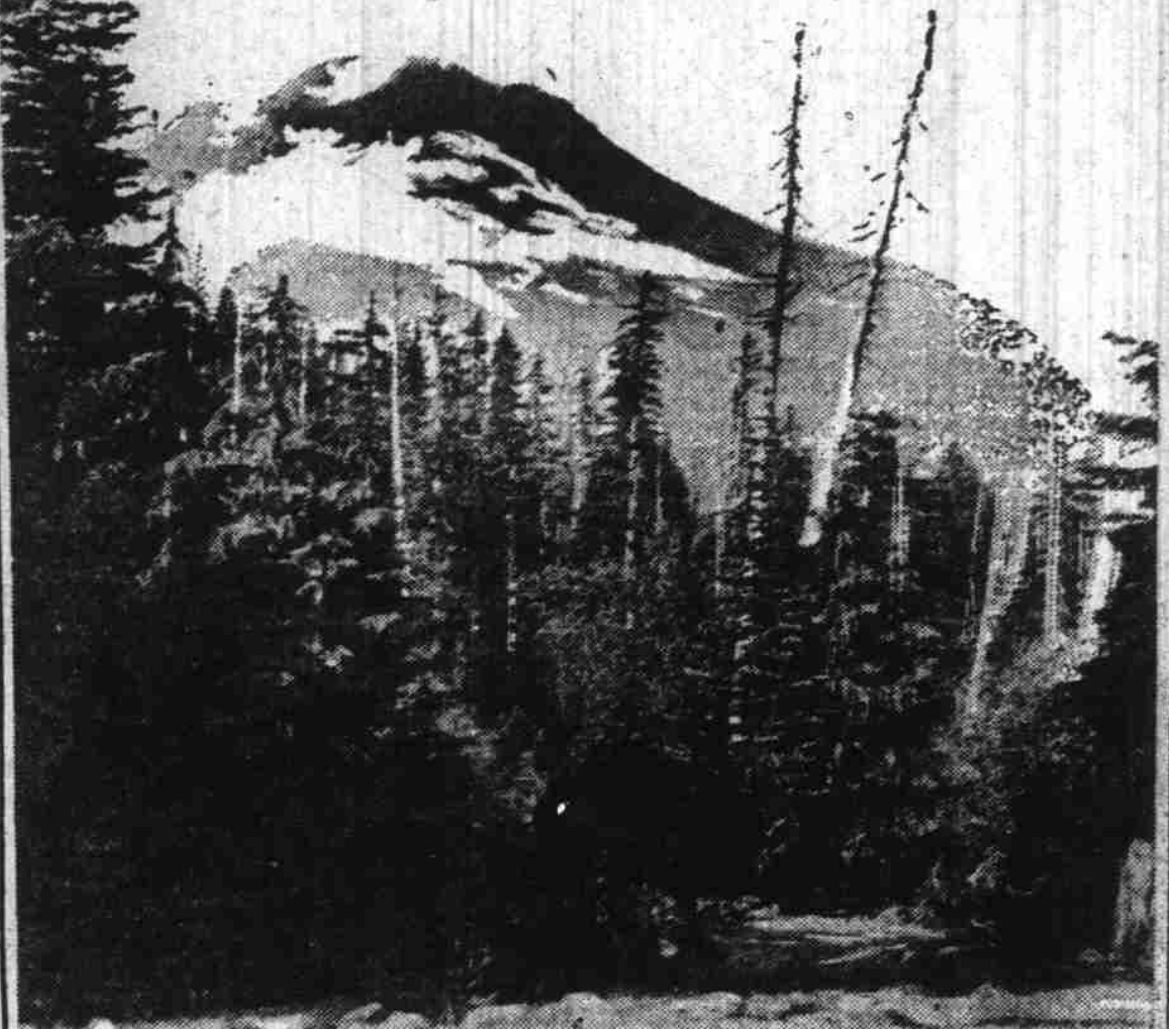


Laurel Mountain Mysteries

Thrilling Yarns Add to Lure of Mount Hood Country



OLD MT HOOD CASTS ITS SHADOW OVER THE MYSTERY MAN'S WORK PLACE



SOMEWHERE IN THIS CHARRED FOREST IS THE MAN'S GOLD



THE BLAZED CEDAR TREE

By Earl C. Brownlee

MURDER, robbery and anguish—these are the toll of the mystery man of Laurel mountain.

In the wake of his wicked work is a tale of treasure—thieves' gold—buried throughout a generation beneath the roots of shaggy cedar trees close within the shadow of old Mount Hood.

The inquisitive prying of years has failed to reveal the secret hoard. The lore of the mountains thrillingly tells us that the hoarder failed to consider civilization's advance in his directions to his son and the search of the second generation has been fruitless. When death wrote a finale to the first chapter of the story there could be no retelling.

Through weary years the son has toiled, following closely his errant father's instruction, yet coming, always and certainly, to the same end—failure.

Ascending the last rocky, forest-bound rise toward famous Government Camp at the base of Mount Hood one is on Laurel hill, charred domain whose history must contain some wondrous yarns delightfully worth the spinning.

The crest of that great hill, Mount Hood, a stalwart sentinel nearby, verdant plains sweeping into the horizon in the foreground, is where the mystery man and his son enacted the scenes of a queer drama that is reviewed by L. F. Pridemore, host at Government Camp and fast friend of the great, grim hills.

Many years ago (so many years that to attempt to verify the facts in existing records would be futile labor) the mystery man appeared with a lone companion in the forest covered realm that first was cut by Barlow trail from the east to the western land of hope.

Evading the little government post that marked the trail where Government Camp hotel now stands, the pair quietly passed on, down the slope, headed for the then small town of Portland.

A few miles back of them, shielded by a shallow grave, was the body of the third member of the party that had fled, only a few days before from The Dalles.

At The Dalles was an infuriated population and a woeful group of bankers whose strong boxes had just disgorged \$28,000 in brilliant golden coin for the enrichment of the fleeing trio.

Eluding all pursuit, the robbers, heavily laden, hid themselves in

the depths of the forest and worked their way westward. They were mad with riches and avaricious in spite of their ill-gained wealth.

Quarreling, as thieves must ever do, the three men halted near the site of Summit house to settle their dispute. A shot was the conciliator from whose decision there was no appeal. It shattered its blunt way into the breast of one of the three, and his mates, with their fortunes thus increased, sped on.

But the honor of thieves could not stand the test of the trail, beset by hardship, dimly lonesome and seemingly unending. At the crest of Laurel hill, safely beyond Government Camp, the two renewed the contention between themselves.

Again a shot rang out. It hit its mark and one of the robbers was left with the knowledge of the crime in which three had participated.

The slayer, his golden burden unsung, sought the heart of the forest to cover up the secret of his deeds. He hewed out a deep hole there, where the eyes of the law might be expected never to penetrate.

Only the giant cedar tree near by looked on as the slayer dropped the body of his victim into its forest-scented sepulchre.

There was none to hear the dull thud of heavy sacks that were piled into the fresh grave and quickly covered over with the cold

clouds and smoothed against discovery with fallen leaves and branches. For the stolen gold was too much for one man to carry over the dim trails that led to civilization and freedom from pursuit.

Down through the thorny mountain paths to Portland, it is said, came the bank robber—two murders charged against him. Sorely tried by the flight of many miles, necessarily made with all possible haste, it is reported that the robber rested here and formed his plans for his return to his cache when the ardor of the chase had cooled.

But a friendly woman interrupted the family and, day by day, the recovery of his stolen wealth became more of a dream than a possibility. Hungry mouths made their urgent call upon his labors and the time that must be consumed by a return over uncertain trails of many miles to the mountain grave presented a sacrifice the robbing father could not make.

The years ran on and hope vanished as that son grew into manhood and the father's life was drained through the cares of a lawful life in a busy, growing city. Always, though, there was a vision of buried fortune—sacks of it—to haunt the thief.

Finally, his dreams unconquered, a weary man called a grown son to him and, with heavy effort, told of a misspent life and its crimes. To the son the father gave instructions that would lead to the cache where,

in the shade of cedar trees, the boy might dig his way to easy fortune.

Perhaps death closed the scene, or, maybe, old memories were not keen. That can never be determined.

What is certain, however, is that, just a few years ago, a strapping young fellow came into Government Camp hotel, secured accommodations and, secretly, went his various ways.

Next day a road gang, bringing the wonders of that vast mountainous wonderland to Portland's dooryard, brought to the hotel report that, on the summit of Laurel hill, almost within sight of the hotel, they had seen a man digging industriously at the base of a huge cedar tree.

"He saw us watching him," they told, "and he dropped his shovel and ran into the thicket."

Thereafter for several days folks brought like stories into the hospitable lobby until, only half believing the existence of a man of mystery, Pridemore himself, with others, personally sought enlightenment. Pridemore walked down

ed and the day for his return became his wedding day. Then, before the courage of desire had prompted him to seek out his buried treasure, came a son into the slope toward the designated spot.

There he saw his guest, a sturdy chap, with several fresh holes in the earth about him, digging still another. A sudden noise startled the workman. He looked up and saw Pridemore, who, to ward off suspicion of prying, was sauntering on. The digger, however, dropped his tools and darted behind a tree.

For many days the mysterious work went on—the workman disappearing at the approach of every traveler—while Pridemore's guest, uncommunicative throughout, lived and acted normally about the hostelry at all times. His daytime labors were his own business and he kept word of them his own secret.

Meanwhile the chill winter was threatening and the digging was halted as quietly as it was started. At the spot may be found today

a huge cedar, surrounded by the fast disappearing signs of a son's labors. Its rugged bark is marred by four deep blazes, aged by time, but vivid marks nevertheless.

It is the theory that the survivor of the bandit trio blazed the forest denizen, conspicuously and, conforming other blazes to it, made it a part of the riddle whose solution would reveal the burial place of his last victim and the hidden gold.

But man had encroached upon the mountain wilds. The axe had brought down big trees that may have had a prominent place in the robber-father's instructions to his son. The lure of the great snow peak had called for road building and here, just at the base of the high tree, road builders had diverted their courses from the trail of the pioneers to build a wider passage elsewhere.

Man's works conspired to thwart the search of the robber's son. The tree with the four blazes still stands, while near it winds a newer roadway, with the stumps the road builders left to border it. So the son's work was vainly

done and he gave up hope as winter came on. Yet hope can be revived, and the following spring he returned to the hills, energies renewed, instructions reviewed, and started work.

Many new holes appeared on the hillside, centering around the great tree with the four blazes, where, it would appear, available features of the father's instructions would lead the son.

An aged father's directions, however, had not contemplated man's invasion of the hills nor the ravages of fire and logging crew.

The son's work failed day by day as it has failed year by year and, in spite of his continued effort to relocate the golden spoils of his elder's misdeeds, the mountain has held relentlessly to the awful charge that was put into its keeping by the man who defiled the face of the hills and their majesty.

Summer, for many years, brought the son back to Laurel hill's charred summit, the last rise before the morning shadow of Mount Hood casts itself over the forest, to seek in vain the loot that he knew must weight the bones of his father's victim.

"Piecemeal, from pioneers of the mountain country, from Indians and from fancy's dictates, I have gathered the facts of this mystery," Host Pridemore declares, "and I long intended to confront my energetic guest with the story. My plans went awry, however, for he has not returned to the mountain for several years and I have neither seen him nor heard word of him in the meantime."

Laurel hill may some day give up the secret it has held these many years, but there is small hope. The region has a reputation for retaining in its own scarred slopes the intimacies of its mysteries.

It was a grizzled old Indian war colonel, then long retired, who told of the terrible winter spent just above Laurel hill on the grassy plain that lies at the foot of Mount Hood.

There, with a small company of soldiers, the colonel had stopped, the mountaineers repeat, to wait for reinforcements with supplies for the coming winter. But winter, rigorous, stormy nightmare of wrath, came before the supplies and it was not long after the first impenetrable snowfall that the poor little troop had to resort to the flesh of its mules to sustain life. Winter swept on, so the story goes, carrying the lives of soldiers with it, into spring, when the pitifully few survivors could move on.

With snows melted and food replenished through nature's bounties, the colonel and his men sought the two brass cannons they had hauled up the mountain side.

No one else had been within miles, but the cannons had disappeared beyond reclaim. Did the earth open its tortured maw to swallow them? That, at least, is the supposition. Today, on a broad meadow near Government Camp, one can "shake" the earth underfoot. Somewhere in that freakish soil, where deep snows covered the brass cannons, are the field pieces of the Indian fighters.