



~ Part 15 ~

Reflections on a Common Theme **Unsolved Mysteries**

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CLOUD COUNTY

Glasco Shares a Mystery or Two

by Joan Nothern

Mysteries abound in our town. There seems to be a reason some happenings remain unsolved, mysterious. Those are events best left in public silence. However, two occasions fall in the mysterious category that can be shared. One, just this summer. A retired farmer who delegates field work to a young neighbor noticed an acre patch of alfalfa had been cut, just part of the twenty acres of pasture grasses usually cut at the same time. Two days later, the cut grass was baled, fine round bales wrapped in net. That seemed strange too. The neighbor wrapped bales with twine. That evening, the neighbor bounded onto the porch, alarmed to find he'd been replaced without notice. Neither he nor the land owner knew who'd come to claim this patch as his own. The bales were stowed next to the silo-to escape the clutches of the mysterious volunteer reaper.

The other local mystery dates back over 100 years. It was a turning point in Glasco's history. By 1911, Main Street had a handsome row of two-story stone buildings, including an opera house and office complex. It was the pride of a progressive community.

One night fire swept the west end of Main, leveling buildings on both sides of the street for over half the block. It was fought with a bucket brigade, for there was not a city water system at that time.

Glasco's spirit was revealed by the changes that followed: a municipal water system was installed; the imposing two-story buildings were replaced with single-story edifices, including a car dealership and movie theatre—signs of the time!

The mystery? That night of the fire a similar fire devastated downtown Jamestown, 15 miles to the north. The cause of both fires remains unknown.

OSBORNE COUNTY

Did he? Didn't he? No One Knows but Him or Them

by Carolyn Williams

On the evening of May 31, 1928, the Osborne County farmhouse of Albert Kaser burned to the ground. The Covert volunteer fire department was not notified of the fire until it was too late to make a difference as the structure was already smoldering when the neighbors found it. But where were the Kasers? Albert, his wife and six children were nowhere to be found. Why hadn't some of the children, or Albert himself, gone to the neighbors for help when the fire began?

After further "sleuthing," the neighbors found evidence of bodies strewn throughout the smoldering rubble of the Kaser home. Some evidence of bullets was also found. What happened to the family? Why were eight people, mother, father and six children all dead on one day? Did they die of gunshot or did they succumb to the fire?

After many months Albert's brother was charged with the deaths of his relatives on that nice spring evening, whether by bullet or by fire. Before he could be tried and convicted, however; he, himself, committed suicide taking the story to his grave along with those of eight others.

To this day, no one knows who murdered who nor how it was done. Today CSI would have had it solved in 60 minutes or less! The entire family is buried in the Covert Cemetery.

ROOKS COUNTY
A Murder in Paradise Township
by Sherry Brown

Decomposed and Dismembered Body Found Near a Wheat Stack. This was taken from the Rooks County Record dated August 12, 1910

The body was found by a threshing crew when they entered the field in the morning. One of the crew went over to investigate and at first thought it was a dummy wrapped up in a blanket placed there by mischief makers but on closer examination was horrified to discover that it was a corpse. It was in a bad state of decomposition and entirely beyond recognition. The coroner was notified and the county attorney accompanied him. A jury was impaneled and investigation began.

It seems the body was that of a male around 25 yrs old. The body was dressed in a coarse work shirt and had on two pair of overalls. The arms and lower limbs from the knees were gone but no bones were found between the location of the body and the stacks of hay. A black wool hat with the crown broken was found by the body along with a pair of brown socks and a new pair of shoes which were found in some of the hay. No weapon of any kind, and no pocket knife or other pocket instrument were found except a lead pencil stub and a cash fair check for 60 cents issued by a Pullman conductor from some place not deciphered to Hoisington, KS dated June 27th was found on or about the body. The wheat stacks contained circumstances somewhat remarkable. There was a place hollowed out at the base of the west stack where the body had evidently lain for some time. The straw where the body had lain was plentifully soaked with blood. The grounds were carefully searched and the loose straw carefully sifted without further disclosure.

The jury deliberating rendered a verdict that the man had come to his death by some foul means by the hands of some person or persons unknown. The conclusion of the jury was based upon the evident effort to conceal the blood stained hollow in the stack and upon the entire absence of any instrument with which the man might have taken his own life. There was no mark of violence discernible on the body, nor was there any hole or cut of any kind in the clothing. It seems remarkable no coin or any of numerous things a harvester would carry were in his pockets. It also seems strange that the man would spend his last cent for a new pair of shoes and have nothing left.

Several people thought they had seen the young man days earlier. The only distinguishing features were the hair being a sandy color and the eye tooth in the left upper jaw was set out prominently like what is commonly called a tusk, and one tooth missing. A couple of Codell men said they saw two strangers three weeks before. One of them had a bicycle and they were trying to trade a gold watch for another. One of the men was a sandy complexioned man with a peculiarly shaped mouth, and he got his bicycle from someone at the east barn in Plainville. A young fellow with the carnival company had a brother missing and went to Codell to see the body, but they had buried it.

The mystery of the murder of John Farris and the hiding of the remains in a wheat stack in the summer of 1910 bids fair to being cleared up, providing the lead now followed is the right one. For a long time the suspicion has pointed to Elmer Farris, a brother of the deceased. It would seem that sufficient evidence has been brought to light to warrant the apprehension of him. The governor of Kansas has requisitioned the governor of Missouri for Elmer Farris. He was arrested in Missouri on a fugitive warrant and brought back to Kansas and turned over to the Rooks county sheriff. The motive seems to be both of the brothers were in love with the same girl and the accused was the last person seen with John Ferris on July 20th. Elmer's older brother accompanied the detective bringing Elmer back to Kansas declared that Elmer is innocent of the horrible crime. The Kansas City police have had a signed statement from the girl Josie Hensley whom the brothers were courting that stated when she asked Elmer where the other brother was after he returned to the area, Elmer said "You'll never see John again, somebody put an end to him out in the wheat fields."

The detective who brought Elmer back has been working on this case for a long time and feels confident that enough evidence is at hand to prove the guilt of the accused. The elder brother said there was no reason for Elmer to kill his brother over the girl. The two of them courted her a little, but there wasn't anything to it. The police think there is.

The hearing took longer than usual since all the witnesses had to come from so far away and it was February in Kansas. In February of 1912 the jury was picked and the trial began. Attendance on the first day was a regular jam and promises to be bigger as the trial proceeds.

The complaint was read and the prisoner took his place, rather pale from his long imprisonment, having lost a little flesh, but otherwise seemed confident and smiling. The prisoner plead not guilty.

Mr. Gold, Ferris's attorney wanted the state to prove that the victim was actually murdered without a doubt. It was believed that he died from a slit throat so it wasn't a natural death. Mr. Gold also wanted the state to prove that the man was actually John Ferris.

The witnesses for the prosecution fell one by one. One of the witnesses was an ex-convict and his only contribution to the trial was to state that Elmer said John was in Springfield and would be along in a few days. The next witness was an assistant postmaster in Mo. He stated that Elmer said John had accompanied him as far as Springfield. On cross examination he admitted that it was his brother who ran the post office. He was asked if he ever had any trouble with the Ferris brothers and he said no, but he did have trouble with an uncle. Next came Josie Hensley the girl the brothers had courted. She testified that she kept company with John Ferris. She was asked if Elmer had ever asked her to marry him. To this she answered "Yes," stating that she told him she would marry him when she became of age. She also stated that Elmer didn't like her going with John because it would cause trouble between the two brothers. After Elmer's return from Kansas he walked her home from a camp meeting and she said she wondered what was the matter with John, she hadn't heard from him and it seemed like a year since he'd been gone, and how much she would like to see him. Elmer replied "You'll never do it, I put an end to him."

After the state rested its case Elmer's lawyer presented his case giving a short history of the brothers. The boys were seldom far from home without their older brothers. Their intentions of earning money here, the different localities in which they worked, their companions and stating that they would prove that Elmer was with two other boys and slept on the commons near Plainville the night the crime was supposed to have been committed and the morning of the 22nd that Elmer took the train which leaves Plainville about 5:30 and reached Squires about the 23rd of July, 1910. The defense brought up several dispositions to be read.

The defense introduced John Griebel who was at Plainville July 20th. He took a friend over to meet the train around 5:00 in the morning when he saw two men standing on the street. He asked them to show him a restaurant. They led him to one and ate with him. One was John Ferris and the other man was later identified as Frank Robbinett. They said they were going out (near where the body was later found) to work.

Depositions were introduced to show that the reputation of Josie Hensley for truth and veracity was not the best.

Elmer Farris was on the stand for over two hours. He told minutely the story of his wanderings over Kansas, from the time he left until the time he returned, and the various places where he worked. His story conformed to that of the prosecution in every detail. He often slept out in the open and thought it not strange that he happened to sleep on the commons at Plainville the night of the murder. He never varied in the slightest detail on cross examination. He said he went with Josie for about a year, but was never engaged to her. He did take her home from a camp meeting but they did not talk of John. He left her in the road so he could catch a ride home with his cousins. Both sides waived formal argument before the jury and after receiving their instructions from the judge, they retired to the jury room where they consulted a short time, they arrived at a verdict within 30 minutes from the time they went out to the time the verdict was read.

The jury declared him innocent of the horrific crime and the court declared him a free man. From the first there had been little doubt that Farris would be freed, the witnesses for the state having failed to make good on the stand what they had openly talked about at their homes.

The county attorney was fully justified in bringing the case is acknowledged by all reasonable persons; and though trials come high, it is the bound duty of our public officials to use every possible endeavor to bring to justice the real murderer of John Ferris.

The case was never solved.

GRAHAM COUNTY

The John Chaney Murder

by Lowell Beecher

To suggest that Gettysburg was the brightest jewel in Graham county's crown during the early years of the 1880s would not constitute a metaphorical extravagance. Indeed, half of Gettysburg's nearly three dozen structures were of locally-quarried magnesia: as a result, the town exuded an air of permanence, of strength, that the county's other villages—Millbrook, Roscoe, Hill City, and Nicodemus—seemed to lack.

The settlement on Sand Creek had reason to be haughty. Its Graham county Lever took regular editorial "shots" at Millbrook, suggesting that Gettysburg could—and should—break Millbrook's tenuous grip on county seat status. Then, too, the WaKeeney-to-Norton stagecoach line and its associated hacks ran daily through Gettysburg, four miles west of Hill City and just across the river from Millbrook, and a flow of travelers utilized the town's first-class hotel. Also, Gettysburg was not a town likely to be moved: too many stone buildings. This early town's confidence was destined to fall victim to baseless rumor and untruth, but that is another story....

Gettysburg township was also home to John Chaney, a disreputable character: hateful, mean, and even guilty of murder in other states, folks claimed. Maybe, or perhaps his reputation was enhanced by his blatant hostility and his willingness –seldom tested—to settle disputes with either fists or revolver.

In November 1883, election day at Gettysburg became "the stuff of legend": Because John Chaney hated Willis Ellsworth, candidate for county sheriff, and F. D. McFadden favored Ellsworth, who was to serve two terms at the post, Chaney took it upon himself to pistol-whip McFadden on a Gettysburg street.

Enter Ed Atkin. Atkin was the postmaster at Fremont (Morland later) and the founder of the village of Atkin, which was a mile west of Fremont. Even more important, Ed Atkin was the owner of a gun shop and was regarded as the most proficient pistol marksman in the area.

When Atkin pulled Chaney away from McFadden, Chaney's recourse, not atypical, was to shout, "Damn you! I'll kill you, too!" Chaney wheeled and fired at his newest adversary, reportedly ripping the hem of Atkin's coat.

That which followed was a running gun battle on Gettysburg streets. While Chaney was notoriously inefficient as a sharpshooter, Atkin was not. Recognizing his superiority, Atkin chose not to kill his adversary. Instead, his first and third shots shattered Chaney's left arm, and his fourth and final round broke the bones of Chaney's right arm "all into splinters," according to the Millbrook Times.

While unnamed Gettysburg residents reportedly purchased a rope and offered as much as \$50.00 to anyone who would hang the now-crippled Chaney, clearer minds and wiser heads prevailed: Chaney was spared his due, perhaps because he had a wife and five children, the oldest being not yet 15 years of age.

However, some 14 months later, the Millbrook Times reported that John Chaney of Gettysburg, after having visited the county seat at Millbrook to pay his taxes, had been murdered on a Gettysburg street.

The facts relative to the killing were few: returning to Gettysburg from Millbrook, John Chaney entered T. F. Goff's General Store and made a number of inconsequential purchases. As he exited the building and while his hand was still on the latch, two shotgun blasts tore through the chill of the evening air; the second, which missed its assigned target, quickly following the first.

Horribly wounded by a full charge of buckshot which had breached his back and exited just above belt level, Chaney instinctively drew his revolver and re-entered the store. Dying from the buckshot charge which, as reported by the Millbrook Times, had made a wound "through which a man could thrust his fist," Chaney walked the length of building to sit on a box in a back stock room. His only comment upon being shot? "My God! I'm done for now!" His assessment was accurate.

A coroner's inquest revealed little. Chaney had been shot from a distance of "less than a Rod" by a shotgun wielding assailant who had stood at a front corner of the building. Oddly, several residents who heard the gunshots were "too frightened" to make an effort to ferret out the perpetrator.

And yet, one individual reportedly witnessed the killing: Abraham Goff, a small boy, claimed that he, playing behind some barrels on the store's stoop, though alarmed by the gunfire, had quickly determined the identity of the killer. He was unceremoniously rushed from Gettysburg to the relative safety of the Goff sheep ranch near Fremont.

John Chaney was buried at Millbrook—even though Gettysburg had an organized cemetery northwest of town—where he was joined five months later by wife Carrie Chaney, 38. With the loss of the county seat to Hill City in 1888, many of the burials at Millbrook—including John and Carrie Chaney— were eventually moved to the Hill City Cemetery.

No one was ever charged in the Chaney murder, and most knowing residents assigned the Chaney case to the "frontier justice" file. The secret of the murderer's identity possibly remains with the descendants of those Gettysburg residents who soon after the killing, watched their town disappear with Gettysburg's failure to achieve county seat status.