

Offbeat Oregon

Trapper's disappearance had relatives suspecting foul play (part 1)

BY FINN J.D. JOHN
FOR THE SENTINEL

As the first day of March 1924 arrived, L. Sarah Wilson's worry and alarm mounted. Something had happened. Something bad. Her son, 36-year-old Harry "Roy" Wilson, had promised he'd be back at her home in Bend sometime in February. Roy was a former U.S. Marine (8th regiment, 1917-1919), and his word was solid gold. If he didn't do what he said he was going to do, it was because he couldn't. Roy's mother was convinced that he hadn't come home to Bend because he'd been murdered.

Roy was a logger who worked for Brooks-Scanlon Lumber Co. of Bend. Late the previous year, he and a co-worker, 23-year-old Dewey Morris, had agreed to spend the winter at a remote cabin by Big Lava Lake with another onetime co-worker, 53-year-old Edward Nickols.

Nickols was spending the winter at the cabin tending to the cabin owner's small fur farm of silver foxes, in exchange for a piece of the action when the furs were sold.

The job promised to be a pleasant one. The foxes didn't require too much care; they had to be fed each day, of course, and their water kept topped up and unfrozen; but that was about it. Meanwhile, the three men were free to run traplines for the wild foxes, martens, and other valuable fur-bearing animals around the lake.

Nickols was particularly keen to have company for the winter, and especially the company of a trained warrior like Wilson, because there was some bad blood between him and a former partner, Lee Collins.

This man Collins was a somewhat slow-witted fellow from Idaho, who had the habit of talking rapidly through his teeth while affecting a toothy and insincere smile — like a fast-talking Jack Nicholson character.

He had spent the previous winter at the cabin helping Nickols tend to the fox farm. At the end of their partnership, though, the fur markets were at a low point, and the fox farm's owner decided to wait to sell the furs until prices were better. Collins, who of course wanted his money immediately, interpreted this as an attempt by Nickols and the owner to cheat him out of his share; so, happening to know where Nickols had \$500 stashed near the cabin, he stole it and disappeared.

When Nickols reported this crime, investigators told him that Collins wasn't the man's real name. He was, actually, Charles Hyde Kimzey, a convict who had recently escaped from the Idaho State Pen, where he had been serving a 14-year sentence for burglary.

With the help of the information Nickols gave police, Kimzey was tracked down and they very nearly caught him. But after he slipped out of their clutches, knowing who had ratted him out, Kimzey made it very clear that he would now be gunning for Edward Nickols.

And, of course, Kimzey would know exactly where to go to find Nickols, since the cabin and fox farm hadn't gone anywhere.

Plus, if he waited to take his revenge until the dead of winter, he'd be able to also steal the fox pelts — valued at about \$1,800 — plus whatever else Nickols might have found on his trapline that winter. Revenge for the ratting-out, plus a nice wad of cash — a tempting prospect for a felon on the run.

So, with this in mind, Nickols got his two friends to come out to the cabin with him, and they settled in for the winter.

On Jan. 15, 1924, Allen Willcoxon, a neighboring trapper and friend of both Nickols and "Collins," came by and spent the night in the cabin with the three men.

He was the last person to have ever seen them alive ... other than their killers.

Time went by, and winter ripened into early spring. Feb. 29 (it was a leap year) came and went with no sign of Wilson.

Sarah Wilson would not be comforted. Other relatives assured her that the boys were probably just fine, maybe snowed in at one of the shelter shacks along their trapline, and it was no big deal ... no sale.

Sarah Wilson was convinced that something awful had happened to her son and his friends.

Finally, a couple of family members saddled up and made the trip out to Lava Lakes for a visit. They arrived on April 13. What they found there certainly gave them reason to worry that Sarah might be right.

The cabin had been unoccupied for some time; the wall calendar still had the January leaf showing. The last meal eaten in the place appeared to have been breakfast, and no one had bothered to clean up or put away dishes.

And the whole cabin was in a very unkempt condition, which was not at all in character with how Nickols, Morris, and especially ex-Marine Wilson kept their things.

Well, that could have been explained away; conceivably, after the three men left for whatever reason, a traveler might have come by and, finding the cabin vacant, lived in it for a few days. But where the men might have gone was another tricky question. Their bedrolls, most of their heavy winter clothing and all but two of their guns — a Colt .22 revolver and Wilson's war-souvenir Luger automatic — were still in the cabin.

Where would the three of them have gone without heavy coats or firearms?

There was a meal out for the farm foxes, but the foxes were gone. Had they escaped, or had someone stolen them?

The visitors made the rounds of the boys' trapline. They found the corpses of several martens and wild foxes in the traps — the animals had sprung the traps and then, stuck in them, died of thirst. Yet there were no pelts in the cabin. Had they not been running their trapline, or had someone stolen all their pelts?

Answers were not slow in coming to light. On April 20, the visitors found a big spot of blood in the snow; it was sandwiched between a lower and upper layer of clean white stuff, as if it had been spilled and frozen several weeks or months earlier.

There were also tracks, visible despite an inch or two of snow having fallen since they were made, of a heavily-laden sled having been pulled away across the snow in the direction of Big Lava Lake.

Following those tracks, the investigators found that they went out onto the lake and ended at a spot where someone had chopped a hole in the ice ... a hole just big enough to slip a body through. And caught in a crack in the ice near the edge was a medium-length strand of sandy-brown human hair.

Then someone found the missing foxes. They'd been killed, skinned and hidden in the bushes.

There was no longer any room for doubt: The three trappers had clearly been murdered, and the motive was either robbery — or revenge.

A few days later, Portland furrier Carl Schumacher, having seen the coverage of the mystery in the Portland Morning Oregonian, contacted the police to report that a man had brought four fox pelts in to his shop on Jan. 22 — seven days after the three men had last been seen alive.

Schumacher remembered the situation well, because the pelts had been mishandled; the trapper, who stayed and chatted with him for half an hour or so about various trapper-related things and seemed to be an old hand at the game, apparently didn't know how to properly stretch and cure a valuable pelt, and although the pelts weren't ruined, they had lost considerable value as a result.

By the time Schumacher contacted the cops, they were already looking into Charles Hyde Kimzey as a suspect. They showed Schumacher a photograph. Schumacher said he couldn't give a positive I.D., but the photo definitely looked like it could be the same man.

But Kimzey was still on the lam. There was still no sign of him when, a month or two later, the ice in the lake melted, and all three bodies were found floating in it. Police lassoed them and towed them to shore.

The evidence they found on the bodies put to rest any lingering doubts about whether or not they'd been murdered.

We'll talk about that, and about the efforts to figure out who did it, in next week's column.

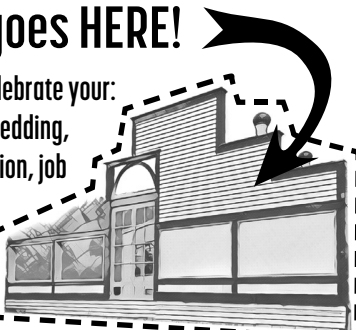
Finn J.D. John teaches at Oregon State University and writes about odd tidbits of Oregon history. His book, Heroes and Rascals of Old Oregon, is available through Ouragan House Publishers. For details, see <http://finnjohn.com>.

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