



Offbeat Oregon History

Albany's "Queen of Fakirs" belongs in con artists' hall of fame

BY FINN J.D. JOHN
For the Sentinel

When D.C. Davis first met Hazel Petterson, she was lying, frail and sickly, in a hotel bed in Yacolt, Washington. She'd been taken there following a horrifying mishap on the Northern Pacific Railroad on April 9, 1909.

It seemed someone had left a suitcase in the aisle, and the train's crew hadn't noticed. As the train had pulled into Yacolt, there had been a sudden lurch, and poor Mrs. Petterson, her baby in her arms, had been thrown forward and tripped over the suitcase. Crashing to the floor with a dramatic scream as she held her baby safely away from harm, she'd writhed there in agony, spitting teeth and blood and clutching her side.

Hastily removed to the hotel bed in which she now rested, they had learned the extent of her injuries — and they were astonishing. Her ankle appeared to be broken, with a bone out of place, although it had not yet started swelling. She appeared to have at least one broken rib. One of her pupils was dilated while the other was normal — a known sign of either eye injury or brain trauma. And she'd spat two teeth out upon the floor of the train amid a welter of blood, the apparent result of a lung hemorrhage, possibly punctured by the broken rib.

This was bad. And it seemed to be getting worse. Davis learned that Mrs. Petterson was a wealthy widow from Calgary, the sort of person who could be expected to take legal action against the railroad if she felt unfairly treated. So Davis spent nearly a week attending to her. A local doctor examined her, confirmed her injuries and set her ankle in a plaster cast.

Davis's first priority was to forestall any litigation and attendant bad publicity. So as soon as he could, before any additional symptoms could appear, he hurriedly started negotiating a settlement with the injured woman. She finally accepted a payment of \$1,250, and he wrote a bank draft out on the spot.

Then he set about getting her ready to go back to Calgary. She was loaded in a stretcher on a baggage car and sent to Vancouver; then she was placed in an automobile and gingerly driven down into Portland, in the care of two nurses hired by the railroad. They first took her to the railroad's banking house, where Davis vouched for her identity and she cashed the draft — taking most of it in gold. This was probably the moment when the first hints of doubt started to cross Davis's mind. Why would a wealthy widow faced with nothing more than a week-long train trip home want the trouble of lugging all that gold along with her?

Mrs. Petterson checked into a hotel. Davis went out, at her request, to find an attorney for her, make an appointment with an eye specialist and arrange accommodations on a train back to Calgary. She then sent one of the nurses to make travel arrangements.

Immediately after the nurse departed, Mrs. Petterson hopped out of bed and made a phone call. Within minutes she'd left the hotel — having somehow made a miraculous recovery — and disappeared into the night.

When Davis returned, she was gone. Following a quick series of inquiries to Calgary by telegraph, the dismayed Mr. Davis learned that there was no recently widowed Mrs. Petterson. He also learned that a very odd thing had been found in Mrs. Petterson's hotel room in Yacolt: A small packet of red powder, which had been recognized immediately as fake blood.

There could now be no doubt: D.C. Davis had been taken for a ride. And, worse yet, he knew exactly who had conned him. All the railroad claims agents, all over the West, had been talking about her. She could be none other than the "Queen of Fakirs," Maud Myrtle Johnson — a smooth and talented actress who over the previous few years had bilked railroads and streetcar companies all over the western United States to the tune of at least \$200,000.

And, in what must have been a particularly bitter revelation to poor Mr. Davis, it turned out that the train she'd been riding on had been carrying Maud Johnson away from the courthouse in Seattle, where she'd just been acquitted on charges of soaking the Seattle streetcar company for \$600 in precisely the same way.

Maud Johnson was born Maud Myrtle Wagnon, on a farm near Albany. After her mother died, her father left her in a convent in Salem and moved to Portland, where, in an ironic twist, he became a police officer.

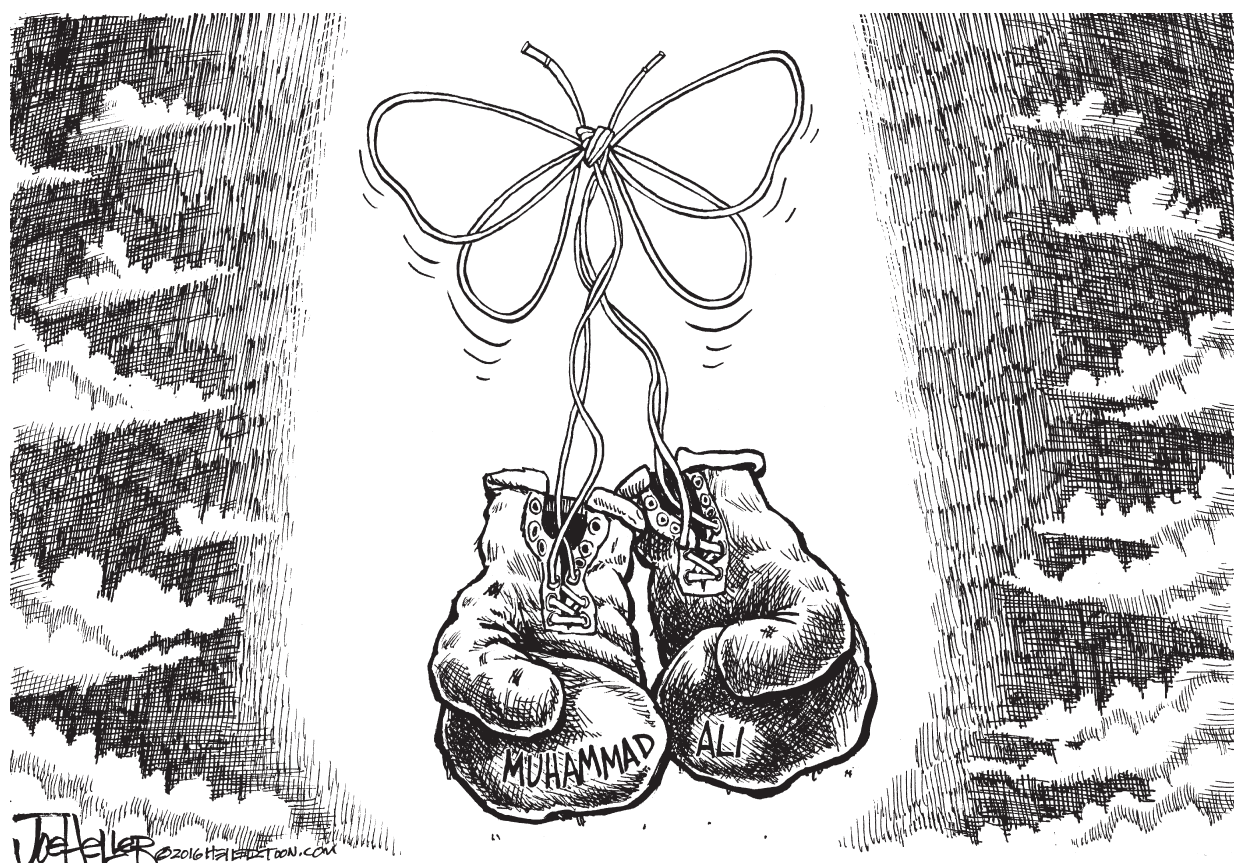
Maud seems to have been something of a hellion. When she was 14, she sued a man for seduction under promise of marriage, and at 16 ran away from the convent to which she had been committed with another man.

She soon drifted into a life of crime — and, it seems, of Vaudeville. At the same time she was becoming well known to the police departments of Salem, Portland, and Pendleton, she was also acquiring a very unusual set of skills.

By 1906, Maud could dislocate an ankle, a knee, and a rib at will. Born with a slightly misshapen chest, she learned to pose it to maximize an illusion of brokenness. One of her eyes was noticeably different in appearance than the other — possibly the result of some old injury — and she could exacerbate that by dilating its pupil at will. And she developed a macabre ability to bite on her gums in a way that produced blood on demand.

So Maud took her show on the road. Adopting a foundling baby from an orphanage to use as a prop — she knew a settlement would be far more likely if a baby were involved — she took her show on the road with a small group of accomplices, bilking railroad and streetcar

Please see **OFFBEAT**, Page 11A



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

More on the Airport

Thanks to Jon Stinnett for a great article about the Cottage Grove Airport welcome center. I want to thank the Woodard Foundation and City of Cottage Grove for their generosity and belief in this project.

Our Airport is the aviation gateway to Cottage Grove, which makes it a perfect match for a tourist information center for pilots and their passengers. It has almost 10,000 visitors a year, and recently the Department of Aviation invested in a new multi million-dollar runway.

For about 20 years there has been no real bathroom for visitors or local tenants. What does that tell visitors

about Cottage Grove? How many of those 10,000 visitors came to downtown or even knew we had one? We are missing a great opportunity to promote business and recognition of the treasured assets in our community. We will encourage pilots and their passengers to visit our city and return for future visits. The City of Cottage Grove is providing a courtesy car for transportation into downtown. We will also have bicycles available for their use along with bus and taxi information.

The 432 square foot Airport welcome center will promote tourism and economic vitality and attract potential aviation business to the Cottage Grove Airport. It will contain

information about restaurants, hotels, golf courses, shops, museums, events, bike trails and more, as well as a providing a much needed bathroom. The Airport welcome center will aid in the desirability to build more hangars and add to the property tax revenue for the city.

We have hit the halfway mark of our fundraising. Tax-deductible donations can be made to: Welcome Center-OAHS, PO Box 553, Cottage Grove, OR 97424.

I am proud to be part of this great project.

Nadine Kelley
Project Mgr., CG Airport welcome center

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Preventing osteoporosis with excellent nutrition

BY JOEL FUHRMAN, MD
For the Sentinel

Bone health is directly linked to nutrition. Cer-

tain foods promote breakdown of bone and osteoporosis. Other foods, such as fruits and vegetables, supply your body with the nutrients necessary to build

and maintain healthy, strong bones and prevent osteoporosis.

A number of substances in foods promote the loss of calcium in the urine, which leads to bone loss and osteoporosis. The foods we should avoid to protect the health of our bones include animal products, salt, soda and caffeinated beverages. Salt and caffeine are known contributors to calcium loss. Also, high caffeine intake is associated with increased bone loss and osteoporotic fractures. Animal protein and other high-protein foods leave acidic residues in the blood, and the body responds by dissolving



bone to release basic calcium salts to neutralize the acid. This results in loss of calcium in the urine. Many studies have found animal protein intake to be associated with low bone mass. In contrast, plant protein intake is associated with decreased hip fractures in the elderly. Natural plant foods do not leave an acidic residue in the blood or promote urinary calcium excretion. Soda, including diet and decaffeinated soda, is associated with bone loss. Soda consumption increases parathyroid hormone (PTH) in the blood, which increases blood calcium concentrations by stimulating bone breakdown. This increased blood calcium is then excreted in the urine.

Whole plant foods are the best foods for bones. Studies show that individuals with the

highest consumption of fruit and vegetables have the strongest bones. A diet full of greens, beans and seeds provides the calcium required to maintain healthy bone. Green vegetables in particular are rich calcium sources. For example, one four-ounce serving of steamed kale has just as much calcium as one cup of milk. Broccoli, bok choy, sesame seeds and garbanzo beans are also excellent calcium sources. Furthermore, the body absorbs about 50 percent of the calcium in many green vegetables, compared to only 32 percent of the calcium in milk. Green vegetables are also high in vitamin K, which is a crucial component for maintaining healthy bones. Nuts and seeds are rich in magnesium, an essential mineral for the formation of bone tissue. They also

help maintain adequate calorie and protein intake to maintain muscle and bone mass without having to rely on high acid-forming animal products.

Also, don't forget about exercising and supplementing with vitamin D. Both of these practices are extremely important for bone health.

Dr. Fuhrman is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of Eat to Live and Super Immunity, and a board certified family physician specializing in lifestyle and nutritional medicine. Visit his informative website at DrFuhrman.com. Submit your questions and comments about this column directly to news-questions@drfuhrman.com.

Cottage Grove Sentinel

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In foreign countries, postage extra.

No subscription for less than Ten Weeks. Subscription rates are subject to change upon 30 days' notice. All subscriptions must be paid prior to beginning the subscription and are non-refundable.

Periodicals postage paid at Cottage Grove, Oregon.

Postmaster: Send address changes to P.O. Box 35, Cottage Grove, OR 97424.

Local Mail Service:

If you don't receive your Cottage Grove Sentinel on the Wednesday of publication, please let us know. Call 942-3325 between 8:30 a.m. and 5 p.m.

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