

## CHARLES H. DAVIS: DOUBLE MURDER AND SUICIDE

submitted by Donna Potter Phillips

Today's newspaper style is light-years-different-away from the newspaper style of 100 years ago. Newspaper journalism has become more factual and less sensational. More thought is given to the lives and feelings of the victims, the criminals and all the families concerned. This is certainly the case with The Spokesman Review, published for over 100 years in Spokane, Washington.

I first found the Davis family in the online Washington State Death Records. It said, simply, "murder" for the wife and infant child, and "suicide" for the man, all on the same hot July day in 1904. I knew there ought to be a story to these simple facts. At the Spokane Public Library, going to The Spokesman on microfilm, I found "the rest of the story," as broadcaster Paul Harvey says. I now share this very graphic tale with you:

The Spokesman-Review, Friday, July 14, 1905

### FIEND SLAYS HIS FAMILY

Charles H. Davis Commits Double Murder and Suicide

#### HE CUTS THROATS

Transforms Pretty Home on Boone Avenue into a Bloody Shambles

#### IS INSANELY JEALOUS

Broods Over Fancied Wrongs Until His Mental State Results in Horrible Tragedy

Frenzied by insanity and continued brooding over fancied injuries, Charles H. Davis, formerly a bartender at the Cobweb saloon, slew his wife and his 2 month old baby son and committed suicide himself in his home at 2415 Boone avenue about 7:45 last night.

Without a moment's warning, before they could utter a cry, the wife and the baby had their heads nearly severed from their bodies by a razor in the hands of the man who should have been their protector. Davis then made 3 gashes in his own throat and fell weltering in a pool of his blood in the kitchen.

So quickly and thoroughly did he do his work that nearby neighbors, enjoying the twilight in their front yards, heard not a sound to apprise the of the terrible tragedy being enacted close by. Mrs. Edwin C. Payne, swinging in a hammock on the front porch of her house, 2416 Boone avenue, directly across the street from the Davis residence, saw Mrs. Davis suddenly pitch forward from her chair. This started an investigation that led to the discovery of the horrid tragedy.

Mrs. Payne detailed to Mrs. James A. Garretson, who lives at 2429 Boone avenue, that she thought Mrs. Davis must have fainted. Mrs. Garretson went across to the Davis residence. She arrived just in time to see Davis fall, gasping, on the kitchen floor. The police and coroner Witter were immediately telephoned for.

The call came in to the police headquarters just as the evening squad were going on duty. A detail of men were immediately dispatched in the patrol wagon. The wagon and its load of officers with the coroner arrived at the scene of the tragedy at 8:10.

#### HOUSE A SHAMBLES

The inside of the Davis residence, a pretty five room cottage surrounded by grass and flowers, resembled a shambles. Just inside the front door in a big pool of blood lay the mother, face downwards. A few feet away lay the 2 month old child with its head nearly severed from its body and its wild frightened eyes staring at the ceiling. In the kitchen, lying on his back, with a horrible gaping wound in his throat, lay the father and husband. The kitchen fire was burning brightly and a teapot was singing on the stove. The supper dishes were lying in the sink unwashed. Under his coat the police officers found the bloody razor.

#### DAVIS WATERS LAWN

The last sight of Davis before the tragedy was a little before 7:30 when he was seen sitting on the front porch sprinkling his lawn. Mrs. Payne, who saw Mrs. Davis pitch forward from her chair, places the time of the tragedy at about 7:45.

### WIFE SITTING IN CHAIR

When she went to her death at the hands of her frenzied husband, Mrs. Davis was sitting rocking in a chair just inside the front screen door. The front door was open, but the screen was locked. Neighbors had observed her rocking this way for some minutes. The back of the chair was toward the kitchen door.

Judging from the fact that there was no outcry, the insane husband evidently killed the mother first and then turned to his child. Davis evidently sneaked out of the kitchen and coming up behind his wife, grabbed her by the hair, then, before she could cry out, he slashed her with the razor. The first cut was close up to the chin and extended to the back of the neck. To make sure of his work, he slashed her a second time. The jugular vein and windpipe were severed and a gash three inches wide was in the throat. Several hairpins were found behind the chair where Mrs. Davis had been rocking and the condition of her hair indicated that Davis had seized her by it.

### KILLS CHILD IN ARMS

At the time the mother was killed the child was evidently on the bed in a room adjoining the front room. The bed was mussed where the child had lain. A powder box and some infant's things were found on the bed. The mother had evidently just finished dressing the little tot when she went to her death.

After slaying the mother, Davis evidently walked into the bedroom and, grabbing the child, carried it out to the front room. Some blood which spurted on linen lying on a stand was mute evidence that he had killed the child while holding it in his arms. With one slash of the razor he nearly severed the child's head from its body and then dropped the child on the floor a few feet from the mother.

### CUTS HIS OWN THROAT

Davis walked into the kitchen and to a corner near the stove where he slashed his throat. He wandered around the kitchen and walked out into the front room where his wife and babe lay. Streams of blood testify to his movements. He walked back into the kitchen again, where he again slashed his throat, and fell lengthwise across the kitchen.

The frenzied man made 3 slashes in his throat opening up a gash over which a hand could have been placed. He was fully dressed at the time. His wife had on a red dressing sack and underskirt, while the baby was in a gaily colored dress. Policeman Tomson found the razor underneath Davis' coat.

The entire house was in perfect order. The lamps had not yet been lighted. On the table in the room where the tragedy occurred were two prescriptions made out by Dr. C.E. Grove and evidently intended for the baby. A letter written in Swedish and signed Olson was also there. In the dead man's pockets \$18.00 was found.

### SAYS DAVIS WAS INSANE

#### Sister In Law Tells of Peculiar Actions Recently

#### Suspects Wife's Relatives of Tying to Separate Them, and Does Other Queer Things

Mrs. H.W. Fellows of 3029 Mallon avenue, a sister of the murdered woman, tells a story which bears out the theory that Davis was insane. Mrs. Fellows was nearly prostrated by the murder of her sister and several times while talking she was almost overcome with grief. She said:

"Up until last Saturday night, my sister's husband has been working in the Washington Mill. My husband, who is an electrician, has a contract at Goldendale, and he had a job there for Mr. Davis, who left for Goldendale on the O.R. & N. train last Sunday afternoon, but only went as far as Riparis. He came back on the train which gets in here Monday forenoon."

### SUSPECTED WIFE'S RELATIVES

"When he came back he acted like he was crazy. He said that he thought his wife and her folks---meaning myself and my husband---were planning to get rid of him and that his wife wanted to leave him. He was not jealous of any man, but simply of her family."

"He didn't intend to leave town. He had those crazy suspicions before he left here and he admitted to pretend to take the train and to come back to his house after dark and see if we or any of the neighbors were in

his house talking about him. In order to slip into the house he left a cellar window open and left some clothes hanging in the cellar. I don't know what he left the clothes there for. He had to take the train, however, because his wife went down with him to see him off and I stayed at their house and kept the baby while she was gone."

#### WAS PENITENT ON TUESDAY

"On Tuesday," continued Mrs. Fellows, "he telephoned me from downtown and wanted me to come up to their house. I told him his wife was with me, and was going to stay to dinner and that he'd better come too. He did so. He seemed very remorseful and cried some. He said he hadn't treated his wife right and he wanted to start all over again."

"Did he whip his wife or use violence to her?" she was asked.

"No, he never did that," replied Mrs. Fellows, "but he neglected her and would abuse her in talking to her. He was very ugly. He didn't drink anything to speak of. He always worked hard and supported her. When he said that day that he wanted to start in all over again, and treat his wife right, she said she was willing. She told him that she got up every morning determined to start in all over again but that every day he would spoil it by being ugly and mean to her."

#### CRAZY OVER NEWSPAPER CLIPPING

"While he was at our house that day he picked up an old newspaper with a piece slipped out of it. What was clipped out was one of the coupons in The Spokesman-Review voting contest, but he insisted that the paper had had some terrible article in it about him and that I had clipped it out so that my little daughter wouldn't see it. Nothing would convince him that it wasn't a fact."

"I didn't see them Wednesday, but today my sister telephoned me that Davis had been downtown nearly all day Wednesday looking for a copy of the paper from which that clipping was taken and that he hadn't been able to find it. She said he had been acting so foolishly that she didn't like to talk about it over the telephone but that if I would come over she would tell me about it. I didn't go. The next thing I heard of them was when I heard that he had killed his wife, his baby and himself."

"Had Davis ever manifested any signs of insanity previously?" she was asked.

"I never knew him to act crazy until he came home Monday from Riparis although for a long time he had acted ugly and mean to his wife."

#### LOOKED HALF STARVED

J.W. Cook, superintendent of the Washington Mill, in whose employ Davis was until last Saturday, said:

"The man had worked for us for a long time—over a year, I think. He always looked to me like a man who didn't have enough to eat. He seemed to be half dead and lifeless. I wanted the foreman to discharge him about a week before he quit, but the foreman didn't want to because he had a wife and baby. He looked to me like a man who had something on his mind, or was brooding over something. He gave us give days notice when he quit."

The general appearance of things in the house do not bear out Mr. Cook's impression that Davis was half starved. The home is a neat and tastily furnished one and Davis owned it. The lawn is well kept.

E.E. Woodward, who runs a grocery store in the same block with the Davis home, said:

"I saw Davis yesterday and today. It struck me both times that he was acting queerly. I can't hardly describe his appearance except that he appeared to have something on his mind."

Sergeant John Sullivan of the police department knew Davis. "He was always a pleasant fellow," said Sergeant Sullivan, "but I had a notion that under his pleasant exterior he was surly and rather ill natured."

#### MRS. PAYNE'S STORY

Mrs. E.C. Payne, who saw Mrs. Davis fall from her chair, lives directly across the street from the Davis home. "I was sitting on my front porch with my little girl," she said, "and across the street I could see that Mrs. Davis was sitting just inside her front screen door. I could tell it because I could see her white apron and because I knew she often sat there."

“Suddenly I could see that she fell from the chair. I knew she had been sick, and my first thought was that she had fainted. I wasn’t personally acquainted with her, so I called to Mrs. Garretson, who lives next door to me, that she had better go over and see what was the matter. She went and discovered the tragedy. The screen door prevented me from seeing Davis and from witnessing his assault on his wife.”

“Mrs. Payne called to me that she had just seen Mrs. Davis fall out of her chair and thought she had fainted,” said Mrs. Garretson. “I went across the street to see what was the matter. When I came to the screen door I saw Mr. Davis go into the kitchen and fall. Then I saw Mrs. Davis and the child lying on the floor. I called to some of the neighbors and the police were telephoned.”

“I always thought that Mr. Davis was queer. He acted strangely ever since he returned from the trip when he started to Goldendale. He did not drink that I know of. The Davis’ (sic) always seemed like nice people. Mrs. Davis was a very sweet woman. They had lived there for about 5 years.”

#### MARRIED FOR FIVE YEARS

Mr. and Mrs. Davis were married in Spokane on March 4, 1900. Mrs. Davis’ maiden name was Lena Larson. They had a child in 1903 but it died in 1904. The child which the father murdered last night was born on Easter Sunday of this year. Mr. and Mrs. Davis were both 31 years of age.

For several years Davis worked as a bartender. He was employed for a long time by M. Lang in the Cobweb saloon on Stevens street between Riverside and Sprague avenues, and by Harris Medekin in the Majestic saloon next door to the Western Union Telegraph office. Prior to his employ by Lang he had worked for the Spokane Bottling Works.

Davis quit the Majestic about a year and a half ago because he regarded the work as too confining. He wanted to do manual labor. Nearly ever since, until last Saturday night, he was employed at the Washington Mill.

#### WIFE A SWEDISH WOMAN

Mrs. Davis was a native of Sweden and had been in America for 12 years during all of which time she had lived in Spokane. Her only relative here is her sister, Mr. Fellows, but she has a brother living in Troy, Idaho and a brother and sister at Wauseka, Minn. Her parents live in Sweden.

Davis’ mother lives at Beaton, B.C. Mrs. Fellows aid last night she did not think he had any brothers or sisters. His father is dead. He is also supposed to have an aunt living in Spokane.

#### MORBID CROWD GATHERS

The news of the tragedy spread like wildfire through the neighborhood and in 15 minutes after the police arrived a crowd of over 200 morbid men, women and children gathered around the house. When the police first arrived, but a few women with drawn scared faces and an excited man or two were at the house.

The furiously driven patrol wagon, with its load of bluecoats, as it dashed with clanging gong through the residence streets of the North Side, attracted a big crowd. Within 15 minutes of the police arriving at the scene the sidewalk was blocked and the street lined with people.

Morbid men and children scrambled to reach windows that they might get a glimpse of the bloody scene inside. Flowers were trampled on by the eager crowd. When the undertaking wagon of J.D.Buchanan arrived the crowd fought for a chance to get a glimpse of the bodies as they were taken to the wagon.

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*Donna Potter Phillips is a very popular speaker on genealogical topics, lecturing among other places on the Norwegian Cruise Line. She regularly contributes columns and articles to many genealogical periodicals, including Heritage Quest Magazine, Ancestry, Family Chronicle, and Genealogy Bulletin. Past Vice President of WSGS, Past President and very active member of Eastern Washington Genealogical Society, she lives in Spokane, Washington, a grandmother of eight..*



Page 3, Recording # 3721 < Oyster Claim - William Payne, Claimant >

This claim covers about 18.5 acres of Port Townsend Bay on which oysters were planted on March 19, 1890. The description mentions the "Albert Brigg's house." The claim was subscribed and sworn before Charles A. Dyer, Notary Public, on March 21, 1890; filed for record on March 22, 1890, "30 m past 7 P.M." by William Payne; and recorded on March 25, 1890, James Seavey, County Auditor.

Page 5, Recording # 3722 < Oyster Claim - Chas. P. Wakeman, Claimant >

This claim covers about 19.5 acres of Port Townsend Bay on which oysters were planted on March 19, 1890. The claim was subscribed and sworn before Charles A. Dyer, Notary Public, on March 21, 1890; filed for record on March 22, 1890, "at 30 m past 7 P.M."; and recorded on March 25, 1890, James Seavey, County Auditor.

Page 7, Recording # 3723 < Oyster Claim - W. E. Wylie, Claimant >

This claim covers about 16 acres of Port Townsend Bay on which oysters were planted on March 19, 1890. The claim was subscribed and sworn before Charles A. Dyer, Notary Public, on March 21, 1890; filed on March 22, 1890, "at 30 m past 7 P.M." by W. E. Wylie; and recorded on March 25, 1890, James Seavey, County Auditor.

Page 9, Recording # 3718 < Oyster Claim - R. A. Ballinger, Claimant >

This claim covers 19.3 acres on which oysters were planted on March 19, 1890. The claim was subscribed and sworn before Charles A. Dyer, Notary Public, on March 21, 1890; filed for record on March 22, 1890, "at 30 m past 7 P.M." at the request of R. A. Ballinger; and recorded on March 25, 1890, James Seavey, County Auditor.

Page 11, Recording # 3790 < Oyster Claim - John Payne, Claimant >

This claim covers about 19 acres of Port Townsend Bay on which oysters were planted on March 26, 1890. The description mentions a bearing from the Southwest corner of Water Street and Walker Street in Port Townsend. The claim was subscribed and sworn before Charles A. Dyer, Notary Public, on March 27, 1890; filed for record on March 27, 1890, "at 9<sup>55</sup> A.M." by John Payne; and recorded on March 31, 1890, James Seavey, County Auditor.

Page 13, Recording # 3793 < Oyster Claim - B. H. Burgess, Claimant >

This claim covers 19.9 acres of Port Townsend Bay on which oysters were planted on March 25, 1890. The claim was subscribed and sworn before Charles A. Dyer, Notary Public, on March 27, 1890; filed for record on March 27, 1890, "at 10<sup>55</sup> A.M." at the request of Wm. Payne; and recorded on March 31, 1890, "Auditor, Jefferson County."

Page 15, Recording # 3794 < Oyster Claim - E. H. Nash, Claimant >

This claim covers 19.4 acres of Port Townsend Bay on which oysters were planted on March 25, 1890. The description mentions the "U. S. Military Reservation" and "Fort Townsend." The claim was subscribed and sworn before Charles A. Dyer, Notary Public, on March 27, 1890; filed for record on March 27, 1890, "at 10<sup>55</sup> A.M." at the request of Wm Payne; and recorded on March 31, 1890, by Auditor, Jefferson County.

Page 17, Recording # 3795 < Oyster Claim - A. W. Lloyd, Claimant >

This claim covers 18.9 acres of Port Townsend Bay on which oysters were planted on March 25, 1890. The claim was subscribed and sworn before Charles A. Dyer, Notary Public, on March 27, 1890; filed for record on March 27, 1890, "at 10<sup>55</sup> A.M." at the request of Wm Payne; and recorded on March 31, 1890, by Auditor, Jefferson County.

[NOTE: Additional "Oyster Claim Records" for Clallam, Grays Harbor, Mason, Pierce, Skagit and Thurston counties, some dating from 1874 through 1894, are available at the applicable state archives regional centers. Oyster claims for other salt-water counties may be recorded in their auditor's miscellaneous records.]