

Murder and Intrigue in Old Tualatin

The year was 1916. Mary Geiberger cleared some space in her home, set up the quilt frames and invited 22 neighbors in for a special quilting bee. There they made a friendship quilt as a gift to Barbara Galbreath. Each woman embroidered her initials in blue thread on a white quilt block, and then all were stitched together and quilted.

The quilters had much to talk about as they sewed on Barbara's quilt. Tualatin's grand old lady, Maria Sweek, had died. She was about the last of Tualatin's original Oregon Trail settlers, and a generous and thoughtful neighbor, and her passing signaled the end of an era.

But what really made the tongues fly was the news of what had happened to Het Jennings over at the Gore house on Tualatin-Sherwood Road."

-Tualatin... From the Beginning

BY: LOYCE MARTINAZZI

Although my birth was decades after the murder and the quilting bee, I was privileged to receive a first-hand historical account of the public reactions to the Het Jennings murder. My own dad told me the story over and over during his last years. It was like he wanted to make sure I would remember what happened-the event that shook Tualatin to its roots in 1916.

Helen Gore Jennings--commonly known by the nickname "Het"--was a fetching 41 year old woman who lived in a bungalow on Tualatin-Sherwood Road. She had been married and divorced twice and was engaged to be married again. She was a handsome woman who knew it, and never lacked for a man or two, according to her relative, Ray Baker.

Het had captured the fancy of many men, including one Bennett Thompson, a local laborer who kept some of his clothes at Helen's house, presumably to use when he was doing chores.

In May of 1916, Fred Ristman, a jitney (taxi)

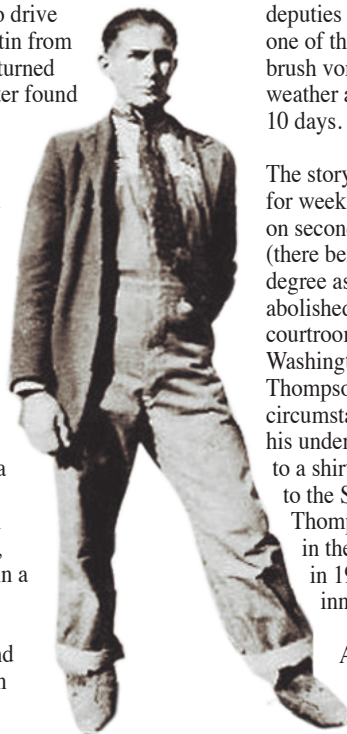
driver had been contacted to drive a dark-haired man to Tualatin from Portland. Ristman never returned home, and his jitney was later found in Helen's driveway. The sheriff was called in when no one answered the door. Helen had been bludgeoned to death with an 11-pound sledge found nearby. Bennett Thompson was identified as a suspect. He had been in trouble with the law before, and called himself "The Lone Highwayman."

Helen was buried in Winona Cemetery and the search for Ristman continued. Ten days after Helen was found, Ristman's body was found in a ditch in the Tonquin area.

My dad was 15 years old and was delivering the afternoon Journal, riding on his horse Toby, when one of the Geiberger boys dashed up to him and yelled "they found Ristman up in Tonquin near the Reber place." Dad dropped the papers, nudged Toby in the ribs and raced up to where the sheriff and



My dad, Art Martinazzi was born in this house on Sagert Road just west of the Freeway overpass. Dad and his sisters Irene and Kate dug up small cedar saplings and planted them around the house. The trees still stand among the apartment complex. My grandfather Julius planted the walnut tree that can be seen along the road.



Art Martinazzi was 20 years old in this photo.

deputies were gathered. Dad saw one of the deputies come out of the brush vomiting. It was typical May weather and Ristman had been dead 10 days. His skull had been crushed.

The story was front page news for weeks. Thompson was tried on second degree murder charges (there being no penalty set for first degree as the State at that time had abolished the death penalty). The courtroom in Hillsboro, the seat of Washington County, was packed. Thompson was convicted on circumstantial evidence. Stains on his undershirt were an exact match to a shirt found on the trail down to the Southern Pacific Railroad. Thompson was sentenced to life in the state pen, and he died there in 1940, still claiming he was innocent.

After my dad died, I found the newspaper accounts on microfiche; the story and photos were splashed over the front page of all the papers. Lurid accounts of Thompson's personal life filled many columns. He appeared in the photos to be a rough but devilishly handsome and masculine fellow. The motive for the murders was never established. Was it jealousy, or was he fearful that Helen was going to squeal on him for robbing a local farmer? Bennett Thompson took the answer to his grave.

Perhaps the best answer to the question arose in the words of the ladies fulminating over their quilt blocks. But the ladies' theories, which were probably as accurate as their quilting, are lost to the mists of time. And the story of Tualatin's double murder would have been lost also, were it not for the memory of a 15 year old boy.

A more complete story of the murders can be found in Tualatin...From the Beginning. The 1916 quilt has been gifted to the Tualatin Historical Society.

Photos courtesy of the Tualatin Historical Society



Helen Gore Jennings was murdered in this house in 1916. It was a new modern bungalow at the time. The house can be seen today on the south side of Tualatin-Sherwood Road.



Ladies gathered in this house to make a quilt in 1916. The house, remodeled and now known as the Luster House, still sits on Sagert Street across from where the old Tualatin Elementary School stood.

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From the Beginning"**

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