



## PART II The Place



# Life and Death in Early Days

by Karen Seidel

## VIOLENCE AND ACCIDENTS

The May 16, 1891 issue of Eugene's *Oregon State Journal* reported a single mother's suicide in Shedd, a young man killed by being struck in the breast by a horse's hoof while judging a horse race at Seaside, an Albany woman's painful injury by sticking her scissors into her side when she fell off a fence while cutting flowers, and two Eugene men in a horse-drawn wagon almost killed by trying to beat the Roseburg express train across the railroad tracks near the University of Oregon.

From painful accidents to fatal incidents the local newspapers in the late 1800s covered them, and, as continues to be the case in the late twentieth century, people were interested in reading about them. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau show that violence and accidents were the second leading cause of death (behind consumption) of Oregonians in 1870 and 1890.

Drownings were the leading cause of these deaths — proportionately much higher than in the country as a whole. The presence of mighty undammed and unbridged rivers must have been a factor. Early settlers not only had to ford or ferry across these rivers; they also traveled, worked, and played on them.

The Willamette claimed its share of victims. **J. E. Goodman** was drowned at Independence in 1884 while watering a horse. **Charles Hurlburt**, of the Hurlburt Brothers bakery, restaurant and confectionery in Eugene, drowned in 1891 while fishing with friends. The Hubble family met their misfortune in 1889, following a berry-picking outing on an island, when their buggy upset while re-

fording the river. Mr. Hubble was eventually rescued, but he lost his wife, **Emma**, and **two children**. "This drowning casualty raises the list of victims to seven who have lost their lives in the water of the Willamette in the vicinity of Eugene during the last year," said the *Guard*.

The drownings with the most curious aftermath involved **Minnie Luckey** and **Albert Wilson** and the swamping of their sailboat on the Siuslaw River near Florence in 1889. Family members in Eugene traveled to Florence as soon as they heard the news, and began dragging the river to recover the bodies. They were unsuccessful until a "Mrs. Wheeler, the clairvoyant," told them where to look on the river bottom. A few days later Wilson's body was found as predicted, said the *Oregon State Journal*. "A day later the body of Minnie Luckey was found, but whether in the place in which it was then said to be lying is not reported."

As is still the case today, suicides were the second leading cause of violent and accidental deaths of Oregonians in the second half of the 1800s. In both Oregon and the United States, firearms and poison accounted for half of the suicides in 1900. The one example of a shooting death found in Eugene newspapers involved Mr. **T. J. Smith**, who shot himself in the head in May 1890. When Smith, 38, learned from his physicians that a brain tumor growing just above his neck would soon leave him insane, he told his friends that he would take his own life rather than die a "raving maniac." He then drew up his will, asked his lawyer to leave the room, and pulled the trigger.

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Morphine was the choice of **Grant Osburn**, age 26. Following a drinking and gambling spree in Albany, he died from an overdose of the drug in June 1888. "Grant's misfortune and death were caused by getting into bad company and acquiring a taste for strong drink before he arrived at maturity," said the *Oregon State Journal*. "But for these bad associates he would have been a blessing to society and an honor to his family."

Two Eugene men died by slashing their throats. Both had had severe mental problems. **Charles McCormac**, son of Rev. J. "Holy Joe" McCormac, was a promising young lawyer but became insane and was committed to the state asylum in Salem. **Jerry Luckey**, father of Minnie Luckey, had also lost his first wife and two children in a drowning incident near Crescent City, California in 1864, when the ship on which they were traveling to Oregon sank.

Guns were common household possessions on the frontier, and their careless handling and use contributed to many fatalities. For example, all 17-year-old Frank Hart had to do was fall from his seat on a wagon near the Chescher post office (west of Veneta). Tragically, he fell on the muzzle of a loaded gun, which discharged, shooting him through the stomach.

Top right: Wood saw crew, 1895.

Opposite page (clockwise from top left): Bellying up to the bar in earlier days; Climbing the Three Sisters, ca. 1898; Eugene millrace scene; Boy with dogs and cougar; Patterson School at 13th and Alder, ca. 1910; Willamette Street, looking north, ca. 1891; Annual feather-plucking for pillows and mattresses, ca. 1914; River logging scene.

By 1900, train accidents ranked fourth as a cause of accidental and violent deaths in Oregon. The Oregon and California Railroad, which ran through Eugene, appears to have been a fairly safe mode of transportation for a number of years. But the *Oregon State Journal* noted in October 1889 that there had been four “smash-ups” between Eugene and Portland in the preceding three months, and that “during the last year eleven or twelve men have been killed on the road, while during eleven years previous not a man was killed.”

Leland Mount, 17, of Cottage Grove, died when he miscalculated a jump onto a moving train in Saginaw. Leland and his friends had lately been in the habit of jumping on and off moving trains, the newspaper reported. “He had been warned and entreated to stop, but would not heed.”



Above: Riding the flume from Prune Hill to Saginaw, 1899.

One of the smash-ups in 1889 was deliberately caused. On July 28, the southbound passenger train ran off the tracks at Lebanon junction because of an open switch, killing the engineer. A few days later, an Albany man confessed that he and two others, while drunk, had opened the switch. The three were arrested and charged with murder. “Hanging is entirely too good for such base hoodlum devils or fools,” said the *Journal*.

For local travel, horses or horse-drawn wagons, buggies, and hacks were the preferred modes of transport. Runaways were common, and mayhem was often the result. **Andrew McCornack**, an early settler and Oregon legislator, died when a hack he was riding in with his wife, two children and a niece bolted after encountering a calf in a wheelbarrow on a road just outside Eugene. The tongue of the hack broke and ran into the ground, throwing Mr. and Mrs. McCornack violently out. “Mr. McCornack was almost instantly killed and Mrs. McCornack very severely injured,” said the *Oregon State Journal*. “The horses proceeded some distance and ran against a telegraph pole which threw the girls out, the boy having jumped out when the hack tongue dropped.”

Eugene newspapers ran frequent reports of fires occurring in businesses, homes, barns, and stables. Eugene’s fire companies used hand-pulled carts, so response time could not have been swift. But most people must have managed to escape from burning buildings, because the local papers contained few notices of deaths from burns. In one instance, a teenager from the coast mountains, who with her mother had come to Eugene to pick hops, died of severe burns sustained from a fire at Brown’s hop yard. And **William Renshaw**, age 63, in impaired health and subject to epilepsy, died from burns on Christmas Day 1886. “It is supposed he rose Christmas morning and built his fire as usual,” said the newspaper, “and was taken with one of his spells, falling into the fire.”

A serious, but fortunately non-fatal, scalding accident occurred at Eugene’s brewery in 1875, when employee Herman Berg fell from a walkway into a boiling kettle of beer. “His feet are scalded very bad,

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having a large pair of boots on at the time which filled with the boiling beer, nearly cooking them before they could be taken off,” the *Oregon State Journal* reported. “Berg is attended by Dr. Sharples and is pronounced to be in a fair way to recover.”

Homicides were often the result of personal grievances and robbery, according to Eugene’s newspapers. The *Oregon State Journal* reported in January 1876 that “on Thursday night, December 21st, B. DeLord, a merchant of South Mountain, who is said to have had a great deal of money, and who lived alone in his store, was foully murdered. No one has been arrested up to Christmas Day, and it is feared the murderers, whoever they may have been, have escaped.”

More space was given to the case of Mrs. Isaac Taylor of Cottage Grove, who killed Marion Martin in December 1889. Mrs. Taylor testified that she was home alone when Martin came to her house and made indecent proposals. She refused, but he would not be put off. In the ensuing struggle, Mrs. Taylor shot Martin twice with a pistol, once in the head. She then locked the house, went to the office of the justice of the peace, and gave herself up.

The coroner and jury went immediately to the Taylor house and found evidence to support her story. The jury’s verdict was self-defense in resisting a criminal assault. The *Journal* described the sixty-five-year-old Martin as a prominent and generous citizen, but quarrelsome when drinking. “Last spring, while under the influence of liquor, he had a difficulty with his wife about money matters, and during the excitement she committed suicide,” the paper added. “Since then he has been drinking more than ever.”

## Words on the Death of Children

“Mr. Hollis, who lives a few miles west of this city, has lost five children with the Diphtheria this summer,” read the one-sentence news item in Eugene’s *Oregon State Journal* of September 22, 1877. During a ten-day stretch of that same fatal summer, diphtheria also killed four sons of the Murch family.

A pause today at the Hollis family plot in Eugene’s Masonic Cemetery confirms the chilling toll: Catharine, age 4; Laura, 8; Rachel, 10; George, 12; and possibly Orrie, 1 (although his tombstone indicates he died in 1876). The Murch family plot echoes the same: Arthur, George, Emmet and Edward, ranging in age from three to nine.

Diphtheria, the “scourge of childhood,” was a highly contagious disease with symptoms of acute sore throat and breathing difficulties. It first appeared in Portland as an epidemic in 1864, leading doctors to declare it the most fatal disease among children. An antitoxin was developed in the 1890s,

and gave good results. But it was expensive and difficult to obtain outside the Portland area. As an early settler told a reporter from Portland’s *Oregon Journal*:

When I was a girl we knew but little about the danger of contagious diseases. When a child had what they called putrid sore throat the neighbors all came with their children to visit, and when the child died, as it frequently did, the neighbors for miles around came to the funeral and took the germs of diphtheria home to their children, and the minister was kept busy preaching funeral sermons for the children in the neighborhood.

Diphtheria was not the only disease that claimed the lives of Oregon children in the second half of the nineteenth century. Measles, scarlet fever, whooping cough and typhoid fever also took their share. Respiratory diseases such as pneumonia and croup, along with “cholera infantum” and other

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diarrheal sicknesses, killed children. Fatal injuries and accidents — chiefly burns and drownings — rounded out the risks.

Again, the story is corroborated in the Masonic Cemetery: Children under ten accounted for over one-third (36 percent) of all persons buried there in the 1860s and 1870s. In the state of Oregon, children under ten represented 41 percent of all the deaths that occurred in 1880, according to U.S. Census Bureau reports.

A primary reason for this was the overall youthfulness of the state’s population. Half of Oregon’s residents were under twenty-two years old in that year. By 1900, Oregon’s median age had risen to twenty-six, pioneers were dying of old age, and only 22 percent of all deaths were attributable to children under ten.

However, this does not imply that death rates among infants and young children in the late 1800s were not staggering. Epidemics, primitive remedies and very primitive sanitation, the lack of hospitals, and the time it took for medical advances to reach a frontier state all took their toll on children’s lives. In Oregon, the death rate of infants (children under one year old) was about 70 for every 1,000 live births in 1880 — ten times as high as the 1994 infant death rate of 7 per 1,000.

The first year of life was critical. In 1890, almost half of the deaths of Oregon children under ten were infant deaths. Because a baby’s life was so precarious, parents were warned against becoming too attached to their newborns. Thus, some children were not even named until they were several months



Above: Lounging on a log, ca. 1900.

or even a year old. Inscriptions on tombstones might refer to “Baby” Noland, “Infant” Witter, and simply, “Son.”

Mothers also died. Frequently married in her early teens, it was common for a woman to have ten to fifteen children during her lifetime. While Census data indicate that the number of deaths of Oregon women due directly to pregnancy or childbirth was not particularly high in the late 1800s, indirect causes can be traced.

Death notices in Eugene newspapers reveal that women were often ill during their pregnancies, and their weakened condition led quickly or eventually to their deaths — and sometimes to the deaths of their babies. As the *Oregon State Journal* reported:

JUNE 3, 1871. In Eugene City, May 30, 1871, **Mrs. Phebe A. Folsom** (age 27) died of consumption. Just developed into motherhood, she leaves an infant daughter bereaved of a tender mother, and a husband to mourn the almost irreparable loss.

AUGUST 5, 1871. In this city, August 4, 1871, **Phebe Mabel**, only child of F. W. and Phebe Folsom, died, aged about 6 months.

JULY 8, 1876. **Mrs. Martha Ann Hill**, wife of W. J. Hill, died at Foley’s Springs on the McKenzie, on the 29th, of consumption.

*Sleep on in thy beauty,  
Thou sweet angel child.  
By sorrow unblighted,  
By sin undefiled.*

(Harry J. Lithgow: died 1888, age 1 year, 5 months)

Five days before their little daughter, **Effie**, died of typhoid pneumonia, aged ten months; mother and daughter were buried together in the Masonic burying grounds.

FEBRUARY 14, 1885. **Bessie**, infant daughter of Mr. and Mrs. G. H. Park, died at their residence in Eugene City last Monday morning, Feb. 9, aged 17 days. Mrs. Park has been sick several months, but her health is now improving.

MAY 16, 1885. **Mrs. Rose Park** (age 46), wife of Geo. H. Park, died at the family residence in Eugene City on Tuesday evening, May 12, 1885. She was the mother of eleven children, three boys and eight girls. One girl died when between two and three years old, about three years ago, and the youngest girl died on the 9th of last February.

While Oregon’s pioneer families were forced to cope frequently with the loss of small children to disease and other fatal hazards of frontier existence, they had one great consolation: the certainty that the dead child was in heaven. This comfort had been denied Puritan parents in the seventeenth century, when Calvinist doctrine upheld the notion of original sin and infant damnation, so that the child was not only lost in this life but for all eternity. But this was challenged in the eighteenth century, and Christian theology, long before the Civil War, came around to the position that “God was too good in heart to damn infants, and infants were too good in nature to warrant damnation.”

Infants, at the time of Oregon’s early settlement, represented the one exception to the overall sinfulness of the world — and this belief in children’s innocence is manifested in the funeral addresses of that period. *The Pastor’s Pocket Manual for Funerals*, published in 1902, contains the following suggestions for funerals of children:



The child is not lost to you, that is found in Christ — not sent away, but gone before — a start, not extinguished, but shining in celestial glory. The early loss of the bereaved, the heavenly gain of the child.

Surely it is not the will of our Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. They are lambs of the upper fold, are without fault before the throne and jewels on the Saviour’s breast.

This belief is also confirmed in the art and inscriptions on children’s tombstones, beginning in the mid-1800s. Skulls and crossbones were replaced by winged cherubs, lambs, and doves. Tombstone art also included rosettes and flowers adorning tender and poetic inscriptions that evoke the Biblical verse, Mark 10:14 — “Jesus said suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for such is the kingdom of heaven.”

Top right: Grave marker of Lucy J. Hampton, Masonic Cemetery.