



# Offbeat Oregon History: Albany man's determination

By FinnJD John  
For The Sentinel

On November 4, 1885, a 27-year-old man was strolling down an Albany street with a pretty 20-year-old brunette woman. He was wearing a disguise — fake mustache and sideburns, a heavy overcoat. He had introduced himself to the woman as “J. Blankhead.” And somehow, he expected her to be fooled by all this.

She was not. She’d recognized him immediately as her ex-fiancé, Charles Campbell. And she’d made arrangements for him to get a lively reception after walking her home.

The reception he got, however, was quite a bit livelier than either one of them had expected it to be. When they reached the front steps of her home, out of the shadows stepped her brother-in-law-to-be, a dark, sinister-looking war veteran named Capt. W. Wirt Saunders. Saunders had a Colt .45 revolver in his hand.

Whether Saunders and Campbell spoke or not is in dispute; the accounts differ. What is not in dispute is that the gun spoke — twice.

Mattie ran to find a doctor and soon found Dr. G.W. Maston.

“For God’s sake hurry up,” she sobbed. “I never thought it would come to this.”

Maston quickly recognized the case as hopeless. He made the wounded man as comfortable as possible and asked him what had happened.

“Mattie and I were coming up the street and Mattie was talking pretty loud,” he said. “Just then someone came up and shot me down like a dog without saying a word.”

He turned to Mattie. “For God’s sake,” he begged her, “forgive me before I die.”

“I don’t know,” she told him, “whether I can or not.”

The killing galvanized the town of Albany. It didn’t help that the town had a new startup newspaper, the Albany Bulletin, whose editor happened to be looking for a good hobby-horse. The other papers, the Albany State Rights Democrat and the Albany Herald Disseminator, covered the story fairly evenhandedly, at least at first; but the

Bulletin went straight to the mattresses.

“A cold-blooded murder was perpetrated in this city a few months ago,” the editor wrote in March. “A young man was shot down without any warning, and leaning on his arm at the time was a woman named Mattie Allison. She put up the whole job, arranged the meeting, and after Charley was shot told people she was sorry she did not do it herself.”

District Attorney (and future Oregon governor) George Chamberlain drew up an indictment against both Allison and Saunders. Saunders, who didn’t deny the shooting, was promptly indicted on a charge of first-degree murder. But against Mattie Allison, the grand jury did not find enough evidence of her having “put up the whole job,” and declined to indict.

Chamberlain tried again. Again, the bill was declined. It looked like Mattie would go free. On his editorial page, the Bulletin’s editor howled like a blood-mad panther, calling the decisions “an attempt to whitewash the character of a woman whose hands are red with the blood of the innocent.” He even called (rhetorically, one assumes) for the arrest and prosecution of the editors of the competing newspapers, whose editorials he deemed insufficiently enthusiastic in asserting Allison’s guilt.

“They tore into Mattie Allison like a pit bull defending a butcher bone,” historian Diane Gores-Gardner writes.

The result was that, when a new grand jury was impaneled later that year and Chamberlain tried for a third time to get charges to stick to her, they finally did.

By that time the waters in Albany had been so thoroughly poisoned by the Bulletin’s sustained campaign that the trial had to be moved to Salem. This meant that Chamberlain was off the hook for prosecuting the case ... a fact that, given the facts that came out at the trial, may have saved his political career.

Mattie Allison’s trial got started in October 1886, just under a year after the killing. And the picture that emerged, as witness after witness took

the stand, was at considerable odds with the one the Albany Bulletin had painted.

The newspaper reports of this trial were how most citizens of Albany learned just what it was that Charles Campbell had begged Mattie Allison to forgive him for, as he lay dying; and why she so coldly declined. He had been stalking her for three years, starting when she broke off their engagement, back when she was a girl of 17. Knowing her family had no male patriarch to stand up for her, as was then the custom in such matters, he had been very bold, and particularly cruel, in how he went about it.

Witness after witness recounted episodes when Campbell had been caught peering in the windows, the times he’d boasted that he was regularly sleeping with her, the times he got drunk and threatened to kill her. He’d pulled a gun on her at her mother’s hat shop; followed her to Eugene when she went to visit her aunt; pulled a pistol on her mother in a jealous rage when the elder Allison refused to support his suit for her daughter’s hand; and even once drunkenly tried to break into her home while they were inside.

Probably the most damning bit of evidence came from a friend who had spoken to Campbell the night he borrowed the overcoat and false mustache, who, according to the Morning Oregonian’s report, said Campbell “had often boasted that he had ‘slept with her’ and would ruin her that night if it cost him his neck.”

Saunders — who had, a month or two earlier, been convicted in an Albany courtroom and sentenced to hang — testified that she had approached him, her future brother-in-law, several weeks before, to ask if he would protect her from Campbell. She’d told him things were OK just then, but that she expected him to start more trouble soon, and she was afraid he would follow through on his threats to kill or rape her. Then a letter had arrived from “J. Blankhead,” a letter that appears to have been intended as a coyly worded proposition: “I am a stranger in your town and desire to see you and form your acquaintance. I wish you to do me a favor. It will be but a slight task for you to perform, and will afford me great pleasure.”

Mattie, not being in the business of doing “favors” for strangers, knew there was only one man who would send her a letter like that. So she’d sent for Saunders — who had promised he would have a little talk with Campbell and, if he would not agree to leave her alone, thrash him for her.

And that’s what Mattie Allison had expected him to do that night: give the would-be Lothario the beating of his life and tell him to stay away. But he’d brought his Colt with him, just in case ....

The verdict was reached very quickly. After about 20 minutes, a “not guilty” verdict was announced, and the entire courtroom burst into applause and cheers.

The Salem Statesman lit into the Albany press with surprising savagery, accusing it of having essentially ginned up a lynch mob. Indeed, there had been an article in the Bulletin in particular that almost looked like an invitation to form one — an apparently made-up article about Mattie Allison begging the sheriff for protection from angry citizens who she was afraid might lynch her, and the sheriff telling her to get lost.

Of course, by the end of the trial the Albany residents who would have formed that hypothetical lynch mob knew the rest of the story, and chances are good that they didn’t appreciate the heavy spinning they’d been subjected to. Whether for that reason or some other, the Albany Bulletin did not last long after that; although the State Rights Democrat and Herald Disseminator are still around, having merged into today’s Democrat-Herald.

As for Saunders, his murder trial, which had been held in the poisoned atmosphere of the Linn County Courthouse in Albany, was overturned on appeal. Retried in Salem, he was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison. Seven years later, Governor Sylvester Penneyer commuted his sentence. He and Mattie’s sister Minnie, who had waited for him, married after his release and moved to Spokane.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

This is an invitation and call out for all of you that have experienced and love the iconic Swinging Bridge over the Coast Fork of the Willamette River. As you probably know this community treasure has been closed for over a year due to safety concerns and this closure has altered our way of life here in Cottage Grove. This vital pathway has connected our two sides of town for nearly 130 years. If you would like to do something to help get our Bridge back please join fellow Cottage Grovers at the Swing the Bridge benefit to help support the restoration of the bridge on Saturday, March 24th, at the CG Armory, 6 to 11pm. You can help support grants the city is pursuing by writing a letter describing how much the bridge means to you, learn of the storied history of the 5 versions of bridges that have been pedestrian pathways in that location, leave a story or memory on the Swinging Bridge Story Wall, and help raise funds for the Swinging Bridge Special City Trust Fund. There will also be music, dancing, and good fellowship with your fellow Swinging Bridge Friends. Please bring an item for the Potluck and anything you can spare to help the bridge. Hope to see you and all of the community there, Swing the Bridge!

Dana Merryday  
Cottage Grove

## Dr. Fuhrman: Pomegranates in your diet

Ruby red, delicious and nutrient rich pomegranates pack a mighty punch in safeguarding your health. Pomegranate contains a unique and powerful antioxidant called punicalagin, the most abundant antioxidant in pomegranate, responsible for more than half of the antioxidant activity of pomegranate juice.

Pomegranate juice has been analyzed to have greater antioxidant capacity than red wine, grape juice, cranberry juice, green tea or acai juice. Drinking pomegranate juice measurably reduces oxidative stress

(the toxic effects of free radicals) in healthy humans. Much research has shown that pomegranate’s potent antioxidant capacity provides protection against heart disease, cancer and cognitive impairment.

Pomegranate was one of the earliest cultivated fruits, and has been prominent throughout history in art, culture, and religion, from the story of the seasons in Greek mythology to Romeo and Juliet to the Bible.

Pomegranate is ubiquitous in Middle Eastern cooking and its super food status, unique flavor and texture

has made it increasingly popular in the U.S. A pomegranate contains hundreds of tiny, crisp arils; each aril is a seed encased in a juicy pulp, a tasty mix of sweet and tart flavors.

Health benefits of pomegranates - anti-cancer:

1) Pomegranate has anti-inflammatory effects that may protect against cancer and other chronic diseases. 2) Pomegranate has anti-angiogenic properties, meaning that they may help to prevent growing tumors from acquiring a blood supply, preventing those tumors from receiving the

Please see FUHRMAN PG. A11



## Letters to the Editor policy

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. 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. The Sentinel reserves the right not to print letters that may contain libelous content.

## IN BRIEF MARCH 14-MARCH 27

- Cynthia Kendoll, Oregonians for Immigration Reform, will discuss their current petition drive at the next meeting of the Cottage Grove 912 Project on Monday, March 19th, 6:30 PM, at Stacy’s Covered Bridge Restaurant, 401 E Main. The petition drive is to get Oregon’s sanctuary law on the ballot in November.
- On Thursday, March 27, South Lane Mental Health will hold a grand opening for its newest location at 27 N. 6th St. from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. The public is welcome.
- On March 15 at 1 p.m. the City of Creswell will officially transfer the ‘old school house’ title to the Creswell Heritage Foundation. The Title Transfer Ceremony will be held in front of the schoolhouse at 195 S. 2nd St., Creswell.

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