



# Offbeat Oregon History: Albany's Faker's Queen

By Finn JD 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 Fakers," Oregonian 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 bit-

ter 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 set out with a small group of accomplices, bilking railroad and streetcar companies all over the country and living high on the hog from the proceeds. Sometimes, after a particularly horrific-looking pratfall, she would even call for a lawyer and minister and "make out a will" on the spot. (This was great for convincing railroad agents that she was rich, and therefore dangerous.)

She was good enough that she might have gotten away with this for many years, had she not been seemingly unable to stick around after being paid. In case after case, the delivery of a stack of cash transformed her from a catatonic cripple into a hale and hearty specimen leaping aboard an out-bound train.

Her performances were so lucrative, and her abrupt departures so obvious and galling to the freshly fleeced, that the railroad agents actually formed the Pacific Claim Agents Association specifically to try to spread the word of her antics and share information that might lead to her capture.

Which is why, after she was arrested in San Francisco for the Yacolt caper, her subsequent trial in Vancouver turned into such an event. It was a bit like a reunion tour for all the claims agents she'd defrauded in her long and distinguished career. The prosecutor paraded them before the jury, one after the other, describing her performances — the horrible falls, the "blood" gushing from her mouth and nose, the sickening misalignments of knees and ribs, and always the poor wailing baby or toddler who was frightened but uninjured in the crash.

The outcome was never in doubt. Off to the penitentiary at Walla Walla went Maud Johnson to serve a five-year sentence. The governor pardoned her out of the joint after two years, and she dropped out of sight.

After her release, Maud Johnson appears to have more or less gone straight, immersing herself fully into show business. She appears only sporadically in the newspapers after that, including one time in 1922 when a minstrel's troupe she'd joined disbanded suddenly and she had to raise some cash by kiting bad checks. But as far as I've been able to learn, she never again tried her fake-injury swindle.

Or ... maybe she did, having learned from previous mistakes. If so, we'll likely never know.

\*This column first appeared May 30, 2016

## Dr. Fuhrman: Vitamin D to treat depression?

Winter is a common time to experience symptoms of depression. When the holidays are over and the weather is cold and dark, it is more common to feel sad, anxious or hopeless. Whether one is experiencing a seasonal decline in mood or suffering from major depression, natural treatments have very high success rates, and are of course much safer than prescription drugs.

My prescription for natural treatment of depression:

Morning light therapy. Light deprivation, common in the winter, can disrupt circadian rhythms and neurotransmitter production.

Bright light therapy, not only in the winter, can be an effective substitute for natural sunlight — applied first thing in the morning it corrects the body's clock and stimulates mood-elevating neurotransmitters. Bright light therapy is effective for not only seasonal affective disorder (SAD) but it also has been found to be just as effective as antidepressants for treating depression.

Vitamin D. Vitamin D is thought to regulate mood by affecting daily biorhythms and serotonin production. Reduced exposure to sunlight during the winter also means less natural vitamin D production by the skin. Low circulating vitamin D is associated with SAD and major depression. Studies of subjects with depression have found that vitamin D supplementation produces an improvement in symptoms and feelings of well-being.

High dose omega-3 fatty acids. DHA and EPA play important roles in the brain, and low omega-3 intake is associated with depression. DHA is an important structural component of brain tissue, and a recent meta-analysis revealed that EPA is the more important omega-3 fatty acid for improving depression symptoms. I recommend DHA plus approximately 1,000 mg EPA per day for

depression.

High-nutrient diet. Nutrition is extremely important for regulating mood. High antioxidant intake from colorful fruits and vegetables helps prevent oxidative stress, to which the brain is highly susceptible. Markers of oxidative stress are associated with a higher incidence of depression. Low intake of folate, present in green vegetables, also correlates with depression.

Regular exercise. Exercise is known to be as effective as antidepressant drugs or cognitive behavioral therapy for improving the symptoms of depression. Exercise increases production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter associated with feelings of well being, which is often low in individuals suffering from depression. In fact, antidepressant drugs most often work by increasing the amount of serotonin in the brain. Aerobic exercise plus strength training works better than aerobic exercise alone, and yoga is also effective.

The combination of all of these approaches increases the likelihood of success, providing people suffering from depression with a safe, natural, and effective alternative to antidepressant drugs.

The McFarland Cemetary is opening for the season on Memorial Day and is announcing a new information kiosk. The public is invited to stop by between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m.

# Cottage Grove Sentinel

## Administration

Gary Manly, General Manager ..... Ext. 207  
gmanly@cgsentinel.com  
Aaron Ames, Marketing Specialist ..... Ext. 216  
aames@cgsentinel.com  
Tammy Sayre, Marketing Specialist ..... Ext. 213  
tsayre@cgsentinel.com

## Editorial

Caitlyn May, Editor ..... Ext. 212  
cmay@cgsentinel.com  
Sport Editor ..... Ext. 204  
sports@cgsentinel.com

## Customer Service

Carla Williams, Office Manager ..... Ext. 200  
Legals, Classifieds ..... Ext. 200  
cwilliams@cgsentinel.com

## Production

Ron Annis, Production Supervisor ..... Ext.215  
graphics@cgsentinel.com

(USP 133880)

Subscription Mail Rates in Lane and Portions of Douglas Counties:  
Ten Weeks .....\$9.10  
One year .....\$36.15  
e-Edition year .....\$36.00

Rates in all other areas of United States: Ten Weeks \$11.70; one year, \$46.35, e-Edition \$43.00.  
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.

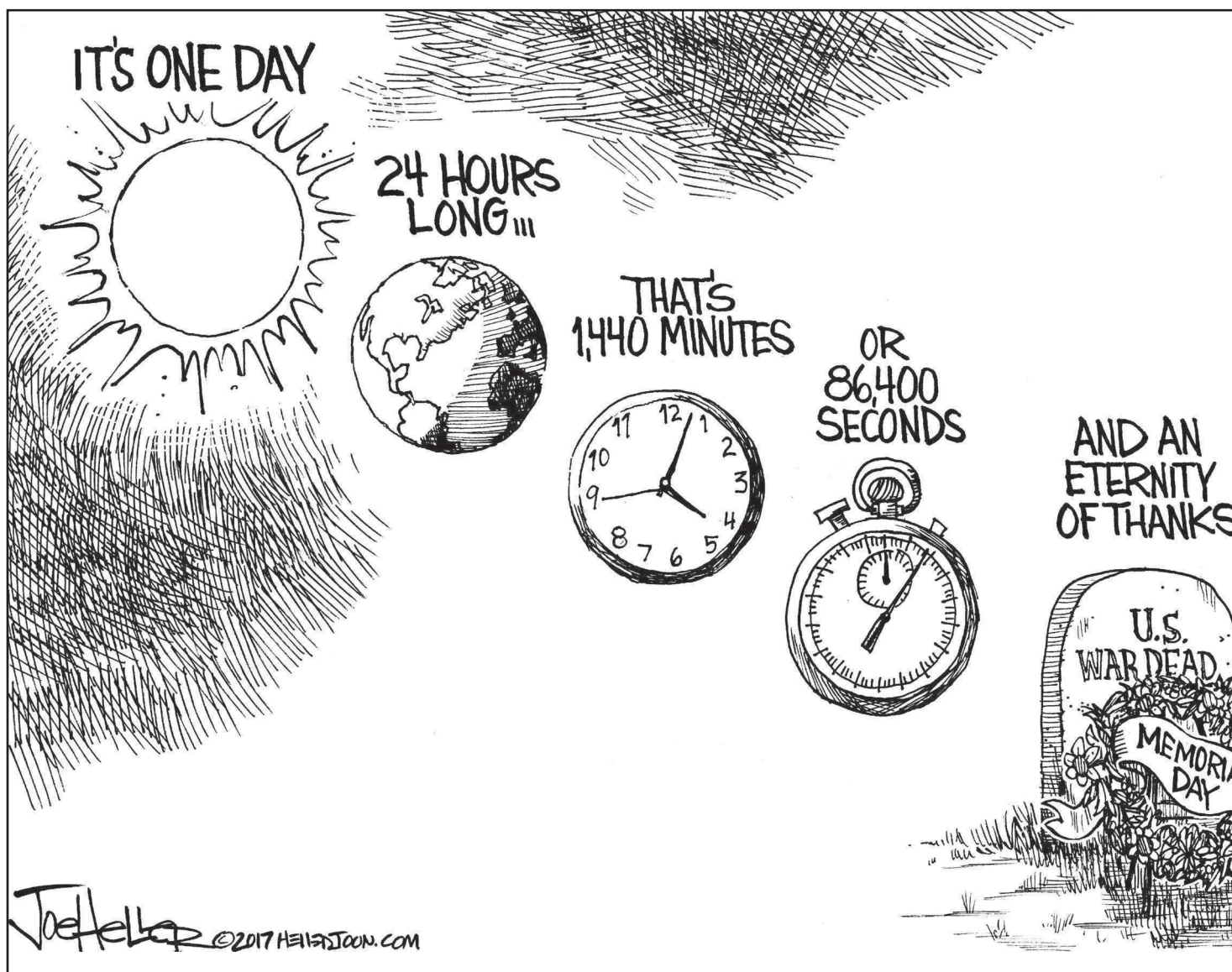
## Local Mail Service:

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.

## Advertising Ownership:

All advertising copy and illustrations prepared by the Cottage Grove Sentinel become the property of the Cottage Grove Sentinel and may not be reproduced for any other use without explicit written prior approval.

Copyright Notice: Entire contents ©2017 Cottage Grove Sentinel.



## Letters to the Editor policy

The Cottage Grove Sentinel receives many letters to the editor. In order to ensure that your letter will be printed, letters must be under 300 words and submitted by Friday at 5 p.m. Letters must be signed and must include an address, city and phone number or e-mail address for verification purposes. No anonymous letters will be printed. Letters must be of interest to local readers. 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. To avoid transcription errors, the Sentinel would prefer editorial and news content be sent electronically via email or electronic media. Hand written submissions will be accepted, but we may need to call to verify spelling, which could delay the publishing of the submission.