

Offbeat Oregon: 1895 holiday murder season started early, ended late

By Finn J.D. John
For The Sentinel

Residents of Linn County probably had a bit of an edgy time over Thanksgiving in 1895. The county jail in Albany had played host, for the previous month and a half, to not one but two of the most notorious murderers in the history of the state.

Linn County's murder season kicked off in the tiny community of Jordan on Sept. 26, when mild-mannered housewife Emma Hannah took a hat, fake mustache and glasses, and a five-shot .32 revolver

next door and assassinated a dangerously dishy neighbor, whom she suspected of being overly friendly with her husband.

Then, on Nov. 19, 18-year-old Lloyd Montgomery, black-sheep son of the Montgomery family of Brownsville, flew into a rage and murdered three people (including his parents) with his old man's Winchester hunting rifle.

It has to have been a holiday season to remember in Albany and the surrounding areas, as both of these cases came up for trial and sentencing right around Christmastime.

Emma Hannah was an ordinary farm wife, or so she seemed. She'd started late — she was 29 when she married John, her husband, in 1875 — but she'd filled their farmhouse with four children over the following two decades.

But something seems to have happened in the course of the birth of her last daughter that caused her to be in chronic pain and unable to function, as a wife, the way she felt she should. This apparently caused her to feel deeply insecure about her position vis-à-vis John.

Her fears, which deepened to the point of outright paranoia, centered around Lottie Hiatt, a younger woman who'd divorced her first husband and now was estranged from her second and living with her mother and three-year-old son a mile or so from the Han-nah house.

To Emma Hannah, the fact that Lottie was a divorcee meant she must be a woman of easy virtue, and therefore a threat to her marriage. Jealousy and paranoia simmered quietly inside her until, on the evening of Sept. 19, 1895, she decided she could bear no more.

She borrowed her son's hat and her husband's overcoat, put on a fake mustache and glasses, pocketed her other son's five-shot .32 Smith & Wesson, and headed on over to Lottie's place.

When she got there, she knocked on the door. Lottie opened it, and the disguised Emma pushed her way into the kitchen, pulling a leather-bound book out of the pocket of the coat.

"I was wondering if you would be interested in buying a book?" the visitor said, pushing it into Lottie's hands.

"I'm sorry, but I'm really not interested," Lottie replied, handing the book back.

The stranger's response was to pull out the .32 and, mutter-

ing, "You should have bought the book," clobber Lottie over the head with it.

Lottie, a little stunned but not badly so, turned and ran. The stranger fired after her, nicking her neck. Lottie's mother, Elizabeth Holman, took advantage of the distraction to clock the strange "man" across the side of the head with a piece of firewood, sending the hat, glasses and mustache flying; the stranger turned and smashed the pistol across her face, sending her flying to the floor, momentarily unconscious.

Then Emma chased Lottie down, put the gun to her temple, pulled the trigger, and left the house.

No one had gotten a very good look at the killer, but Lottie's little boy, Lofa, testified that the killer had had long gray hair done up in a bun.

Suspicion naturally fell upon Emma, whose enmity for Lottie was well known; and when the sheriff went to question her, her answers made it clear that although she was denying having killed Lottie, she was very, very glad she was now dead.

During the investigation, it came out that someone in the neighborhood had been leaving little notes on Emma's gate — notes claiming that John had been having an affair with Lottie and would soon be running away with her.

No one ever figured out who was leaving them; but whoever it was probably was just making trouble for the sake of making trouble — if John ever did have an affair with Lottie, everyone involved was unusually discreet about it, for no evidence of such a thing was ever found.

The trial started on Nov. 25, and the outcome was never much in doubt. Emma was convicted of second-degree murder and sent to prison, where she was moved back and forth several times between the penitentiary and the insane asylum until her death in 1930.

By the time her trial had started, though, an even more heinous murder had pushed

her case off the front pages of newspapers statewide: the double-parricide of Lloyd Montgomery.

Loyal "Lloyd" Montgomery was the oldest son of John and Elizabeth Montgomery, who owned a big prosperous farm near Brownsville. Lloyd was their oldest son, and he had just turned 18; he was a hulking, surly youth, very stubborn and with a bad temper.

For the previous few years his smaller, frailer father had been afraid to discipline him, and consequently he'd developed an attitude of entitlement and a disinclination to consider the feelings of others. He was, in short, something of a bad seed.

There isn't really any way to know for sure what happened on that day, Nov. 19, when Lloyd shot his parents. Lloyd was a very good shot, and he left no survivors. But the most believable of his several confessions was that his father had slapped him across the face in the presence of a family friend, a mill owner named Daniel McKercher, and he had been so furious that he'd gone back in the house, retrieved his father's Winchester .40-86 express rifle, and shot his father through the head with it.

McKercher had then fled around the side of the house with Lloyd in hot pursuit, trying to take cover by dashing inside. Just as he gained the front steps, Lloyd got a clear shot, and McKercher's body landed with a crash in the middle of the sitting room floor.

This, of course, greatly alarmed Lloyd's mother, who ran for the back door screaming. Lloyd fired twice more: once through the mid-dle of his mother's back, and once in the back of her head.

In the stillness that followed, Lloyd's thoughts naturally turned to the question of how he might avoid being hanged for the crime he had just committed. Laying the rifle down next to McKercher's body, he hustled off to the field that his brother Orville was plowing, hoping to establish an alibi.

This might have worked,

but he met his younger sister and brothers on the way. The youngest boy asked him if he knew what all the shooting had been, and he claimed — in front of four witnesses — that he hadn't heard a thing.

Lloyd then followed the other kids back to the house, and when the youngest came out hollering that there was a dead body in the sitting room, Lloyd leaped on McKercher's horse, raced to an uncle's house, and reported breathlessly that someone had murdered his parents and McKercher.

Suspicious eyes were on Lloyd immediately, and he was promptly arrested. He had lots to say about the murders over the following few months, but he never was able to explain how he'd known his parents were dead when the only body he supposedly knew was in the house was McKercher's.

Also, his reputation as a bad seed didn't help his cause much either. "Be sure and have a strong guard over him," his grandmother told the arresting officers, "or he will be back and murder a lot more of the family."

Probably the most interesting thing about Lloyd's case was his behavior in prison, and the public reaction to it. He first claimed McKercher had murdered his parents and he'd killed McKercher in self-defense — a claim that nearly got him lynched, as he'd seriously misjudged McKercher's popularity in the community.

Then he confessed, retracted his confession, reconfessed, and told story after story. When some of his old childhood pals were arrested and put in the cell next to him he had a high old time with them, and seemed to have not a care in the world.

Meanwhile, of course, he had been convicted and sentenced to hang. Each time his story was in the paper, a picture of his strong, boyishly handsome face appeared, and his "fan club" grew.

Governor William Lord was deluged with pleas from women around the state begging him to pardon the young rake.

Lord, though a kind-hearted fellow, didn't bite, and just before Candlemas — on Jan. 31, 1896 — Lloyd was hanged for the murder of his parents.

By then, of course, the 1895 holiday season had been over for several weeks. But (with apologies to Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers) Lloyd Montgomery and Emma Hannah had certainly made this a Christmas to remember for Linn County.



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