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Offbeat Oregon History

Murderer surprised when Unwritten Law fails to protect him

The Unwritten Law Files

Today's column is the last in a series of case studies of the early-20th-century mania for honor killings in Oregon. It was popularly known as "The Unwritten Law," and it was a social convention that permitted a man to murder anyone whom he knew to be working to seduce his wife or sister. Unwritten Law cases arose around the country in the 1890s and were alarmingly common until around the time of the First World War. Today's column discusses the case that fairly definitively put the would-be honor killers of Oregon on notice that they could no longer expect The Unwritten Law to protect them.

BY FINN J.D. JOHN
For the Sentinel

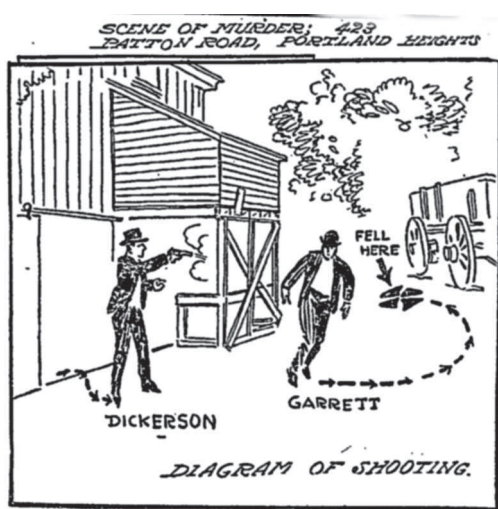
The Unwritten Law had quite a run in Oregon during the first decade of the 20th century. But by the time R. Thomas Dickerson made his attempt to claim its protection, the signs of it having worn out its welcome were there for those who looked.

It had certainly worn out its welcome at the city's newspapers. Probably the best demonstration of the Morning Oregonian's attitude toward The Unwritten Law was the lead sentence in its story about Dickerson:

"Charged with the commission of a cold-blooded murder," the reporter writes, "closely guarded in a cell in the county jail, believing his act will be excused by a jury of his countrymen through invocation of the Unwritten Law, R. Thomas Dickerson, a street contractor, of 512 Patton Road, Portland Heights, his voice shaking with vindictive rage, openly told the story while in the custody of officers of a tragedy yesterday morning shortly before 6 o'clock, which ended in the death of Harry A. Garrett, one of his teamsters, and disclosed to the world a shocking scandal of an allegedly faithless wife and the punished wrongs of a home destroyer."

What's most noticeable about this sentence, other than its astonishing length, is the clear hostility it shows toward both Dickerson and the Unwritten Law.

The article went on to detail the full story, or as much of it as was known at the time. Dickerson was inside a stable when he caught sight of one of his teamsters, Harry A. Garrett, walking



This sketch of the murder scene appeared in the Portland Morning Oregonian the day after the shooting.

out in front of the building. Dickerson immediately exited the stable, pulled a revolver out of his pocket, and fired five shots into Garrett.

Garrett then fell to the ground and died, and Dickerson went to surrender himself to the police.

He freely admitted what he'd done, telling them he'd done it because Garrett had wrecked his happy home by getting frisky with his wife, Martha Messner Dickerson — who had, in consequence of Garrett's depredations, moved out of the family manse with the couple's 7-year-old daughter, Pearl, and sued for divorce.

He also claimed Garrett had threatened to kill him as soon as the divorce case was concluded and then run away with Martha, and added, "I have heard of his breaking up other homes. He boasted of this, and some of my wife's folks said, so I heard, that she told them she was going to leave with one of my men as soon as the divorce hearing was over."

But Martha stoutly denied that there was anything going on with Garrett, and suggested another possible motive for her husband's actions — one that was easy to document: Garrett was to have been the lead witness in her suit for divorce.

And there was another thing, too: This was the Dickersons' second marriage to each other. The first one had ended when little Pearl was five years old, when Martha had sued for divorce on grounds of physical cruelty and verbal abuse.

Please see OFFBEAT, Page 10A

COMMUNITY BRIEFS

Firewood permits available

The U.S. Forest Service says that now is the perfect time to obtain a permit to collect firewood in the Umpqua National Forest. The Cottage Grove Ranger District has been issuing firewood permits since September and will continue to do so, with additional firewood becoming available this fall season. One non-transferable permit per household per year is issued for two cords of firewood at a total cost of \$20. For those households who have already purchased their Cottage Grove firewood permit this year, additional permits for other districts may be available for purchase at their corresponding Umpqua National Forest offices.

Permits will expire within 60 days of issuance or on Dec. 31, 2015, whichever comes sooner. If a permittee would like to receive the full 60 days allotted for firewood collection, they are urged to obtain a firewood permit on or before Nov. 2.

Permits are issued on a first-come, first-serve basis. Permits are also limited to correspond with the amount of known firewood available, and demand for firewood permits may exceed the supply of available firewood on the Cottage Grove Ranger District.

Firewood cutting areas are typically on narrow single-lane gravel roads with an average distance of 35 miles from the city of Cottage Grove. More information on specific areas for firewood cutting will be provided with the permit.

Cottage Grove Ranger District issues permits Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. (except holidays). Those with questions can contact the office at 541-767-5000 or email cgrdinfo@fs.fed.us. The Ranger District office is located at 78405 Cedar Park Road, Cottage Grove, OR 97424.

Property tax statements available online

Lane County property tax statements became available online on Monday. The County says this is the first year taxpayers will be able to access their property tax statements one week prior to the annual mailing, which is planned for Monday, Oct. 19.

The Lane County Assessment and Taxation office will extend its hours of service from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday between Oct. 19 and Nov. 17 in order to offer additional assistance to taxpayers.

In addition to property tax statements, taxpayers also have access to a greater level of data online compared to previous years. Now, it is possible to access individual account graphs detailing 10 years of property value history (real market value, assessed value, and maximum assessed value).

Property tax payments are due Monday, Nov. 16.

The County said the total Real Market Value of Lane County as of Jan. 1, 2015 is \$50.8 billion — an increase of four percent from 2014. The typical Lane County dwelling's market value increased 4.25 percent from 2014. In total, \$478 million in taxes were certified for the 83 taxing districts in Lane County in 2015 — an increase of 3.1 percent from 2014. The 2015 tax roll was certified on Monday, Oct. 5.

Property tax statements can be accessed by visiting www.lanecounty.org/AT.

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Meet the DJ/Program Host

ROB WARD

Rob loves the music he is playing! Rob invites you to tune in on Wednesdays, call-in your requests and enjoy some great Rock 'n Roll, Soul and Rhythm & Blues tunes. Rob was born in San Francisco in 1954 and grew up listening to KYA 1260 and KEWB 910, then later to KFRC 610. Rob formed his first garage band in 1966 as a 12-year-old, and continued with the same bandmates until early 1969. If it was played on top 40 radio, Rob heard it. His love for 50s and 60s music continues today and he loves keeping the music of the 50s and 60s alive, especially songs that should have been heard, but weren't. When he's not spinning records at KNND, Rob is the co-owner of Grill & Chill, "the little blue box that rocks on the corner of 9th and Whiteaker". He invites you to stop by and say hi.

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