

FIRST DRAFT

MURDER MYSTERY



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This cabin, built by John Patrick and Eliza Quinlan in the late 1880s, still stands just east of Dotsero, not far from where Charlie Johnson was murdered.

1901 Dotsero victim had been accused of multiple crimes

It's been 123 years since Charlie Johnson was murdered near his cabin west of Dotsero, and the identity of his murderer is still a mystery.

That may be due to the fact that Charlie Johnson was not a beloved character to many in the area. He was believed to be a cattle thief, an arsonist and perhaps a murderer himself.

Johnson did have friends who wanted to find his killer. And they had theories on who killed the cowboy, but little hard evidence.

Johnson was murdered on July 26, 1901. His body was found floating in an eddy of the Colorado River, then called the Grand, just downstream from Dotsero near a resort called Siloam Springs.

Harvey Van Horn, a friend and neighbor, discovered the body on Sunday, July 28, after several of Johnson's ranch hands stopped at Van Horn's place and asked if he had seen Johnson. Van Horn and his wife drove a wagon to Johnson's cabin, found it empty, then walked to the river.

"There a ghastly sight met Van Horn's eyes," the Eagle County Times reported on Aug. 3, 1901, "for lying half concealed in the water and partially covered in mud, was a human form."

Van Horn drove immediately to Gypsum, about 6.5 miles up the Eagle River, to report his discovery. Because Red Cliff was then the Eagle

County seat, word had to be sent to the coroner there. He caught a train to Gypsum the following morning. When he finally reached Dotsero and examined the body, he

determined Johnson had been shot in the back of the head.

Johnson was about 45 when he died. He was single and managed a large ranch "with vast herds of cattle" about 10 miles north of Dotsero at a place called Willow Springs. He also spent time at the cabin at Siloam Springs.

He had been a prospector and ranch hand in the area for at least 20 years. One friend declared after his death, "I have known Charley Johnson for twenty-one years and have always known him to be a good citizen."

However, Thomas Thomas, whose family moved to Sweetwater Creek when Thomas was just 3, said Johnson could be charming, but he was dangerous.

In 1887, when Johnson was working on a construction crew for the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad, he got in a dispute with his crew boss. There were rumors that he burned a newly built railroad bridge in Glenwood Canyon soon afterward.

There was speculation that he was involved in the killings of several people in ensuing years, but little evidence.

It was the death of elderly rancher S.V. Gruner on Sweetwater Creek in 1895 that really turned suspicious eyes on Charlie Johnson.

Gruner lived alone, and was said to have accumulated a lot of money that he kept in his cabin. In September 1895, the cabin burned down with Gruner inside. When the county coroner ruled the death an accident, without visiting the site, people were outraged.

Two friends of Gruner demanded the coroner conduct a more thorough investigation because they had seen Gruner's body and said his skull was crushed, an unlikely event if he had simply fallen asleep while smoking his pipe, as the coroner ruled.

A New Castle newspaper



EAGLE VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Charlie Johnson's tombstone in the Gypsum Cemetery.

accused the coroner of dereliction of duty, and said there was good reason to suspect foul play.

Thomas Thomas had no doubt about who was responsible.

A man fishing near Gruner's cabin heard Gruner scream, Thomas wrote, then saw Johnson beating Gruner, demanding that Gruner tell him where his money was hidden. When Gruner expired, Johnson pulled a tin box from Gruner's flour barrel, got on his horse and rode away, the fisherman said.

But the fisherman didn't tell his story immediately. "This man never breathed a word of what he witnessed until Charlie Johnson was killed, for he knew his life would end if he did," Thomas wrote.

Johnson wasn't charged in Gruner's death, but in coming years, there were other accusations.

In January 1900, the remains of three head of cattle belonging to August Grundel of Gypsum were found near Siloam Springs. The animals were part of a larger herd of Grundel cattle that had been stolen and tracked to near Johnson's cabin. But Johnson wasn't arrested.

He was arrested, however, in June 1901, after Dotsero rancher Jack Stewart swore out a complaint that Johnson had stolen cattle from the Stewart herd.

Johnson was taken to court in Glenwood Springs, where the charges were dismissed. But he was immediately re-arrested under a new warrant

and ordered to stand trial in the autumn in Rifle.

Another suspicious incident occurred April 13, 1901, when a flour mill in Gypsum burned to the ground.

The mill was built by Frank and Sam Doll of Gypsum, who also had one of the largest cattle operations in the area. In 1901, they had just sold the mill to a Chicago company, but they continued to own the property and the mill building.

A witness claimed he'd seen Charlie Johnson coming out of the flour mill shortly before the fire started. Another man, who had an interest in the flour mill, reportedly owed Johnson money and had been threatened by him. But once again, no charges were filed.

After Johnson death, testimony at the coroner's inquest suggested several potential suspects:

Harvey Van Horn had heard "Doc" Yost, a neighboring ranchman; say in reference to Johnson "We will fix him before the summer is over." Yost had accused Johnson of stealing some of his cattle one year earlier, and there was continuing antipathy between them.

Another man, Billy Richards, testified that the quarrel between Johnson and the Stewarts, who accused Johnson of cattle theft, dated back to 1893.

But there was no evidence to link either family to the killing. Nor was there evidence that anyone involved with the burned flour mill had committed Johnson's murder.

One story suggested Johnson had information, which he planned to divulge at his trial, that would put others behind bars. "It is believed by many that on account of these threats Johnson was done away with," wrote a New Castle newspaper.

Even notorious cattle-range killer Tom Horn was suggested as Johnson's killer. And there was a connection. One of the men who owned the ranch that Johnson managed was Ora Haley, a Wyoming rancher who had helped hire Horn to get rid of small cattle operators in northwestern Colorado and southwestern Wyoming.

"Haley had a bunch of cattle at Willow Springs in Johnson's care and Johnson had been accused of accumulating cattle at a more rapid rate than was altogether natural and legitimate," the Glenwood Post wrote in 1902. "Horn had been at the Willow Springs camp and was familiar with the country. Put two and two together and draw your own conclusions."

Despite all the speculation, and a \$500 reward offered by Eagle County to find Charlie Johnson's killer, nobody was ever arrested.

Sources: "The Early Days of Sweetwater," by Thomas Thomas; "Gypsum Days: Pioneers, the Poor Farm and Progress," by Kathy Heicher; historic newspaper articles provided by Bill Johnson and www.coloradohistoricnews-papers.org.

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George "Doc" Yost was one of the people who had a long-standing quarrel with Charlie Johnson.