

Esther Mitchell paroled on April 5, 1909.



Originally built in 1871, the hospital was officially known as Western Washington Hospital for the Insane and colloquially as Steilacoom asylum or the Steilacoom lunatic asylum because it was built on Steilacoom Boulevard in Lakewood, Washington. Today, old buildings have been torn down, new ones built, and Western State Hospital is a psychiatric hospital overseen by the Washington Department of Social and Health Services.

A United Press International Story circulated nationwide the first week of April 1909.

GIRL WHO SHOT HER BROTHER RELEASED

Esther Mitchell Has Been Paroled From Washington State Asylum.

Seattle, April 7.—Esther Mitchell, central figure in the murder of "Joshua" Creffeld and the killing of her brother, George Mitchell, who had shot the "Holy Roller" leader, has been paroled from the Steilacoom asylum. She was taken to Oregon by O. V. Hurt, who suffered more than any other man from the Creffeld teachings, and whose daughter married the Holy Roller agitator.

One of the stipulations in the parole is that Miss Mitchell shall be returned to the Steilacoom asylum if she shows any symptoms of a return of her malady.

Esther Mitchell was one of Franz Edmund Creffeld's followers in the Holy Rollers camps of Oregon. She was an intimate friend of Maud Hurt, who subsequently married Creffeld and came with him to Seattle. Because of Creffeld's influence over his sister and the practices reported in the Holy Roller camp, George Mitchell resolved to free his sister and the other Holy Rollers by killing him. Mitchell followed Creffeld to Seattle, where the Holy Roller leader was hiding in an obscure lodging house and where he was planning to establish a new camp in Southeastern Seattle. In July, 1906, Creffeld and his wife were met by Mitchell and the former was killed by the infuriated brother.

After a sensational trial during which Esther Mitchell was called to testify, George Mitchell was acquitted. Mitchell, his brother and father, attempted in vain to reconcile Esther to the remainder of the family. Finally George Mitchell and his family despaired of reconciling Esther and the two brothers prepared to leave for Portland. Esther sent word that she would see them at the depot and joined the family there. As George walked ahead toward the train, Esther and her brother followed. Suddenly the girl drew a revolver and killed George.

Esther was promptly arrested and Mrs. Creffeld was taken into custody on her way back from the cemetery. Mrs. Creffeld subsequently died in the county jail under circumstances that indicated poisoning and Esther Mitchell was sent to the asylum.

According to the hospital authorities at the Western Washington Insane hospital, Esther Mitchell is thoroughly cured of her fanaticism and has for the past few months refused to discuss the "Holy Roller" craze or "Joshua" Creffeld, the fanatic whose teachings unbalanced the girl's mind.

The influence Creffeld and his wife exerted over the girl was responsible for her actions. Dr. Calloun, superintendent of the Steilacoom asylum, is quoted as saying that he is satisfied Mrs. Creffeld's influence, after her husband's death, influenced the girl, and that her belief that "Joshua" would arise from the dead was sincere and she had killed her brother because he had removed the great religious leader and should die. With her three years detention at the hospital this influence has been removed permanently and there is no likelihood of her returning to her old beliefs.

A Seattle newspaper reported she first visited their office to learn the location of her brother's grave which she then visited. True or not, Esther left Washington behind for good and moved to Waldport, Oregon, in Lincoln County, to live with the Maud Hurt's parents, Orlando and Sarah Hurt.



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Esther Mitchell an Opium Addict, and other Lies Told about Her

Almost immediately after her release from the Steilacoom Insane Asylum, there were false and malicious reports about Esther published in newspapers eager to sell more copies and more advertising.

The first was that she walked away from the asylum (escaped) and the authorities had decided to do nothing about it. This went on for one full week until the asylum superintendent put a stop to it when he issued a public statement the report was false, and she had been paroled on good terms.

The second fictitious story came out later that summer when a Vancouver, British Columbia newspaper claimed Esther was living with a Chinese man in his shack on Vancouver Island. Apparently, the man was her pimp and she was “consorting wholly with the Chinese of late” (the writer is implying that she was selling her body) “to satisfy her craving for the poppy,” (to support her opium habit). The writer continues his slam job by repeating the fabrication that she had escaped from the Steilacoom asylum before ending with the false claim that he knew could not be confirmed or unconfirmed that “...the Washington authorities were quietly seeking her” to return her the mental hospital.

No, they were not, but it was a good lie. One that could not be proven or disproven since it was all “hush-hush.”

MITCHELL A VAGRANT

Esther Mitchell, the central figure in Seattle's Holy Roller killings of two years ago, is in the hands of the provincial police at Nanaimo, having been found horribly emaciated and heavy with opium in a Chinaman's shack at Departure Bay. She is held for vagrancy and will probably go to a rescue home.

In Seattle during July, 1907, her brother shot Joshua Creffield, a Holy Roller priest, whom he charged with ruining the girl. Esther, meeting her avenging brother at the union depot, shot him dead, alleging being inspired thereto by Creffield's wife. She escaped punishment on the ground of temporary insanity and has since fallen lower and lower, consorting wholly with the Chinese of late, and living only to satisfy her craving for the poppy.

Esther Mitchell left Fort Steilacoom asylum near Tacoma, where she had been confined, some months ago without being discharged. Since that time the Washington authorities have been quietly seeking her, and she may be brought back to the asylum.

ESTHER MITCHELL NOT A VAGRANT

Regarding the recent story circulated concerning the discovery of Esther Mitchell in an opium den, the Evening Telegram of yesterday makes this correction.

Doubting the story of a woman in the Victoria, B. C. jail, who represented herself as Esther Mitchell, sister of George Mitchell, and who was arrested in an opium den near Nanaimo, B. C., The Telegram wrote O. V. Hurt, of Waldport, asking him if the real Esther Mitchell had not been at his home since her release from the Steilacoom asylum. Mr. Hurt replies:

"Waldport, Ore., Aug. 23.—(To the Editor of the Telegram.)—The report that has been circulated that Esther Mitchell of Corvallis, was in trouble in Victoria is absolutely false, as she is at my home, and has been since last April, and is living a quiet life. She has won the confidence and respect of this community. She expects to make her home with us, and can be found here any time, and anyone representing herself as Miss Mitchell, is an impostor.

"O. V. HURT."

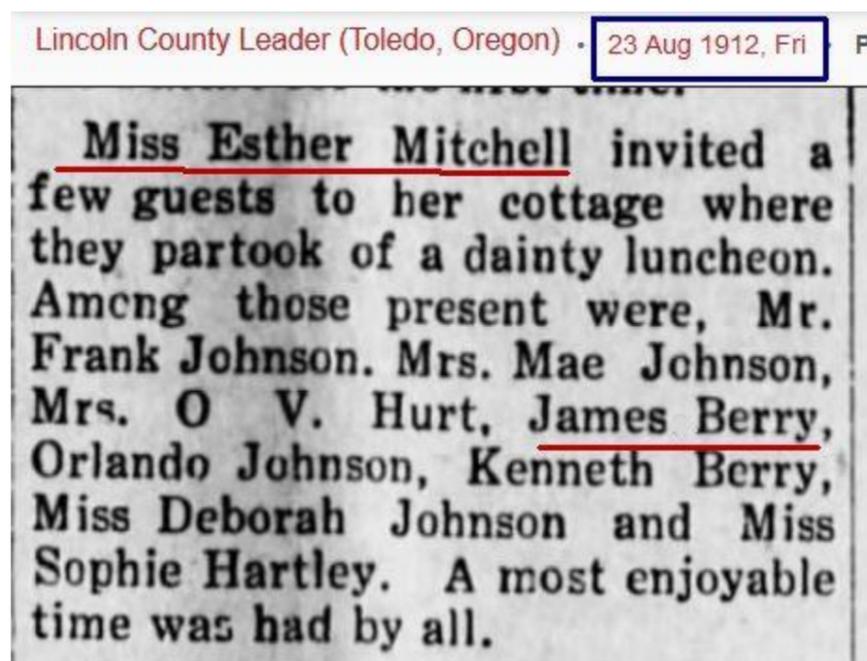
The article above appeared in a Salem, Oregon newspaper but was copied nearly word for word from a Vancouver, British Columbia newspaper report published on August 1, 1909.

The story on the right was published by a newspaper in Enterprise, Oregon and includes a correction written by Esther's caretaker, Orlando Hurt. This article appeared on September 1, but by then, the Esther Mitchell opium addict vagrant story had circulated nationwide in thousands of newspapers.

ESTHER MITCHELL GETS ON WITH HER LIFE

The mental hospitals decision to parole Esther, and place her into the custody of the Hurt family of Lincoln County, Oregon was the best decision they could have made. Living with them in the small town of Waldport, they took special care of Esther and gave her a firm foundation on which she could build a new life. Despite murdering her brother George, her two remaining brothers and sister, Dana Starr, lived nearby and treated her with a tender kindness that restored her shaken faith in herself, and the world around her.

Over the next four years, Esther lived quietly and worked hard. She built a good reputation throughout the many small communities that bordered the sea in Lincoln County. By 1912, she eventually moved out of the Hurt family home in Waldport and rented a small cottage near the community of Ocean View, where her brother Paul lived. On August 23 of that year, she hosted a luncheon for eight people from her adoptive family, and close friends.



One of those guests would soon play a major role in her life--and his reputation wasn't as good as hers.

But in 1912, it didn't matter and Esther continued to plant roots, build a life, and secure her future. In July 1913 Esther purchased, or was granted, 40 acres of land by the United States Federal Government in the area of 1498 Fruitvale Road in Lincoln County (according to recent plat maps). She then turned around and sold four of those acres to Mrs. Sarah M. Hurt (wife of Orlando Hurt and mother of Maud Hurt, the former Mrs. Creffield) for \$10.

Although she was living her life peacefully, and was well respected by neighbors who could forgive and forget her past, newspaper reporters were still fabricating salacious stories about her.

Two months before she purchased the 40 acres, Esther's old life with Chinese dope dealers in Vancouver, British Columbia, were revived with ludicrous tales that she had somehow transformed herself into a Chinese woman; one at the bottom of society, the other at the top of the criminal world as Lin Toy, the Queen of Chinatown.

Eugene Oregon newspaper, May 7, 1913.

Salem Oregon newspaper, May 8, 1913.

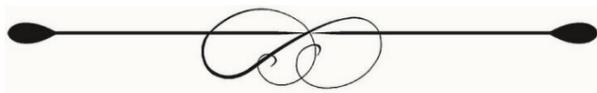
WAS NOT ESTHER MITCHELL

Reporter "Fakes" Story Involving Former "Holy Roller"

Vancouver, B. C., May 7.—It now develops that the story that the Chinese girl who committed suicide in the local Oriental district was not Esther Mitchell, who figured in a murder case at Seattle some years ago. The mistake was the work of a "faking reporter" and misinformation given out from police headquarters. The dead woman's real name is Mrs. Chew Bing, and she is half caste Chinese and Italian.

NOT ESTHER MITCHELL.

Portland, May 7.—A very surprising story was published in Vancouver, B. C., today to the effect that Lin Toy, the queen of Chinatown, and who was claimed to be high in the Chinese Masonic councils of the coast, was really Esther Mitchell, of Corvallis, a girl who figured in the Holy Roller episode. As a matter of fact, Miss Esther Mitchell is at Waldport, Or., on a small farm, living her life peacefully, and highly respected by her neighbors.



Esther gets Married, Makes Poor Choice in Men. Again.

On April 7, 1914, nearly five years to the day she was paroled from the insane asylum, Esther and James K. Berry, 36, were married in a quiet ceremony in the seaside town of Newport, Oregon, not far from Waldport. The two had known each other for several years, and he was once a luncheon guest 18 months prior.

While researching the genealogy of James K. Berry for this epilogue, some peculiar facts about Mr. Berry were uncovered. As it was with her choice in cult leader Creffield, Berry was a poor choice as a husband for the woman described in local newspapers as one of "the most attractive" in Lincoln County.

While Esther had done much to rebuild her reputation, James was in the lifelong process of destroying his own. This was James' third marriage, and it would not be his last. According to Ancestry.com, he married Clara Mae King on January 4, 1904. She was only 16 years-old at the time, but had lied on her marriage application that she was 18. James was 25 years-old.

One year later, she gave birth to their son, Kenneth James Berry. Four years after they were married, James didn't want to be married anymore. He wanted a divorce. As the plaintiff in the case, the judge ruled in his favor and awarded him custody of Kenneth.

By the summer of 1910, Clara had moved to Washington and married Albert Viggers. Earlier that year, her ex-husband James had also found love with Hortense Sophia "Tensy" Johnson. He lost that love for Tensy not long after she gave birth to their daughter, Nema, on August 6, 1911. The two divorced sometime between then and August 1912, although it is not clear when.

What is clear is that by the summer of 1912, Berry was a 34-year-old man looking for love and the women he loved were always ten years younger. Berry was friends with the Orlando Hurt family, and through them, he met Esther Mitchell. Despite his two prior marriages, Esther liked Berry enough to invite him, his son, and several of members of the Johnson family to her cottage for lunch on August 23, 1912.



Four months later, Esther Ann Mitchell Berry was dead. According to her obituary printed below, in the months leading up to her suicide on August 1, 1914, she was frequently ill and had lost weight and "flesh."

After a 6:30 p.m. dinner at home with her husband, step-son, and a Mrs. Cora Hartley, James went to town, and Esther helped Cora wash the dishes and pluck two chickens before going up to her room at 9:30 that Saturday night. There, she wrote a short suicide note and prepared her strychnine--the same poison used by her dear friend, Maud eight years before. Mrs. Hartley explained what happened next.

Newport

News came to Newport from Waldport Sunday morning that Esther Mitchell Berry, wife of James K. Berry, was dead. The investigation of the coroner's jury showed the following facts: On Saturday evening at the Berry home, about 6:30 the family, consisting of James Berry, Mrs. Berry, Mrs. Cora Hartley and Kenneth Berry the eight year old son of Mr. Berry, were at the table. There was nothing unusual occurred in the family. Mrs. Berry was cheerful and apparently happy. After supper Mr. Berry went down to town, and Mrs. Berry helped with the dishes and also helped to dress a couple of chickens for dinner the next day. At 9:30 Mrs. Berry went to her bedroom up stairs and about 11 o'clock Mrs. Hartley heard a noise up stairs as though someone was in distress. She went up stairs and found Mrs. Berry lying on the bed under the covers and in her night clothes, in a spasm. Mrs. Hartley asked what she could do for her and Mrs. Berry said, "Nothing." Mrs.

Berry said, "Nothing." Mrs. Hartley then tried to turn her on her side and Mrs. Berry said, "You hurt me; let me go," and immediately expired. The coroner's jury found the body rigid, the arms drawn up on the breast and the fingers clenched; lower limbs extended and rigid; eyes, pupils contracted and glaring; body warm, face and hands red. On the stand table two feet from the bed, with a lamp burning on it, was found an empty bottle that had contained one dram (60 grains) of strychnine with the cork out. A glass with some undissolved crystals of strychnine in it and it appeared as though water had been used to dissolve the strychnine. It was evident from the condition of the body and the empty bottle of strychnine on the table that Mrs. Berry had coolly and calmly planned to take her own life. It could not be ascertained where she got the poison or how much was in the bottle. Strychnine is a very fatal poison, is quickly absorbed and if taken in sufficient quantity the respiratory muscles are paralyzed and death occurs in a very short time. In strychnine poisoning the muscles twitch, the limbs jerk, violent convulsions set in, the limbs are rigid and death soon occurs. Mrs. Hartley gave the alarm and soon Mrs. O. V. Hurt came and other neighbors and friends, after Mrs. Berry had passed away. Mrs. Berry was

had passed away. Mrs. Berry was paroled from the Steilacoom Asylum several years ago and placed in care of O. V. Hurt, who was appointed her guardian. While in his care she was treated as one of the family everything being done done to make her feel at home and happy. She was a woman of nervous sanguine temperament, of refined, retiring disposition had had a very impressible temperament. She was 26 years old last January. On recommendation of a physician the parole was removed and about two and a half months ago Miss Mitchell was married in Newport to James K. Berry and they afterwards went to Waldport to make their home. Within the last few months Mrs. Berry complained of feeling ill and it was noticed by her friends that she was failing in health and losing flesh. The funeral services were held at the home of the deceased, conducted by Rev. Cook, pastor of the Presbyterian church at Waldport, and the interment took place at the Fern Ridge Cemetery. Many beautiful floral offerings were placed upon her grave by friends and many tears were shed by those who knew her best. She is survived by two brothers, Perry Mitchell, who lives at Ocean View, a brother in Portland, and a sister, Mrs. Dana Starr, who also lives at Ocean View, and her husband.

Along with her obituary published on the front page of the Lincoln County Leader (above), the newspaper also published the findings of the coroner's jury. At the bottom of their report was a copy of the 50-word suicide note Esther left behind. It her last will and testament, and explained nothing about her decision.

Report of Coroner's Jury

We, the jury empaneled to inquire into the cause of the death of Mrs. Esther Berry, wife of James K. Berry, find after careful examination of the evidence produced, that Mrs. Berry, came to her death by taking strychnine, administered by her own hand, with suicidal intent. We further find that no blame is attached to anyone.

J. W. Walker, foreman,
M. V. Leeper,
S. L. Osted,
O. N. Starr,
D. L. Chesley,
E. E. Everson,
F. M. Carter, Coroner.

The following note was found on the table in the room where Mrs. Berry died:

"Dear James: Please deed the two lots over there to mother and father; give the piano and ring I sent away today to Martha; the silver watch to Attie. Esther.

"P. S.—Of course this place is now free from mortgage and is yours, and the little money in the bank."

Even after she died, Esther had another mystery or two to add to her story. After her release from the asylum and the pain she endured with lurid stories about her, Esther found shelter in anonymity. That anonymity continued after she died when she was buried in one of the smallest and most remote cemeteries in Oregon, the Fern Ridge Cemetery north of Waldport. At 150 by 250 feet, there are only about two dozen markers visible on satellite image from Google Earth. As if that wasn't enough, her small stone lists her first name, not her maiden name or her married one it. It simply reads,



After her death, James married three more times with: Esther's older sister, Donna Mitchell in 1916; Alice Kent in 1920; and Mollie Hurt in 1930. Mollie was the widow of Frank Hurt, who was the son of Orlando and Sarah Hurt. He remained married to Mollie until he died in 1943.

