administrative judges in the Huntington office, was assigned nearly all of Eric C. Conn's clients' disability claims. These claims were, coincidentally, handled and processed approximately three times more quickly than all other claims presented to the same office. More significantly, Conn's clients received benefits at a far greater rate than similarly-filed claims from other lawyers. Specifically, the average rate of success of social security disability benefit claims in 2009 and 2010 was approximately 60%. In that same time span, Conn's cases, which were presented almost exclusively to Judge David Daugherty, were approved at a 99.7% rate. Of the 2785 cases that Eric C. Conn presented, 2776 were approved.

The 2011 Wall Street Journal article led to a Senate investigation in 2013. This investigation revealed a scheme in which Judge Daugherty was paid \$400 per claim by Eric C. Conn to assure a favorable finding of disability. Moreover, the Senate Committee found that a third conspirator, Alfred Bradley Adkins, a clinical psychologist, provided misleading or even fraudulent medical proof to be presented to Judge Daugherty. He was paid \$350 per assessment by Conn.

The findings of the Senate investigation were staggering. The scheme, spearheaded by Conn, fraudulently procured Social Security disability benefits for around 1800 individuals. The total payout by the US government to Conn's clients for those cases was more than \$600 million. Since the original investigation, that number has grown by approximately 2000 additional cases, with current estimates being that Conn bilked more than \$1 billion worth of benefits for clients from the US Government.

Dr. David Daugherty, at age 81, received a four-year prison sentence for his role in the conspiracy. Alfred Bradley Adkins, the clinical psychologist who crafted embellished or totally fraudulent reports for Conn, decided to take his case to trial, typically a mistake when dealing with federal prosecutors. That decision yielded him a 25 year prison sentence along with an Order to pay \$93 million in restitution. That may take a while to get paid. (Judge Adams and I have to watch middle age nere-do-wells shamle into juvenile court to make \$5.00 payments on their court costs.) So the writing was on the wall for Mr. Social Security. And he handled it with every bit of the grace and honor you would expect of a man of Conn's impeccable character. He went into full stonewall mode. Conn reportedly shredded 26,000 pounds of legal documents, an estimated 2.6 million pieces of paper. To get an idea about just how much paper that is, if I were to stack 2.6 million pieces of paper on this table, it would make a really really tall stack of paper. Conn also allegedly staged huge bonfires of potentially damning paperwork right under the feet of replica of Honest Abe. An employee later reported that he asked her to deposit hundreds of thousands of dollars into her bank account. Eric C Conn was not going to go quietly.

For several years after the Senate investigation, Conn's world rolled on pretty much as usual. (Usual being a relative term in the Eric C. Conn law compound.) Conn's advertising campaign slowed somewhat, but he remained very visible and continued to practice law. He even produced a defiant ad showing that the Eric C. Conn law Office was still open for business. (*Let me ask you a question ad.*) Locals began to wonder if he was going to find a way to beat the rap. Then, on April 1, 2016, (April Fool's Day) Conn was indicted by a federal grand jury for 18 felony crimes carrying up to 130 years of jail time. The indictment alleged that between 2004 and 2012, Conn defrauded the United States government by at least half a billion dollars. Charges included mail fraud, wire fraud, conspiracy to retaliate against witnesses, destruction of evidence, false statements to investigators and money laundering. Conn was served with the indictment and locked up on April 4, 2016 (*mug shot*) before being released eight days later on home incarceration and a GPS ankle monitor to track his movements. Eleven months later, Conn was indicted on two additional federal charges and on the same day entered into a guilty plea to two counts of bribery and theft by fraud. The recommended sentence from federal prosecutors included 12 years in the federal pen, \$100 million in restitution to the Social Security Administration, five million dollars in restitution to the US Department of Justice and a \$50,000 fine. It appeared that if Conn cooperated, the remaining eighteen charges from the original indictment would be dismissed.

But as our study of Mr. Social Security indicates, cooperation is not a trait that comes naturally with Eric C. Conn. At the time of his release from jail, prosecutors argued that he was a flight risk, but he was released over their objection. Judge Atkins, I'd ask you to pay special attention to this portion of the paper. On June 2, 2017, Conn

met with his attorney in Lexington to discuss his upcoming July sentencing date. After that meeting took place, Conn took drastic action, cutting off his ankle monitor and beginning his ill-fated run. He was assisted by former employee Curtis Lee Wyatt, a native of Raccoon, Kentucky (not making that up), who had previously paid cash for a 2002 Dodge Ram in Somerset, Kentucky and provided same to Conn for his escape. And where does a man fleeing the US government who learned Spanish off of a tape, a gringo who speaks the lingo, head? That's right, Eric C. Conn was making a run for the border. **(Wanted poster.)**

A quick note before we get into Conn's exotic tale of Latin American absconding. Most of the details of Conn's trip are first-person accounts. Conn, ever a lover of the spotlight, sent a 42 page handwritten letter to the Lexington Herald Leader describing in great detail, and possibly a smidge of exaggeration, his journey. As someone who spends part of his time prosecuting criminals, let me say that I highly endorse individuals who have run afoul of the law and face pending charges fully documenting those crimes for publication.

According to Conn's memoir/confession, he drove from Lexington to El Paso, Texas where he acquired a fake passport and attempted to board a flight to an unspecified Latin American nation before freezing up at the sight of armed airport security and fleeing the airport. His stooge, Curtis Lee Wyatt, had made several border crossings in the weeks leading up to Conn's flight in order to find the best one for Conn to utilize. Conn made it, later stating that it was not overly difficult, proving once again my long-held theory that when the going gets tough, you can always depend on guys from Raccoon.

Once in Mexico, Conn hitchhiked to the city of Juarez. In his letter to the Herald Leader, Conn described the city in these glowing terms. "Ciudad Juarez was certainly not on many 'bucket lists' of places to visit. It is best known as the city with the most drug-related murders in all of Mexico." Understandably uneasy with that circumstance, Conn decided to make the roughly 2000 mile trek southeast to Guatemala, a trip which he made over several days via bus. Once he made the Guatemalan border, Conn had to rely on his formidable wits to see him through. Once again, an excerpt from his confession/Central American travel guide:

"When I, at long last, arrived at the border crossing into Guatemala it was early afternoon. This meant I only had a few hours to observe the procedures at the crossing. I glimpsed a young man who was holding a small light brown puppy. The little guy was not exactly Rin Tin Tin, but I thought almost everyone loves puppies. I asked the young man if I could borrow his puppy for about 30 minutes. 'Yes, for five dollars,' he quickly replied. I gave him the five dollars and the puppy and I began our walk across a long bridge at the border going for Mexico to Guatemala. I realize that I had not asked for the dog's name. I was concerned my returning to get the dog's name would cause unwanted attention. Consequently I decided to give him the temporary name of Curly. As Curly and I started to walk past the Guatemalan border guards, Curly spotted a chicken which caused him to start barking loudly. Curly's barking got the attention of one of the guards. The guard said 'I've got a dog that looks just like him.' I replied 'I named him Curly.' The guard, apparently had watched the Three Stooges because he started laughing and said 'Curly.' I just looked at the guard and smiled and kept walking.

Finally, Curly and I successfully crossed the border. Curly and I had a nice dinner together before I sent him back.” (Sent him back?)

You may think at this point that Conn’s story has every important dramatic element. Fame, money, crime, clearly fabricated stories about dogs and chickens, but what about love? Recall from earlier in the story Conn’s affinity for torrid affairs with Latin American women. According to his account, his fascination with them and their interest in him, a middle-aged overweight white man, had not diminished despite his precipitous fall from fortune and fame. Conn paid off a bus driver to drive him east from Guatemala into Honduras in what Conn referred to as a “chicken bus.” It would seem somewhat unlikely that sparks would fly on a dirty, smelly bus full of day laborers and people fleeing the law, some of whom were apparently carrying chickens. But let’s not underestimate Eric C. Conn’s personal magnetism. (*Bald pic*) Let’s soak in the details from Conn’s confession/dime store romance novel as to the great chicken bus romance.

“I boarded the bus to where I did not know. Nonetheless, I simply desired some rest so it did not really matter. This desire for rest was soon replaced by a stronger desire. I glimpsed an incredibly beautiful woman, but there was a hardness and imperiousness about her that was the extreme opposite of helplessness. There was something restless, eager, and potentially explosive about her. I was a moth to the flame.”

Conn goes on to describe his conversation with the woman, who he later tells us is named Jessica, which seems like a very normal Central American name. As you

listen to this absurd account of their alleged banter, bear in mind that he is, for reasons known only to him, writing this all to the Lexington Herald Leader.

Conn after moving over to sit by Jessica....

"I thought it was better to move here closer to you than staring at you from afar.' She laughed and said 'I don't understand why a gringo is on a bus all alone in this dangerous country.' 'I'm always a little stupid when it comes to beautiful women,' I said. 'I am an American with some problems in the United States.' She replied, 'I get it, you don't have any travel papers.' I was so stunned I had to remind myself that mind reading, as far as I knew, was impossible. I said 'I think it's best if we talk about it later.'

Conn then described how he dramatically mimicked Rhett Butler from *Gone with the Wind* by pretending he was drunk when confronted with Honduran border guards looking for his papers. According to Conn, the guard believed his tale and remarked "I believe all gringos are crazy."

Once in Honduras, Conn, after securing Jessica's phone number, traveled from place to place looking for a suitable spot to live out his days. He ultimately settled in a town called La Ceiba, a Caribbean tourist city located on the northern coast of Honduras. He even had a brief visit from Jessica the chicken bus beauty. Conn describes it this way:

"Jessica had come to be with me in La Ceiba about two weeks before the political chaos had begun. We spent some knowing moments together, but I could feel something was wrong. In the second week together, I found out Jessica had her own problems. Jessica was not even Honduran despite her having a Honduran passport.

Jessica was from Medellin, Colombia. I should've known because I had long been attracted to women from Medellin.”

Ultimately, Jessica departed and Conn decided there was nothing left for him in Honduras. He planned yet another border-crossing. However, before doing that, Conn made a final Honduran stop to dine at his favorite local restaurant, Pizza Hut. Conn had ordered a personal pan pepperoni pizza and a bowl of Azteca soup when the second shoe fell on Mr. Social Security.

“I had finished my personal pan and was listening to the Eagle song *Hotel California* while I waited on my soup to arrive. A woman who I did not know sat down in the booth with me. She looked at me and said ‘I’m honored to meet you because this is the first time I’ve ever met a Mensan.’ (Conn claims to be a member of the Mensa society for geniuses, but I have never encountered him at the local meeting, so I cannot comment on the veracity of this particular claim.) I said, ‘I believe you are here for me.’ She replied ‘I am.’”

As it turned out, the woman in the booth with Conn was part of a four team Guatemalan police unit hired to track down and arrest the American fugitive. The date was December 2, 2017, six months to the day from the date his run began in Lexington. Conn was caught and tagged for a return trip to the United States. But to ensure that he not let his readers down, Conn added a bit more intrigue to the story of his return. He described how the Honduran police force who captured him requested and then ultimately demanded at gunpoint money to secure his release. (*Pic in custody of police.*) When he confessed to being stone broke, he described discussions about

whether the police would give him over to American authorities or simply kill him. He even threw in an illusion that the woman who made the original daring Pizza Hut capture seemed to fall for him. As we know, Mr. Social Security has a way with Latin American women. Turns out, the gringo speaks the lingo of love.

Conn had a federal prison sentence waiting for him on his arrival back in the states. He had been sentenced in absentia on July 14, 2017 to the original 12 years on the two counts for which he had pled guilty. As of this moment, Conn also faces the original 18 federal charges from the first indictment as well as numerous additional charges related to his escape. Though the majority of his crimes took place in far Eastern Kentucky, and the majority of this story took place in Central America, Mr. Social Security sits tonight less than 100 miles from us at the Grayson County Detention Center awaiting the remainder of his legal fate. ***(Grayson county mug shot pic.)***

So there you have it. The rise and fall of Mr. Social Security. What was the point of me telling it to you? Perhaps it was to remind us that sometimes, in our zealous pursuit of ambition, we can fly a little too close to the sun. Perhaps it is because when I screw up at work, I can at least look in the mirror and know I'm not Eric C. Conn. But mostly, there's no real point to it other than the fact that I enjoy the absolute absurdity of his story. Eric C Conn, the man that bilked the US government for \$1 billion from a used trailer in the middle of nowhere, authored a desperate Central American flight with the FBI on his tail and heartbroken Latina women in his wake, and learned Spanish off of a tape.

Buenes Noches, senior Conn.