

FIRST DRAFT



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This illustration from Harper's Weekly magazine in the late 19th century — long before Peter Swanson was murdered — shows the brutal tactics used in Colorado to kill sheep while the sheepherders were held under armed guard.

# Shepherd's 1907 murder near Kannah Creek remains unresolved

When Montrose sheepman Peter Swanson was killed south of Kannah Creek in April of 1907, it provoked outrage and demands for justice.

It also prompted sheepmen in the region to become more careful as they moved their flocks. In early 1908, the so-called "sheep army," a heavily armed contingent of sheepherders and owners, drew national attention as they herded several thousand woolies through Grand Junction and into Utah.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

The sheep army had come from Montrose, and participants stopped to mark the site of Swanson's death by building a rock monument south of today's U.S. Highway 50. They also offered hefty rewards for the capture of Swanson's murderers.

Even so, it took more than seven years for authorities to indict four cattlemen in the killing. Then, just before the trial was to begin in January 1915, the lead witness — Swanson's brother Al — disappeared and all charges were dismissed. Not a lot is known about Peter Swanson. He was described as "a man of rugged physique and ... a sheep man of long experience," in one Daily Sentinel article.

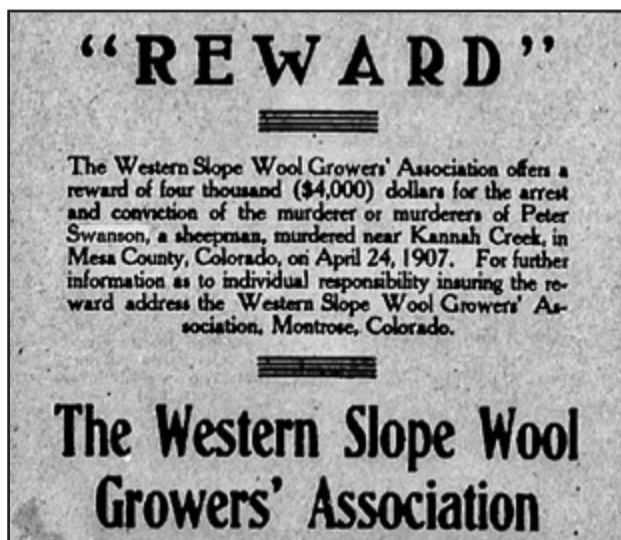
"He was about 33 years old and unmarried," the Delta Independent reported on April 26, 1907. He was "spoken of in the highest terms by all who knew him."

Swanson was a partner with Charlie Weatherwax. The Swanson brothers and a man named Grover Cornett were moving 2,000 sheep from Ruby Canyon west of Grand Junction to summer range in the high mountains east of Ouray that spring.

They had camped April 24 about two miles south of Kannah Creek along Indian Creek. That night, armed men on horseback appeared and tied up Cornett and Al Swanson.

There were at least 11 attackers. They apparently intended to kill the sheep, not the sheepherders. But Peter Swanson had a rifle and ordered the attackers to leave. Instead, he was shot in the abdomen, and the men left hurriedly without harming the sheep.

Al Swanson and Cornett managed to free themselves and rushed to



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This advertisement appeared in the Delta Independent newspaper on May 31, 1907. The reward would later increase to \$10,000.

the nearby W.J. Ponsford ranch. Ponsford accompanied them back to the campsite to get Peter.

Still alive and conscious, Swanson was taken to the Ponsford home. Swanson was able to recount what occurred to Ponsford and Mesa County Undersheriff Charles Wallis before he died on April 25.

His body was taken to Grand Junction, and he was buried in Fairview Cemetery on April 27.

A closed-door coroner's inquest was held April 29, and the jury returned a verdict of "murder with felonious intent." None of the sheepmen Peter Swanson was able to identify as the attackers were brought to justice.

"The jury lays the crime at the door of unknown cattlemen," wrote the Delta Independent.

However, one possible attacker was named by the Montrose Press. "The name of 'Shorty' Bowman, a prominent cattleman of that section, was brought into the case" during the inquest, the paper reported. "But what testimony was given against him cannot be ascertained."

No charges were brought against Bowman or any other suspect in 1907, despite the inquest and rewards offered by sheepmen that started at \$4,000 and rose to \$10,000.

The Sentinel and newspapers across the country denounced Swanson's "brutal murder" in early 1908, as the "sheep army" crossed into Utah.

In July 1908, John Otto wrote a long letter to the Sentinel, in which he said he "deplored" Swanson's killing, even though he hoped sheep would be kept off the ranges in Mesa County "forever."

But no arrests were

made in 1908.

It wasn't until 1914, after a grand jury had reviewed the case, that four cattlemen were arrested.

Al Swanson, Cornett and Weatherwax all testified before the grand jury, but it is not clear what new evidence was presented.

Still, in March 1914, the Sentinel reported that a former Mesa County cowboy named Claude Timbrel had been arrested in Idaho and returned to Colorado for the murder.

Not long afterward, three other men were arrested — George Hughes, Dale Mitchell and T.D. "Shorty" Bowman, the man named as a suspect by the Montrose newspaper in 1907.

"Hughes, Mitchell and Bowman are well known and it would have been difficult to find three men more prominent in the cattle business in Mesa County," the Sentinel wrote.

Hughes ranched near Whitewater, Miller lived in Grand Junction but had a ranch near Fruita, and Bowman resided near Fruita. Timbrel worked for various ranches.

"The murder of Peter Swanson, one of the most heinous and diabolical crimes in the history of Mesa County, may yet be avenged," declared a Sentinel editorial after the arrests. The trial was planned for January, 1915.

But the case fell apart a few days before trial when prosecutors announced they couldn't locate their primary witness, Al Swanson, also known as Nels Swanson.

All charges against the cattlemen were dismissed, and they were hailed as wrongly charged innocents by their friends.

Al Swanson didn't reappear. I could find no

reference to him either as Al or Nels Swanson in Colorado newspapers over the next decade.

However, all of the other principals in the case remained in the region.

Grover Cornett, who helped the Swanson brothers when the murder occurred and was a witness to the killing, was still living in the Montrose area in 1925. In 1917, he made headlines when he shot a charging bear, and it dropped dead just 20 feet from Cornett and his companion.

Peter Swanson's partner, Charles Weatherwax, was present in the Montrose area at least into the early 1920s, and was active in a variety of community groups.

The cattlemen accused of Swanson's murder, meanwhile, remained active in the business in Mesa County over the next decade.

T.D. "Shorty" Bowman served as a stock inspector in 1916 and apparently had a friendly visit to sheep camps near Mack in 1917. He was married twice, in 1919 and again in 1921, by which time he had sold his Fruita ranch and moved to Grand Junction.

George Hughes continued to ranch near Whitewater into the 1920s. In 1916, he was one of several ranchers who began pushing Congressman Ed Taylor to pass legislation to limit grazing.

Dale Mitchell got married barely a month after the charges against him were dismissed. He maintained his ranch near Fruita into the 1920s. In 1921, after beef prices collapsed at the end of World War I, he and a partner opened a butcher shop in Grand Junction to sell their meat.

Claude Timbrel and his wife returned briefly to Idaho after the Swanson case, then moved back to the Grand Valley. He earned a reputation as a top bronc rider in local rodeos, and he visited the Bowman ranch frequently.

The rock monument built off Bean Ranch Road to honor Peter Swanson was dismantled decades ago, said Anita Clark, 97, who grew up and lived much of her life on Kannah Creek.

Sources: *Colorado historic newspapers* at [www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org](http://www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org); *historic editions of The Daily Sentinel* at [www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com); *"The Woolly West: Colorado's Hidden History of Sheepscapes,"* by Andrew Gulliford; *author interview with Anita Clark.*

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