

Murder at the lake: The Pelican Point mystery

Amber Foote | Posted: Saturday, January 13, 2007 11:00 pm

Utah Lake has long been a venue for industry and recreation, from the now-quiet steel yards and factories hugging its east side, to the numerous resorts and harbors which have sprung up and faded from its shores over the last century. But few remember that due west across the lake from Geneva Resort near the now-abandoned mining and farming town of Pelican Point, one of the most nefarious and publicized murders in Utah history occurred in 1895. IN APRIL OF THAT YEAR, newspaper headlines throughout the state shouted descriptive headlines: "Most Atrocious Crime In Utah's History," "The Deed Of A Monster" and "A Ghastly Find" -- when the first of three male bodies washed ashore from the thawing waters of Utah Lake near Pelican Point. Two more bodies were found five days later in close proximity to each other and about three miles downshore from the first. All three men had been shot through the head with a .38-caliber pistol, with one body carrying an additional bullet in the chest.

The young men, all cousins, were Albert Enstrom, 22, of Eureka; Alfred Nelson, 17, of Lakeshore; and Andrew Johnson, 20, of Benjamin. They had been killed while sleeping in the cabin where they tended livestock near Pelican Point. Their bodies had been loaded into the back of a wagon which was then driven out onto the frozen lake behind a team of horses, and their bodies were dumped through a hole cut in the ice. The murderer had then loaded the wagon with the boys' goods -- quilts, food, guns and tools -- and disappeared.

Upon discovery of the bodies, the victims' families revealed that the three had been missing since Feb. 17. It was supposed that they had gone to Arizona for a few weeks. Not until April 15, 1895, was the boys' true fate discovered. The bodies, even after two months, had been eerily well preserved in the icy waters (only their faces were unrecognizable, and officials presumed that the young men had been killed soon after their arrival at Pelican Point.

The case pulled a variety of law officers from around the county, most notably Sheriff George Storrs from Provo.

The suspects

THE INVESTIGATION that ensued produced a string of suspects who were examined and interrogated:

The first was Oliver Slade of Lehi.

Slade had a lawsuit pending against the stepfather of victim Albert Enstrom. Enstrom's family had once lived in another cabin at Pelican Point which was owned by Slade and were evicted for non-payment just months before the murders. Slade brought a suit for damages against Enstrom's stepfather for destruction of property. It was for a hearing on this suit in Lehi, that Enstrom, Nelson, and Johnson were last seen on Feb. 15, 1895. Slade was released from suspicion just days into the investigation because of lack of evidence and his reputation for being a peaceful citizen.

The eye of suspicion next moved to members of the victims' own families.

Harry Hayes, Albert Enstrom's stepfather, was at the center of a whirlwind of accusations and rumors. Eyebrows rose at Hayes's nonchalant attitude and lack of emotion concerning the disappearances and deaths. He displayed what many believed was suspicious and inappropriate behavior during the investigation. Adding grist to the rumor mill, witnesses told investigators that Harry's relationship with Albert was rocky; the two were often on bad terms. It was reported by several different witnesses that they had heard the two arguing quite violently at times and had even seen Hayes threaten Enstrom with a gun. Hayes's apparent apathy toward the crime and his reputation for being, as a newspaper reported, an "eccentric and mean old cuss," combined with circumstantial evidence to make him the primary suspect. Authorities conjectured that Hayes had acted out of spite with the help of his natural son, George, who had been visiting his father from the East. George, however, was cleared upon the discovery that he had left the territory and returned to Connecticut before the murders occurred. His innocence was further reinforced by the discovery of the dislike George had for his father as a result of the abuse he had suffered under his hand.

William Tyril, Porter Rockwell's grandson and stepfather to victim Andrew Johnson, was next under the microscope. He was suspected of having acted with Hayes in the slayings. Tyril was also said to have been on bad terms with his stepson Andrew.

A possible motive for the murders was that two of the young men, Enstrom and Johnson, had been bequeathed the property and cabin at Pelican Point by their mothers, who were the wives of Hayes and Tyril. The property was being held in

the mothers' names, and it was thought that Enstrom and Johnson had plans to assert their rights of ownership. Authorities suspected that Hayes and Tyril had been coveting the property and livestock and had murdered all three young men before they could take the land for themselves. Again there was insufficient evidence, and Tyril was cleared of wrongdoing.

Hayes then became the sole suspect.

The lawman

GEORGE STORRS was elected as Provo sheriff approximately one year following the murders and became a key player in Hayes's fate and the outcome of the case in general. In later years, Storrs documented the investigation of the Pelican Point murders in his personal journal and related that the case against Hayes was "woven about him so strongly that there was no one at that time but thought he was guilty beyond a reasonable doubt." Storrs also noted that the amount of circumstantial evidence against Hayes was weak to the point of being "ridiculous."

Despite efforts by his attorney, Hayes was tried and convicted of the murders and sentenced to be hanged on June 16, 1896. Storrs had taken office just two weeks before Hayes was to be noosed and felt an acute interest in the case. He noted, "[W]e had the gallows all ready, the rope with the knot in it already made up ... and everything was in readiness for the execution." The night before the hanging was to take place, Storrs locked himself in with the prisoner intending to get Hayes to admit guilt for the murders. Storrs interrogated Hayes all night; Hayes responded with intermittent crying, swearing and seriousness, but always proclaiming his innocence. Storrs was convinced that Hayes was "as innocent of the crime as I was" and took up the matter with Gov. Heber Wells. Storrs told the governor that if he would commute Hayes's sentence to life imprisonment, Storrs would find evidence to prove his innocence. Thus began a lifelong commitment by Storrs to bring the real killer to justice.

Storrs began his search by compiling a list of all the items that were said to have been stolen from the ranch at Pelican Point on the night of the murder. Items such as chains, crowbars, pitchforks, guns, ammo, food, quilts, and a team and wagon -- among many other things -- were included on the list. He sent out a circular with these items to every police officer, post office and constable he could around the "country."

Three months later, Storrs received a lead from a man in Mapleton who stated that he had helped unload many items on the list from a wagon into a cabin at the

mouth of Spanish Fork canyon. The cabin was being rented by a man by the name of James Weeks, who shared it with his wife, Jennie, and small daughter. The Mapleton man told Storrs that Weeks and his family had brought the wagon and items to the cabin. Upon seeing a photograph, Storrs remembered that he had arrested Weeks a year earlier for cattle rustling just days after the Pelican Point murders had been committed. Weeks was released on bond but disappeared.

Stolen goods

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL of stolen items from the cabin, Storrs found that they had been sold by Jennie Weeks and purchased by various people in the area.

One by one, he began locating the purchasers of the goods in an attempt to positively identify the items as belonging to the murdered youths. In doing so, Storrs drove to Lake Shore and showed the mother of one of the victims several different quilts he lined up on a fence. She failed to recognize any of them until an old-fashioned blocked quilt made of remnants was brought out. She screamed, "That is my boy's quilt!" She had an identical one at her home. She also described a Spencer rifle with identifying marks on the stock and sights that had been owned by her son. A rifle was then brought out and examined by Storrs and found to match the description. Storrs followed up on other items that had been sold, including the missing wagon. Positive links were made to Pelican Point. The team of horses also was located -- their remains, that is. More than a year had elapsed since the murders. The horses were found shot dead in a gully.

There was no doubt that Weeks had been in possession of all the wares taken from Pelican Point, and Storrs was convinced that Weeks was responsible for killing Enstrom, Nelson and Johnson. He learned that, upon breaking bond, Weeks had left the cabin at Spanish Fork on a horse and headed for Colorado.

Storrs began his manhunt by following a trail that was more than a year stale. In Colorado, Storrs met an old settler who claimed that Weeks, using the name C.T. Case, had worked for him for several months the previous year. He said that Case had moved on to Cripple Creek, Colo.

The sheriff came into Cripple Creek during the Labor Day celebration and sat down on a bench to observe the townspeople. He bought a copy of the Denver Republican and was astounded to see a photograph of Weeks with the lines, "C.T. Case, Attorney at Law and once king of Freshwater ... now in jail at Guffey for the murder of William Crampton." Incredulous at this timely discovery and shocked at

the announcement of another murder committed by his suspect, Storrs immediately hired a team and buggy and drove to Guffey, Colo.

There he found that Weeks, a.k.a. Case, was in the custody of a Pinkerton agent in Chicago, and the Guffey sheriff had gone to pick up the prisoner. While waiting for their arrival, Storrs took time to collect information on Case's activities and dealings in the area. Storrs learned that Case had gone into the small mining camp of Freshwater to offer his services as an attorney. The miners saw him as an enterprising man who could help jump-start their camp and turn it into a profitable town. Through banquets and engaging speeches, Case won their confidence and trust -- and, cunningly, an interest in their mining claims.

Two brothers by the name of Crampton, however, were not taken in by Case's ideas. In an effort to win them over, Case went to their home on Jan. 17, 1896, where an argument ensued with William Crampton, who was alone at the cabin. Case ended the argument by killing Crampton. He then went to the justice of the peace, reported that he had been at the Crampton place and observed blood on the floor, which led him to suspect foul play. Case even rounded up a search party to investigate" the murder, volunteered himself as coroner, and wrote the official verdict of murder, killer unknown.

Case soon left the area and traveled east where he took up residence at the Sea Shore Hotel and began writing for the Chicago Times. He also found a woman, a local postmistress, and was engaged to marry her, though he was still legally married to Jennie Weeks.

Young witness

UNFORTUNATELY FOR CASE'S SCAM, a young boy in Freshwater, Colo., told local authorities that he had seen Case kill Crampton and that Case had threatened his life if he told anyone. A large reward was offered for Case's capture, whereupon the Pinkerton agent apprehended him in Chicago.

After waiting for several days back in Colorado, Storrs was disappointed. The Guffey sheriff showed up without Case in custody. Demanding an explanation, Storrs learned that the sheriff had asked for half of the reward money for the capture of the fugitive. Unwilling to give up the money, the Pinkerton agent had simply released Case, who seemed to have the uncanny ability to elude justice at every turn.

Upon interviewing Case's fiancée, Storrs learned that Case had come to her after his release and said he was heading back to Colorado to face the murder charge of which he was innocent. She also had a letter from him, mailed from a train, stating that life was not worth living and he was going to kill himself. Whether a red herring or legitimate, that note, according to Storrs, was the "last definite knowledge we ever had of (Case)."

Storrs went back to Utah and started a nationwide search for Case/Weeks and followed leads that took him to Oklahoma, Denver, San Francisco, Oregon and other places. Despite his dedicated persistence over the years, the sheriff always came up empty-handed. In later years, Storrs speculated that Weeks may have actually followed through on his threat to commit suicide or else had joined the army during the Spanish-American war and lived out his life eluding the law in some foreign country.

As a side note, Weeks's wife, Jennie, had left Utah with her daughter after being abandoned by her husband. Storrs brought her back to Utah from New York to help in the investigation and search. Although she was an accessory to the Pelican Point murders by virtue of concealing her husband's crimes, Jennie had acted out of fear for herself and her daughter and was absolved of wrongdoing. She eventually became acquainted with -- and later married -- Frank Storrs, the cousin of Sheriff George Storrs. Under stress and worry because of her past, Jennie became addicted to drugs, probably marijuana or opium. She was later divorced. It was noted by Sheriff Storrs that she died a "fearful and despondent death" as a result of her addiction.

Charming chameleon

STORRS LEARNED MUCH about the real character and background of the Pelican Point murderer. The chameleon's real name was George H. Wright, using the aliases Weeks and Case, born of one of the most prominent and refined families in Minnesota. Well educated, he began his career as a preacher, then moved on to become an attorney and later a civil engineer. He was a successful businessman, adept at fitting into any social situation. Storrs's own encounter with Wright, as well as his interviews with witnesses, produced testimony that described Wright as charming, handsome, well spoken, gentlemanly and very intelligent.

Storrs recalled the night when he had initially arrested Wright for cattle rustling just after the Pelican Point murders. While riding into town in the sheriff's custody, Wright turned and asked Storrs if he looked like a criminal. "I replied that he did

not," Storrs later related. "He had the most brilliant and powerful toned voice I had ever heard, and his language was of splendor." Storrs would never forget that for a moment he unknowingly had the Pelican Point killer in his custody.

It was never known absolutely what the motive was behind the killing of the three young men. Storrs did learn that Weeks had stopped off at the youths' Pelican Point ranch during February 1895 while on the run for cattle rustling. He had pretended to be a land surveyor and was apparently engaged in that business for several days at the ranch. Storrs suspected that Weeks had developed an interest in the livestock at the ranch and was caught in the act of theft by Albert Enstrom. It is thought that Wright killed Enstrom first, near the corrals, and then shot the other two boys as they slept in the cabin.

Memorials

FOR MORE THAN A HUNDRED YEARS now, Enstrom, Johnson and Nelson have rested side by side on the northward slope of the quiet, hillside cemetery in Benjamin. At the base of each obelisk headstone is etched the sobering words, "Said to be massacred."

Next to the three young men's graves also stands a memorial to Harry Hayes, who was wrongly convicted and later absolved of the murders after serving four years in prison. Hayes's headstone seems to capture the sentiments of one long seeking acknowledgement that he had been convicted of a crime he never committed. His epitaph reads in part: "... But truth shall conquer at the last, for round and round we run. And ever the right comes uppermost, and ever is justice done."

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http://www.heraldextra.com/news/article_5576286e-8ecd-5ddf-b7c3-9d5e13a73b16.html