

Son Kills Father, Assisted by Mother

Cemetery record – Father died Apr. 1889 at age 69 of gunshot, plot purchased by youngest daughter

William H & Julia homesteaded in Buffalo County in 30-10-16. Mile northwest of Riverdale
William accumulated more land

Grown family – William, Jr. (Willie) homesteaded

Daughter married to farmer in neighborhood

George farming in 18-9-16 southwest of Riverdale

Frank farming in 30-10-16

Carrie recently married J. E. White

Washington (Wash), single, lived at home and worked the family farm

On April 15, 1889 -

Youngest son comes in from field, plans to put horses in barn

Father in barn will not let son enter, argument follows

Apparently Mother hears and comes out to barn.

Youngest son has shotgun, for shooting prairie dogs in field - Shoots father

June 7, 1889 - Arraigned – plead not guilty

June 28, 1889 – Wm. Pettit and wife, divorced 2 years ago, have remarried

Sept. 11, 1889 – Julia Pettit was arrested as an accessory and put in the same cell as her son. She was not jailed earlier because of her age, 65, but she has been watched by her neighbors and if she had tried to leave the county she would have been arrested. “The surmise of the prosecution was that if she was allowed her liberty that all suspicion would be lulled, and that woman-like she would blab about her family relations to her neighbors. The surmise proved correct and a chain of testimony will be presented at the trial next week that will surprise the accused.

Sept, 13, 1889 - Julia released on bail which was furnished by J E White, Carrie White & Louis Majors. J E is Carrie’s husband, formerly engineer at City Steam Laundry. Louis is constable in Divide Township & married to the other daughter. The old man in his will left all his property to Carrie and the rest of the family \$1each

Oct. 4, 1889 – Preliminary hearing. Trial set for Oct. 9. Will probably be held at the skating rink. Mother will have a separate trial for being an accessory.

Oct. 5, 1889 – Subpoenas were served on witnesses, 23 for prosecution, 27 for defense

Oct. 8, 1889 – Pettit trial set for 10 o’clock at the opera house.

Oct. 9, 1889 – 96 people summoned for jury duty

Oct. 10, 1889 – Report of the first day of trial

Jury was chosen, and listed in the paper with township of residence and occupation

In opening remarks the county attorney took the position that it was premeditated murder.

Defense counsel said it was justifiable homicide & spent some time describing the mean disposition of the deceased.

1st witness – J F Brown, Grant township. Lives ¼ mile away. Has known Wash 11 years. Shortly before sundown Wash rode over, said the old man was dead and his mother was alone, would he go over and stay with her. He did, when she came out of the house her hands were bloody. He went to the barn and saw the body, a gunshot wound in the neck. He asked for a cloth to cover the body. [must be at the time of the killing, he was in his own house] He heard loud talking and a shot. He was in the house at that time.

4 more witnesses and the coroner also testified

The reporter then told of his visit to the scene about 3 o'clock the morning after the killing. The corpse was lying on straw in the barn and then talked to some neighbors who told him Wash had a loaded gun in the field to shoot gophers, he carried this Winchester repeating rifle with him into the barn when he went to put the horses in the stall. There was a quarrel between Wash, his father and his mother. Wm. was shot once in the shoulder and once in the neck. "The wound in the neck must have caused almost instantaneous death as the bullet passed downwards through one of the legs and lodged against the vertebrae.

Oct. 11, 1889 – Report of second day of trial

Description of mother, sister, Carrie, and Wash. Julia out on \$5,000 bond until her trial.

2nd Witness - Dr. Humphreys, coroner - did not know Pettit. Described position of body, pitchfork under him, tines down, gunshot wound in neck on left side just below the jaw. Right shoulder also shattered but did not cause death. That shot at different angle than one in neck

3rd Witness – A Brown, Grant Township . Known Pettits 11 years. Wash road to his place and told him the old man was dead. He went, saw body, only saw one gunshot wound, He heard Wash's testimony to the coroner's jury, He saw the empty shells by the body, heard the disturbance before the shots.

4th witness – T W Harper – Lives in Stanley – Did not know the Pettits. Was on road near their home, did not hear disturbance but did hear shots. Two shots a few seconds apart.

5th Witness – Sherman Ellison – Lives in Divide township. Wm came to is house that morning to borrow a pole for breaking weeds. Next time he saw Pettit he was dead in his barn. He heard Wash testify at coroner's jury

6th Witness – John Fellows – Lives at Stanley, knows Pettits. Worked for Wash last April. Was in field when old man came over and "went for me for driving so fast." He came over at night and got the team to get corn. Mrs. Pettit told Wash he (Wm) would be after his team next and Wash said if he did there would be a dead Pettit. He noticed mother and son talking to each other but they stopped whenever he was around.

7th Witness – A L Potter – Knew Wash. Wash was talking one Sunday morning to his (Potter's) father and asked if his (Wash's) father had come over for a team, and said that if the old gent came for his team there would be a funeral

8th Witness – Mrs. Potter – Wash had been at their house 2 weeks before the shooting asking Mr. Potter's advise about trouble he was having with his father. Said if his father came down to meddle there would be a funeral. She did not like old Mr. Pettit very well. He had run her son off his place with a shotgun.

9th Witness – Ed Wetherell – lives a half mile from Pettits. Heard disturbance, heard screaming, heard Wash say, "I dare you to", two shots, woman say "don't, don't" He went over there about 2 a.m.

10th Witness – Mrs. Cornelia Brown – Heard a disturbance and shots. Went over there and stayed an hour. Said Wash said, “If it hadn’t been for that old devil, it wouldn’t have happened, but I’m glad it did.” He also said he thought his father was going to kill his mother.

11th Witness – John Wilson, Buffalo Co. Sheriff – Saw Wash the morning of the 16th. Went to farm because of call from coroner. Took Wash back to Kearney. On way asked what happened. Wash said he started to take the horses into the barn but his father would not let him. He took them around to another door and his father met him with a pitchfork, hit him on the hand. Wash had his gun, fired, the man fell against the stall.

Beginning of second day

Defense attorney offered a motion to require the county attorney to call Julia Pettit as a witness. Co. Attorney did not want to because her reputation for telling the truth was not good. Also she was to be tried as an accomplice. After motions and counter motions, it was finally ruled that Mrs. Pettit was to be a witness for the prosecution.

12th Witness – Mrs. Julia Pettit – On the day he was killed he came over in the morning and stayed until noon, then went home for dinner. Came back about 3, went out around the barn. This was on the old timber claim. Wash was out plowing, came home about 6. She was building up a fire, heard loud voices at the barn. She went to the door, did not see anyone but heard the angry voices. Heard Mr. Pettit refuse to let Wash put the horses in the barn. She went out there, told him to let the boy bring the horses in. He still refused. He was standing in the doorway with a pitchfork in his hand and a club by his side. Wash was pumping water for the horses. She told him to take the horses to his own stable. She did not see the gun. She went through the old stable, husband followed, guarded the door with the pitchfork, stuck it in doorpost. She told him the horses have been working hard all day. Come to the house and get some supper. He said he would kill her and Wash, leave the place or die. She screamed “Murder!” and yelled for help. Pettit raised the pitchfork to stick Wash. She said to stick her, she was ready to die. He hit her with the club. She fell to the ground and lost consciousness. When she came to Wash and Pettit were holding the gun. She took hold of it, did not hear it go off. Next she remembered was talking to Mrs. Brown saying she supposed they were both dead. Remembers the coroner’s jury slightly but does not remember what she said. Does not remember bloody hands.

Guns, shells, and clothing were entered into evidence.

Oct. 14, 1889 – Trial ended, Lawyers gave final statements – prosecution said it was deliberate so family could get his estate; defense said it was to protect his mother from being stabbed. Judge gave directions – a) if Wash was waiting for opportunity to kill father, 1st degree murder; b) if they quarreled and in anger he killed his father, 2nd degree murder, life or at least 10 yrs. c) shooting in quarrel, manslaughter; d) if he thought it necessary to shoot father to save mother, acquit. Case went to jury Saturday night, Oct. 12, and they spent all night in city council chambers deliberating. Returned to Opera House at 9:40 Sunday morning to a full house. Jury found him guilty of manslaughter. State punishment is imprisonment for 1-10 years.

Oct. 17, 1889 – Judge reamed him out and sentenced him to 10 years hard labor. Julia’s case was continued until the next term of court. Her lawyers asked that her legal expenses be paid by the state because she had transferred her 1/3 interest in the estate to her daughter for \$200 per year for support. The court thought she made the transfer on purpose to avoid paying and denied the request.

Oct. 18, 1889 – Mrs. Pettit is released until next term of court under \$5,000 bail.

Oct. 26, 1889 – It cost the taxpayers \$1050 for the trial. Wash's legal expenses were about the same.

March 8, 1890 – Frank Pettit was arrested for striking his mother

March 13, 1890 - That Pettit Family

Something is Wrong in the Make-up of Them.

Everybody knows Washington Pettit. He was sent to the penitentiary last fall for killing his father. Two weeks ago Frank Pettit before Squire Hoge swore out a warrant against his brother George, charging that he feared George would kill him, do bodily injury, or burn property. This case yet hangs fire.

On Friday afternoon Mrs. Carrie White, sister of these boys appeared before Judge Cornett and swore that Frank was striking his mother when she interceded and Frank struck her in the face.

Something is radically wrong with that Pettit family. The old man must have been all that was claimed of him, and the boys must have inherited all his bad temper. They should be sat down upon and made to comb their temper before we have another murder trial. Buffalo County has paid enough costs on account of the Pettit family.

March 10, 1890 – Case of Frank striking his sister continued 30 days. Carrie said she would not press charges if George behaves himself. Newspaper believes he will behave himself until the next time he gets mad.

Aug. 5, 1890 – Mrs. J. A. Pettit who lives north of Kearney went to Lincoln.

Nov. 7, 1890 – Notice that W. A. Pettit was selling a pony to pay for expenses accrued for its care.

Apr. 24, 1893 – petition being circulated to as governor to pardon Wash Pettit who has spent almost 4 years in penitentiary for killing his father. Not meeting with much favor.

Oct 18, 1893 – Mr. O'Kane saw a girl, 16, crying in the street and stopped. She said her name is Pettit and her stepfather, George Pettit drove her out of the house for not complying with his wishes and submitting herself to his brutal and beastly passions. O'Kane took her to Mrs. Hull of the WCTU who gave her a room at the society.

Nov. 1, 1893 – Wash Pettit was to be paroled from the penitentiary. First case under the new system.

Nov. 11, 1893 – Wash Pettit, recently paroled, married Miss Ollie Euyart of Marion, Kansas

Nov 4, 1896 – Julia very sick with inflammatory trouble

Dec. 3, 1900 – Julia died, had been living in Montrose, Colorado

She filed for widow's pension following year (Father was Civil War vet)

Probate record:

Youngest daughter was named executrix.

Will, handwritten, dated two days before shooting

Each child gets \$1

Wife gets \$5

Youngest daughter gets all real and personal property

Kearney Hub

Family of 2 daughters, 3 sons. Youngest son convicted of shooting father day after he signed a will cutting out wife and all children except youngest daughter. Now 6 months later –

“Something is Wrong in the Make-up of Them.”

Everybody knows [the youngest son who] was sent to the penitentiary last fall for killing his father. Two weeks ago [one brother] swore out a warrant against [the other] brother, charging that he feared [this brother] would kill him, do bodily injury, or burn property.

On Friday [the sister who inherited the property] appeared before [the j]udge and swore that [the brother who had gotten the warrant] was striking his mother when she interceded and [he] struck her in the face.

Something is radically wrong with that family. The old man must have been all that was claimed of him, and the boys must have inherited all his bad temper. They should be sat down upon and made to comb their temper before we have another murder trial. Buffalo County has paid enough costs on account of th[is] family.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CHURCHES IN BUFFALO COUNTY, Part II, by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell, *Buffalo Tales*, Volume 19, No. 4, July - August, 1996

Also from Bassett's history, in early Huntsville (near present Amherst) Mrs. Basten writes, "There was no social life in the community except church and prayer meeting. Politics and baseball interested some of the men. At a Wednesday night prayer meeting all those gifted in prayer took turns praying for Washington Petit's bad temper."