

## Additional Notes on Oscar Wheelock

(Written by Larry Lashway, Feb 2016, Olympia, Washington, a relative of Oscar Wheelock)

### Oscar Wheelock in Butte

A search of a Butte-area newspaper (the *Anaconda Standard*) from 1911 has turned up additional information on the time that Oscar Wheelock spent in Butte. (He apparently arrived there in January or February of 1910, and hastily departed on December 31.)

A front-page story in the *Standard* on January 5 carried the news that Rodney H. Merrick, a clerk at the National Packing Company, had fled town a few days earlier, possibly after stealing money from his employer, and that “Merrick” was in fact an alias for Oscar Wheelock, an embezzler wanted in Massachusetts. Over the next two weeks, a series of stories detailed Oscar’s time in Butte, and revealed the startling claim that local authorities had known his true identity since summer but had left him alone.

OSCAR: The local newspaper accounts provided a fuller description of Wheelock than has previously been available. The *Standard* on January 6 quoted the wanted poster from Boston: “Wanted for larceny--Oscar M. Wheelock, age 35 to 40 years, height 5 feet 9 or 10 inches, weight 135 pounds, complexion light, hair very light. He is very pale and his nose has the appearance of having been broken and turns up at end; is nervous and vain, walks very straight, wears glasses with a gold ear chain. He is a good billiard and pool player<sup>1</sup> and expert at figures.” The original story on January 5 described him as bald, but wearing a toupee. Accounts agreed that he was personable and quite capable—polished in his manner and very well educated. “He was a clever entertainer, played the piano, and sang well, was a good story teller and was welcomed in the best circles in Butte.”

When he came to Butte, he took a job at the telephone company, but later got a position at the National Packing Company. His alias of “Rodney H. Merrick” was said to have been taken from a former coworker at the National Cash Register Company, and he may have used that Merrick’s references to get the bond needed for his position at the packing company.<sup>2</sup>

The story on January 5 added some dramatic details of his departure. Apparently spooked by the imminent arrival of a company auditor, he came home on New Year’s Eve and told his wife he was leaving for an undisclosed destination. “I am going out and try to get to the top. If I succeed, you will hear from me. If I do not, I will blow my brains out.” Crying, he said he had worked hard to make a new name for himself; he appreciated her loyalty but his only hope was running.<sup>3</sup> Winnie covered up his absence for a few days before finally admitting he was gone.

The paper also briefly cited an incident from earlier in the year in which Merrick had suffered what he said was an accidental gunshot wound to the knee while getting ready to leave for work in the morning. However, a later story on January 10 seemed to be dubious about what had happened. The paper reported that a druggist sent to the Merrick residence at 3 a.m. had found him writhing with pain from a bullet wound in his leg. “Mrs. Merrick looked as if she were the one who needed the medicine more than her husband. She was haggard and worn and had apparently been through some frightful ordeal.”

A January 10 story in the *Standard* claimed that Merrick was a “high roller” and frequent gambler who had run through a \$40000 fortune as well as \$10000 of his first wife’s money. He was said to be from a “highly connected” family.<sup>4</sup>

## WINNIE

On January 11, Winnie was asked to give testimony before a police commissioner (the story was carried in the January 12 *Standard*). Although her testimony was described as “rambling and disconnected,” it did provide some interesting information.

She indicated that she had arrived in Butte in March, several months after Oscar. (She and Oscar are listed as Butte residents in the 1910 census under the name “Rodney H. Merrick” and wife Winnie. At that time they were living in a boarding house.<sup>5</sup>) She also said that she and Oscar had been married in Somerville, Massachusetts, in October of 1909, using their real names. When asked whether she had been previously married, she declined to answer.<sup>6</sup>

A number of accounts have claimed that Winnie was related in some way to the mayor of Butte—a niece, a cousin, or just a “distant relative.” In her testimony, Winnie clarified that her older brother was the father of the mayor’s wife, Matilda (in effect, Winnie was her aunt, even though they were about the same age)<sup>7</sup>. Winnie had other relatives in Butte as well. When asked about her relationship to William McGill (who played a role in protecting Oscar from the authorities), she indicated her half brother was the father of McGill’s wife.<sup>8</sup>

Winnie clearly had a strong support network in Butte. On January 6, the *Standard* quoted an acquaintance: “Mrs. Merrick is a fine little woman and all who know her are sorry for her. She stood loyally by her husband through thick and thin and no one should blame her for that. He was a very brilliant, entertaining man and made many friends. Even if she did help deceive some people here she should not be blamed too much, for she wanted her husband to get a fresh start in life and she did all she could to protect and help him.”<sup>9</sup>

## WHO LET OSCAR GET AWAY?

The story would probably have faded away in a day or two if it hadn't become entangled in an ongoing feud between the mayor, Charles Nevin, and a police captain, William Buckner. In 1909, Nevin had instigated Buckner's dismissal from office. (Buckner, responding to rumors that the newly-elected mayor intended to "clean up" the police force, had been soliciting money from fellow officers for a legal defense fund.) Buckner had sued and his job was restored, but bad feelings persisted.

On January 6, the *Standard* reported that the mayor had just filed charges against Buckner on the grounds that the officer had learned Merrick's true identity six months earlier but failed to arrest him. Buckner, on the other hand, said he had tried to arrest Merrick, but was told to keep his hands off because Merrick was related to the mayor, who was protecting him. (Buckner was also faced with two other charges: extortion and having been verbally abusive to the mayor when he encountered him on a streetcar. Both of these charges got less attention than the Merrick issue.)

A series of stories over the next two weeks detailed the claims and counterclaims.

In late July, Buckner had come across a wanted poster from the Boston Police Department for Oscar Wheelock and thought he might be Rodney Merrick; he knew Merrick from having played billiards with him a few times. That night he came across Oscar and Winnie on the street and started to arrest him. After first denying it, Oscar admitted that he was the man in the poster, but asked that he be allowed to take Winnie home before going to the police station; Buckner agreed. On the way, Oscar and Winnie began talking about all the influential friends they had, including "Bill" (William McGill) and "Charley" (Mayor Nevin). Once at their house, Oscar and Winnie called McGill (one of Winnie's relatives), who came right over. Accounts differ on what happened next.

*Buckner:* He said that McGill claimed Mayor Nevin was interested in the matter, and that things could be cleared up once they had a chance to talk with Nevin. McGill told him that if Buckner would be willing to hold off on the arrest until the next day, he would personally guarantee that Merrick would stay put. Buckner agreed. The next morning he discussed the matter with Chief Quinn, who declined to give him any advice on what to do about it. Later that day he saw McGill, who told him everything was fixed up: the mayor wanted to keep his name out of it, but if Buckner left Merrick alone, the mayor wouldn't press charges against Buckner.<sup>10</sup>

*Winnie:* She talked to the mayor on the phone, and he came over to the house, but refused to go inside. Telling him, "Charley, I am in trouble," Winnie

asked him just to say that he knew her husband as Rodney Merrick. “Oh, we’ll do more than that,” he replied. But when he heard Buckner was the officer involved, he refused to go in the house, saying he was afraid Buckner was trying to get something on him. But he assured Winnie he could fix things up. When she saw Nevin the next morning, he said she could tell Buckner that he wouldn’t press charges. He also complained that if “Rod” had told him the truth in the first place, he could have asked Chief Quinn to destroy the wanted poster before Buckner had a chance to see it. He thought that if Merrick got out of town for a few days, the whole thing would blow over.

*McGill:* He verified that he had intervened on Merrick’s behalf and had talked to the mayor, but that Nevin had told him he *wasn’t* going to protect Merrick. McGill said they discussed the pending charges against Buckner but the mayor made no offer to hold off filing them in return for protection of Merrick. Nonetheless, McGill said he took it upon himself to tell Buckner that he could get the charges dropped if he left Merrick alone.

*Nevin:* The mayor consistently denied trying to protect Merrick. On January 7 he told the *Standard* “I don’t know what Merrick or Mrs. Merrick may have said to Buckner or led him to think. I do know that I absolutely refused in any way to sanction anything that would look like compromising with him. I thought Merrick was a crook from the start. I told others I thought he was. That was long before he had anything on him in another way. I instructed Chief Quinn to wire Boston and see if he was wanted there.<sup>11</sup> I never in any way intimated that the man should be protected here at all, and, in fact, gave instructions to go after him.” At the hearing he reaffirmed these statements and also denied giving Oscar a job recommendation.

The outcome of the hearing was quick and probably inevitable, considering that members of the police commission were appointed by the mayor. Just 15 minutes after the hearing ended, the commissioners voted to dismiss Buckner.

Whoever one chooses to believe, it’s hard to disagree with the *Standard*, which on January 6 stated, “From all the statements of the parties interested, it is believed that in this proposition Merrick again used that remarkable shrewdness that he displayed all the way through, and played all his cards so well that he was able to avoid arrest.”

### Where did Oscar and Winnie go?

Oscar’s route after leaving Butte has never been completely clear. We know that he soon found his way to El Paso before joining the rebels in Mexico. According to a story in the January 26 *Standard*, officials had determined

that he left Butte for Salt Lake City early on January 1, and from Salt Lake City proceeded on to Los Angeles, and then San Bernadino.<sup>12</sup> They speculated that he had met Winnie there, but apparently did not have firm evidence of that.

We know that Oscar was in El Paso at the end of January.<sup>13</sup> On January 27, the El Paso *Herald* published a brief social note stating that “Misses Anne and Frances Hughes and Alice Mills, and Messrs. L.J. Locke, R.N. Thigien and O.G. Creighton motored down from El Paso [to nearby Ysleta] and enjoyed an impromptu but delightful dance at the Payne home.” (Frances Hughes is the socially prominent young woman who Creighton apparently became engaged to while in El Paso. If he had already established a relationship with her by the 27<sup>th</sup>, he must have been in the city for some time.) He probably went to Mexico soon after. His name begins showing up in war dispatches by February 20, when he was described as a promising young officer who had already earned the confidence of rebel leaders.<sup>14</sup>

At the time of her testimony to the police commission, Winnie had said she wanted to return east, but she apparently followed Oscar to California, although there is no evidence she met him there. (A story in the January 10 *Standard* said that she had previously lived in California and may have had property there.<sup>15</sup>) On June 3, the El Paso *Herald* published a story saying that a San Francisco detective, W.B. Guinand, had been following Winnie.<sup>16</sup> He said she had left Butte around January 17 and had gone directly to Los Angeles. While there, she had received several letters under the name “Mrs. A.E. Lewis,” and had also sometimes used “O’Malley” as her name. She also traveled to San Diego a number of times. A day earlier, the *Herald* had reported that rebel leader Francisco Madero had received a letter from a Long Beach, California, physician saying that Winnie was on her way to El Paso. She was said to be very ill. She evidently stayed only briefly, leaving for Danvers, Massachusetts, on June 4.<sup>17</sup> She returned briefly to Texas in March of 1912, after going to Mexico City to receive \$6000 and a pension from the Madero government.<sup>18</sup>

What happened to her thereafter is unclear. In the early 1920s, several Boston city directories show a Mrs. Winifred Wheelock, listed as a widow. There is also a 1925 marriage record in Marin County, California, showing a Winifred Wheelock marrying a Patrick H. Moran. She was listed as a native of Pennsylvania and as a resident of Boston. Her age is given as 35, which is within the range we would expect for Winnie. However, there is no way of confirming that this was her.

#### Reaction of family & friends

In November of 1911, Annie Wheelock, Oscar’s aunt, wrote to her brother Charles Sumner Wheelock<sup>19</sup>, and included this bit of family gossip:

“Did I write you about Oscar, the oldest boy, I hardly think so. Warren wrote me and sent a clipping from the California paper that Leslie sent him. It referred to death of Captain Creighton and it was discovered that it was Oscar Wheelock. I will enclose the clipping and when you have read it will you kindly take care of it or return it to me. Warren sent it to me. I then wrote to Frank<sup>20</sup> and he answered me at once and told me almost the same things as this but did not go into quite as many details. However, he did say that Oscar was reckless and daring and from his letter I assume caused considerable worry. His wife died in Boston and this must have occurred after that. He must have just gone to the dogs after that if not before. Frank wrote that his wife died in January 1910--I believe. He must have married again or else pretended to be married from this clipping. They sent his body home and Frank said Joe<sup>21</sup> was at the funeral. He said Etta<sup>22</sup> was nearly killed over it. He always was a wild one I guess.”

In Massachusetts, a reporter for the Boston *Traveler* found that Oscar’s friends were forgiving. “Those who knew him here will not talk of the thing with which he was charged. ‘He was a brave man—and he is dead,’ they say, and there they stop.” In a philosophical mood, the reporter said, “Since the beginning there have been men who have marched through the world with puzzled eyes and have sinned in the marching. After the sinning is over and the whimsical hearts are stilled and the puzzled eyes closed, it has long been the wont of the world to cease in its judging and to gaze mistily upon the bier and—to forget. It may have been that Wheelock was a man like this.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> He was skilled enough to be booked for an exhibition match with a well-known touring professional, George Sutton. (Boston *Globe*, December 30, 1905).

<sup>2</sup> The Dayton, Ohio, city directory for 1907 shows an Oscar Wheelock and wife Fanny G.; he was listed as a tracer for the National Cash Register Company. Since Oscar’s name does not appear in the 1907 Somerville directory, this is almost certainly him. There were a number of Merricks in Dayton, but none named Rodney.

<sup>3</sup> The reporter was vague about his sources for this story. It’s not clear whether he talked directly with Winnie, got the information second-hand, or was just reporting a rumor.

<sup>4</sup> The reporter was either reporting rumors or trying to improve an already good story. Whatever Oscar’s spending habits, there is no evidence whatever that he had access to that kind of money. His family, while respectable, was never particularly prominent or well-connected.

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<sup>5</sup> Winnie's presence in Butte in April makes it much less likely that she is the same person as the Winnie O'Malley in Brookline, Massachusetts, where the census was also taken in April. The Winnie in Brookline was a 19-year-old recently arrived Irish immigrant; the Winnie in Butte said she was a 24-year-old native of Pennsylvania.

<sup>6</sup> Despite this claim, there is still no known record of this marriage under either name—Wheelock or Merrick.

<sup>7</sup> This appears to be accurate. A 1902 Montana marriage certificate for Charles Nevin and Matilda O'Malley lists Matilda's parents as William P. O'Malley and Bridget Lavell O'Malley.

<sup>8</sup> An 1893 Montana marriage certificate shows William McGill married to Mary O'Malley, daughter of William O'Malley and Bridget Lavell O'Malley. This has to be the same William O'Malley who was Matilda's father, so it remains unclear whether he was Winnie's brother or half-brother.

<sup>9</sup> The acquaintance was not identified, but may have been William McGill, who seems to have done the most to protect Oscar & Winnie.

<sup>10</sup> It isn't completely clear what charges against Buckner might have been pending in summer of 1910. It's possible that they were the same accusations that were cited at Buckner's hearing in January. The *Standard* on January 8 indicated that those charges (accepting protection money from Belle Rhodes, "a landlady in the restricted district") dated back to 1908. Perhaps Nevin had just been holding on to them for an opportune moment.

<sup>11</sup> If so, it was a useless gesture, since the Boston police were looking for Oscar Wheelock and had never heard of "Rodney Merrick."

<sup>12</sup> This account implies that he went directly to Los Angeles, without a stopover of any length in San Francisco. His train may have passed through there on its way south, but given the timelines, he seems unlikely to have had the time to pull off the bank robbery with which his name is often associated.

<sup>13</sup> He may have chosen El Paso as his destination because a cousin, Erdix Dearing, lived there at the time.

<sup>14</sup> El Paso *Herald*, February 20, 1911.

<sup>15</sup> This can't be confirmed, but might be true, since she was apparently comfortable enough with Los Angeles to spend several months there after being abandoned by Oscar. The Los Angeles city directory for 1910 shows a Winifred O'Malley, listed as a domestic servant. If Winnie was there early in 1910, it conflicts with her story about

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following Oscar to Butte from Massachusetts. Overall, Winnie's life before she reached Butte remains a mystery.

<sup>16</sup> He was said to be working for the company that had bonded Oscar when he worked in Boston. They were presumably hoping to recover some of the money he had embezzled.

<sup>17</sup> El Paso *Herald*, June 5, 1911.

<sup>18</sup> El Paso *Herald*, March 23, 1912.

<sup>19</sup> A copy of this letter is currently in the possession of Larry Lashway of Olympia, Washington.

<sup>20</sup> Oscar's younger brother.

<sup>21</sup> Oscar's father. (His parents were evidently separated.)

<sup>22</sup> Oscar's mother, Juliette.

<sup>23</sup> As reprinted in the *Anaconda Standard*, June 12, 1911.