

2015-08

Joan Skilbred

April 14, 2015

Series: Pioneer Park Railroad Museum Rail tales lectures

Martin Gutoski welcomes everyone to the meeting. He introduces Leslie McCartney who will be filming the presentation.

Gutoski plays a very short film by Robert Prince about Engine no. 1.

Gutoski introduced Joan Skilbred and talked about her current and past activities. She will be telling the story about a murder by John Cooper in Fairbanks.

Joan Skilbred said a couple of months ago she told Martin Gutoski about John Cooper. Skilbred talked about a photo of John Cooper while he was hauling water with two dogs. She showed a copy of the census of the Fairbanks regions. In 1910 there were 25 Black males and ten Black females in the entire Fourth Division (Alaska court division). Fairbanks had ten of these males and all of the females. They were a small percentage of the population of 6,200.

Skilbred said before she begins the story of the murder she will explain who John Cooper and William Wimbush were. John Cooper showed up in the 1901 census for Canada as a resident of Dawson City. She showed a photo of a man in Dawson City who might be John Cooper. Cooper was born around 1871 in Montreal, Canada. The 1901 census indicates that Cooper arrived in the Yukon in 1898. In 1905 or 1906 he arrived in the Fairbanks area. By January 1907 he was in the federal prison in Fairbanks serving a term for larceny. While in the jail he received a letter from Charles Henderson. Henderson had gone up to the Chandalar District and staked a claim in Cooper's name. The mining claim was on Squaw Creek where mining still takes place today.

Skilbred said the first indication of William Wimbush in Alaska was in the August 9, 1906 Fairbanks newspaper with a notice about his mail. A couple of months later he was at the center of a landmark court case regarding mining law. He was listed as the owner of number 9 below discovery on Gilmore Creek in 1907. Skilbred said he was most likely residing on that claim at that time. The Wimbush Cascaden opinion was a headline in the newspaper in 1906. Judge Wickersham ruled on the case. The case revolved around the issue that if a claim owner leases out or if there is a sublease on a claim and if the owners default on paying laborers then do the laborers have a right to attach a lien against that claim. This had been a sort of gray area in mining law. Mr. Wimbush along with five others sued Dave Cascaden for the claim rights because they had not been paid for their labor. Judge Wickersham ruled in favor of Wimbush because Mr. Cascaden had failed to file or record the lease contracts and he had failed to post liability disclaimer notices on the claim. The claim in question was number thirteen below on Cleary Creek. This set a new precedent on mining law in Alaska. This decision was published in the Mining and Scientific Press in October 1908. By 1908 Wimbush shows up in the annual assessment list published in the newspaper. He filed assessment work done on October 27, 1908

on number 8 below first tier left limit of Pedro Creek. It doesn't mean he was the owner of the claim. It only means he filed the assessment work. Skilbred said she learned later that he did own 8 below.

Skilbred said sometime before December 1909 Wimbush and Cooper formed a partnership. They showed up in the 1910 census in the Iditarod area. They were on Willow Creek in the Iditarod District. It was called Otter Creek in the census records at that time. Wimbush was fifty years old and single. Cooper was forty-five years old and had been married for eighteen years. Wimbush was born in Alabama. Cooper was born in Canada but both of his parents were born in Georgia. It was possible that both of these men were born to slaves. Skilbred said Wimbush could have been born a slave but she has not found any evidence to support that. Both men took part in the Iditarod stampede. They did not stay there very long and returned to Fairbanks by the summer of 1910. They moved out to Gilmore Creek and started mining and woodcutting.

The murder took place in November 1910 on Gilmore Creek. The location of the crime scene was just east of the buildings of the NOAA tracking station on the Steese Highway. Most of the buildings are on the discovery claim. The last time anyone saw William Wimbush was in November of 1910. Wimbush was well liked by his neighbors on the surrounding creeks and it wasn't long after his disappearance that people began asking Cooper about his missing partner. Cooper said that Wimbush had left the country and would not be returning. He told different versions of where Wimbush moved. Suspicions grew. Wimbush had left the country without any of his possessions and they were in plain view in the cabin. Cooper told people that Wimbush had been apprehended by the authorities for a crime and had been taken out to the lower states. The men and women living in the near vicinity had witnessed a couple of large fires that took place at the end of November. The neighbors began to fear the worst. Over the next few months there were reports to the marshal's office. The office ignored these reports because they needed evidence of a crime. By August 1911 Waterfront Brown did his own investigation. The newspaper said the crime took place on Pedro Creek, but the trial records say it was on Gilmore Creek. The Fairbanks Daily Times on August 3, 1911 said that Waterfront Brown was convinced that Wimbush was murdered. Brown proposed they clean out their shaft for evidence. There was no government provision for such work. A blood stained razor was found on the drift of the mine where William Wimbush last worked. Cooper disappeared after a quizzing in the Fairbanks office of the district attorney. It was believed that Cooper was on Fish Creek or in that neighborhood. Brown commented about the lack of investigation by the authorities. By August 10 funding for the investigation appeared. A search warrant was issued as well as an arrest warrant for John Cooper. The crime was listed as murder in the first degree. The arrest was made by deputy marshal Allen Cunningham. Isaac Ogren was deputized and watched Cooper while the marshal searched the place for evidence. Ogren noticed Cooper looking at the wood pile and when Cunningham returned Ogren found ashes including bones and teeth in the wood pile. Cooper was taken to the federal jail in Fairbanks. The coroner's jury ruled that Cooper had committed a first degree murder. The evidence was charred bones and bits of personal items. Things did not look good for Cooper. Cooper had claimed that Wimbush had gone to the Koyukuk. Wimbush was a Black man and fluent in German. There happened to be another Black man in the Koyukuk who had a partner who was German and this caused a lot of confusion. They finally ruled out the other man. Cooper was indicted by the federal grand jury in November 1911. Cooper plead not guilty. He was remanded to the U.S. marshals. The trial date was

September 1912. The federal judge was Judge Overfield. There were two high profile cases that year in Ruby so Judge Moraine was brought in from Nome to cover the court proceedings. Judge Moraine arrived in August 1912 and he started working on the case. He wanted to be able to return to Nome on one of the last steamers of the season before ice closed down navigation. He had to finish up all of the cases. One of the subpoenas was issued to Mr. Gable who was on a boat on the Tanana. Judge wanted fifty jurors for selection. There were 12 men chosen. The defendant lawyers were D.W. Adams and R.H. Roth. Crossley was the prosecutor. The jurors were chosen on the first day of the trial. The judge ruled that the court would extend into the evening hours. Skilbred shows crime scene evidence. The investigation showed that there were two separate fires to try to get rid of the evidence. Skilbred detailed the evidence brought out at the trial. The trial lasted for five days. The case went to the jury. All of the evidence was circumstantial. The jury was given a list of verdicts to choose from by the judge. The jury found Cooper guilty of first degree murder without capital punishment which meant a life sentence with hard labor. The verdict was read on September 22, 1912. Court was adjourned and the judge had to wait a few days for sentencing so the defense could file a motion for a new trial which they did and the judge denied. On September 25, 1912 the judge sentenced Cooper to life in prison with hard labor. Moraine left town on one of the last boats of the season. Cooper was transported down the Valdez trail to Cordova and then to McNeal Island Prison in Washington. He was prisoner 2245. He arrived at the prison on November 14, 1912. At the time of his arrival some physical information was recorded. He was 41 years old and Skilbred lists his physical attributes. A mugshot of Cooper is shown as well as his waterman photo. One year after Cooper's trial Henry Bats had jumped Wimbush's claim on Engineer Creek. On November 1913 there was a story on the front page of the Fairbanks Daily Times about Judge Moraine being removed from office. He resisted the attempt of his successor to take the office. In May of 1914 the remains of Wimbush were turned over to his friends for burial in the Fairbanks cemetery on Clay Street. John Cooper died in prison on February 22, 1920 after spending seven years in the prison. He was buried in the prison cemetery and later moved to another cemetery on the mainland.

There was a question about Waterfront Brown. Skilbred said he was the bill collector in town.

Martin Gutoski finishes up the talk by asked all of the people to visit