



Offbeat Oregon History: "Unwritten law" and murder

Working together to be our best



By Ned Hickson
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Cottage Grove has always been a special place to me. I got to know one of my close friends while having dinner at the Axe and Fiddle. The public library was the first place I spoke at following the publication of my first book back in 2013. During my 20 years at *The Siuslaw News* in Florence, I've come to know several members of *The Sentinel* newsroom staff, including Finn John, Matt Treder, Jon Stinnett and others — all before our two newspapers became part of the same news company family several years ago.

That being said, you'll notice my name has been added to the staff box on page 4 as the managing editor. I'm glad to say I can add current editor Caitlyn May to the list of *Sentinel* folks I've come to know and, in this case, am looking forward to working with in the weeks and months ahead.

Cottage Grove's historic district and diverse mix of both urban and rural communities create a broad tapestry of experiences, perspectives and opportunities for those who live here, as well as the journalists who chronicle it.

Ultimately, a newspaper is a reflection of its community, serving as both a rearview mirror to the past and a look at who we are today — and both of which are necessary for looking ahead as an informed and united community.

Without question, *The Sentinel* has seen changes over the past year. Some of those changes have come as a result of Caitlyn's goal, as editor, of providing more relevant and timely coverage of news and events. This can be particularly challenging when faced with the limitations of a weekly publication and a small staff.

Those changes have also helped usher *The Sentinel* toward a more traditional newsroom structure that utilizes a managing editor, which has become a standard among newspapers, both large and small.

Through a recent survey, as well as your letters, emails, phone calls and conversations during the past several weeks, we've had a chance to hear what many of you like and dislike about the changes.

Some appreciate the longer, more in-depth series examining the impacts of

state or national issues on the local level; others feel our scope has broadened too much.

Some readers think we lean too far left, others too far right — and some feel we try too hard to straddle the middle without taking a stance.

Ultimately, our objective is to serve you in the best way we can by providing the kind of news, information and coverage that offers something for each of you — whether it be local politics, sports, business news, the arts, and coverage of special events, organizations or individuals within the six communities *The Sentinel* has come to serve over the last year.

Like many small newspapers, we are also working to utilize our online presence through *The Sentinel* website and social media page to close that time gap and improve the relevancy of the news and information we provide. This is particularly true of breaking news situations that involve public safety, as well as important information that can't wait for several days to see print.

Continuing to achieve these goals takes trust, communication and a strong working relationship with our readers — areas that will continue to be an important focus for us, and my primary focus as managing editor.

Though I remain editor at *The Siuslaw News* in Florence, I will be in Cottage Grove every Wednesday, all day, so please feel free to stop in; my door is always open. I also welcome you to call or email me any time with questions, complaints, suggestions or concerns.

In addition, Caitlyn and I will be hosting a free Press Release Writing Workshop at the Cottage Grove Public Library on Wednesday, May 16, from 6 to 7:30 p.m.

I encourage anyone involved in a non-profit group, community organization or local club who wants to learn the ins and outs of writing press releases (and who doesn't!) to attend this free workshop. As a small newspaper with limited staff, press releases are an important tool in assuring information about your organization or event gets into the community.

As I mentioned at the beginning, Cottage Grove has always been a special place to me. This makes it just one more reason to feel that way.

I hope to see you May 16, or any time.

Ned Hickson
Managing Editor
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By Finn JD John
For The Sentinel

Alfred Lester Belding may have intended to try to claim the protection of the "Unwritten Law" when he made his plans for revenge. But, reviewing the historical record, it seems more likely he didn't give a single thought to anything beyond the four murders he had planned.

It would have been a long shot anyway. The "Unwritten Law" was a social convention that "allowed" a man to murder another man if he sincerely believed the victim had been intimate with his wife, or had adulterously "ruined" a close female relative. It didn't have much to say about murdering mothers-in-law, fathers-in-law, and/or the wife herself.

Belding and his wife, Sylvia Maude, had been married for seven years — long enough to produce one son, Eddie, now 6. Their marriage had been, to use a euphemism of the day, a stormy one, and by July 11, 1902, everyone knew it was over. Sylvia, after at least five years of everyone in her family urging her to do so, was finally suing him for divorce; moreover, she had been seen with another man, George "Gyp" Woodward. Belding was convinced that they were having an affair, cuckolding him. He himself had been carrying on an adulterous affair with a younger woman named Cora Dawson for a number of years, but that, of course, was different.

So, Gyp Woodward had to die. And Sylvia had to die, because if Belding couldn't have her, nobody could. And her mother and father, who had urged her to leave him and then taken her in when she finally had — they had to die, as accessories to the crime of home-wrecking.

And now, as the evening of July 11 wore on, it looked like Belding was going to get his chance. He had learned that Gyp Woodward had come over to the in-laws' house for a visit. All four of them were there. The only way it could be better would be if her brother and sister were in the house too, but one couldn't be too picky. Four was enough.

So after bracing himself up with a generous measure of liquor, he armed himself with a pair of revolvers, which he "borrowed" from his employer — he worked as a bartender at a saloon at 14th and

Marshall. He didn't know it, but the wheelguns — a Colt and a Smith & Wesson — weren't fully loaded; there were only nine shells between the two guns, a fact that would quite possibly save at least one life that night.

Then he headed over to Sylvia's parents' house, on the corner of Fifth and Flanders.

Out on the porch Belding found his son, young Eddie. He paused for a few minutes to talk to the boy, then gave him a kiss goodnight and told him to go inside to bed.

Just then, Gyp Woodward stepped into the doorway. Belding lifted the Colt and let him have it. One shot, right through the head. The curtain had gone up.

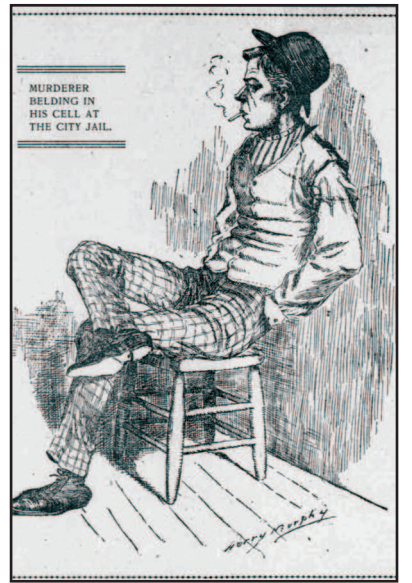
Belding stepped past Eddie and over the dead body of his "rival" and stepped into the house. Startled by the noise of the shot, Sylvia now stepped into the hall, met his eyes. The Colt bellowed again, and Sylvia Maude McCroskey Belding died in her tracks.

The murderer now started down the hall, knowing his in-laws were both still alive and in the house somewhere. He found his mother-in-law, Deborah McCroskey, first. Again he fired one fatal shot.

Belding was obviously quite a good shot when his victim was standing there waiting to be murdered. But his skills weren't nearly as good when his victim was shooting back, as his next victim, Lemuel McCroskey, was. Lemuel had had plenty of notice as to what was going on, and he'd gotten his own pistol out. When Belding found him, he was charging, firing as he came.

Luckily for Belding, Lemuel wasn't a very good shot; none of his bullets touched their mark. Belding had better luck; of the three shots he fired, all three hit. The first one nicked his neck; the second one inflicted a minor flesh wound in his arm; and then the older man clinched with him. Belding got one more shot in, and this one did the trick — it would have been fatal had it not been deflected by the old man's pocket watch. As it was, it put Lemuel out of commission for the night.

Knowing the house was now empty of targets that could shoot back, Belding now turned and opened fire on little Eddie, who was apparently still on the porch.



"Pa fired three times at me," Eddie testified at the subsequent trial. "Once at my right foot and then at my left, but the third time it did not come near me. I was across the street."

Leaving one of the now-empty pistols lying on the floor where he had dropped it wrestling with Lemuel, Belding now strolled leisurely across the street to the Lake Charles Saloon, throwing the other pistol down in the street as he did. Then he telephoned the police to let them know what he'd done, ordered a drink, and waited for the cops to arrive.

At trial, Belding's attorney didn't have much to go on; but he tried to argue his client had been temporarily insane, driven thence by the sad news that his wife was moving on and his happy home was lost and gone. This proved to be a really tough sell. For one thing, when Belding had learned that his fourth victim — Lemuel McCroskey — was still alive, he'd become visibly enraged. That didn't strike the jurors as consistent with a claim that the crime had been done in hot blood during a temporary bout of rage-induced insanity. It was, however, very consistent with the prosecution's claim that Belding was a cold-blooded monster who had tantrums when he didn't get what he wanted.

Another blow came from a police detective, who testified to having seen Belding smoking in opium dens several times. Opium was legal in 1902, but in mainstream Portland society, indulging in it was regarded in much the same way injecting methamphetamine is viewed today:

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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.

MAY 1-MAY 14

South Valley Farmers' Market will open on Thursday, May 3 from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. at the corner of Main St. and 7th.

The American Legion will host bingo on Friday from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. at 826 W. Main St. Proceeds (50 cents per card) support local veterans' programs.

Sustainable Cottage Grove will host its First Friday Potluck this Friday, May 4 at the Healing Matrix at 632 E. Main St. For more information, call (541) 543-5735.

Coast Fork Feed Company's 2018 May Fair is set for Saturday, May 5 from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. at 106 S. 6th St. Features local farmers, crafts, interactive exhibits and Celtic music.

Do you have an event, lecture or gathering you want people to know about? Send details to cmay@cgsentinel.com.