

The all-night municipal gunfight of the frontier town of Ione

Offbeat Oregon History No. 366

By Finn J.D. John

November 22, 2015

Plenty of Oregon towns have been the scene of Old West-style gunfights during the frontier era, but very few of them have ever hosted one in which nearly everybody in the town participated.

The tiny town of Ione, in northern central Oregon, is one that has.

The occasion of Ione's experiment in mixing a gunfight with a block party ("two great tastes that taste great together") was the arrival on the scene of a local troublemaker named Charles Earhart.

Earhart was well known to the citizens of Ione. At various times a wheat farmer and a saloon-keeper, he was also an ex-convict, having just been pardoned out of the joint six months earlier on charges stemming from a drunken shooting spree in Ione. He was one of those fellows who's perfectly nice until he takes a drink — but after that, watch out.

That night, his boilers were well stoked — and he was on the town to settle a score. Before his jail stretch, when he was keeping his saloon in town, he'd boarded with a woman named Mary Granger. He and Mrs. Granger apparently got along too well for the tastes of her husband. Whether there was anything to be jealous of or not is unknown, but Mr. Granger was confident enough in his conclusions that he moved out, taking the couple's two sons with him and leaving three daughters — ages 10, 13 and 14 — with her. The couple had a fourth daughter as well, who had married a man named Henry Clark and left the nest.

Months went by. Earhart went to prison, served a year and a half, was pardoned by the governor, and moved back to town. Mary Granger left her boarding-house business and took a job as manager of the Ione Hotel. And then, in late June of 2009, she offered Earhart a job on her staff.

When news of this job offer reached the ears of Henry Clark and his wife, the two of them confronted Mary and demanded that she fire Earhart and remove her other daughters from his influence.

News of this interference reached Earhart's ears on Thursday, July 2.

He apparently stewed on it for a day; but Friday

night found him in a more pro-active mood.

"Early Friday evening, Earhart began to tank up, and at dusk went down to the hotel conducted by Mrs. Granger," the Heppner Gazette reporter wrote. "Upon meeting the woman in front of the hotel on the sidewalk, a quarrel ensued. The quarrel, after reaching the warm stage, was taken up by Henry Clark."

Clark was, of course, just the man Earhart wanted to see, and he pulled a big knife out of his pocket with which to continue the conversation — escalating the imminent conflict from fists to knives.

Clark responded by escalating things a bit more — with a revolver.

Mary Granger jumped between the two men, trying to hold Clark, who fired over her shoulder at Earhart. Then, shaking free, he ran to the street and fired three more shots after the fast-retreating ex-con.

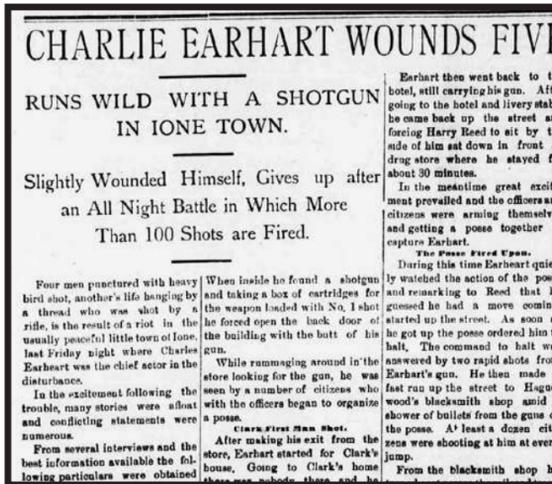
All were clean misses. But Earhart didn't scare that easy — not, at any rate, when drunk.

Running to Walker's General Merchandise store, he kicked out the plate-glass front window and ducked into the building, making for the gun counter. He was looking for a Winchester rifle, with which to continue the arms race with Clark.

Luckily for everyone involved, he couldn't find the rifles in the dark. But he did find a dandy double-barreled shotgun, and grabbing a couple boxes of shells (loaded, in another stroke of luck for all involved, with No. 1 birdshot) he headed for the door, bashing the lock off with the butt of the shotgun to let himself out. Then he struck out for Clark's house.

Nobody was there. But on his way back to town, Earhart met Clark with another man. Leveling the shotgun at them, he ordered them to climb over a nearby fence, and as they did so, he pumped a charge of bird shot into Clark's back. Luckily for Clark, it didn't penetrate enough to inflict more than a painful flesh wound and knock him off the fence, where presumably he had the good sense to not move.

Meanwhile, Ione residents who'd seen or heard the burglary at Walker's



The Heppner Gazette's report on the gun battle in the following week's edition ran under this attention-grabbing headline.

store had reported the situation to the town marshal and sheriff's deputy. Soon virtually every man in Ione was excitedly (and, in most cases, drunkenly; after all, it was Friday night) hurrying home, arming himself, and presenting himself for service on a posse. The officers were gathering and instructing the excited members of the still-growing posse on the main street in town, apparently unaware that their quarry was sitting quietly on the steps of the drugstore next to a friend whom he'd forced at gunpoint to accompany him.

Finally, Earhart looked over at his friend, remarked that it was his turn to make a move, and started up the street.

The movement caught someone's eye, and a shout went up from the posse:

"Stop right there!" Earhart's reply was two quick blasts from the shotgun as he took to his heels, heading for the far side of a blacksmith's shop; the path before him was lighted by the muzzle flashes of at least a dozen posse members' rifles and pistols, but somehow none of the bullets hit him, although one did graze his back.

As he ran, Earhart tripped over an elderly hobo, who had spread his bedroll out between two houses. The hobo raised his head, trying to see what had happened — and a member of the posse, seeing him there and thinking he was Earhart, shot him, inflicting a severe chest wound.

"As soon as the facts were realized the posse was considerably rattled, and Earhart's whereabouts were lost track of," the Gazette reported.

Assuming Earhart was in one of the warehouses, the posse surrounded them. They soon learned their mistake when the shotgun bellowed again from a nearby bush on the hillside behind them, sending a cloud of stinging .160-caliber pellets at a posse member from 80 yards away.

The posse member, peppered with shot but not really hurt, fell to the ground and started yelling for help; Morrow County Sheriff's Deputy Walter Cason went to help him, and himself got a charge of shot in the back and another in the legs.

After that, the posse re-formed and waited for daylight, which finally came and revealed Ear-

hart's hideout. Tired, sober and suddenly aware of the hopelessness of his situation, Earhart started crying and begging for mercy. He came out and was soon safely arrested and shackled and on his way to Heppner in the care of the sheriff.

Behind him he left the town of Ione peppered with bullet holes — more than 50 of them on the north side of Main Street alone.

On the way to the sheriff's office, Earhart and Deputy Walter Cason — who, remember, Earhart had hit with two long-range blasts from the shotgun — got into a nasty verbal fight. It ended with Earhart threatening to come back to Ione and kill Cason — a threat that several other people overheard.

Earhart pleaded Not Guilty to all charges, and his trial was a bit of a circus. "In outlining his case to the jury, (Earhart's attorney) declared that they would prove the shot fired by Earhart ... was fired accidentally as the result of his stumbling as he walked along the sidewalk," the Gazette's reporter wrote. "He said further that they would prove that a conspiracy was formed by the armed mob for the purpose of murdering the accused man."

Not surprisingly, it didn't work. He drew four and a half years in the state pen.

One imagines the citizens of Ione didn't much look forward to Earhart's release date. Of course, he came straight home. But he found the reception awaiting him somewhat warmer than he might have anticipated.

Maybe Earhart intended to settle his score with Cason upon his return to town, and maybe he'd forgotten all about it. But when he arrived, he found Cason waiting for him.

The two men went for their pistols. Cason shot him through the heart.

(Sources: Heppner Gazette: July 25, 1908; July 8 and 15, 1909; and Jan. 20 and 27, 1910; Heppner Herald, Sept. 22, 1914; Pendleton East Oregonian, July 5 and 7, 1909; correspondence with Mark Hooker)

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Folklore program set Friday in Heppner



Sandra Van Lieu with her animals

The Oregon Trail Library District will present a program, the Oregon Folklife Network, Keepers of Tradition: Morrow and Umatilla Counties, on Friday, March 11, at 6:30 p.m. at St Patrick's Senior Apartments, 190 N Main St., Heppner.

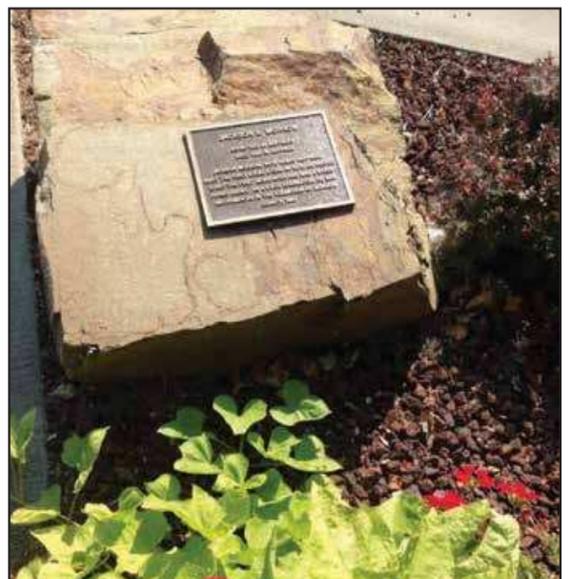
Debbie Fant is hosting the presentation. Fant, who has a master's degree in anthropology and folklore from the University of Texas, Austin, has been a public folklorist for over 20 years, first as a fieldworker for the Bureau of Florida Folklife. She was the recent recipient of an Archie Green Fellowship from the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. She has worked as the Idaho state folklorist, manager of the Cowboy Poetry Gathering (Western Folklife Center), deputy director of Northwest Folklife, and now for the Washington State Parks & Recreation Commission. Fant has conducted fieldwork, directed festivals, edited publications, curated exhibits, and is now conducting fieldwork in Oregon's Columbia Gorge region.

According to Fant, Riki Saltzman, Oregon Folklife Network executive director, "is very excited to see all the great folk and traditional artists that folklorist Debbie Fant has documented in Morrow and Umatilla counties."

Saltzman, who plans to be at the public programs, notes that "Fant's library programs will give local audiences a wonderful opportunity to hear firsthand about the fascinating cultural traditions of northeast Oregon. And we'd love to get feedback on future folklife programming in the region."

Funding for the library programs and folklife survey fieldwork in Morrow County is provided by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, Folk & Traditional Arts. Additional support comes from the Oregon Arts Commission, Oregon Historical Society, and the University of Oregon. The Oregon State Library, Oregon Trail Public Library, and the Friends of the Heppner Library provided additional support.

Talking Rocks tour March 19



Everyone is invited to join the city of Heppner for a bus tour after the St Patrick's Parade, Saturday, March 19. Those planning to attend should meet in front of Heppner City Hall 111, N. Main Street at 2 p.m. for a free, approximately one-hour tour to learn about the community's history. For more information, call 541-676-9618.

Arts and crafts sale planned for St. Pat's weekend

Members of the Morrow County Creative Arts and Crafts will be at the front of the Les Schwab building in Heppner over the St. Patrick's weekend.

Hours will be Friday, March 18, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturday, March 19, from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Members at the sale will include:

-Phyllis Piper with her Raggedy Ann dolls, using an old pattern with her original design. She will also have her dish towels for sale.

-JoAnn Shannon with lots of crocheted items such as baby clothes, dressed bears and towel toppers.

-Carmen Williams with jewelry, assorted crocheted craft and crocheted towel items

-Dottie Hunnicutt with baby fleece blankets, children's adjustable aprons with cookie cutters, stuffed dolls, coasters, church purses and other miscellaneous items.

-Darla Hanson with prints of fighting elk, sledding and goldfish.

-Dave Williams with wood craft items and assorted leather items.

-Don Shannon with wooden crafts, decorations and pillows.

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Marriage Licenses

Morrow County Clerk Bobbi Childers has released the following marriage license report:

-March 1: Harold Poeling, 56, Irrigon, and Linda Marie Putnam, 54, Irrigon.

-March 3: Bruce Allen Daniels, 32, Umatilla, and Sonja Leilani Bradley, 26, Umatilla.

-March 4: Curtis J. Papineau, 56, Lexington, and Carolyn M. Proebstel, 54, Lexington.

ALL NEWS AND ADVERTISEMENT DEADLINE:

MONDAYS AT 5:00 P.M.