

TERRIBLE TRAGEDY AT CAMP 5 -- MAD MAN KILLS THREE, WOUNDS ONE AND COMMITS SUICIDE

A WANTON MURDERER

The little morgue building in Shelton was a charnel house, indeed, last Friday night, when it held the bodies of five dead, four of whom had met violent death in tragedy that rarely comes to any community, except from some great catastrophe or from war. There remains in humankind a trace of savagery that our so-called higher civilization can never entirely erase, and only fear of man-made laws serves to hold in check, and in rare instances the human mind becomes obsessed by real or fancied grievance to the point where only the lives of other men can appease. We can only guess at the workings of such a mind, - neither stupefied with liquor, nor yet apparently insane, but, in which madness ruled and for the time being drove out every spark of pity for his victims, or for their families or his own; nor did it appear that any reaction came at the moment of self-destruction, but only the satisfaction of having "squared accounts."

Shelton was shocked when news came over the telephone from Simpson's camp 5, at the extreme end of the Peninsular railroad, and about thirty miles from town, shortly after three o'clock Friday afternoon, that a crazed man had run amuck and killed several of the well known and popular employes of the logging and railroad company. The first news indicated that the man was still at large, well-armed and probably bent on further destruction, and preparations were made for a stern chase, and probably a repetition of the Tornow affair which cost our men their lives before the outlaw was finally destroyed in his lair in the same region two years ago. A breath of relief followed the later announcement that the murderer had ended his own life. A special train was immediately made up and sent out to the scene, and on its return, about nine o'clock, detail which came over the line were confirmed; George Steel, a former employe of the company, had shot and killed Foreman Joe Stertz of camp 5, Conductor Frank Day, who held Steel's former position, and seriously wounded Brakesman Joe Burke, of the upper train crew, and killed Elick Johnson, conductor of the middle train, all being married men with families living at the camps. Steel himself having a wife and two small children.

George Steel had been employed as conductor by the Simpson Logging Company for about fifteen months, and was considered a good workman, but did not get along very well with the train crew. Following a disagreement Steel was laid off, and the engine crew transferred to other work. Steel was off eighteen days in February during which time he visited other logging railroads but failed to find work. Returning he was again placed at work and got along well with Engineer Dorman and Fireman Banher, but it appears that he had drawn a revolver on Foreman Stertz at the time of his former lay-off and it was thought best that he leave the camp. The last eighteen days rankled in his mind, and he came down to Shelton and talked with Manager Reed about his troubles. Mr. Reed finally agreed to allow him payment for the lost time, and he received his check in full. He spent the day in town and appeared to be drinking a little, and talked with several others, including George Grisdale, superintendent of logging, to whom he gave some intimation of his alleged grievance. He urged Grisdale to come to camp the next day and see that his goods were safely shipped. While he declaimed feeling sore at Grisdale, it is thought that part of his mission in meeting the incoming train was to "get Grisdale." Returning to camp he spent the next day in packing up his goods for removal, and was ready to leave with his goods and family when he started out bent on murder. Those who observed Steel and talked with him say he seemed to exhibit no feeling, but was cool and sardonic in his manner throughout the bloody hour. Steel had been a heavy drinker in former years, but rarely ever touched liquor while in the employ of the company, and had told others that drink had been the cause of all his troubles in the past. A rifle and revolver were used in the bloody work, and he evidently secured his ammunition while in town.

DETAILS OF THE TRAGEDY

As the engine and crew of the upper division of the Peninsular railroad were leaving Simpson's camp 5 after noon last Friday to run down to the division point, the high bridge, to meet the train from Frisken's Y and help it up the hill with the empties, Foreman Joe Stertz joined the train crew for the trip. George Steel who had been packing up his household goods preparatory to leaving the camp, was at a neighboring house and noted the passing of the engine. He left, saying to a boy near him that he was going to "pay the Kaiser the rent," evidently referring to Stertz who owned the house occupied by his family. He was noticed soon after leaving his house with a rifle and taking the trail over the hill, a "short-cut" of about a mile to the bridge. Nothing was thought of the incident and not even his wife had any inkling of Steel's fell purpose, although some were aware that he had made threats of getting even with some of those with whom he had formerly worked.

After reaching the usual waiting place at the upper end of the big bridge the train crew, consisting of engineer Dorman, fireman Ed. Banner, conductor Frank Day, brakesman Joe Burke and foreman Stertz, all entered the engine cab to escape the light rain which was falling. They had been there about twenty minutes when without warning the muzzle of a rifle was poked into the cab door and Steel, who had come up unobserved, casually remarked "Good-bye, boys" and began shooting. Several shots were fired into the bunch at close range before they could scramble out of the cab on the opposite side, Day seemingly being the only one hit, as he half-fell to the ground. Dorman remained on his seat in the cab, and Steel looked up to him motioned that he was not wanted.

Steel then coolly passed around the engine to the edge of the steep embankment about ten feet distant from the track, and standing there observed the four fleeing men seeking hiding places behind logs and stumps on the steep hill-side down to the river 200 feet below. Stertz was the first killed, one of the several shots fired striking him on top of the head and killing him instantly. Steel then turned his attention to Day, whom he could see behind a small log, and called for Day to come out as he was bound to "get him." Day begged him not to shoot, saying, "I never did anything to you," but Steel sent a couple of shots into the exposed part of Day's body, and he rolled over dead. Next Steel turned in the direction of Burke and demanded that he get up, which Burke did, and seeing the gun leveled at him quickly dodged behind a small stump but received the bullet, which entered the fleshy part of his back. Burke dropped and remained quiet. Banner was also well down the grade behind a small hemlock tree but steel paid no attention to him and Dorman had by that time left the engine cab and run up the track out of sight.

The murderer evidently believing he had settled all scores in that direction, started across the bridge to meet the lower train about due from Frisken's Y. It soon appeared, the long string of empty flat cars in advance of the engine and freight car, and came to a stop with most of the cars out on the bridge. Steel was standing on the ground at the end of the bridge and allowed the first brakesman to pass, but when the conductor, Elick Johnson, who was in the middle of the train, was opposite him and stooping to uncouple the cars, Steel fired two shots into his body and Johnson fell and rolled to the ground at his feet, dead.

In the freight car were Edgar Mumen, Weyerhaeuser timber inspector, Harold Munson, one of the survey crew, Ed. Stallnaker, a cook and two other men going to camp. They noticed the shots, but thought the reports came from the air brakes and stepped to the ground close to the man with the gun. To Mumen Steel coolly held up four fingers and said he had "just won four victories," but added, "I am not after you, Ed." A logger started toward Steel and the latter partly raised his gun, when the logger was pushed aside by Mumen, Steel then waved his hand to the engineer, Guy Hutchinson, said "Good-bye" and started back across the bridge, after assuring himself that no others were there that he wanted.

Dorman in the meantime had returned to his engine and throwing open the throttle lost no time on the run back to camp 5. He had only been there a short time with the news of the tragedy, and efforts were being made to telephone to other camps and Shelton for help, when Steel appeared over the hill. He shot off his rifle once and whistled for his wife, who was still at a neighbor's and not yet aware of his acts. To her he simply stated that he had killed four men and intended to finish himself, and stepping inside his house he placed the muzzle of the rifle to his mouth and pulled the trigger.

Engineer Dorman gathered several of the women of camp, including the wives of the victims, with stimulants and bandages, and started back to the scene with them. Passing Steel's house it was found that he had shot himself and was no longer dangerous. Reaching the scene the bodies of Day and Stertz were found lying where they had dropped and Burke then called from a point lower down where he had remained quiet, fearing that Steel might come and finish up his deadly work. He was brought up to the track and made as comfortable as possible, until the train from Shelton with Dr Wells and other help reached the spot.

The lower train returned to Frisken's Y, as soon as Steel left it, bearing Johnson's body. By that time word had reached the other camps and Shelton, and word was also sent to the sheriff of Cheaslis county, the crime being committed out of Mason county, and posses were being organized to hunt the murderer, fearing another Turnow chase. All breathed a sigh of relief when it was later learned that Steel had killed himself and closed the chapter, already bad enough.

The train bearing its three dead, Steel just breathing, and Burke badly injured, with the families of some of them reached Shelton about ten o'clock that evening, and the latter was immediately sent to the hospital at Olympia by special steamer, his wife and two children going with him. Steel was taken to the hotel where he lived several hours before dying, and his body was then added to those in the morgue.