# Offbeat Oregon History

The Circuit Preacher Chronicles: A longshoreman's funeral

BY FINN J.D. JOHN For the Sentinel

ne 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 differ-

Tacoma was a new port city that serviced a growing bluewater 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 forecastle, cashed it in for a \$10 "blood money" bonus from a ship cap-

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 longshoreman'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 en-

sued 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

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

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 com-

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

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

"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."

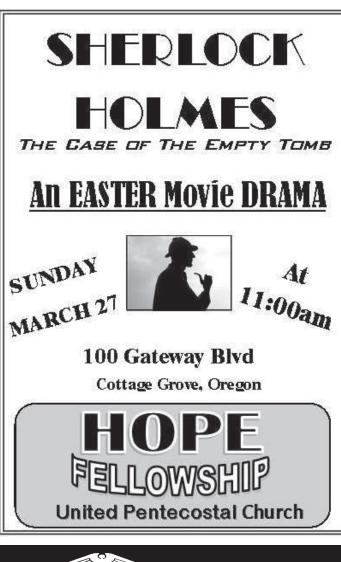
The fact that none of those grim riders clinging stubbornly to their seats in the hijacked cabs would bestir themselves to help bury their friend, even though the roadhouses were just a few hundred yards away from the cemetery gates, has to have rankled Wells. And although he claims no responsibility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

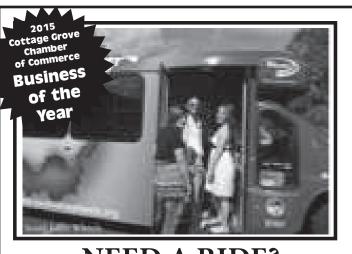
"Just then something startled one of the teams," he writes, somewhat coyly; "which ran away and ran into the next one and started that and so on down the line till they were all running at top speed; running into one another and wrecking and making sad havoc. The longshoremen's union had to pay several 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://finnjohn.com. To contact him or suggest a topic: finn2@ offbeatoregon.com or 541-357-





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