

Courthouse escape

Spokesman Review, 19 Jan 1997,
SLEEPY TOWN, BUT PAST A RIOT
Move afoot to restore courthouse

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Illustration: Color Photo

Caption: The Shoshone County
Courthouse in Murray, Idaho, is the one
of the oldest standing public buildings in
the state. Photo by Craig Buck/The
Spokesman-Review

Things are quiet here, in this town of 50.
“People come here to get away from
Spokane, Coeur d’Alene – even Kellogg,”
says Mike Condon, kicking back at the
Spragpole, a 112-year-old tavern. “People
come here to drop out.”

But once, Murray was a place where
water flowed with gold and the air rang
with gunshots. Back in 1885, it was the
Shoshone County seat.

The symbol of that history is the Murray
courthouse – paint peeling, walls rotting.
There’s a movement to restore the
building to its original Old West flavor.

And if those wooden walls could talk,
they would whisper gravelly voiced yarns
that rival anything Louis L’Amour ever
concocted.

The Bunker Hill trial

Noah Kellogg was an unemployed
carpenter in his 60s when he turned to
prospecting in 1885. After much cajoling,
Dr. J.T. Cooper and contractor O.O. Peck
agreed to back his venture.

They gave him an especially loud donkey
(which they were happy to get rid of),
and a few supplies. After tromping
around for a couple days, Kellogg was
beat and discouraged. That night, he slept
like a rock.

According to old newspaper stories and
William Stoll’s book, *Silver Strike*, this is
what happened next:

When Kellogg awoke, the donkey was
gone. Kellogg could hear its spine-rattling
braying somewhere up a hillside. After
finding the critter, he sat down, defeated.
He idly picked up a rock and tossed it.
Where the rock had been, Kellogg saw
glittering galena, a mixture of silver and
lead. Kellogg later said the donkey
mystically lead him to “a great expanse of
shinin’ ore, glistenin’ in the sunshine.”

“I think it’s B.S.,” offers Mike Condon
back at the Spragpole.

“(But) that’s what they claim,” answers
owner Walt Almquist.

Either way, Kellogg double-timed it back
to Murray – where Cooper and Peck
sloughed him off. They wanted gold, not
galena.

Kellogg, ticked off, found new partners and staked a claim to the Bunker Hill and Sullivan mine.

Once the claim turned out to be big, Cooper and Peck wanted a piece. They took Kellogg to court. After all, it was their donkey.

Judge Norman Buck – who was prone to spitting tobacco juice on the floor in open court – ruled that the jackass discovered the mine along with Kellogg.

The decision was appealed. But while the case was pending, an Oregon man offered to buy the mine for \$1.5 million. To speed things along, the case was settled. Since then, the mine has produced 160 million ounces of silver, and “literally tons of lead,” says John Amonson, who runs the Wallace District Mining Museum.

And the jackass? It ran around Murray, ownerless, braying mournfully and keeping everyone awake. One afternoon a group of drunken miners captured the critter. They tied sticks of dynamite to it and sent it galloping down the street. There was a terrific explosion, and the discoverer of the Bunker Hill mine was no more.

“That night,” Stoll wrote in his book, “Murray slept in peace.”

Run for the (other) border

Johnny Harris was an early Wallace pioneer, sometime prior to 1890. The story's a little sketchy, but somehow he found trouble and allegedly shot a man. During the trial, Harris jumped from a second-story window and escaped on a horse, never to be heard from again – until Silver Valley developer Harry Magnuson found him.

“He spent his life up in Sandon,” Magnuson recounts. On a trip to the tiny British Columbia town in the 1950s, Magnuson stopped at a hotel. And there, in his 80s, was Johnny Harris, Murray fugitive.

“The story that was told was that he always sat with his eye on the door and with firearms nearby,” Magnuson says. The brother of the man Harris allegedly shot always said he'd catch up with him.

Wyatt Earp ... claim jumper

At the Spragpole, Wyatt Earp is no hero. He's remembered as a thief who still owes Shoshone County \$8.27 in taxes. “What you see about Wyatt Earp on TV is mostly B.S.,” Condon says.

Earp was involved in four claim-jumping suits while he lived in Eagle City, a now-defunct town three miles west of Murray. In 1884, Earp and his some of his brothers opened a bar called The White Elephant. But the Earps were into more than booze. They wanted bullion. Earp lost three of the claim-jumping suits, and won one on a technicality.

And people were scared to death of him. Just a few years earlier, in 1881, the Earps had cut down the Clanton gang in Tombstone, Ariz. at the O.K. Corral. During one Idaho claim dispute, the Earps exchanged gunfire with a man named Bill Buzzard and his outfit. No one, though, was hurt.

Folks in Murray today swear Earp's cases were heard in their courthouse. Amonson isn't so sure. The Murray courthouse opened in 1885. "But they could have had a temporary courthouse there," Amonson says. "There's a little conjecture there."

Murray today

The family of Wilfred Gardner, a Boston lawyer, has owned property in the area since 1896. Gardner first visited Murray 30 years ago to check on the family investment.

"I looked at it and thought, y'know, this is just a damn shame," he says. He and others started the Murray Historical Society. To fix up the courthouse, they've raised about \$10,000 in private contributions and a \$2,500 grant from the Idaho Heritage Trust. It could cost \$100,000, \$200,000, maybe more.

Amonson guesses it may take several years to fix up the place.

"It's a great piece of Idaho history," Magnuson says. "There's a resurgence,

and with that new highway going in, that area is going to come alive."