

The Great Homestead Murders

A mother and daughter drove out of Hood River one dark night in 1904, accompanied by a local farmer, and they were never seen again, dead or alive. Though their bodies were never found, their murderer was traced down and convicted, by hitherto unheard-of methods of detection and scientific criminology.

On a February day in 1901, a young Iowa farmer arrived at Hood River seeking the whereabouts of his sister, Alma Nesbitt, and their mother, who had come west to homestead five years previously.

A livery stable operator remembered having seen the two women on a dark night in March, 1900, in a two-horse rig he had rented to a Hood River homesteader named Norman Williams. Williams returned the livery rig the next morning, but the stable operator could not recall ever having seen the two women again.

Nesbitt believed his sister and mother had been murdered and took his suspicions to Fred Wilson, deputy district attorney for Wasco county. He swore out a warrant for Norman Williams, who was arrested at Bellingham, Wash., and returned to Hood River.

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Second of Two Parts

THE FIRST move of the two amateur detectives was to take a train to Portland thence to 60½ Grand avenue, a rooming house operated by Henry D. Winters. This was the place where Alma had written the last letter to her brother in Iowa, in March of 1900.

Proprietor Winters got out his four-year-old register. There it was, the clear signature of "Alma Nesbitt, Hood River, Ore.," and below it "Mrs. Louisa Nesbitt." George Nesbitt declared both were in Alma's hand.

The women had registered on February 8, 1900, and remained until March 8, the same date on which Norman Williams had engaged the two-horse rig at Hood River.

Proprietor Winters recalled the two women well. A man had called on them and the three held a long conversation; something about property; and the talk had grown heated. Voices grew loud.

Next, Deputy Wilson and George Nesbitt went to Vancouver, then as now a noted Gretna Green, and in the Clark county recorder's office learned



THE PROSECUTOR told the jury that Alma Nesbitt, above, was murdered by her husband, Norman Williams, because she discovered he already was married and threatened to leave him.

that on July 25, 1899, or some six months before Alma's disappearance, she and Norman Williams had been married by a justice of the peace.

This find made Williams out a liar. In the meantime, authorities at The Dalles learned that Williams also had married a woman in Dufur, in 1898, and left her without troubling about a divorce.

So Williams was a liar and a bigamist, if nothing worse.

The pattern was still far from clear, but something approaching a motive for murder began to take shape.

Next the busy sleuths located one



"THE STAINS on the gunny sacking are human blood," the young female chemist from Portland testified. The hush that followed her pronouncement was tomblike. For scientific testimony was something new, and astounded jurors and spectators alike.

J. R. Reese of Hood River, who told of doing some day labor for Williams. It had consisted of cutting a lot of brush and of grubbing a good many stumps on the Williams homestead.

That had been in April 1900, or in the month after the women disappeared.

Later that summer, Reese continued, he had occasion to visit the Williams homestead again. The brush and stump pile, which he described vividly as "the damndest pile of stuff you ever see" had been burned. Clean.

Well, it was customary to burn brush and stumps.

The amateur detectives canvassed the scattered homesteads of Hood River valley, and found that a Mrs. Mary Riggs had known Alma Nesbitt. Mrs. Riggs, too, had talked with Norman Williams a number of times "since Alma and her mother went away," and had always asked him about Alma.

At least four times, she said, Williams replied that he received letters from Alma right along, and that she and her mother were well. Mrs. Riggs said she thought it mighty queer that Alma had left the neighborhood for good without coming to say good-by to her.

Wilson and Nesbitt did some more investigating, the results of which were to become obvious at Williams' trial. The case had become a sensation in Oregon. It had that something about it—the man driving two women, one of them young and beautiful, out of Hood River and into a dark from which neither woman had returned.

And almost overnight, in the press, Alma Nesbitt became the Lone Girl Homesteader, the pioneer covered-wagon woman right down to date.

Williams went on trial in the old Wasco county courthouse at The Dalles on May 24, 1904. The town was packed with the biggest, liveliest crowd seen there since the eastern Oregon gold rush of the 1860s.

Seattle, Spokane, Portland and San Francisco newspapers sent reporters and sketch artists to cover what already was "The Great Homestead Murders Case."

The Morning Oregonian's man was Leslie Scott, and he wrote that "the

nodding plumes and gay ribbons show that the female contingent is out in full force."

The courtroom overflowed. Fortunately the day was warm, and Judge William Bradshaw, a humane man, permitted open windows, thus allowing those in the yard to see and hear.

The milling crowd, soon to become quiet enough, packed the yard and flowed into the street.

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In his opening statement Fred Wilson, now playing the part of a prosecutor instead of detective, told the jury that the state would prove:

1. That Norman Williams drove the two women to his ranch on the night of March 8, 1900, and there murdered them in cold blood.
2. That he buried their bodies in the grounds, covering the hole with a great pile of brush and stumps.
3. That this pile was used as a funeral pyre.

As a motive, prosecution said, the state would prove that Williams had another wife living when he married Alma Nesbitt; that Alma may have discovered as much, and planned to leave Williams, and that Williams wanted Alma's homestead for himself anyway.

H. D. Langille, onetime partner in the Fashion Livery stables, took the stand to say that on the morning after he had rented the two-horse team and wagon to Williams, he, Langille, had seen the man driving into Hood River by the Parkdale road.

"There was no one in the wagon with Williams," Langille said on oath, "and Williams drove direct to the stable. This was at about half past eight."

Prosecution now brought out a blackboard, and on it Prosecutor Wilson drew a map of Hood River village to show that Williams could not have driven to the Hood River railroad station, as he had claimed to have done, without first having passed the Fashion stables.

Next the chief train dispatcher of the OR&N railroad testified that the only westbound train to pass through Hood River on the morning of March 9, 1900,



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DR. VICTORIA HAMPTON, the attractive chemist and microscopist, who was the sensation of the murder trial. She was a woman, and a scientist—a combination almost unheard of in 1904.

had done so at 5:33, or some three hours before Langille had seen Williams driving into town.

Langille and the train dispatcher thus demolished the claim of Williams that he had driven the two women into town and put them aboard that train.

The prosecution next sprang what the press termed a bombshell. It was in the form of John H. Hall, United States attorney of Portland, who told the jury how, late in 1900, a Norman Williams had brought to his office a document purportedly signed by one Alma Nesbitt in which she relinquished her homestead in favor of Williams.

The transfer had been made. Then, said U. S. Attorney Hall, a clerk in his office got to thinking. He had remembered Alma Nesbitt, a very handsome girl, at the time she herself had filed her original homestead claim. He became suspicious of the signature appearing on the relinquishment.

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He confided his suspicions to Hall, and Hall had sent to Washington, D. C., for the original homestead application, on which Alma Nesbitt's unquestioned signature appeared. The document proved beyond doubt that the relinquishment was a forgery.

Hall continued his testimony. He had gone to Norman Williams and accused him of the forgery. Williams admitted to signing Alma's name, but said she had given him permission to do so. He could not produce any evidence of such permission.

"At the time Williams was arrested for murder," Hall concluded, "my office was looking for him. He was under indictment for forgery."

The links in the chain were becoming a little tighter. Reporters noted that the prisoner, at first so assured, now moved about in his chair, changing his position every little while.

Now to the stand came Dr. Victoria Hampton, the Portland chemist and microscopist. Here was the sensation of the trial. Dr. Hampton was young and stunning. She was a scientist. She was also a woman. The conjunction was almost unheard of in 1904. The boys in the press box wrote their heads off.

Amid a silence so tense that Fred Wilson remembers it almost half a century afterward, the young microscopist took the stand. "The stains on this

gunny sacking," she said in a clear, musical voice, "are of human blood."

The prisoner was seen to twitch. The jury was round-eyed.

"Matted in the stains," Dr. Hampton went on, "I found several hairs, white in color. They are human hairs. They were torn from the head before death."

The hush was tomblike. Scientific testimony was new. Dr. Hampton explained clearly and to the point how she had arrived at her conclusions.

The newspaper reporters wrote that the testimony of Dr. Hampton had "made a profound sensation on jurors and spectators alike." The state had closed its case.

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Now came Henry E. McGinn, Oregon's most noted criminal lawyer of the day, to loose his splendid eloquence. He called no witnesses at any time. He rested his case solely on the premise that the state had not shown a corpus delicti—which, as he explained carefully to the jury, meant simply that the state had not proved that anybody had been murdered, much less Alma Nesbitt and her mother.

"Gentlemen," cried the dramatic McGinn, "the state has not proved and cannot prove death in this case. There are suspicions, grave suspicions, but nothing more. You cannot hang a man on mere suspicion, especially when there is such serious doubt of death as there is in this case."

Attorney McGinn went on to cite cases to show that no matter how damning the evidence of circumstances, no jury should convict a man unless a corpus delicti—the body—were shown.

"For all you and I know, gentlemen," cried McGinn in his closing, "Alma Nesbitt and her mother are today alive and well, living for reasons of their own, in some obscure place.

"You can't find this man, this Norman Williams guilty of a crime that you don't even know has been committed."

It was a forceful plea, but the jury could and did find Norman Williams guilty as hell. An appeal was taken to the state supreme court, but the learned judges denied a rehearing.

The Oregon court's denial has been cited again and again in the 48 intervening years and in almost every state in the union, including New Jersey, where it was cited against Hauptman in the Lindbergh baby kidnaping case.

What Oregon's supreme court said, in brief, was that there can be no universal rule in regard to proof of the corpus delicti; that the body of the crime may be proved "by the best evidence which is capable of being adduced, if it is sufficient for the purpose."

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More than a year after the trial, Norman Williams walked one morning to the gallows and shot through the trap at 6 o'clock.

It was July 21, 1905, and it is said to have been the last public hanging in our state.

Norman Williams lived on, for a time, in a ballad that seems to be largely forgotten today, which is perhaps just as well:

Oh, Williams built a fire
And he threw the bodies in;
He thought he'd covered up
His bloody trail.
But he left a couple hairs
A-buried in the ground, and
They hanged him at the
Wasco county jail.

The case is pretty much forgotten except by Hood River old-timers, and by lawyers the country over, to whom this great homestead drama is known, in the quaint manner of lawyers, only as 46 Ore. 287 (80 v. 655).