

Offbeat Oregon: Sheepman's disappearance maybe be Oregon's oldest cold case

By Finn J.D. John
for The Sentinel

The disappearance of sheep rancher Shorty Davis has got to be Central Oregon's oldest cold case ... there are older unsolved crimes, but it's hard to think of an older one that people are still thinking about. It's been almost 120 years since the affable, odd-looking pioneer vanished, and locals are still spinning theories about what might have happened.

The most popular theory, then and now, is that he was a victim of the last round of the Oregon range wars — the Crook County Sheepshooters outbreak of 1896-1906.

Another good possibility, supported by local resident Dorothy Lawson McCall — Gov. Tom McCall's mother, by the way — is that he was murdered by one of his neighbors, an ill-tempered cattleman who later proved the low quality of

his character by perpetrating a murder-suicide on his wife after some financial setbacks.

Whatever happened, it seems to have left no trace of the stockman. He took with him only his horse, his saddle, and (some sources say) a gun. He left behind 800 acres of good ranch land, roughly 3,000 head of sheep, about 60 cattle, 14,000 pounds of wool in the barn ready to be shipped to market — and lots of very puzzled friends. A \$1,000 reward was promptly offered for anyone who could find him or his body. No one ever claimed it.

Shorty Davis first came to Crook County when it was still part of Wasco County, in 1881 — the year before the formation and reign of terror of Colonel William "Bud" Thompson and his Prineville Vigilantes.

As a general rule, all men nicknamed "Shorty" are either

very short or very tall; and in Shorty's case, it was the former. He was a powerful, barrel-chested man, with very long arms and an unusually large head, but with very short legs; it was as if he were a dwarf from the waist down and a giant from the waist up.

He was a dark man, olive-skinned and with black hair. And there seems to have been something about him that inspired friendship and trust.

Upon arrival as a penniless laborer in his mid-20s, he immediately started working for local sheep outfits, taking his pay in sheep at the end of every season and acquiring land every chance he got. By 1895 he had a substantial acreage — three quarter-sections plus a ranch with a house and barn on it. He also had a big flock of sheep.

But 1896 was the year a group of cattle ranchers got together to do something about the "sheep problem." The increasing popularity of sheep ranching in central Oregon was putting pressure on the publicly-owned rangeland. Legally anyone was allowed to graze anything on that land at any time; but the cattlemen felt that since they

had been there first — well, actually, they personally hadn't, but there had been cows on the range before there had been sheep — they should be entitled to first rights on it.

They decided that when they found a flock of sheep grazing on public land that they had "claimed" for their gang, they would sneak up on the shepherd, tie him up, and massacre the sheep. They took their style and tactics from Thompson and the Vigilantes, wearing masks and riding by night and sending anonymous sinister threatening messages to anyone who opposed them; in fact, historian David Braly reports that a number of them had been members of the Vigilantes, 15 years before.

And so, slowly at first but with increasing boldness over the following decade or so, they started doing this. By the time a long-suffering and exasperated federal government ended the squabble by establishing a grazing-permit system, tens of thousands of sheep had met an untimely end at their hands.

Shorty, of course, had a lot of sheep, and ran them

on lands that cattlemen were pleased to think of as their own turf. So, tensions rose as the 1890s ripened into the dawning of the new century.

Then one mid-August day in 1900, Shorty's neighbors heard a big commotion at his ranch: all the animals were bawling and bleating. They were, as it turned out, hungry. Shorty had apparently left without feeding them.

Or maybe he didn't leave. In any case, he was never seen again.

Shorty was declared dead less than a month later — which seems unusually hasty, even by the standards of a century ago, but Shorty had a lot of valuable property and most likely some of the would-be bidders were well connected; they would have wanted to hurry things up before any relatives could find out. If so, this tactic worked. Shorty's relatives wouldn't learn of his disappearance for several years after it happened.

Meanwhile, a desultory run of advertisements in nearby papers didn't turn up any heirs, so his stock and land were auctioned off — and the bidders got the land and stock for about 15 cents on the dollar of its actual value.

Elsewhere, the Sheepshooters were getting increasingly bold. In 1903 alone, they killed over 10,000 sheep. Community opinion was starting to turn against them, as it had with the Vigilantes two decades before, and for similar reasons; they were powerful, scary, anonymous, and accountable only to themselves.

Plus, they hated sheepmen. It was only natural that suspicion would fall on them for Shorty's disappearance.

In 1905, a witness in a land-fraud trial in Portland claimed Shorty had been murdered and dumped into an old dry well on his property. The well was excavated; it contained no trace of Shorty. Apparently the witness had made up the story just on the off-chance that the murderer had disposed of the body that way, so that he could snag the \$1,000 reward.

In 1909, a spring flood exposed some bones in a creekbed near Prineville, and on the basis of that evidence Charles Colby, the neighboring cattle rancher who had feuded with Shorty, was arrested. He was released for lack of evidence — although Dorothy Lawson McCall re-

mained personally convinced of his guilt. The bones apparently were not his.

By that time, though, Shorty's relatives had been found.

His real name, it turned out, was Leonidas Douris; he was a Greek by birth. He had changed his name to conceal himself from other Greeks, including his relatives, who would put the bite on him for loans and then never pay them back. Shorty was a nice guy — apparently too nice for his own good — and therefore easy to take advantage of. It had become a big enough problem that he literally went on the lam from his friends and family to short-circuit it.

Shorty's brothers came to town to wrap up all his affairs and to collect and distribute what was left of his estate. But still there was no trace of Shorty himself.

Over the following years, Shorty Davis became something like an obsession, and remained so for decades afterward.

In March 2008, Shorty's grand-niece, Anastasia Douris, came to the U.S. to learn more about him. The family back in Greece had heard that he'd been murdered by cowboys, who had taken over his ranch. She found that, far from being a forgotten victim of Old West violence, her relative was Prineville's municipal mystery — still.

So, what really happened to Shorty Davis? It seems unlikely that, if he died of natural causes, no body would have been found. During the years when a \$1,000 reward was being offered, people were crawling all over the landscape looking for clues. If he'd drowned in a river, his horse would have been found; if the horse had slipped off a trail and over a cliff, someone would have found the bodies or bones.

So it's most likely someone hid him deliberately, presumably after murdering him. And if that's the case, unless his murderer was incompetent, we'll almost certainly never know.

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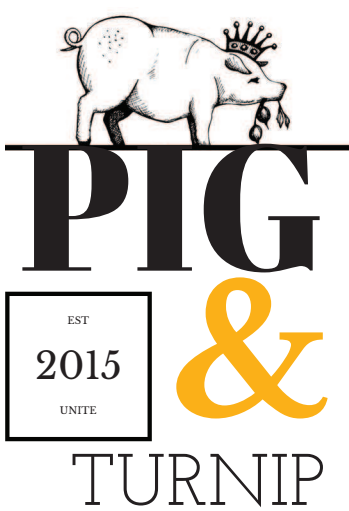
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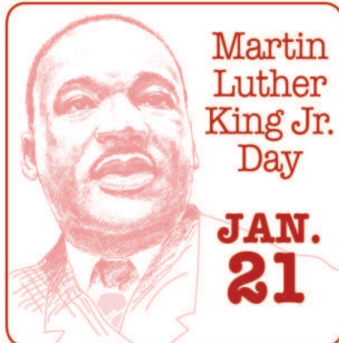
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