

The History Corner

Orcas Island Historical Museum in
Eastsound, Washington

Murder in Olga

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Jack Hand and Tom Robertson, both original settlers in the Olga area, were not good neighbors. Hand, a “frail and elderly” man of 77, was universally well-liked in the community. Robertson, a heavy drinker who had feuded with Hand for years, was less well-regarded. A friendly gesture in the Olga Store, combined with a gallon of whiskey and a long-simmering feud, culminated in the murder of Jack Hand at 5:00 p.m. on Monday, February 17th, 1902.

That morning, Jack Hand had gone to the Olga Store to deliver a load of apples and poultry for shipment to Whatcom. Tom Robertson’s daughter was counting out the eggs she had just delivered to the store, when Hand entered and, according to later testimony, “...laughingly and playfully put his hands on her shoulders: she turned, looked at him and laughed.” Robertson, who Hand had not seen sitting by the stove, and who had once warned Hand never to speak to any of his family, waited until his daughter left and then began loudly cursing and abusing Hand. As later told at the trial, Hand “...replied quietly and without any show of anger, denying that he had intended any disrespect to Robertson’s daughter.” After other neighbors had intervened to quiet Robertson, Jack Hand left the store.

Returning later in the afternoon for some nails, Jack Hand left the store with the bag of nails over his shoulder and began walking home, a distance of about two miles. A mile from Olga he met Tom Robertson, now armed with a loaded .45-.70 rifle, in front of the Moore home.

Ella Moore, her sister, and Mary Robertson, daughter of Tom Robertson, were in the Moore house and witnessed the events that followed. As Ella Moore later testified at his trial, Tom Robertson attacked Hand, and in the ensuing scuffle the rifle discharged and shot a ball clear through the Moore house. Hand was able to disengage himself from Robertson and continue on his way home. He had only gone about thirty to forty yards when Robertson, having reloaded the rifle, shot him in the back as he walked up the county road, the ball splitting the bag of nails he had been carrying over his shoulder. Jack Hand fell facedown, dead in the dust of the Olga-Doe Bay road.

Jack Hand’s murder became known as the “Olga Tragedy”, and excited wide interest, and controversy, throughout and beyond San Juan County. Tom Robertson was found guilty of Murder in the Second Degree and sentenced to fifteen years in the state prison at Walla Walla. The brevity of his sentence for the heinous crime provoked numerous complaints from throughout the county. A subsequent San Juan Islander newspaper column protested that, in the event Robertson survived prison and obtained all the “good behavior” credits possible, he could be released in “...NINE YEARS AND FIVE MONTHS, by which time he would still be younger by two years than the man whose life he took.”

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