

Offbeat Oregon: Dynamite killing turned out to be sordid love triangle

By Finn J.D. John
For The Sentinel

Late on the evening of April 21, 1955, 35-year-old Portland attorney Oliver Kermit Smith left the Columbia Edgewater Country Club and walked to his car.

He was probably a little tipsy; there had been a stag party that night, and he was one of the last to leave.

He slipped behind the wheel of his 1952 Buick, turned the ignition switch to "on," and stepped on the floor-mounted starter button.

Two or three seconds later his mangled, lifeless body fell to the ground three feet behind the Buick's rear bumper, amid a shower of broken glass and bits of torn metal.

Someone had stuffed 10 sticks of stumping powder under the driver's seat of Smith's Buick, wired it with an electrical detonator to the starter solenoid on the car, and left the circuit open so he could drive to the country club without setting it off.

And while Smith had been inside playing gin rummy with his friends, that someone had slipped up to the car, connected the last two wires together under the floor mat, closed the door, and sped off into the night.

Portlanders learned about the murder, of course, when they read the front page of the next morning's paper. And if any of them wondered how long it would take police to find the killer, they weren't kept wondering for long.

The crime was more or less solved within 18 hours of Kermit Smith stepping on that starter switch.

The thing was, it wasn't the first time someone had tried to kill Smith. About six weeks before, the attorney had been waylaid outside his home by a shadowy figure wielding a heavy bottle, with which it tried to bash his head in. In the struggle, Smith's nose was broken, but the attacker got away.

When police asked him, in his hospital bed, if he had any idea who might have done this, he said, "Wolf."

Victor Wolf, he told the cops, was a 45-year-old electrician who rented a room in a house owned by Smith's wife, Marjorie. "He kinda likes my wife," Smith added.

There was no evidence, so there wasn't much they could do; and Smith, as an attorney, knew that — so he told the cops to "forget about him." But, of course, they hadn't, and now



The wreckage of Oliver Kermit Smith's car after it was blown to pieces by a dynamite bomb in the parking lot of the Columbia Edgewater Country Club. Picture is from the files of Det. Walter Graven. (Image: portlandcrime.blogspot.com)

they had a far more compelling reason to want to talk to him.

Victor Wolf was literally roused out of bed and taken into custody within two hours of Smith's death. Of course, he denied any knowledge of either crime. But holes started appearing in his story fairly quickly. He told police he'd used dynamite before, but didn't know how to rig up an electrical detonator ... which would be an odd skill for

an electrician to be lacking. And when the cops found the extra red-and-yellow wire clipped off the detonators stuffed in the heater vent of Wolf's brown Mercury, he realized the jig was up — and started talking.

Some of what Victor Wolf confessed to sure sounded like bunk. Specifically, any time a gray-haired 45-year-old man claims an attractive 34-year-old brunette has been "using me for a sex slave," the chances that he's spilling gospel truth are about equal to the chances that Santa Claus framed him for a burglary.

But maybe, the cops thought, maybe he was dumb enough to think it was true. Because a lot of the other things Wolf confessed to turned out to be backed by fairly solid evidence.

Kermit and Marjorie Smith had been married to each other twice. The first marriage had ended in divorce after Marjorie accused Kermit of striking her and being verbally cruel.

It was shortly after that divorce that Victor Wolf had started renting from Marjorie Smith. The two of them had started dating, and Wolf said they soon learned they shared a dream in common — a dream of homesteading in the Alaska Territory. This took money, though — more than either of them had.

So, Wolf said, Marjorie hatched a plan to get that money by having her reconcile with Kermit and remarry him; after that, Wolf would murder him, and Marjorie would collect on his life insurance policy, and then the two of them would be off to Alaska.

According to a front-page article in the Oregonian, this plan was implemented forthwith, and the Smiths were remarried on Feb. 4, 1955.

"Wolf said that as soon as she was married again to Smith she denied Wolf her favors until he should kill Smith according to the plan," the article continues.

Wolf told the cops Marjorie gave him a .38 Special to kill Kermit with, and he lurked in the bushes waiting for him with it on March 10; but at the last minute he "lost his nerve" and tried to murder Kermit with a heavy bottle wielded like a blackjack instead. That, of course, hadn't worked; so the two of them had hatched the dynamite plan. He said he'd wired the bomb up in Kermit Smith's own garage one day while Smith was out.

He'd bought the dynamite in two different stores near Molalla, and he and Marjorie had traveled to Ridgefield, Wash., to buy the detonators, he said. They'd stopped along the way for a picnic lunch, and he'd cut

a bouquet of pussy willows for her.

It was probably the pussy willows that made the detectives sit up and take note. They had, of course, searched the house by this time; and there was a vase with pussy willows in it in the house.

Police found more evidence, too. Police, examining the .38 Special that Wolf said Marjorie gave him to kill Kermit with, discovered it was the service revolver that had belonged to Kermit's father when he was working as a police officer. They also found a set of keys to the Smith home on Wolf.

And when he guided detectives to the spot where the picnic happened on the way back from Ridgefield, detectives found cut-off pussy willow stems that matched the ones in the vase, and discarded dynamite caps lying around.

Marjorie Smith continued to indignantly deny everything. There was rather a lot of evidence against her — but all of it was circumstantial, and could be explained in other ways. In the end, the jury at her trial didn't find it convincing enough to convict, and she was acquitted.

As for Victor Wolf, he had confessed, and some of the evidence against him — fingerprints, things left in his car, etc. — was far more than circumstantial.

In the end, he drew a life sentence, and was probably very happy to get it; in 1954, the gas chamber was a real possibility in a case like this.

Kermit Smith, by the way, was an interesting man, and one we probably would have heard more about had he not been killed. He was a World War II vet, fought in the Battle of the Bulge, made First Lieutenant, transferred to the Army Air Corps and finished the war as a captain, with a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star on his record.

He ran for the Republican nomination for a State Senate seat in 1950.

So, what was the real story? Did Marjorie Smith vamp Victor Wolf to get her husband murdered, like a real-life version of Nicole Kidman's character in the 1996 Gus Van Sant movie "To Die For"? It sure looks that way.

But the jury in Marjorie's case didn't agree, and there are aspects of the case that don't make much sense; it seems likely we'll never know the full story.

(Sources: Fisher, J.B. "Pussy Willows: The Murder of Kermit Smith," Slabtown Chronicle, 11 Apr 2014, portlandcrime.blogspot.com; Portland Oregonian archives, 22-23 Apr 1955)

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DRAIN:
HOPE U.M.C.
131 W "A" St. Drain, OR
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Pastor: Lura Kidner-Miesen
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Worship: 12:30pm

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10:00am
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Calvary Baptist Church
77873 S 6th St • 541-942-4290
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Worship: 11:00am
The Journey: Sunday 5:00pm
Praying Thru Life: Wednesday 6:00pm

Calvary Chapel Cottage Grove
1447 Hwy 99 (Village Plaza)
541-942-6842
Pastor: Jeff Smith
Two Services on Sun:
9am & 10:45am
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Child Care 10:45am Service Only
www.cgcalvary.org

Church of Christ
420 Monroe St • 541-942-8565
Sunday Service: 10:30am

Cottage Grove Bible Church
1200 East Quincy Avenue
541-942-4771
Pastor: Bob Singer
Worship 11am
Sunday School: 9:45am
AWANA age 3-8th Grade,
Wednesdays Sept-May, 6:30pm
www.cgbible.org

Cottage Grove Faith Center
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541-942-4851
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www.cg4.tv
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Church of Christ
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Worship Service 11:00am
Youth Wednesday 6:30pm
cgfirstbaptist.com

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3rd and Adams St
541-942-4479
Rev.: Karen Hill
Worship: 10:00am
Sunday School: 10:00am
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541-942-2061
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9:15am
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Comm. Kitchen Free Meal Tue & Thur
5:00pm TLC Groups
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334 Washington • 541-942-3033
Pastor: Lura Kidner-Miesen
Worship: 10:30am
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umcgrove.org

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