



Offbeat Oregon History: Soapy Smith

By Finn JD John
For The Sentinel

August 1, 1882. On a sunny street-corner in the middle of the rough-hewn, stump-strewn frontier town of Portland, a fresh-faced, wholesome-looking 22-year-old fellow named Jefferson Smith, nattily attired, sets up a big valise atop a portable tripod.

He opens it up. It's full of little packages, wrapped with paper. He pulls out his billfold and extracts several banknotes: some ones and fives, a ten, a twenty.

Then he looks around the crowd, and starts his spiel. He has the most wonderful soap, he exults; it's lightly scented and possessed of wonderful cleansing properties. Moreover, this soap, he assures the bystanders, can make them a tidy sum of money — if they watch him carefully.

He picks up the \$10 bill and a cake of soap, wraps the bill around the cake, deftly re-wraps the whole thing in paper and drops it into the valise.

"Watch me closely, gentlemen," he prattles — or words to that effect — as he scoops up another cake. This one he wraps with a \$5 bill, and drops it back in the valise.

Finally, out comes a \$20 bill — worth \$440 in today's dollars — and into the bin it goes, wrapped around a cake of soap.

Dozens of eyes watch the \$20 cake as the young man gives the contents of the valise a desultory stir with his left hand, while gesturing emphatically with his right as he extolls the wonders of his product.

Then he begins his closing pitch. His wonderful soap costs just 50 cents per package, or three for \$1. (One dollar in 1882 is worth about \$22 in 2015.)

And in the crowd, watching with interest, is a reporter for the Portland Daily Standard.

The presence of that reporter is how we know about this street scene today. In his news story, the reporter didn't actually quote Smith's sales patter; he simply referred to him as "a fakir" whose tongue appears to be hung in the middle and run at both ends.

"During about 10 minutes in which (the reporter) was watching him, he took in about \$20," the article noted. "The whole business is one of the most transparent frauds imaginable and should be

stopped."

Apparently this advice was taken to heart by someone in Portland, because less than 10 days later, Smith had moved on up the river to Albany.

This article is the first documentation of the streetcorner swindle that would make Jefferson Smith rich and famous — and would give him a nickname: "Soapy" Smith, the late, lamented, too-soon-martyred patron saint of Old West con artistry, the most famous "bunco man" of his time. From the prize-package soap racket he would move on to ever more audacious criminal enterprises, eventually making his name as a political fixer and an organized-crime boss with multiple businesses specializing in fleecing "greenhorns" — and anyone else he could get away with fleecing.

All that was in the future, though, on this day in Portland. Young Soapy was still young and relatively inexperienced, traveling from town to town as an itinerant swindler of a fairly common type. His skills were still rough, too, by his later standards. Toward the end of his Oregon run — late October — he got in a fistfight with some disappointed soap buyers in Eugene. An older, smoother Soapy would never have let that happen.

Soapy's Oregon run is hard to reconstruct in detail. It was early in his career, and as an itinerant swindler, he didn't keep very good records; nor did the newspapers of the day take much notice of streetcorner hawkers. But the kind of operation he was running at that time was a turf-burner, meaning that he couldn't stay too long in one spot; eventually the marks would get wise, and the city cops would start dreaming up charges on which he could be jailed. For a successful con artist, half the game was knowing when it was time to disappear in the middle of the night. Guess wrong, stay just one day too long, and you could end up with a new coat of tar and feathers, or worse.

Despite these challenges, Jeff Smith, Soapy's biographer and great-grandson, was able to place him in Astoria in early July; Portland in late July to early August; Albany in mid-August; Salem in mid-September; and Eugene in mid-October. And by February of 1883, he was in Utah, having apparently left the Beaver State for good.

But the Beaver State wasn't done with Soapy yet. Oregon still had one more role to play in

Soapy's story — and it was a role that would not have pleased him much, had he known.

In later years, Soapy would develop the prize-package soap swindle to a science. Working with a team of "cappers," or secret confederates, he would set up his valise — a specially built case with a secret compartment inside, which would enable him to sort the soaps on the fly — and start his routine, wrapping a dozen or so cakes of soap with bills ranging from \$1 to \$100. The \$1 cakes would occasionally go to a mark; the larger denominations, though, would be pulled out of the valise only when one of the cappers made a purchase. The capper would joyfully "discover" a \$10 bill in his soap and go frolicking off with it. Soapy would glibly point out that the \$20 and \$100 package were still in play, and resume his sales.

As the number of bars in the valise dwindled, Soapy would switch to an auction format, and people would bid up the price of the remaining soaps. From there, it was simple enough. Near the end of the soap supply, Soapy would simply sell the \$100 package to a capper, and the crowd, disappointed, would melt away.

It was a few years after leaving Oregon that Soapy Smith settled down in Denver to build the first of his three major organized-crime empires. He seems to have realized that rather than living on the lam, one step ahead of the law or the vigilance committee, he could establish himself in a morally flexible town which a lot of suckers pass through, and fleece them while leaving the locals alone and building their trust and goodwill with copious local philanthropy.

Soapy built elaborate criminal empires first in Denver, then in Creede, Colo., and finally, after the Klondike Gold Rush broke out, in Skagway, Alaska. At their peak, these operations ran multiple crooked saloons and gambling dens, lottery shops, auctions for imitation jewelry and watches, and even fake stock exchanges.

But as he got older, Soapy's bad habits started to catch up with him. Throughout his mid-30s, his drinking problem worsened, and when drunk his temper was terrible. The morale and discipline of his confederates — the "Soap Gang," the cappers and assistants whose loyalty was always Soapy's number-one asset — started to go to seed.

It all came to a head on July 8, 1898, on the Juneau Wharf in Skagway. Three members of the Soap Gang had swindled a miner out of \$87 in a game of three-card monte. Wanting more money to play, he offered some gold dust from his bag, which contained \$2,700 worth; one of the robbers snatched the bag and ran.

A vigilante group demanded that Soapy return the money; Soapy refused, loyally standing behind his men's claim that the miner had lost it all fair and square playing three-card monte. The vigilantes were meeting on the pier to decide what to do about it when Soapy loaded his Winchester rifle and went down to the meeting in an apparent attempt at intimidation.

When he got there, he found the vigilantes had posted four guards to bar any Soap Gang members from the meeting. One of them, the only one of the four who was armed, was an Oregonian: Frank Reid, a teacher from Linn County who had joined the gold rush a year or two before. (It's tempting to wonder if Reid might have bought some soap from Soapy when he was working the marks in Albany 15 years earlier; he was, at the time, 48 years old.)

The three unarmed guards stepped aside for Soapy, who was almost certainly liquored up and in a bad humor. The fourth, Reid, did not. Soapy went for Reid with the rifle, either to clobber him with it or shoot him; Reid pulled his revolver; and second or two later, Reid was mortally wounded and Soapy was stone dead.

Soapy Smith was just 38 years old when he died. His passing was largely unlamented at the time, but in subsequent years his career would be refurbished in nostalgic memory in the typical manner of American bad guys from Jesse James to D.B. Cooper. Today, remembering the copious philanthropy that was always necessary to ensure the support of the local population, he is sometimes depicted as a sort of fast-talking Robin Hood, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. And the true story of Soapy Smith can sometimes be hard to pick out from among all the legends that have developed.

The world was probably a better place after Soapy was removed from it. But it was, without question, a less interesting and colorful one.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Upset with snack choices at CG

Raceway

Last weekend my wife and I decided to go to the Cottage Grove Speedway to see the big Memorial Day race. We are both in our mid-60's and are on low fat diets due to high cholesterol. We are on a fixed and limited income. The cost of the race was \$12 each. We brought with us two bottles of water, a bag of nuts, an apple and a few pieces of candy. As we were admitted, they wanted to go inside my wife's purse because they said they did not allow anyone to bring in their own food or beverages. We can't eat most of their food because it's either high fat or high sugar.

We don't mind paying for the price of admission but we should not be forced to buy their food or water. And I believe the 4th amendment protects us from being searched and having our property seized. This seems like plain old greed and it is anti-American as well.

Thank you,
Edward Garcia

Global citizens

We have two eyes, which allow us to have what's called parallax view. With two eyes we can see the same thing in the distance from two different sides. This allows us to locate accurately an object in the distance. We each live in the com-

munity in which we have a home and employment and our friends and within a small nucleus of mutual support and love. We each live as the children of Earth. And the same sky shines over all of us. We are all homebodies and we are all global citizens. These are not opposing points of view. These two perspectives are like two strong legs you need to stand and move on, two hands by which you grab the tasks of your life. But national governments, when they shift from serving the needs of communities by serving as bridges to the world to serving the needs of powerful interests who stand to make a great deal of money in viewing the world as an economic battlefield, actually

isolate us from opportunities in green growth and the economic possibilities available when we are in communication with the world.

The religious tests of every nation are nothing less than attempts to give the individual the biggest picture of a world in which the fate of the individuals are not only linked to the weal of the whole, but to the very stars above our constantly rolling sphere of the seasons. Our families and the world itself are the two eyes we look upon our world with. If either of them are put out, it is said that we have become blinded.

Leo Rivers
Cottage Grove

Cottage Grove Sentinel

(541) 942-3325

Administration

- James Rand, Regional Publisher
- 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)

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