



## Offbeat Oregon History: 1886 Lafayette axe murder

By Finn JD John  
For The Sentinel

On November 11, 1887, a 28-year-old convicted murderer named Richard Marple stood on the scaffold in the town of Lafayette and shouted his defiance at the crowd below.

"Murder!" he yelled, as the black hood was fitted over his head. "May God judge you all!"

Marple had maintained his innocence until the bitter end. But his alibi story had changed several times, and he'd further damaged his credibility severely by claiming that the real killer of storekeeper David Corker twelve months before was the Yamhill County Sheriff, Thomas J. Harris, leading a conspiratorial cabal of prominent members of the local Masons Lodge.

Corker had been found in his bed, brutally chopped about the head and shoulders with an ax. In the days before the murder, Marple had been overheard joking about how easy it would be to rob Corker, because he was deaf; and Marple was widely suspected of being a thief and a robber. He had moved with his family from Corvallis a year before, and already the family was regarded with considerable suspicion in Lafayette. Marple's mother, Anna, a hard-eyed woman who was believed to be a "gypsy," lived with him and his wife, Julia, and their several children.

The evidence against Richard Marple was circumstantial, and there really wasn't a whole lot of it, although what there was was serious. The sheriff had noticed blood on his coat the day after the murder. Richard explained it as having come from a butchered hog; his wife, Julia, claimed it had come from a child's injury. Richard also was in possession of burglar's tools, which was important because a rear window had been forced to get in and kill Corker. There were his witnessed remarks about how easy it would be to rob him.

The real problem for Richard Marple, though, was his mouth. Had he been able to keep quiet and be nice, he likely would have been acquitted for lack of hard evidence; but he seemed utterly unable to keep his mouth shut. When he'd first been arrested, he'd first denied involvement and then, with a nasty smile, issued a series of uncomplimentary remarks about the deceased murder victim. During jury selection he made no attempt to conceal his contempt for everyone in the room, and took obvious pleasure in any display of hostility or enmity from townspeople.

So it shouldn't have been much of a surprise when the jury found him guilty.

The judge accidentally scheduled his hanging for a Sunday, so additional hearings had to be convened to make new arrangements, and another court had to study the question of whether the error was grave enough to require a new trial. (It decided that it was not.) Consequently it wasn't until a full year after the crime was committed that Marple went through the floor of the scaffold to pay for it.

It wasn't a clean execution. Even by 1880s standards, it was a barbaric and sickening spectacle. The knot slipped under the condemned man's chin and it took him 18 minutes to slowly strangle to death. Meanwhile, from outside the courtyard, the baleful screams of Marple's "gypsy" mother arose, calling down curses and maledictions upon the town, screeching that she would see it burn.

By the time the grim spectacle was all over, several members of the crowd might have been feeling a little uneasy about it, wondering if all the trouble was a sign — if maybe he was innocent after all.

They wouldn't wonder for long.

The very next day, one of Marple's cell mates, William Henry Hess, came forward with a re-

markable story. The day before his execution, Marple had pulled him aside and told him he'd give him the truth if he'd swear to keep it secret until after his death.

Here's the story Marple told Hess:

Needing money badly, and knowing Corker had plenty, he had collaborated with his wife and his mother to rob him. The plan was that Anna, who was carrying on a secret affair with Corker, would, after suitably vamping the deaf merchant, fix him a drink with knockout drops in it. Then she'd unlock the door and let Richard in to rob the place.

At the appointed time, Richard found that Anna had forgotten to unlock the door for him, so he had to break in through a window. He found Anna there with the drugged and sleeping Corker, and after a few minutes they had found his wad: \$203.75 (worth about \$5,600 in 2017 dollars). Only then had they realized that Anna — whose affair with Corker was of course widely suspected — would be the very first suspect hauled in for questioning when the robbery was discovered. Especially if the entire family left town 48 hours later, as they planned to do.

Richard Marple had an idea, though. They'd kill Corker and then set the building on fire.

Anna then grabbed an ax and aimed a very diffident and girlish blow at her unconscious lover. She missed, but the pole clipped his head and woke him up.

Now galvanized to action, Richard grabbed the ax and messily finished the job. But the screams and cries for help had spooked both Marples (and had been heard by passers-by), so instead of lighting the place on fire, they hastily arranged the corpse in a ritualistic-looking way, hoping to deflect attention onto the Masons, and then legged it.

They still might have gotten away — but Julia, Richard's wife, got sick, delaying their planned exit long enough for the sheriff to develop suspicions and arrest mother and son on burglary and murder charges.

Hess said Richard Marple also told him that he'd killed before, and with an ax too. In 1879, he said, he and three other men had murdered an old lady, a Mrs. Hagar, in Oregon City; they had heard she'd come into considerable money. Mrs. Hagar had turned out to be a savage fighter, though, and nearly turned the tables on them; but eventually Marple had gotten her with the ax. He showed Hess a ring that he said he'd taken from her.

He also told Hess that he and three other men had killed a French woman in Portland, and that they had gotten quite a bit of money from her. This may have been Emma Merlotin, a French-born courtesan whose brutal ax murder in 1885 in her luxurious "crib" had shocked the city and led to a crackdown on brothels there.

So: was it all true? Jailhouse confessions are notoriously unreliable; it might have been a play by Hess to get out early, or possibly the notoriously cold-blooded Marple just wanted to put a little posthumous scare into the people of Lafayette.

In any case, the people of the town believed it, and likely felt less conflicted about his bungled execution after hearing it.

After the execution, Julia Marple, Richard's wife, moved back to the Corvallis area; less than nine months after the execution, she was remarried and moving on with her life. Anna, his "gypsy" mother, moved to Jackson County and eked out a living on her late husband's military pension; she died at the age of 94.

## Dr. Fuhrman: Fighting breast cancer with diet

The old adage "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" best describes what our focus should be regarding breast cancer, which is the most common form of cancer that affects women, and is the second leading cause of death for women after heart disease. While a great deal of money and attention is focused on breast can-

cer awareness, it would make more sense to concentrate on preventing the disease from occurring in the first place.

There are nutritional strategies that are safe, easily implemented and have been proven effective in reducing the risk of breast cancer. Among the most powerful anti-cancer foods are flax and

chia seeds, which are a rich source of lignans. Lignans have anti-estrogenic effects that inhibit cell growth in breast tumors.

Let's take an in-depth look at lignans and why they are so effective in combating breast cancer.

Plant lignans are one of the four classes of phytoestrogens (isoflavones, lignans, stilbenes, coumestans). Phytoestrogens are a group of chemicals found in plants that can act like the hormone estrogen. In particular, lignans are structurally similar to the main mammalian estrogen, estradiol. Plant lignans are modified by bacteria in the human digestive tract into enterolignans.

Enterolignans are structurally similar to estrogen and can bind to estrogen receptors. This capability allows lignans to either have weak estrogenic activity or block the actions of estrogen in the body. For this reason, plant lignans are classified as phytoestrogens, and there has been much interest in the potential contribution of lignan-rich foods to reduced risk of hormone-related cancers.

It is important to recognize the role of healthy bacteria in this process, because antibiotics can destroy beneficial bacteria in the gut, resulting in long-term reduction in enterolignans. Eating com-

mercial meats expose us to antibiotics, as does the overuse and inappropriate prescribing of these drugs by physicians.

The best sources of plant lignans:

Flaxseeds are the richest source of plant lignans, having about three times the lignan content of chia seeds, and eight times the lignan content of sesame seeds.

Women ate either a control muffin with no flax seeds imbedded, or a 25g flax-containing muffin, starting at time of diagnosis of breast cancer for just 32-39 days until surgery. Tumor tissue analyzed at diagnosis and then at the time of surgery demonstrated surprising benefits even in this short time frame. There was a significant apoptosis (tumor cell death) and reduced cell proliferation in the flaxseed group in just the one month.

Likewise, women eating more flaxseeds with a documented higher serum enterolactone were found to have a 42% reduced risk of death from postmenopausal breast cancer and a dramatic 40% reduction in all causes of death.

Bottom line: don't forget to take your ground flax seeds (or chia seeds) every day.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### A word on Measure 20-280

The Chamber Cottage Grove Area Chamber of Commerce supports Measure 20-278 which will renew the South Lane Fire District's Local Option Levy at its current level. The Chamber's Legislative Committee has reviewed the measure and the Board of Directors voted unanimously to take a position of support to renew the levy. This is not a new tax and a "yes" vote allows the district to maintain their current level of staffing and operations. Our fire district enjoys the second lowest permanent tax rate among Lane County's 24 fire districts yet we recently received one of the best ISO (Insurance Services Office) ratings in the en-

tire state, which can significantly reduce insurance costs for home and property owners. Without this funding, the district could potentially have to cut up to 9 positions which would negatively impact emergency response time, their ability to provide ambulance service and our newly acquired ISO rating. In other words, it could cost our citizens and businesses more to let the levy expire than it will cost to maintain it at its current level. On behalf of the Cottage Grove Area Chamber of Commerce, we urge you to VOTE YES ON 20-278!

Travis Palmer, chamber executive director  
Chloe Becks chamber president

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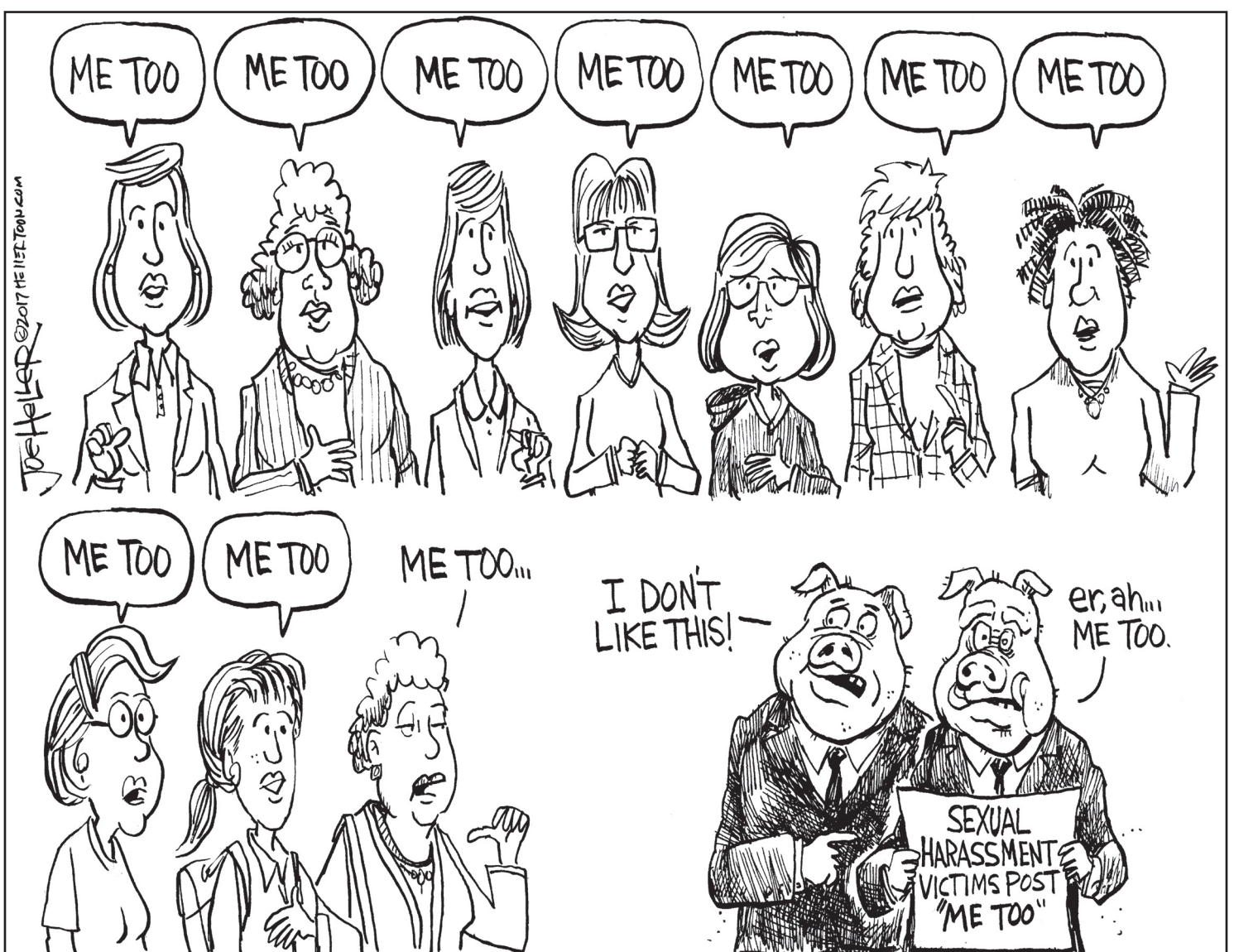
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