**Seattle Holy Rollers Killings: The Spectacular End To An Oregon Love Cult**

HistoryLink.org Essay 4263 : [Printer-Friendly Format](http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=pf_output.cfm&file_id=4263)

Early in the morning of May 7, 1906, Oregon mill worker George Mitchell spotted the man he had been looking for in Seattle since he had arrived from Portland on May 2. Franz Edmund Creffield was walking with his wife Maud down 1st Avenue. Mitchell took up a position in front of the Quick Drugstore at 1st and Cherry. As soon as the couple passed, he shot Creffield in the back of the neck with a 32-calibre revolver. Creffield died instantly. Thus did family quarrels ignited by an Oregon love cult erupt in the streets of Seattle.

**Creffield's Brides and Their Brothers**

Mitchell made no attempt to escape. He surrendered to police and handed over his gun. From jail he sent a telegram to Orlando Victor “O. V.” Hurt of Corvallis, Oregon, who was Mrs. Creffield’s father. It read. “I’ve got my man. I’m in jail here.”

Creffield had been a thorn in the side of fathers, husbands, and brothers of Corvallis for years. A former Salvation Army worker, he had renamed himself Joshua, and declared himself a prophet of a new religion. Adherents, who numbered around 20 at any given time, were mostly female. They prepared for the millennium, took the Bible literally, and rejected worldly things. To this end, they let down their hair, threw off their corsets, burnt their hats, went barefoot, and wore long shapeless tunics called “wrappers.” Their devotions included long periods of ecstatic rolling on the ground, and the people of Corvallis called them Holly Rollers, although they styled themselves “Brides of Christ.”

Creffield had arrived in Corvallis in 1903. For a time the cult operated from the home of prominent local citizen O. V. Hurt, whose wife and children were followers. (O. V.’s own flirtation with the sect lasted only a few weeks). Neighbors grew alarmed when members began to throw the Hurt family’s possessions on a bonfire of worldly goods in the front yard, including the household furniture, a guitar, a bicycle, shrubbery from the garden, and the wooden sidewalks in front of the house. There were also indications that household pets had been consigned to the flames, starting speculation that human sacrifice might be next.

Soon, there were ominous rumors of immoral activity involving Creffield and his mostly female followers. After O. V. Hurt had had enough and kicked the cult out of his home, it regrouped. Members lived communally and refused to return to their families, or indeed, to have anything to do with them. Creffield was said to have explained that “marriage was not necessary.”

**Main Menace Marries Maud**

“Rollerism” was declared a menace. A group of men got together on the night of January 4, 1904, and tarred and feathered Creffield and a male associate. The next day, Creffield startled townspeople by marrying O. V. Hurt’s daughter Maud. Press coverage noted that the groom smelled of recently removed tar. When vigilantes looked for him the following night, they brought a rope. But Creffield had vanished and his new wife Maud soon moved back in with her parents.

A few months later, a devotee named Donna Starr, had sex in Portland with Creffield, in what appears to have been a “purification” ritual. Her husband, Burgess Starr, filed a criminal complaint of adultery, and Donna signed an affidavit declaring that she and Creffield had had “improper relations of a most revolting kind.” Press accounts said Donna was only one of 10 to 15 other women and girls whose participation as a Bride of Christ meant consummating a physical relationship here on earth with Creffield.

Several wives and daughters were packed off to the state asylum in Salem, or in the case of the younger devotees, the Oregon Boys’ and Girls’ Aid Society, a home for troubled youth. One of them was 15-year old Esther Mitchell, a sister of Donna Starr, who was sent by her brothers, including George Mitchell, to the children’s home.

Creffield went on the lam to avoid the adultery trial. All was quiet in Corvallis until July, when O. V. Hurt’s 14-year-old son crawled under the porch looking for worms to use as fish bait, and discovered the bearded, filthy, half-starved, naked Creffield. Unbeknownst to O. V., the prophet had been living under the front porch of the Hurt home. Devotees -- including Hurt’s wife Sarah until her June incarceration in the state asylum -- had given him food and water.

Creffield was found guilty of adultery and sent to the state prison. The men folk of Corvallis relaxed, and wives and daughters began drifting back, apparently cured, from the asylum and the children’s home. Soon, with Creffield safely in prison, they had all been released.

**A Coastal Eden**

But Creffield, now calling himself Elijah, reappeared after serving 17 months of a two-year term. He convinced many followers to come with him to Waldport, Oregon, and begin a new life in a coastal Eden. Some of the women walked many miles through cougar and bear infested wilderness to get there. The fact that Creffield had recently put a curse on “the Sodoms” of Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, and Corvallis, and that a few days, later, on April 18, 1906, a huge earthquake rocked San Francisco, gave him added credibility.

George Mitchell, among others, had had enough. Learning Creffield was in Seattle he went there and killed Creffield. He said he did this to avenge the honor of his sisters Esther Mitchell and Donna Mitchell Starr, and to prevent their further exploitation. Creffield’s body was laid out in the Bonney-Watson funeral home and buried in Lakeview Cemetery. His followers believed this was a temporary arrangement and that he would soon rise from the grave.

**Trial By Opinion**

George’s sister Esther, furious with her brother, rushed to Seattle. Soon she and the widow, Maud Hurt Creffield, were living together under the custodial eye of a police matron. Authorities feared the women might take revenge for the death of Creffield. The police matron had taken a gun from Maud, and subsequently a second gun she'd bought to replace the confiscated weapon.

O. V. Hurt also came to Seattle, for the dual purpose of comforting his widowed daughter, Maud, and making sure George Mitchell got a good defense from Morris, Southard, and Shipley, a top criminal defense firm. Well-wishers in Oregon had provided a $650 fee.

While the *Post-Intelligencer* expressed concern over vigilante justice as meted out by Mitchell, Alden J. Blethen’s *Seattle Times* editorialized that if Creffield was “the debased brute, clothed in a cloak of religion, he is said to be, George Mitchell deserves immediate freedom[.]” Horace Cayton’s *Republican,* despite its strong anti-lynching stance, referred to the victim as “a human monster.”

The official defense was temporary insanity. To prove it, the defense called witnesses who revealed that they had disclosed many unsavory details of the cult’s sexual practices to George Mitchell, and this knowledge had driven him insane. This was testimony that might not have been considered admissible if it hadn’t been for the insanity defense. The result was that the jury got an earful about the victim, whom the press soon referred to as “a reptile.”

**Sobbing on the Stand**

On the stand, O. V. Hurt implied that his wife and daughter Mae had also had sex with Creffield, their respective son- and brother-in-law. *The Seattle Times* reported that tears welled up in his eyes, and referred to Creffield as “a human vampire.”

The cuckolded Burgess Starr testified that he had told Mitchell about an attempt made by the cult to spring his sister Esther Mitchell from the Oregon’s Boys and Girls Home during her time there, and turn her over to Creffield “for the purposes of bringing forth a second Christ.” Starr too, wept during his testimony and while hearing it, George Mitchell collapsed in sobs on the defense table. The jury got the case on at 3:14 and by 4:45 the “not guilty” verdict was read out. As the jury hadn’t said George Mitchell was insane, he was free to go.

**Brothers and Sisters**

A few days later, on July 12, George Mitchell, went to the train station to go back to Oregon accompanied by his brother Perry. The day before, their brother Fred had appealed to Esther to patch things up with George, so the brothers were pleased to see her at the train station to see them off. She shook hands with George.

At 4:25, the four siblings walked out toward the platform, George and Perry in front, the peacemaker Fred and Esther behind. When Fred offered to take the coat Esther carried on her arm, it was revealed that there was a gun under the coat. She shot George from behind, aiming at the same spot on his neck where George’s bullet had entered Creffield’s body. It hit him in the back of his head, severing an artery, and he soon bled to death. George Mitchell was about 23 years old.

He was also laid out at the Bonney-Watson funeral home. His visitation was packed, including a mysterious groupie in white who had attended his trial and given him flowers that he wore in his buttonhole. His body was shipped to Oregon for burial.

Maud Creffield didn’t deny she had bought the murder weapon and a box of cartridges after George Mitchell’s acquittal. Esther Mitchell and Maud Creffield expressed no remorse. Long-suffering O. V. Hurt, who had provided a defense for George Mitchell, now arranged to do the same for his daughter Maud and her friend Esther Mitchell.

**A Second Trial**

Police Chief Charles Wappenstein said, “I wish these Oregon people would kill each other on their own side of the river.” The *Post-Intelligencer* complained about Oregonians washing their dirty linen in Washington. Judge Archibald Frater, who had presided over the Mitchell trial, proposed forming an insanity commission to examine the women before they were brought to trial, thus saving the taxpayers the expense of another trial.

Prosecutors resisted, but the judge put together a sanity commission, including his personal physician, and a young man just a year out of medical school, none of whom where specialists in what were then called “nervous diseases.” Critics said the fix was in, and that Frater had sought commission members who would agree to declare the women insane. They declared both women were delusional and dangerous.

Frater then ordered that both women should be “deported” to the Oregon state insane asylum at Salem, under a statute allowing him to do so. The State Supreme Court, however, ruled that Judge Frater had no authority to do this, and that the statue was flawed. He could only dump them on the other side of the Columbia.

**More Sad Ends**

While the matter was under appeal, Maud Creffield managed to get some strychnine smuggled into the county jail and killed herself. Her father, O. V. Hurt, aware of her desire to be buried alongside her husband, arranged to have Creffield’s remains removed from his original plot at Lakeview Cemetery into a slot next to one he bought for Maud there.

Esther went on to the Washington state asylum at Steilacoom, and was released two years later, in 1909, declared cured. Asylum personnel said she was now “thoroughly disgusted with herself.” O. V. Hurt again entered the picture, taking her into his home as her guardian.

In 1914, aged 26, she was living in Waldport, Oregon, and had been married for three months. Although outwardly happy, she, like Maud Creffield, took strychnine and died.

The cult itself died with Creffield, but members of the little group, many of whom were related, stayed together. Most of them, like Esther, moved to Waldport, Oregon, where they intermarried and had children.

**A Half-Century Later**

In September 1975, two strangers came to Waldport and scheduled a meeting at the Bayshore Inn to discuss religious beliefs. Out of a population of about 700, 100 people attended.

After the presentation, attendees were invited to shed their worldly belongings, and follow the two to Colorado to meet a space ship. Twenty people did just that, one couple leaving infant children behind. They were early -- some say the first -- recruits of the Heaven’s Gate cult, whose members eventually committed mass suicide more than 20 years later in 1997 when the Halle-Bopp comet came close to earth. It is not recorded if any of those who left Waldport that day were descended from the Holy Rollers.

**Sources:**  
Jim Phillips and Rosemary Gartner, *Murdering Holiness: The Trials of Franz Creffield and George Mitchell* (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2003); T. McCracken and Robert B. Blodgett, *Holy Rollers: Murder and Madness in Oregon’s Love Cult* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Press, 2002); Stewart H. Holbrook, "Oregon’s Secret Love Cult," 1937, in *Grand Deception: The World’s Most Spectacular and Successful Hoaxes, Impostures, Ruses and Frauds* ed. by Alexander Klein (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1955); Linda Crew, ***Brides of Eden****: a True Story Imagined* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

By Kathrine K. Beck, December 02, 2003