



*The chimney of the Pinegrove Mine cabin. Some say the word
M-U-R-D-E-R-E-R could once be seen on the mantle.*

The Tragedy of the Pinegrove Mine

by
Marie Mogge

In the early 1900s, a tragedy unfolded at the Pinegrove Mine near Mormon Hill that has never been completely solved, but changed the lives of James Lawson and his family forever. Sadly, his youngest daughter was shot and killed. The perpetrator? None other than James Lawson himself.

Lawson headed west from Utah to California in the 1800s, with his wife Mary. Whether it was simply because he came from Utah, or because he really was a follower of the Mormon faith, he became known as Jimmie the Mormon, or sometimes Mormon Jimmie. Whether he was, or wasn't, a Mormon, his grandson remembers he could "sure spout the Bible."¹

Upon reaching California, he first tried his hand at farming. He homesteaded 160 acres around Castle Peak in what would become the Sierra National Forest. On his land he raised red beans to sell to the local communities, and vegetables for his family: wife Mary Christiana, and three daughters, Ruth, Mary, and the youngest, whose name is unknown. The homestead was patented in 1897.

Described as "excentric, temperamental, and cruel"² by Ranger Gene Tully, he was also known to be something of a thief. Dan McSwain, an early North Fork resident, claimed that Jimmie would sneak into the powder sheds for the Sugar Pine Lumber Company railroad, open the bottom box of dynamite, remove the powder, then nail the box shut so it wouldn't be discovered until much later³. Few people had nice things to say about Jimmie.

Eventually, Jimmie set his sights on a different goal than farming. Jimmie had gold fever.

Jimmie began mining for gold on a claim not far from his homestead, near Whiskey Ridge and Mormon Hill, eventually known as the Pinegrove Mine. For all his faults, he was a very industrious soul. He built a one room stone cabin, planted a large garden that would supply both his family and provide an income when the surplus was sold to the local community, and he hand dug a ¼ mile ditch to a nearby creek for water to supply an arrastra. He then built the arrastra, powered by a hand made wood overshot water wheel. The arrastra was needed to grind all the gold ore he was going to find.

Known as being a "hard family master,"⁴ the primitive rock cabin that he built, measuring roughly 15' square, was barely big enough for a family of five to do little else but huddle around the fire when nights were cold. Most of the time the family slept outside on the hard ground, under the trees, and near the garden that Jimmie guarded. For Jimmie, this was fine.

Jimmie ran his mill almost constantly, rarely taking time to sleep. There was just too much gold waiting to be found.



At the mine – Jimmie and Mary Christiana are probably pictured here – could one of the men be Sam Daulton?

Living with his family on the mining claim in the summers, Jimmie dug trenches and tunnels throughout the slopes of his claim for several years. It's unknown how much gold, if any, was pulled out of these trenches and tunnels, but sorrow soon loomed on the horizon...

Late one night – no one knows exactly what happened – Jimmie's youngest daughter was shot and killed. Jimmie claimed that the little girl left her sleeping place to use the outhouse, and because of his poor eyesight, he mistook her for an animal raiding his garden and shot her.

Jimmie's wife said that their daughter was shot in a fit of rage because she would not stop crying.

Neighbors suspected that Jimmie had shot her while he was in an ugly mood because of doubts of her paternity.

Others thought that the young girl had accidentally set off a shot-gun trap Jimmie had set for Sam Daulton, a neighbor that he believed was spending too much time with his wife, Mary.

An investigation could not determine the details of what really happened, and no charges were filed. Ranger Gene Tully helped Jimmie bury the deceased little girl in a primitive grave near the claim.

As the weeks passed by without an answer for the killing, the atmosphere grew more tense, and there was talk of a lynching. One day, Jimmie, feeling nervous about the unrest among his neighbors, put

his pistol in his pocket and disappeared. This left Mary alone on the homestead to care for the crops and remaining children. She feared for her safety. Fortunately, her nearby neighbor, Sam Daulton, would stop by occasionally to help her with chores. He even offered to accompany her one time on a trip to Fresno for supplies. They could use his team and wagon. It was an offer that Mary graciously accepted.

Meanwhile, it was believed that Jimmie had drifted into the foothills.

On the way back from their trip to Fresno, Mary and Sam stopped at Bellview Station to rest for the night. It just so happened that that night there was a dance at the station. Mary attended the festivities to watch the dancers, while Sam enjoyed a drink with some of the other gentlemen at the saloon.

Suddenly, and without warning, Jimmie burst into the crowd of dancers with his gun drawn, and fired two shots at Mary. Where did he come from, and why was he shooting at Mary?

At the sound of gunfire, the men came rushing in from the saloon. Mary lay bleeding on the dance floor. There was bedlam in the room -- women were screaming, and men were shouting. Jimmie fired his gun again, this time in Sam's direction, but these shots went wild. In the midst of the chaos, believing that he had surely killed Mary, Jimmie ran for the door and disappeared into the blackness of the night.

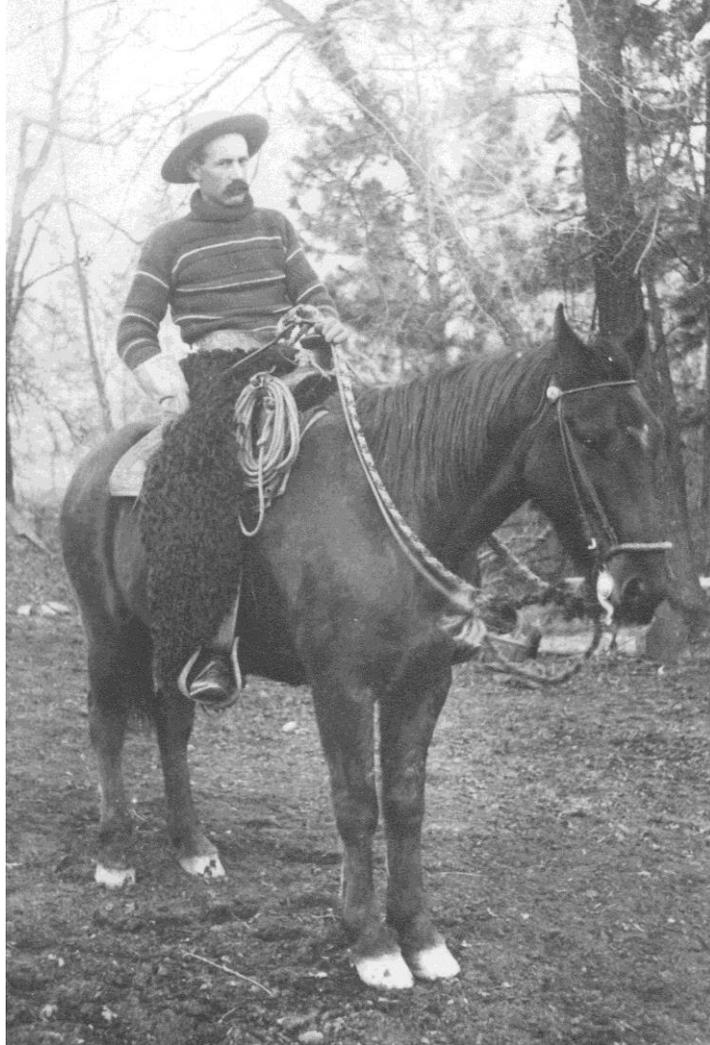
Mary was seriously wounded, but she survived. The hunt for Jimmie the Mormon began.

Knowing the countryside, Jimmie eluded capture for several months. Then - perhaps he grew tired of running, or perhaps he thought he was wiley enough that he wouldn't be captured - Jimmie made a mistake that proved to be his undoing: he surfaced at the Geddes Ranch near North Fork.

Not wanting to risk becoming the target of Jimmie's gun, as had many others, the Geddes family entertained him and served him a hearty meal. Jimmie then disappeared again into the night, this time heading towards the Noddin homestead. Word of Jimmie's visit at the Geddes Ranch was sent to Ranger Gene Tully, and a warning was quickly sent to the Noddins.

Arriving at the Noddin place, Jimmie didn't realize that he was walking into a trap. The Noddins distracted him until Ranger Tully got into position -- when Jimmie stepped out the door he walked straight into Tully, and "the business end of a 45."⁵ Tully captured Jimmie without further incident, and he was quickly delivered to the Madera County jail.

A trial soon took place, and Jimmie was found guilty of attempted murder. After being convicted and sentenced to 12 years at San Quentin, Jimmie made one last attempt at freedom. On the train taking him to prison, somewhere near Modesto, he leaped out of a bathroom window and was on the loose again. Jimmie was a hard man to hold on to.



Ranger Gene Tully – determined to get his man.

Months would pass before Ranger Tully got a lead on Jimmie's whereabouts. A man fitting Jimmie's description was seen working on a ranch near Sacramento. Determined to see Jimmie behind bars, Ranger Tully headed for the ranch. Disguising himself as a ranch hand, Tully got close enough to identify Jimmie, and then apprehended him without a struggle. This time, Jimmie was delivered to San Quentin prison without any further complications.

The end of the story? Not quite.

For good behavior, and because his conviction was found to be based on prejudicial testimony, Jimmie was paroled after 3 years. Returning to the North Fork area, he found his whole life changed. Mary had remarried (coincidentally to Sam Daulton), and his family was gone.

For a time he worked the Ragsdale Mine on Fine Gold Creek; then his old mine on Whiskey Ridge; and finally the San Joaquin River near Kerckhoff Dam, but to little reward. He even tried to talk his young nephew into working an old prospect claim in Nevada in 1934. Jimmie still had gold fever.



Jimmie the Morman mining near Kerchoff dam – note the sacks of gold ore to the upper right.

Living into his 80s, time finally ran out for James Lawson. Sadly, he died a broken man, alone and penniless, a ward of the state, in a Madera hospital.

Few mourned his passing.

The crumbling remains of the Lawson's cabin can still be seen, if one knows where to look. It's hard to imagine in the quiet solitude of the forest, the fateful events that took place here. The word, "Murderer,"⁴ once clearly scrawled on the mantle above the fireplace has long ago disappeared, along with the vivid memories of a what happened in this quiet place.



The remains of the Lawson cabin.

Somewhere along Whiskey Ridge, in the shadow of Mormon Hill, amid the pines and the oaks, is a small, unmarked grave. Within that grave are the remains of a little girl whose name no one remembers, along with the secret of the tragedy that ended her life.

Notes:

¹ Popelish, Connie, phone conversation with Glen Green (Bass Lake Ranger District Historic Document and Information Database, Gene Tully Collection, HD00338) 17 February 1999.

² Tully, Gene, story (Bass Lake Ranger District Historic Document and Information Database, Gene Tully Collection, HD00337) no date.

³ Popelish, Connie, interview with Dan and Ella McSwain (Bass Lake Ranger District Historic Document and Information Database, Gene Tully Collection, HD00205) 8 August 1990.

⁴ Tully, Gene, HD00337.

⁵ Tully, Gene, HD00337.

References:

“Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records.” [Glorerecords.blm.gov](http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov). Accessed: 9 November 2011: <http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov/search/default.aspx>.

Klette, William. “Mormon Jimmy--Gold, Beans, Tragedy.” *The Fresno Bee*. 11 April 1967.

Popelish, Connie. Phone conversation with Glen Green: 17 February 1999. Bass Lake Ranger District Historic Document and Information Database, Interview Collection: HD00338. On file: Sierra National Forest, Bass Lake Ranger District.

Tully, Gene. “Story of Jimmie The Morman.” No date. Bass Lake Ranger District Historic Document and Information Database, Gene Tully Collection: HD00337. On file: Sierra National Forest, Bass Lake District.

Historic photographs are from the Sierra National Forest Historic Photograph Collection.