



Offbeat Oregon History

Did brutal wartime railroad murder end in cynical "railroad job"?

BY FINN J.D. JOHN
For the Sentinel

On the bitter cold winter night of Jan. 22, 1943, a beautiful 21-year-old woman named Martha Brinson James was settling into her sleeping berth in a crowded Pullman coach, headed for San Francisco.

Young Mrs. James would not live to see the sun come up on Jan. 23. And the circumstances that led to her death are, 70 years later, still emerging from a cloud of mystery not unmixed with deliberate obfuscation — but one of the few things we do know, with near certainty, is that the man sent to the gas chamber for this crime was innocent.

Here's the story as it was told the next day in the Portland Morning Oregonian:

Martha Brinson James came of a blue-blooded Virginia family, her father a good friend and neighbor of the governor of that state. On the night of her death, she had been married for just four months, to a dashing young Navy pilot named Richard James. The two of them were traveling from Seattle to their new home in California, where Richard had been stationed as a reserve Naval aviator. Richard, a lowly Ensign (the lowest rank of commissioned Navy officer), was sent on a troop train; his wife followed a few hours behind on the Southern Pacific West Coast Limited.

The West Coast Limited was packed on that chilly day. It was still early in the Second World War, and the tide of war was only just starting to turn in favor of the U.S. Military personnel and their families were being shuttled all over the country, and trains, like all bits of home-front infrastructure, were being run as Spartanly as possible; traveling was not fun. They were crowded and cramped. In one car, a family of five was packed into two twin-bed-size berths. The windows were blacked out under wartime rules, making the train car into a coffin-like box hurtling through the night. Inside that box, people sweated, swore, emitted noxious gases, feuded, got carsick ... and, after midnight or so, tried desperately to sleep.

At about 4 a.m., the passengers on Car D were startled awake by a scream — a woman shouting, "Oh my God, he's killing me!" They rushed to pull aside their curtains and saw the form of a woman who had obviously fallen out of her berth, lying on her back in the middle of the aisle. Standing over her was a uniformed Marine Corps private, apparently the first on the scene. He was covered in the blood that was still spurting from her throat, which had been savagely slashed.

The Marine, Pvt. Harold Wilson, said he'd been in the bunk just above hers when he heard her scream; he'd pulled aside the curtains in time to see her falling out of her berth, and to see a dark, heavy-set man running from the

scene.

"He kind of turned a little sideways, so I could just get the side of his face," Wilson told investigators later. "It was pretty full. He had on a brown pinpoint stripe suit. I think he was about 5 feet 10 inches, and he had short hair. The light was so dim I couldn't tell whether he was a light Negro or a dark white man."

Hastily pulling on his pants, Wilson said, he'd jumped down from his berth to see if she needed help but had quickly realized she was beyond the reach of aid.

When the train arrived at Eugene, authorities went through it as carefully as they could. There was a trail of blood drops that led to the back end of the train, which suggested that perhaps the murderer jumped off into the night; but then again, some or all of that trail was likely left by Wilson, the too-late would-be rescuer. Other than that, the evidence was scant. The victim's throat, early reports claimed, had been slashed with something dull or blunt; the weapon wasn't found.

At Eugene, Wilson was taken into custody as a material witness, along with an African-American dining-car waiter who matched the vague physical description of height, build and complexion he had given.

As you can imagine, the entire country found this story riveting. More than one historian has compared the whole thing to a story from one of the many tawdry "true detective" pulp-fiction magazines. It had all the elements ... all the elements but one, that is: A villain. For it soon appeared that the local law-enforcement authorities were stumped on this one.

Tracks were found in the snow near where the train had been when the murder took place, and even some blood. But that trail went cold when authorities found the tracks came from and returned to a local farm; the farmer said he'd suffered a nosebleed from the cold. Clearly whoever did the killing remained on the train.

There was that dining-car waiter. But he was quickly eliminated as a suspect. He had been asleep in a berth at the other end of the train, and had several solid witnesses to back up his alibi.

Then there was Pvt. Wilson, of course, found standing over the body with blood all over his hands. But Wilson was a U.S. Marine, and one rather expects Marines to run to the rescue of women who cry out in the night. Nobody wanted him to turn out to be the guy who did it; it would be like learning that a firefighter was a secret serial killer. How would that look to the citizens of a country at war, its trains and subways packed with young men in uniform? How would home-front logistics be affected if women started looking at every young man in uniform as a potential predator? How would

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Thanks from the bank

Lane Blood Bank thanks the public for its support, partnership and powerful service to our community. June is our highest requested month for blood from our hospitals. On Monday, June 27, we collected 27 lifesaving units from a presenting 36 Cottage Grove

community blood donors and registered three of them for the very first time too! Each unit of donated blood is broken, separated, componentized and saves three lives. This means that over 78 patients will benefit and be impacted by blood donations made just on that one particular Monday at Cottage Grove Community blood drive at Cottage Grove Community Center. When we give blood, lives

are saved, helped, and enriched in the community. We look forward to next month's return for a BBQ blood drive in the reception hall/patio area at the Community Center on Friday, July 15 from 11 a.m.-4 p.m.

Raena Wood
Lane Blood Bank Acct. Rep.

Commissioners' anti-initiative effort is unconstitutional

Last Wednesday's Register Guard exposes a wholly unconstitutional effort by the Lane County Commission to seize control over Lane voters' initiative rights. The legitimacy of this attack on direct democracy has already been soundly rejected by Lane County Circuit Court Judge Charles Carlson in a recent case, *Bowers v. Betschart*. In this case, corporate interests sought to gut an initiative effort of local residents by asserting that the residents' initiative was not a "matter of county concern" before it had even been passed by the voters — thereby eliminating voter participation in the initiative process.

On June 3, 2016, Judge Carlson wrote in a letter opinion: "That the subject matter of the initiative petition only addresses 'matters of county concern' is not one of the constitutional requirements for the initiative process. Just as, on the state level, a statute's constitutionality is evaluated after its enactment, so too, on the county level, an initiative measure's constitutionality is evaluated only after it has been adopted." Nevertheless, at County taxpayer's expense, the Commission works hard to erode the

constitutional rights of Lane County voters in precisely the same manner that Judge Carlson found unlawful. Pete Sorenson, the only lawyer on the Commission, is notably the lone dissenting vote against this assault on the people's democratic rights.

While the complicit Commissioners allege concern about the County budget, they lose sight of the fact that they themselves do not have the authority to act against the people's rights secured by the Oregon and U.S. constitutions. Under the initiative and referendum powers, but for ministerial requirements, the people of Oregon can write and pass laws without limitation. "The people's right to circulate, discuss and pass laws is constitutionally protected," says Ann Kneeland, attorney for initiative activists, Community Rights Lane County, "Oregon law is extremely clear that no one — including elected officials — can interfere with proposed legislation based on its legality, validity, or constitutionality before it has been passed into law." Ironically, the Community Rights initiatives that have sounded an alarm in the halls of the County Commission are efforts by Lane County residents to shore up

the people's right of local community self-government and their authority to write laws to protect their health, safety, and welfare, including one that would ban on the aerial spraying of herbicides. The growing Community Rights Movement seeks to expose the ways in which corporate interests work with government officials to shut out the will of the people.

"We can thank the Lane County Commission for shining a spotlight exposing how the rigging of the system happens on the ground in Lane County," said Michelle Holman of Community Rights Lane County. "This is a call to action — not only to defend the people's initiative right from the undemocratic efforts by the majority of our Lane County Commissioners on behalf of moneyed interests but to proactively secure the people's right of local community self-government where we live."

Community Rights Lane County meets on the first Monday of each month, from 6 – 8 p.m., at the First United Methodist Church, 1376 Olive Street. More information about CRLC can be found at CommunityRightsLaneCounty.org.

Exercise has significant anti-aging effects

BY JOEL FUHRMAN, MD
For the Sentinel

New research indicates there is a no-cost simple

way to wage war on the aging process. And you can do it any time, most anywhere. All you have to do is exert your body. In addition to the many well-known

benefits of exercise for reducing the risk of chronic disease, evidence has emerged in the past few years suggesting that exercise may slow the aging process at the DNA level.



One fascinating area of research on biological aging centers on regions of DNA called telomeres, non-coding sequences located on the ends chromosomes. Telomeres are shortened with each cell division until eventually the telomeres become too short, preventing the cell from dividing any further (called "senescence").

As more and more cells in a tissue become senescent, its

function can become impaired — the tissue ages. Therefore, telomere length is used as an indicator of cellular aging, and many studies have investigated potential factors that may contribute to changes in telomere length.

In human studies, shorter telomere length has been associated with hypertension, cardiovascular disease, insulin resistance, type 2 diabetes, oxidative stress (toxic effects of free radicals) and obesity. A low level of physical activity contributes to these conditions, and therefore maintenance of telomere length may be one link between exercise, disease prevention and longevity.

Regular exercise is associated with a longer lifespan, and a number of studies have now documented links between physical activity and longer telomere length in white blood cells or skeletal muscle cells. Many of these studies have found that those who exercise regularly have "younger" DNA than those who are sedentary.

In fact, one study in particular showed that older individuals (ages 55-72) who regularly engaged in endurance training not only had longer telomeres than sedentary people their own age, but also similar telomere length to younger (ages 18-32) endurance-trained individuals. This is promising data that suggests that exercise helps to maintain a longer telomere length over time, contributing to slower cellular aging.

The pathways by which exercise may affect telomere length are still under study and may be due to alleviating oxidative stress and/or inflammation. Oxidative stress and inflammation are factors that affect telomere length and also contribute to diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

Combining exercising regularly with a diet based on nutrient dense plant rich foods (a nutitarian diet) can achieve substantial protection against cellular aging and chronic disease.

Dr. Fuhrman is a #1 New York Times best-selling author and a board certified family physician specializing in lifestyle and nutritional medicine. His newest book, *The End of Heart Disease*, offers a detailed plan to prevent and reverse heart disease using a nutrient-dense, plant-rich eating style. Visit his informative website at DrFuhrman.com.

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Personal attacks and name calling in response to letters are uncalled for and unnecessary.

If you would like to submit an opinion piece, Another View must be no longer than 600 words.

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