

Rifle's mystery hid a macabre tale

By Jerry Bowen

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An article published in The Reporter last year about the renovation of the William H. Buck mansion reminded me of a story about George Sharpe, the builder of the house.

Local history buffs may recall that George Sharpe was one of the early carpenters in the area and his many structures reflect the fine craftsmanship of the time.

But something else happened to George during his journey in life that is not so well-known.

One day in 1912, while hunting between Solano County and Napa on the Blue Ridge near Sturgill's Cut, he happened across a relic of a different nature. It was a Winchester rifle, 1875 model, .44-caliber, and from its appearance it had been laying in the open for many years. Curious about how the rifle came to be in this remote area, he began to investigate. In doing so, he unraveled a mystery that began in 1887 with a senseless act of violence, which resulted in the murder of a 22-year-old woman.

At the beginning of the year 1887, Herman Lyons, a Wooden Valley rancher, hired a woodchopper by the name of Pete Olsen to chop and stack firewood for a few months. As part of his compensation, Olsen was allowed to live on the property while he accomplished these tasks.

By early February, Pete finished the job and asked for his wages, but after inspecting the woodpile, Lyons determined that it had not been stacked according to his instructions and demanded that it be done properly. Apparently they argued over who was right and the bickering continued over the next few days. In spite of the mounting tension between the two parties, Olsen was allowed to continue living on the property pending the settlement of the dispute.

Tensions reached the breaking point later that month. On that fateful day Lyons and his wife drove to Napa to do some shopping in a light wagon he had borrowed from his father-in-law, A. F. Grigsby.

The pleasant day spent shopping had been a good break for the pair and gave no hint of what would follow upon their return. Arriving back at home from town, Lyons helped his wife remove and store their goods. With this done, he started for his father-in-law's place, about a mile-and-a-half distant, to return the wagon.

As he was walking home after dropping off the wagon, he was met at about the halfway point by Olsen, armed with Lyon's Winchester rifle. Evidently he had taken it from the Lyon's home. The angry woodchopper immediately threatened to kill Lyons, punctuating his remarks with a shot. Fortunately the bullet missed its intended mark.

Reacting quickly, Lyons ducked behind a stone fence as Olson fired off two more shots barely missing his intended victim.

Dodging furiously, Lyons made good his escape and hurried back to where his father-in-law and two brothers-in-law were building a fence. He quickly explained the series of events, including the theft of his rifle and his concern for his wife and child at home.

Lyons, along with one of the men, armed themselves and started after Olsen.

In the meantime another member of the Grigsby family rushed to the Lyons' home. Upon entering the house he recoiled in shock at the gruesome site. Mrs. Lyons lay stretched out on the floor; she had been ruthlessly slashed about the face and her throat was cut. The murder weapon, a razor, was lying near her body.

The couple's infant daughter was found unharmed in another room, but the blood on her dress indicated the murderer had picked the child up and removed her from the room where the dead woman lay.

Apparently, Olsen entered the house after Lyons left to return his father-in-law's wagon, murdered the woman, stole the rifle, then started in the direction of the Grigsby ranch with the intent to waylay Lyons on his way back home.

Law officers were at once notified and a manhunt followed, but after searching for several days Olsen was nowhere to be found. Time passed and it became the general belief that Olson had perished in the mountains between Vacaville and Napa. This conclusion was reinforced with bloodstains found on the ground in the search area, indicating that he may have been wounded during the violent struggle with Mrs. Lyons. During the search, several men resembling the murderer were arrested in various parts of the state and released after determining that none of them were the hunted fugitive. Olsen was never seen or heard from again.

About three years after the tragedy, Mr. Samuels, who lived in the Blue Mountains about five miles east of the Lyons' place discovered a human skull near his house. His dog evidently had brought in the gruesome object. It was determined that the small amount of hair which remained on the skull resembled Olson's. Law enforcement officers concluded that the remaining bones had long since been scattered by wild

animals.

Then, 26 years passed and the tragic events faded from memory. In 1913, George Sharpe found a rifle high in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The similarity of the rifle found by Sharpe and the one carried off by Olsen when he escaped was immediately apparent. It was brought to Vacaville and displayed in Nay's Hardware Company show window. Most of the local citizens with first-hand knowledge of the senseless crime that had occurred some 26 years before agreed the mystery of the elusive slayer had finally been solved.

The slayer, apparently injured, had become lost in the mountains and died from a loss of blood, a fitting end to a senseless act of barbarous violence.

What ever became of the rifle is not known. It was displayed in the window of Nay's Hardware store in the Shroeder building on the corner of Main Street and Dobbins for a time and may have been discarded after the novelty wore off. Whatever its fate, it is now only a footnote in the history of Solano County.

On April 27 Solano County residents can step back in time in historic old town Cordelia. The Cordelia Area Homeowners Association is planning an event-filled day including actors who will reenact the robberies of a train and Thompson's Corner Saloon. History tours, lectures, vendors and much more are in the works. It should be a great day for a family outing and an opportunity to learn a little more about the interesting history of the second oldest community in our county.

Green Valley School, the oldest school building still standing (barely) in Solano County along with an old gnarled oak tree that serves as a sentinel is one of the many excellent subjects for both amateur and professional photographers.

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