

SUSAN B. CLARK MURDERED IN ORANGE CITY NOV 11, 1919

Jerry Hale* – 1 June 2010

The recent news of the murder of Rabbitt R. M. Burns in her home in Orange City was tragic. The police soon caught up with her killer. The police are much better at catching the bad guys in this day and age of forensics and instant communication. It was not always so. A similar murder happened in Orange City way back in 1919. Another woman, Mrs. Susan (Baker) Clark, ran a grocery store on "Main Street", known today as Graves Avenue, just east of Volusia Avenue (Hwy 17/92).

The initial story was found in the *Brownell Collection*¹. There are many such stories in those volumes but this one caught my eye. Was Susan Clark a native or had she come to Orange City from somewhere else? Would it be possible to learn more about her? With all of the resources available in the Genealogy Room and online it might be possible. "Our Story of Orange City"² mentions the story but doesn't give any details about Susan or about Mrs. Marshall who was beaten up and tied in a similar fashion on that same night but survived. The account in the newspaper of that time differs from the story in the Orange City history. Here is what was learned:

Susan Baker was born in Manchester Borough, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh, in about 1846, the 4th of 10 children. Her parents both came to this country from England before 1850. Her mother died between 1870 and 1880 and her widowed father continued working as a Blacksmith. He is listed in 1880, age 63. Susan, age 30 and her sisters, Harriett, age 28 and Sadie [Sarah], age 24 were all still single and living at home.³

Meanwhile John Wesley Clark was born in Sept 1848, in Lime Ridge, Center Twp., Columbia County, Pennsylvania, near Wilkes Barre. His parents, Robert and Elizabeth Clark, both from England, were farmers.³ By 1870 the father, Robert, had passed away and his son William was running a dairy farm in Pittsburgh, Ward 21. William and his wife Mary as well as John, age 21 and his wife Virginia E. [Estelle], age 20, are listed as dairymen. Mother Elizabeth, age 60 is keeping house. There was apparently a connection between the Clark and Baker families as Jane Baker is listed with the Clark family in 1870, occupation 'H.R.'³



The Clark grocery store building, later known as the Hogan Hotel
[From the Orange City Library Association collection used with permission
of Mr. Harley Strickland, President and thanks to Mrs. Joan LaFleur]

By 1880 John and Estelle V. [Virginia] are in Ward 3, Precinct 21 of Pittsburgh, running a retail grocery business. Estelle Virginia or Virginia Estelle was born in Ohio in 1849, her father was also born in Ohio and her mother is listed as born in "Europe". She was not present in the 1900 census and John had gone to Florida.³

Nothing more is known of John Clark and Susan Baker until they both arrived in Volusia County and were married in Orange City, on March 23rd 1887.⁴ They opened a retail grocery business on Main Street (see photo above). John was not well and struggled to help Susan run the business, doing the books and ordering until shortly before his death. He attended the Methodist Church when his health allowed.

Knowing he was failing John made all possible preparation for his interment which he desired should be made in Pittsburgh in a beautiful lot there selected by himself. He sent for his brother, David G. Clark in Pittsburgh. David started for Orange City immediately but before he arrived John had passed quietly away on May 8th 1907. Gus Allen prepared the body and Rev. Autle preformed the ceremony at the house. After the funeral Susan and John's brother David accompanied the body back to Pittsburgh for burial.⁵

Susan continued to run the grocery business. Two of Susan's sisters, Harriett and Sarah came to live with her in Orange City. Harriett died of tuberculosis on 25 May 1913 and Sarah died on 8 Dec 1917.⁶

Undoubtedly lonely, Susan married Thomas H. Nelson on 30 Mar 1918.⁷ This marriage is documented but its dissolution is not. What happened to the marriage and to Thomas Nelson is a mystery. He doesn't appear in anything that has been recorded of Susan's life and she remained Susan B. Clark until her death.

Now operating her grocery business and living alone above her store on Main Street, age 73, tragedy struck. The headline on the morning of November 12, 1919 read **"ORANGE CITY WOMAN MURDERED IN HOME ANOTHER BEATEN UP"**⁸

The Story⁸

"About 9 o'clock this morning, John Thursby, agent at Orange City Junction, noticed that the little refreshment stand opposite the depot had not been opened. He went across the railroad tracks, and upon approaching the building heard groans. He went inside and there found Mrs. Laura A. Marshall, the keeper of the refreshment stand, tied to the foot of her bed, with several cloths around her head and throat, her feet tied together, and her hands tied behind her back. Blood was on the floor and on her clothing and she had been severely beaten and bruised. He released the old lady and sent in the alarm. Dr. G. A. Davis of DeLand was telephoned for as was also Sheriff Morris. Mrs. Marshall, as soon as she was able, stated that she had been beaten during the early part of the night by a dark brown negro, who beat her up, tied her, and finally made her confess where she kept her money. The negro secured the money, about \$80.00, and made his escape. She remained where she had been tied until help came late this morning.

MURDER IN ORANGE CITY. When this news was flashed to Orange City, Miss Bessie Martin recalled that Mrs. S. B. Clark's store had not been opened all morning, and she, with Mr. Thompson, went over to investigate. Mrs. Clark lived in the second floor of the brick building on the north side of the main street. Miss Martin and Mr. Thompson effected an entrance by the back stairs where they found Mrs. Clark foully murdered, and the entire house torn up. The murder had been committed by means of a blunt instrument, either a monkey wrench or possibly the butt of a revolver. Mrs. Clark was also tied with cloths; her skull was crushed, and she had been beaten practically all over the body. The house was ransacked, evidently by someone looking for money or valuables.

INQUEST BEING HELD. County Judge McCrory, Sheriff Morris and several of his deputies are in Orange City this afternoon holding an inquest.

TWO SUSPECTS ARRESTED. One white man and one negro have been arrested as suspects.

NEGRO WAS ARMED. Mrs. Marshall stated that the negro was armed with a big revolver, but that he beat her with a wrench. Dr. Davis, who attended her, states that her wounds are not necessarily fatal.

WHITE STRANGER NOTED. Mr. Thursby states that there was a white man around the Orange City Junction station for a considerable time yesterday, with no apparent pressing business.

PRATT'S HORSE STOLEN. B. G. Pratt's horse was stolen in Orange City last night, but returned home of its own volition this morning. The halter with which the horse was probably driven was found this morning on the Harden Ferry road.

ORANGE CITY INN ENTERED. Some one entered Orange City Inn yesterday afternoon during the absence of the managers. Entrance was effected through a window. So far as can be ascertained, nothing was stolen.

The next day **ORANGE CITY MURDER STILL A MYSTERY - MURDERER AT LARGE. . . . HANDSOME GOLD WATCH.** A handsome gold watch, Waltham movement, was found on the floor of Mrs. Marshall's room; it is thought that this watch was worn by the person who assaulted her and was wrenched loose in the scuffle. Mrs. Marshall's bank book was found some distance down the railroad track.

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The information in the DeLand News articles of November 12th & 13th didn't provide many clues, only that watch, and on Nov 17th & 19th tideland *Daily News* and the *DeLand News* reprinted a story from *Daytona Daily News* which compared this murder and assault to the famous Packwood murders in Oak Hill in 1891 and of Mr. & Mrs. Neff in their home between DeLand and DeLeon Springs of a few years before.¹⁰

Also in the *DeLand Daily News* of the 19th it was stated that Sheriff Morris had received a letter from Sheriff J. A. Hampton of Plant City. Sheriff Hampton related that a robber had made off with several watches there the week before. One of those stolen watches turned out to be the one found on the floor of Mrs. Marshall's apartments.

Mrs. Clark was buried in "Hollywood Field" Lot #44 W-1/2 grave #3, on November 18th 1919, beside her sisters Harriett and Sarah.⁶ Susan is always referred to as Mrs. Susan B. Clark, there was no mention of a husband, nor was she ever called a widow.

The search continued for the murderer. Governor Catts put up a \$150 reward for the murderer and an extra \$100 for the assault of Mrs. Marshall. The town of Orange City offered \$1,000 for the murderer of Mrs. Clark.

The investigation into the murder and assault dragged on into 1920. At several times someone would be arrested and thought to be the perpetrator but Mrs. Marshall had gotten a good look at the criminal and cleared several of them.

On December 30th 1919 Samuel Habersham was arrested in Miami for attempting to break in and rob the home of ex-Sheriff John Fronoch and for carrying a concealed weapon. He fit the description of the perpetrator and so Sheriff Lee Morris & Mrs. Marshall traveled to Dade Co. Samuel Habersham turned out not to be the man who did the crimes in Orange City. He was prosecuted and sentenced for the burglary and ended up in the law annals of Florida when his case made it to the Florida Supreme Court. His conviction was upheld upon review. (see Appendix xxxv.)



Roy Trapp

In August Sheriff Morris received a wire from Sheriff C. E. Jackson, Sheriff of Orange County California at Santa Ana.¹² One Mose Gibson had murdered a rancher, Roy Trapp and his wife at Fullerton, Calif. Gibson was pursued and captured in Topoca, Arizona, (sic Topock) about 260 miles east. He was brought back to Santa Ana where he was arraigned, given a preliminary hearing, convicted and sentenced to hang within three hours. Because of a lynching threat Gibson was transferred to San Quinten prison to await his fate.

Sheriff Jackson interviewed Gibson who proceeded to confess to several murders and an array of burglaries. One of the murders he confessed to was a woman in Orange City Junction, Florida in November of 1919. Whether he thought he had killed Mrs. Marshall or was just confused or, some thought, lying in hopes of delaying his hanging and perhaps find a way to escape, is not known. He didn't seem to remember killing Mrs.

Clark on that same night and his confession was rambling and contradictory.¹³

Sheriff Morris traveled to California to interview Gibson¹⁴ himself but nothing was ever mentioned about the results of that trip. The newspaper file is not complete and so, if anything was printed it must have been in the missing pages.

On Saturday, September 25, 1920 the *DeLand Daily News* carried a short article:

“Mose Gibson Hanged For California Murder.”¹⁵

“The negro Mose Gibson, convicted of the murder of Mr. and Mrs. Roy G. Trapp, and who confessed the murder of Mrs. Susan B. Clark of Orange City and the assault of Mrs. Laura A. Marshall of Orange City Junction was hanged in San Quentin, California prison yesterday.” Thus ended any mention of the incident. Mose Gibson's “confession” is recorded in Appendix xxx. The article that introduced that confession carried the headline **“Mose Gibson Confession Orange City Murder Seems Rather Mixed.”** The *Orange County, Calif BLOG* discusses the crime under the heading **“The 50 most notorious crimes in Orange County History.”** <http://tinyurl.com/32mvvs3> > and carries the below photograph of Mose Gibson in custody after being returned to Santa Ana. The front page of the Santa Ana Register on the day Gibson was executed is also displayed. (see Appendix xxxiii & xxxiv and see Appendix xxxvi for a map of the area.)



Convicted killer Mose Gibson, center, was hanged at San Quentin Prison. Courtesy: Orange County Sheriff's Department

Whether Mose Gibson was the real murderer or whether he was led to the confession of the murder of Susan Baker is still a mystery in my mind. What do you think?

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References:

- 1- "The Brownell Collection" DeLand (FL) Library Genealogy and Local History Room; Daphne Brownell, Notebook 11 (pdf on DVD), Carr - Clarke, pg 328-335
- 2- "Our Story of Orange City Florida" Village Improvement Ass'n 1894-1966 R.R. Stn pg 90, General Store pg 101 (used here with permission, President Joan LaFleur, Orange City Woman's Club.); and "Our Story of Orange City" Village Improvement Association, Village Improvement Association, Orange City Woman's Club 1894-2000; Joan J. LaFleur, Editor; re Susan Clark, pg 37; Re Mrs. Marshall, pg 45.
- 3- 1850 – 1900 Census; Clark and Baker, see Appendix i thru ix.
- 4- Volusia County Marriages Book "B", Part 2 1883 – 1887 Volusia Co GenWeb <http://www.volusiagenealogy.net/marriages/bkbmarr2.htm> Copyright ©2008, W.R. Morgan Vol Co Marriage Records 1856-1925 © 1999 W. R. Morgan; Book "D" thru "I" Brides 1904 to 1926 Tab "D" Page 137 (Appendix xv)
- 5- Obituary J. W. Clark; The Volusia Co Record. 17 May 1907. (Appendix xi.)
- 6- Misc Records of Vol Co. Daphne M. Brownell; Hollywood Field pg 7 (60)
- 7- Book "E" Part 1 1912 To 1914. [Thomas H. Nelson & Susan B. Clark, Mar. 30, 1913] Bk E, Pg 122
© 1999 W. R. Morgan (Appendix xv)
- 8- DeLand Daily News 12 November 1919 pg 1. (IMG_0167)
- 9- DeLand Daily News – Thursday November 13, 1919 (IMG_0239-0240 Appendix xviii)
- 10- DeLand Daily News Monday Nov 17, 1919 Vol 6 No. 35 (IMG_0214-0219) and The DeLand News Wednesday, Nov. 19, 1919 Vol. XXXIV No. 47 (IMG_0616-0622) Appendix xix.
- 11- (Supreme Court of Florida Vol. 80 June Term 1920 "Habersham v. State of Florida" pg 241-242 and 80 Fla. 240 Supreme Court of Florida, July 10, 1920. Southern Reporter pg 655-656.) Appendix xxxv.
- 12 – DeLand News Wednesday, 28 July 1920 Vol. XXXV. No. 29 (IMG_1768-1770) Appendix xxviii
- 13- DeLand News, Wednesday, 18 August 1920, Vol. XXXV No. 32 (IMB_1823-1831) Appendix xxx
- 14- DeLand News, Wednesday, 25 Aug, 1920 (IMG_1850-1855)) Appendix xxxi
- 15- DeLand Daily News Saturday, 25 Sept 1920. (IMG_1920 09 25 Mose Gibson) Appendix xxxii