

# Offbeat Oregon History

The Circuit Preacher Chronicles:  
A longshoreman's funeral

BY FINN J.D. JOHN  
For the Sentinel

One fine day, in around 1886, the Rt. Rev. Lemuel Wells was approached by a deputation from the local Longshoremen's Union. The burly dockworkers had a sad story to tell and a request for the Reverend's spiritual help. It seemed one of their members, while stumbling home following an epic spree, had fallen in the water and drowned. His body having been retrieved, the longshoremen now wanted Wells to give their poor deceased pal a decent Christian burial service.

Wells had been quite possibly the first working Episcopalian pastor to set foot in the Oregon country, just after the Civil War. Based out of Walla Walla in the Washington territory, he'd been responsible for the spiritual well being of Episcopalian residents from Gold Beach to Tacoma and as far east as the Idaho-Montana border.

But in 1885, the church had reassigned him to Tacoma. He'd gone from a lawless frontier to a rough-hewn new city that was just as lawless, albeit in different ways.

Tacoma was a new port city that serviced a growing blue-water sailing fleet, and although its waterfront sordidness was not yet in a class with Portland or Astoria, it was catching up fast. In his memoirs, Wells recounts an early-1880s incident that would have been worthy of Portland's legendary Joseph "Bunco" Kelley: It seems a boardinghouse operator named Brown stole a corpse from the local undertaker's parlor and, representing it as a drunk sailor sleeping soundly in the fore-castle, cashed it in for a \$10 "blood money" bonus from a ship captain.

So that was the scene in which the longshoremen in Wells' office earned their daily bread. Like most West Coast 1880s waterfront workers, they were hard-punching, hard-drinking, bluff and hearty men, as quick with a joke as they were with a fist, but sentimental in ways that a modern reader might not expect. The untimely loss of their friend had hit them hard, and they wanted to do right by him — to say their goodbyes and send him off with what they considered to be proper respect.

Wells was, of course, happy



The Rt. Rev. Lemuel Wells as he appeared in the early 1920s, from a photo published in Up to the Times Magazine in 1923.

grief-stricken. Each visit to the bar would increase their tears and call out longer eulogies and greater professions of sorrow. I said to the president of the longshoremen's union, 'We'd better begin right away or these fellows will be too drunk to attend the funeral.'"

Accordingly, the president called for order; Wells led the mostly-sozzled mourners in a calming prayer; pallbearers were selected, and the dreary burden was taken up. Down the stairs they solemnly went, through the saloon and out to the waiting hearse.

But when the pallbearers went to climb into the hack that had been brought to carry them to Trinity Church for the funeral, they found their seats had been hijacked by drunken longshoremen, who stubbornly refused to

give them up.

Protracted negotiations ensued with the president of the union. These talks ended with the president agreeing to provide hacks for the members so that they would not have to walk.

That worked fine for getting this particular crew of squatters out of the pallbearers' seats. But by this time there were a lot of longshoremen on the scene, and even if the union president could have swung it financially, he couldn't have found and hired enough hacks for all of them to ride. Some of them were still going to have to walk.

So when the hired hacks started to appear, there followed a huge, drunken melee among aspirants to their seats.

"They all tried to get into the first one, and a free fight ensued, and when the cab was filled they dragged off the driver and two mounted the box and drove off," Wells recounts. "The crowd made a rush for the next vehicle and so on until they were all (filled)."

Salvaging some dignity for the solemn occasion was doubtless a little difficult after that display, but Wells did his best, and soon the funeral procession of hijacked cabs was on its ponderous way through the streets of Tacoma, surrounded by resentful, footsore longshoremen exchanging hostile glares with their comfortably seated comrades.

Upon arrival at the church, the pallbearers declined to leave their seats and take up their sorrowful burden. They knew the minute they did so, their envi-

ous comrades would pounce upon those coveted seats, and they'd have to walk the rest of the way.

So Wells and his undertakers, joined by the president of the union, lugged the body into the church, and Wells preached the funeral service to the rows of empty pews, while the members of the congregation eyed one another warily in the parking lot outside.

"On returning with the body to replace it in the hearse, we saw the men all grimly seated in the carriages waiting for us," Wells recalls. "When we arrived at the grave nobody would get out of the carriages, so the undertakers and I had to bury the deceased."

Once the graveside service was preached, and Wells and his helpers were throwing dirt onto the top of the coffin, the men in the hacks drove off, followed by the longshoremen on foot — leaving to Wells and his helpers the task of moving about five cubic yards of earth into the open grave.

This kept them busy for some time — probably half an hour or so. Afterward, they climbed aboard their hearse and started back toward the church.

But before they even got out of the cemetery, they saw something that has to have provoked a curse word or two from even a mild, kindhearted man of the cloth like Lemuel Wells:

"Just outside the cemetery gate there were a number of roadhouses, as they were called — disreputable places with bars for the sale of liquor," Wells writes. "When we reached the

roadhouses, the carriages were all standing empty in front of them."

The fact that none of those grim riders clinging stubbornly to their seats in the hijacked cabs would bestir themselves to help bury their friend, even though the roadhouses were just a few hundred yards away from the cemetery gates, has to have rankled Wells. And although he claims no responsibility for what followed, it's hard not to wonder if he perhaps had a little something to do with it:

"Just then something startled one of the teams," he writes, somewhat coyly; "which ran away and ran into the next one and started that and so on down the line till they were all running at top speed; running into one another and wrecking and making sad havoc. The longshoremen's union had to pay several hundred dollars for the damage."

Wouldn't you just love to know exactly what that "something" was?

(Sources: Bromberg, Erik. "Frontier Humor: Plain and Fancy," Oregon Historical Quarterly, Sept. 1960; Wells, Lemuel H. A Pioneer Missionary. Seattle: Progressive Publishing, 1930)

Finn J.D. John teaches at Oregon State University and writes about odd tidbits of Oregon history. For details, see <http://finjohn.com>. To contact him or suggest a topic: [finn2@offbeatoregon.com](mailto:finn2@offbeatoregon.com) or 541-357-2222.

**SHERLOCK HOLMES**  
THE CASE OF THE EMPTY TOMB  
An EASTER MOVIE DRAMA

SUNDAY MARCH 27 At 11:00am

100 Gateway Blvd  
Cottage Grove, Oregon

**HOPE FELLOWSHIP**  
United Pentecostal Church

2015 Cottage Grove Chamber of Commerce Business of the Year

**NEED A RIDE?**  
Work ~ School ~ Doctors Appointment ~ Shopping  
We can get you there. Give us a call today!

South Lane  
**Wheels**  
Your Local Public Transportation Service

1450 Birch Ave  
541-942-0456  
[southlanewheels.org](http://southlanewheels.org)

**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.

321 Main Street  
Cottage Grove, OR 97424  
Lobby Phone: 541.942.2468  
Studio Line: 541.942.5548  
Online requests: [request@knnd.com](mailto:request@knnd.com)

# Health Services Directory

**Counseling & Mental Health**

**South Lane Mental Health**  
Serving Cottage Grove Since 1988

- Outpatient Counseling for Children, Adults & Couples
- Psychiatric Medication Management
- Crisis Assistance

541-942-2850 • 541-942-3939 • [www.slmh.org](http://www.slmh.org)

**Dental Health**

**Jonathan E. Backer, D.D.S.**

Preventive and Cosmetic Family Dentistry

New Patients Welcome

942-8437  
1551 E. Main St.

**See Dr. Bitner D.D.S., P.C.**  
350 Washington Ave • Cottage Grove  
Lumineers (behind International Fitness)  
The Most Natural Veneer 541-942-7934

**Delaying going to the Dentist?**  
Sedation Dentistry is a Dream come True... find out if its for You!

**BIRCH AVENUE DENTAL**

- Comprehensive General Dentistry
- Advanced Cosmetic Techniques
- Implants

1325 Birch Avenue, Cottage Grove  
541.942.2471  
Park W. McClung, DDS & Tammy L. McClung, DDS

**Dental Health**

**Douglas G. Maddess, DMD**

Preventive and Cosmetic Family Dentistry

New Patients Welcome

914 South 4th St. • Cottage Grove • 942-1559

**Dr. Shane Parsons**  
605 Jefferson Ave.  
Cottage Grove

**TIMBERLINE DENTAL**

Hours: Monday-Friday, 8am-5pm  
Emergency appts. available daily  
New patients welcome

2 Hygienists available • Same friendly and caring staff  
Please call for an appointment at 541-942-9171

**Hearing**

**Grant's Hearing Center**

Jenna Buetow  
Oregon Hearing Aid Consultant

541-942-8444  
1498 E. Main St.  
[www.grantshearing.com](http://www.grantshearing.com)

Next to Safeway in Cottage Grove  
Hearing Aids For Every Need And Every Budget

**Medical**

PeaceHealth Cottage Grove Community Medical Center

Great care in a great place.

Our services include:

- Primary Care
- Laboratory
- Physical Therapy
- Imaging
- Home Health
- Emergency Department
- Walk-In Clinic
- Medical Out-Patient Services

[peacehealth.org/cottage-grove](http://peacehealth.org/cottage-grove) • 1515 Village Drive  
Hospital: 541-767-5500 • Medical Clinic: 541-767-5200

**Medical Equipment**

**Grove Medical Equipment**  
"BUILDING A HEALTHY COMMUNITY"

SALES AND RENTALS

Home Oxygen • CPAP • Nebulizers  
Wheelchairs • Walkers • Canes • Crutches • Power Mobility  
Bathroom Equipment • Incontinence Supplies  
Aides to Daily Living • Splints & Braces • Compression Therapy

541-225-5443  
148 Gateway Blvd  
Cottage Grove, OR 97424

**Pharmacies**

**BI-MART Pharmacy**

OPEN at 9am Mon. - Sat. • Convenient Walk-Up Window  
100 Gateway Blvd. • 942-9107

To list your business call us 541-942-3325