

Veteran Scribe Recalls How Nationally Known Swindler Was Tripped Up In Klamath Long Ago

(When my story of the old Klamath County Bank was published in the Herald and News some weeks ago Mrs. Frank Ira White called me immediately to tell me how often she had heard her husband relate the story of the clever swindler who so nearly ruined a local bank. She also called Frank Jenkins who asked for another story. For information in the article which follows all thanks are due Mr. Sam Walker, Mrs. Ira White, Mr. Don J. Zimwalt, Charlie DeLag for his assistance and courtesy in digging up the old court records, and to The Herald for the use of its old files. I. S. O.)



MR. FRANK IRA WHITE

By IDA KOMYER ODELL.
From the state of Kentucky to the state of Washington, from learning city to gossip village, he swindled his way merrily across the continent, this man who called himself Frank B. Houston, with a stop over in Klamath Falls which proved his undoing.

As luck would have it, when Thaddeus E. York, alias Frank B. Houston, hit Klamath Falls, things were boiling around that place. With three courthouses, (two beautiful and unused, one old, decrepit, and humming with activity) Mr. York landed with both feet, or at least with one foot and a cork leg, right in the middle of the courthouse fight and of the HOG COMBINE. Under this fantastic nomenclature were classified all those who wished the four souce to remain on Main street between 2nd and 4th, by all those who were trying to move it to the present site of the Klamath Union high school.

And the cork leg, together with an urge to take a bath, furnished the clue which finally took Mr. York to a town hitherto unvisited by him, our State Capital, Salem, Ore.

Arrives in KF
With a career likened by the Portland Telegram to that of the then famous character in fiction, J. Rufus Wallingford, Mr. York arrived in Klamath Falls in March of 1910, registering at the old Lakeland Inn under the name of Frank B. Houston. And there let us leave him for a while, and sketch briefly his exciting past as reconstructed from newspaper accounts printed after his capture.

York was considered one of the cleverest swindlers in the country, and buccaned big concerns for many thousands of dollars, bought tracts of land in Oregon and Washington, buying outright an entire township in Washington. He extended his operations over the Pacific Coast and the southern states. He was described by the Telegram as an ex-convict with experience as a telegraph operator. His skill in reading Morse code as it came over the wires was

exercised during a brief stay in Tonopah, Nev., to use for his own benefit the messages on the horse races as they came in. With this advance information he stung the pool-rooms of that city.

Mr. York was so highly pleased at this prank on his part that he boasted of it to a Klamath Falls business man later.

Secured Blanks
Somehow York at one time secured 57 blank money orders from the Northern Express company and by means of these added \$10,000 to his worldly wealth. In 1909 he parted one James Stone, a Chicagoan, from \$900 of the latter's funds. Individuals and banks alike were his game and in Chicago he touched the State Bank of that city for \$5000. He operated extensively in Kentucky and swung north to Bellingham, Wash., where in May his persuasive personality swindled a bank out of \$2300. Seattle did not escape and the American Savings and

Trust company of that place padded York's roll with \$1339 of their money. In Portland, under the name of J. A. Ross he cleaned up \$2500.

And now back to Klamath Falls. In San Francisco York visited a firm by the name of the Klamath Falls Investment company and informed them that he had a large amount of money to invest. Well, of course they recommended him to go straight to Klamath Falls, a rapidly growing town on a newly opened spur of the Southern Pacific. Thus did Mr. York land in the middle of the Hog Combine.

With three highly interesting pieces of paper in his pocket, one a Time Certificate of Deposit for \$13,860; one for \$30,000; and still another for \$40,000. Mr. York was introduced by a local real estate broker to the American Bank and Trust company. At that institution he parted with his time certificate which had a legend on its face showing it bore interest at 3 per cent if

left for one year. By being allowed the privilege of using the money as he needed it he generously gave the bank whatever interest had accrued or might accrue. Mr. York (as Houston) represented himself as being greatly impressed by the little city and wished to identify himself with its future. Of course there were some things which a man of the world like himself might help correct. In other words he felt that he would soon start to make the place over more nearly to his heart's desire by building a hotel which would be a credit to the town and himself, and definitely by remedying the deplorable newspaper situation. Clever Mr. York.

Two Projects
With his nose for opportunity and ear for local gossip he had hit on the two projects most open for financing by the bank, which was smarting under frank attacks by the Evening Herald which had coined the name of Hog Combine and identified members of the banking family with said combine. Also the fact which caught up this picturesque term to describe their opponents were most elated over the plans underway at that time for the construction of the White Pelican hotel for which ground had already been broken on the corner now occupied by the Balisee Garage. The \$100,000 modern hostelry proposed by Mr. York sounded like an answer to prayer to those anxious to hold the center of the town static. Mr. York's plans for a newspaper also soothed some very wounded feelings for he proposed, no less, the purchase of The Evening Herald, negligently overlooking the necessity of obtaining the consent of The Herald.

It appears that newspaper reporting in those days was somewhat different from the present time. Vitriolic articles were spread all over the first pages of the papers if the reporter saw fit. The word "Alleged" behind which a reporter could dash for safety had not as yet been dug out of the dictionary. Statements were simply and frankly made as for instance when the death of Mrs. Hemenway occurred, there was no softening statement—just a flat: "Mrs. Hemenway, an addict to the use of drugs died this morning from an overdose."

Mr. York was expansive and generous in the plans he outlined for spending those funds he so confidently expected to acquire by his pleasing personality. It is recorded that, as the Portland Telegram phrased it: "Having established

himself as a promoter, a good fellow and a high liver, York bought \$556.25 worth of jewelry from H. J. Winters, the Klamath Falls jeweler, and gave a worthless check in payment. This jewelry, explained York, was presented to various people in Klamath Falls as a token of his esteem and regard. J. Rufus Wallingford could not have worked the game on a larger scale nor made a better impression."

He entertained lavishly, giving big dinners and joy rides to various willing new acquaintances.

Representing the need of funds to make the down payment on the newspaper he drew an additional \$6000, making a total now received on his time certificate of \$8500. Then Mr. York, or Houston, faded from the scene.

When his absence became prolonged enough to excite comment and when the bank began to exhibit anxiety as to his whereabouts some local investigation started. Accounts from hereon vary but it is believed that the following is essentially correct.

Mr. Houston wanted Mr. York to take a bath. And he found his key for his cork leg was worn and unusable. And, as an aside, it was found out later that when he obtained his cork leg at a price of \$150 he allowed payment of \$100 of the amount to slip his mind.

New Key
John Peck and a man named Berry had a foundry on Walnut street across from the residence of the local policeman and deputy sheriff, Sam Walker. In his going and coming from home Mr. Walker, who had eyes and ears that brought many criminals to justice, had noticed Houston visiting the foundry several times. When Houston was missed Sam went over to find out what business he had had with the foundry and was told that the key for the famed cork leg was defective and they had been asked to duplicate it, which they did exactly.



MR. SAM WALKER

the bank which would be able from the number on the original key to trace the wearer of the artificial limb. Both Sam Walker and Frank Ira White were investigators of far above the average intelligence and it is impossible at this late day to entirely reconstruct the clever detective work which landed York back in Klamath Falls.

Mr. White, as a reporter on the Denver Post, had been instrumental in bringing to justice more than one criminal of highly dangerous character. Mr. Walker is famed throughout Klamath county for his intrepid and clever trapping of murderers, horse thieves and cattle thieves. So it would seem only fair at this distant time to split the credit between them.

Vivid Memory
Mr. Walker's memory of his conversation with Mr. Peck is most vivid. The bank after getting the number of the key wrote to the factory to ascertain to whom the artificial limb had been sold and a reply came that only two legs of that description had been made, one for a man in the Eastern states and one for a man named York of Los Angeles, and they were able to supply the address of the apartment in which this York lived with his mother.

The American Bank and Trust company then placed the matter in the hands of Pinkerton's Detective agency who planted a woman op-

erative in an apartment near York's mother with instructions to cultivate the latter's friendship. This was not hard to do, and before long Pinkerton's was able to wire the bank that York's mother was leaving on the steamer President running from Los Angeles to Seattle to meet her son.

Sheriff Billy Barnes and deputy sheriff, Claude Daggett, a member of the official family of the bank went to San Francisco, met the boat, and rode, unknown to Mrs. York, to Seattle with her. There she was met by her notorious son, and he was promptly taken into custody by Billy and Claude.

If you picture Mr. York as being crushed by the turn events had taken I have drawn but a weak description of our hero's indomitable character. Indeed he was the most unconcerned of all the parties to the transaction. On July 1, 1910, the three men boarded a train bound for Klamath Falls (via Weed).

The Portland Telegram reported: "Houston still refuses to talk. Sheriff Barnes and Claude Daggett who have in charge T. E. York, alias P. B. Houston, who is wanted in Klamath Falls for swindling the American Bank and Trust company, left here for there last evening."

The Herald speculated: "There will doubtless be a large crowd in waiting in the station to greet this

famous swindler but it is unlikely that they will get a glimpse of him. It is more likely that the sheriff will take him from the train at some point before the city is reached and whisk him off to jail in an auto. Sheriff Barnes has no desire to do the spectacular and the probability is he will do what he can to land his man in jail without running the gauntlet of curiosity seekers."

From the time of his arrival until he entered his plea in court the Herald broke out in a rash of headlines, for, making no effort to conceal its own sore spot over the would be purchase of the paper, it took full occasion to prick the sore spot of at least one of the bank officials.

July 1—"Uncle Sam Is After Houston"
July 5—"Houston Jokes Former Friend"
July 6—again not even setting new type, "Uncle Sam Is After Houston"
July 7—"Houston May Write a Book"

July 8—"Houston Gives up All!" Under the headline that Uncle Sam is after Houston an account was given of a wire received from a U. S. marshal asking Sheriff Barnes to hold Houston. Sarcastic comments follow:
"There is no likelihood of Sheriff Barnes releasing Houston on his own recognizance. This telegram has caused much amusement here for there is no probability that the sheriff is going to throw open the doors of his boarding house and tell Mr. Houston to hike."

No indeed, Mr. York was ours and we were going to keep him. Under the headline "Houston Jokes Former Friend" the paper printed: "Thaddeus E. York, or the man who bought The Herald for the Hog Combine is back among his friends."—followed by a skin removing article on said friends.

Through it all York was self possessed and exercised his own particular brand of humor, greeting the official family of the American Bank and Trust company who visited him in jail, with "Well it takes all kinds of people to make a world" and when they expressed regret at seeing him in such a position told them to hold their sympathy—"It is all a case of graft in this world. You see I was unfortunate enough to get caught. You are fortunate so you see you had better save your sympathy." This delighted the newspaper with its implication of graft against Houston's "friend." One ponders on how the reporter, avowedly unfriendly to the bank's officers, was able to reproduce with such fidelity a conversation held between the swindler and the swindled in the privacy of his cell. Could there have been any

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