

# Offbeat Oregon: Shyster lawyer planned to steal man's land by shanghaiing him

By Finn J.D. John  
for The Sentinel

In the late 1880s, in the wilds of southwest Washington near the mouth of the Cedar River, a "stump rancher" named Peter Norris developed a more-than-professional interest in the wife of his hired hand, whose name was Browning. It wasn't long before the Brownings were aware of the fact, and things became very awkward around the Norris home.

Then, one August day, Mr. Browning went out berry picking and never came back. His wife immediately left the area, probably worried about what Norris might do. Her husband's body was found days later; he'd been shot — but there was no evidence of who had done it. So, although nearly everyone in the area figured Norris had murdered him, no charges were ever filed.

About two years after this, one of Peter Morris's neighbors, who was also named Norris — Darius Norris, no relation to Peter — was walking along the pier in Astoria when the town's chief of police, W.J. Barry, stopped him.

"Come with me," the chief said. "I have orders from Sheriff Turner of Pacific County to arrest you."

Now, Darius Norris wasn't actually a resident of Astoria. He lived with his elderly mother on a huge piece of acreage on Long Beach Peninsula — in Pacific County — which his father had bought years before when it was considered worthless. Now, with the steamboats bringing hordes of tourists to Long Beach all summer long, it was worth a lot of money, probably the equivalent of more than a million 2019 dollars.

Norris was, on paper, a wealthy man; but he had very little cash flow. To support his elderly mother and himself he traveled to Astoria and did work in canneries and as a longshoreman. That was why he was here, in Astoria. But he lived in Pacific County. If the sheriff of Pacific County wanted him, why would he have bothered waiting until he crossed the river and then asking Barry to extradite him back?

"I objected and told him to show me his warrant," Norris recalled later. "He said, 'Damn you, I don't need a warrant; you come along jail or I will fill you full of lead.'"

This mysterious arrest quickly got even more weird as Barry furtively conveyed his prisoner to the jail, warning him not to make any noise. Norris's request to make bail was curtly refused. The sheriff told him he would send a couple of lawyers to talk with him; Norris gave him the name of his lawyer; and the sheriff told

him no, Norris would take the lawyers he sent or nothing.

"He told me a Mrs. Browning had made a confession implicating me in murdering Browning," Norris recalled, "and said that men had gone over to Pacific County to search for Browning, and that I was in a very bad fix."

Then the sheriff left his prisoner sitting there in the dark, puzzling this out.

Soon thereafter, the two attorneys arrived; C.J. Curtis and L.G. Carpenter were their names. Curtis promised to do what he could and departed; Carpenter rather unhelpfully reiterated what the sheriff had said, that Norris was in a very bad fix, and urged him to follow the sheriff's instructions very carefully.

Then he was left to rot in jail for nearly a week.

Finally, Carpenter returned with some paperwork for him.

"I could only see the bottom part of the papers, and asked him to let me read the rest," said Norris. "He would not do it, and told me to sign them quickly, as he could not get me out unless I did."

Doubtless feeling a little desperate by this time, Norris signed.

A few more days passed. Then Sheriff Barry came to get him, late at night, and escorted him to the river scow on which he had been camping while working in Astoria, to get his blankets and things. The sheriff warned Norris to say nothing to anyone or he would be shot dead on the spot; and while he retrieved his things, the sheriff stood in the shadows across the road, hand on his gun butt.

Then he was escorted to a small boat lying close by in the shadows. "All the way down ... Barry had been telling me my life would not be safe if I ever came back again," Norris said, "and when we reached the ladder he said, 'Damn you, get in that boat and never come back again!'"

This was probably the moment when Norris realized he was being shanghai — by the police chief — because he knew the two men in the boat. They were notorious Portland-Astoria shanghaiers Larry Sullivan and one of his lieutenants.

The voyage Norris now shipped out on was a miserable one; it was understaffed, and the ship ran out of limes so that months later when it finally arrived in Liverpool, everyone had scurvy. When he got there, Norris found that after Larry Sullivan's \$140 "blood money" fee was deducted from his wages along with \$40 in incidentals, he had only about \$10 coming to him.

He also found two letters awaiting him:

The first was from the L.G.

Carpenter — the lawyer. It urged him to depart forthwith to Australia and never even consider returning home, because Astoria was too dangerous for him and his life wasn't safe there. The other was from the other lawyer, C.J. Curtis. Curtis wrote urging Norris to get back to Astoria as quickly as possible to settle the legal battle that had broken out over ownership of his Long Beach Peninsula land after he'd signed it over to Carpenter.

After he'd... what?

What apparently had happened was that several months before Norris was shanghai, Norris's sister, Mary, had consulted Carpenter — who was, remember, a practicing attorney — about the family's property. Mary didn't like living in poverty on a million-dollar piece of land and wanted to sell it; but her brother and elderly mother were both dead set against the idea. Could he help?

Well, yes, he certainly could ... help himself, that is.

So, Carpenter got his network of business associates into gear. Either with a fat bribe or the promise of a slice of the action, he got Chief Barry to "arrest" Norris; then Sullivan shanghai him off overseas never to return; and finally Carpenter himself set about spreading the word that Norris had fled the country after word got out that he was a murderer. The plan was for everyone to be confused by the coincidence of Norris's name with that of suspected murderer Peter Norris. It probably sounded like a great plan to the Astoria townies.

It didn't work, though. People who actually lived in Pacific County knew both Norrises well, and knew they were very different men. Norris also had lots of friends on the Astoria waterfront, who knew a bum rap when they saw one — and also knew how corrupt the city was at that time. Also, although the news stories aren't specific on this topic, it appears Carpenter forgot about Norris's sister. She may have wanted advice about getting her brother

to agree to sell. But having a complete stranger swindle them all out of the property was clearly not what she'd had in mind.

So, when Norris's reply to attorney Curtis's letter arrived in Astoria, and Curtis released it to the press, things got rather hot for L.G. Carpenter. He soon found it expedient to transfer his practice to San Francisco.

Which is where he was when the state of Oregon issued a warrant for his arrest. He had hastily signed the title to the Long Beach property back over to the family before decamping; but it was pretty clear what he'd tried to do.

But he was probably never in real danger. The people he'd been working with were, essentially, the rulers of Astoria. Ex-Police Chief Barry came up for trial for kidnapping and embezzling, and was promptly acquitted; a few months later, he was back on the force, although no longer serving as chief. Larry Sullivan wasn't even charged. When the San Francisco police heard about that, they declined to bother serving the warrant, and that was the end of that.

As for Darius Norris, he finally made it home by working for his passage on the American bark *Recovery*. Upon arrival in New York, he had to hide out from the Bowery shanghaiers, who were boarding every incoming ship and asking if anyone knew about him — obviously Larry Sullivan had sent word and called in a few markers. Luckily, one of Norris's Astoria waterfront friends had journeyed to New York to meet him, and they were able to make it home safely.

(Sources: *The Oregon Shanghaiers*, a book by Barney Blalock published in 2014 by *The History Press*; *Portland Morning Oregonian archives from September 1892*)

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