



Offbeat Oregon History: Frontier murder case

By Finn JD John
For The Sentinel

One year after the Civil War ended, a double murder happened in Linn County. And it was one of

those stories that seems to peel away like an onion, layer by layer, or like one of those Russian nesting dolls — in fact, even today, it's almost certain that the full story isn't known.

Here's how it got started:

On March 9, 1866, a resident of the Brownsville area named James Cunningham saddled up and paid a visit to his neighbors, Sidney and Barbara Presley Smith.

The Smiths were a particularly prosperous pioneer family. Sidney was 42, Barbara 30; the couple had four children, ranging in age from 16-year-old Rhoda Ann to baby Edward.

They were especially prosperous just then, because it was the height of the Idaho gold rush of the early 1860s, and Sidney had just returned from the gold fields — where he had been very successful.

Sidney had been able to go to the gold fields because Thomas had been around, to stay home and run the farm while he was gone. Thomas had lived on the farm, taking care of business, until Sidney's return, at which time he'd moved out to stay with a neighbor.

Upon his return, Sidney had hidden his gold on the farm — banks were few and far between in 1860s Oregon, and those that did exist weren't always trustworthy.

So, with a successful farm and a big stash of cash, the extended Smith family seemed to have it made.

Which was just one of the reasons Cunningham was surprised to learn, from Thomas Smith, that Sydney had suddenly gone nuts, pulled a revolver, murdered his wife, then shot himself — all in front of Thomas and the kids.

The sheriff was called in, and took everyone's

statements. The kids, understandably, were terrified — having just witnessed what they had.

But then one of the two older girls overcame her terror and asked the sheriff a simple question: "How could Papa kill Mama when he was dead already?"

The implication that she knew more about the sequence of the murders than she had previously said was not lost on the sheriff. He questioned all the kids again, closely and by themselves, and a new story emerged:

It turned out that Thomas and Sydney had an argument earlier in the day. This had been an increasingly common thing since Sidney had returned from the gold fields, and probably had led to Thomas moving out of the house. Remember, Thomas had stayed behind to run the farm while Sidney went to the diggings, and Sidney had come back with a lot of gold. Thomas felt, not unreasonably, that some of that gold should belong to him, since without him it would not have been possible for Sidney to go dig it up; Sidney disagreed. It had become a source of some tension.

Today, that tension seemed to have come to a head. In the account given by the children, Thomas, snarling "This will not do me," stormed out of the house. And then, several minutes later, Rhoda Ann, sitting with her back to the door, was startled out of her chair by the roar of an indoor gunshot, and saw a dark spot appear on her father's forehead, right between the eyes. Sidney Smith fell forward, dead.

Thomas fired again, and this time the bullet sped past the baby's head and hit Barbara in the chest. Barbara, wounded badly but not fatally, laid the baby on the floor and ran out of the house; Thomas followed, caught her up at the woodpile, dragged her into a smokehouse, and stabbed her to death.

Then he came back into the house and promised to kill all the kids if they didn't swear that their fa-

ther had killed their mother and then shot himself.

The terrified children did as instructed — but at least one, probably 10-year-old Leora, didn't fully understand what Thomas was asking them to do; hence the inconvenient (for Thomas) question about how Papa could have killed Mama when he was already dead.

But by the time this question was being asked, the sheriff was already suspicious. He'd noticed an absence of powder burns around the hole in Sidney's forehead, which absolutely ruled out the suicide theory. He had already decided maybe Thomas ought to be questioned again.

Thomas was — and when he confessed, a third layer of this awful onion was exposed.

Thomas told the sheriff that the whole thing had come about because he had been having "an affair" with his oldest niece, Rhoda Ann, then 16. Rhoda Ann had, he said, "confessed the affair" to her mother, who had told Sydney about it when he came back from the gold fields. Her father, furious, had staged a confrontation. Rhoda Ann had refused to cooperate, so Sydney had started beating her; and Thomas, in defense of his incestuous "lover," had murdered her father, after which he'd gone ahead and murdered Barbara too.

Obviously, this left a few questions unanswered. The peculiar savagery with which Thomas attacked Barbara — slashing her face and hands before fatally stabbing her in the neck — argued for more personal feeling than he was admitting to.

A modern reader can hardly fail to draw certain conclusions from Uncle Thomas's story, especially in Oregon in the aftermath of the Neil Goldschmidt case. It's clear that the "affair" was child molestation, started by Thomas after Sidney left for the gold fields and left the Smith women and children in his care.

(Knowing this, it's hard to avoid the suspicion that the reason for Thomas's savagery in cutting up Barbara with the knife was that he had tried to

make a move on her, and been rejected.)

Then Sidney had returned, and learned what he'd done. Now both his victim's parents knew what he'd done ... and what he was. So he'd murdered both of them so that they could not expose him. Then, when he'd been exposed anyway, he'd tried to paint poor Rhoda Ann as a "scarlet woman," a teen-age temptress who had seduced him.

It's hard to say from the newspapers' accounts whether or not anyone bought this. It seems likely they did not. But, it would be nice to know what became of Rhoda Ann after all her family's dirty laundry was aired in the newspaper and she was publicly accused of seducing her uncle.

Regardless of whether people understood the true nature of the "affair," there was widespread agreement that Uncle Thomas needed to die, and the outcome of the trial was never in doubt. A hanging was scheduled for May 10, 1866 — and on that very morning, the newspapers carried the word of Thomas Smith's other brother, Calvin, who was still in the gold fields of Idaho. He had, apparently, committed suicide. Thomas was the only surviving Smith brother.

That changed a little later that day, just 62 days after the double murder — still a record in Oregon history. That's when, nattily dressed in frock coat and leather boots, Thomas Smith dropped through the gallows trap door into eternity.

There is a postscript to this story, though. Sometime after the execution, the orphans were out playing on the Smith farm, and one of them found a leather bag with \$25,000 in gold dust — obviously the proceeds from the gold prospecting trip that had taken Sidney away from his farm, his wife, and his daughter. In 1866, \$25,000 was a tremendous fortune; but it's surely safe to say that if Sidney could have turned back time, knowing what it would cost him to acquire it, he would have turned that money down.

Dr. Joel Fuhrman: Is coffee good or bad for you?

You'll be happy to know that getting up and enjoying a cup of your favorite coffee is fine, however that's where it must end. The problem lies in reaching multiple times a day for that cup brimming with caffeine. Although one cup of coffee per day is not likely to cause any significant health problems, it is clear that excessive consumption of caffeinated beverages is dangerous.

Coffee is known to contribute to heart disease by raising blood pressure, LDL cholesterol, and homocysteine.¹⁻⁴ Furthermore, a seventeen-year study of over 40,000 people found that those who drank more than four cups of coffee per day were at an increased risk of death from any

cause. Men under age 55 that drank that much coffee had a 56 percent increase in risk of death, and women more than doubled their risk.⁵

Coffee interferes with sleep. The caffeine in coffee is a stimulant and as such gives you a false sense of increased energy, allowing you to get by with an inadequate amount of sleep. In addition to affecting the quantity of sleep, caffeine also reduces the depth of sleep. Inadequate sleep promotes disease and premature aging, and can fuel over-eating behaviors.

Sleep deprivation also results in higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol and interferes with glucose metabolism, leading to insulin resistance.⁶ This

insulin resistance, and subsequent higher baseline glucose level, further promotes diabetes, heart disease and other problems.

People who drink caffeinated beverages are likely to eat more often than necessary because they mistake caffeine withdrawal symptoms—such as shakiness, headaches, lightheadedness, etc.—for hunger. These detoxification symptoms are easily mistaken for hunger because eating temporarily suppresses them. It is impossible to get in touch with your body's true hunger signals if you are addicted to stimulants.

There are thousands of different substances in coffee, not just caffeine. Certainly, caffeine

is dangerous in large quantities, but decaffeinated coffee also has potentially harmful side effects. Both decaffeinated and regular coffees have cholesterol raising effects, and these effects are known to be due to constituents in coffee other than caffeine.⁷ Also, these effects are amplified as the number of cups of coffee consumed per day goes up. The chemical substances used to remove the caffeine may be hazardous. Drinking decaffeinated coffee is also associated with the risk of developing rheumatoid arthritis, possibly due to the caffeine-removing additives.⁸ For this reason, it is probably safer to choose a water-processed decaf if you choose to drink decaffeinated coffee.

As for the claim that coffee protects against diabetes, a small decrease in risk (7 percent) of type 2 diabetes has been shown with each additional cup of coffee consumed per day.⁹ Similar results are seen for decaffeinated and regular coffee, so caffeine is likely not the substance responsible for this benefit. Actually, in the short term, caffeine impairs the body's sensitivity to insulin; decaffeinated coffee also has an insulin desensitizing effect, but to a lesser degree compared to caffeinated coffee.¹⁰

Since coffee also raises blood pressure, LDL cholesterol, and homocysteine, it is not a good idea to rely on coffee to protect you from diabetes. The best pro-

tection against diabetes is maintaining a healthy weight with a nutrient dense, plant based diet and regular exercise.

In summary, coffee is most like a drug, not a food. Like most drugs it may have some minor benefits, but its toxic effects and resultant risks overwhelm those minor advantages. Caffeine is a stimulant and a long and healthy life is most consistently achieved when we avoid stimulants and drugs and meet our nutritional needs with as little exposure to toxicity as possible. If you do drink coffee it is best to limit to one cup per day, and if you drink decaffeinated coffee, choose water processed.

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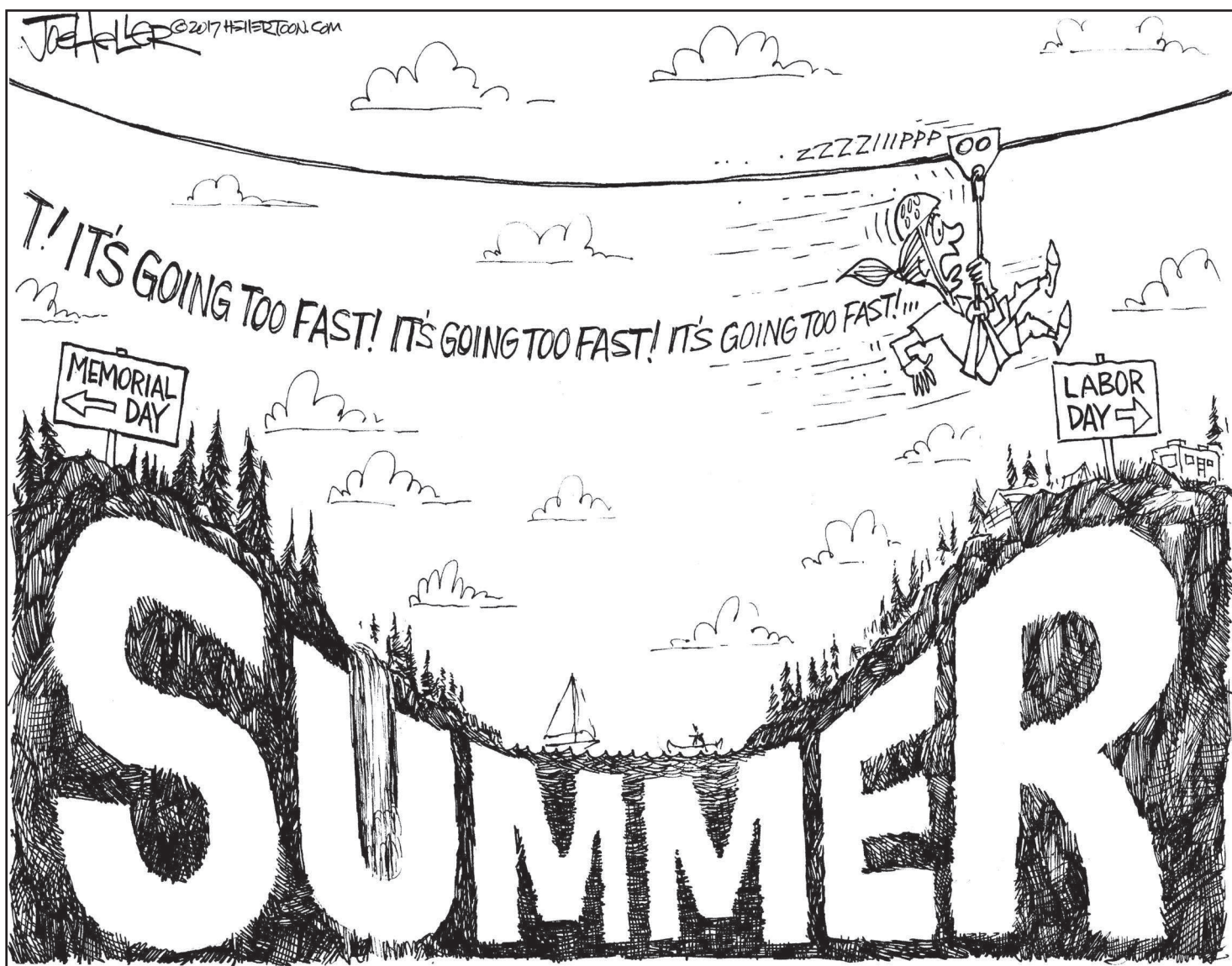
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