

History Question of the Month

During the late afternoon on February 18, 1874, Alva Tanner, a South Cottonwood resident on his way from Union to Sandy made a terrible discovery. What was it?

Answer

On February 18, 1874, Alva Tanner, while traveling to Sandy, found the dead body of Peter Van Valkenberg, his father-in-law, lying in the road. He hurried on to Sandy to notify the Justice of the Peace. When they returned, others had also found the body and had notified Silas Richards, the Justice of the Peace in Union, who also served as the Coroner. Mr. Richards had ordered the body taken to his home for a "Coroner's Inquest." The results of the Inquest indicated that Mr. Van Valkenberg, the deceased, was coming home from Sandy with a wagon load of manure when he experienced a problem with the wagon. While repairing the wagon, he was hit with almost a dozen balls from a shot gun and killed. It was unknown by whom.

While the Inquest was going on, Martin Florida, Deputy Sheriff for Salt Lake County was in pursuit of those that committed the crime. By the time the sheriff was through, he had arrested seven men. Eventually, two, William Kelley, a step-son-in-law and Philip Shafer, a blacksmith living with the Kelley family, were charged with the murder. Three others were charged with being complicit in the murder, but, they had the charges dismissed due to lack of evidence. The other two, Gray, a Sandy Saloon Keeper and Thomas Fox, an ex-step-son-in-law, became the main witnesses for the prosecution in the trials of Kelley and Philips.

Shafer was tried in Third District Court in Salt Lake and found guilty of 1st Degree murder and sentenced to death. That conviction was appealed and he was retried and convicted of 2nd degree Murder and sentenced to 10 years in Prison. Kelley was convicted of 2nd Degree murder in the First District Court in Provo and also sentenced to 10 years in Prison. Motive for the murder seemed to center around a long standing dispute over property.

Peter Van Valkenberg was buried in the Union Pioneer Cemetery located on Creek Road.

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