

The Murder of William Ellexson

By Robert Hutchison

“Modus operandi” (M.O.) is a Latin term that means the mode of operation of a crime; in the case of Ellexson, it is murder. Occasionally, as in this case, a more recent crime must be solved prior to solving a previous crime. The M.O. of Ellexson’s murderer, in my opinion, fits James Dennis Houck like a glove. To put this in perspective: The murder of Ellexson, who was a shepherd, took place on July 20, 1885, according to the markings on his headstone. Consequently, his flock of sheep disappeared around the same time. His headstone is located about 10 miles north of where Al Fulton was murdered in 1888. Approximately seven miles southeast is where the “Hanging Tree” is located where Stott, Scott and Wilson met their demise a month earlier than Fulton in 1888. Houck was present at the Hanging Tree, along with 27 other men, when the hanging took place and Houck’s sheep ranch is located two and a half miles east of the Hanging Tree.

Of the five gravesites that I have discovered in the past year, Ellexson’s is the only one that has a footstone and is the only one that hasn’t been violated by grave robbers or relocated, such as they did with the graves of Stott, Scott, Wilson and Fulton.

The St. John’s Herald Newspaper, printed on October 14, 1886, gave Houck’s testimony as follows:

“James D. Houck came in from his big sheep ranch this week on business connected with commissary department. Mr. Houck, having contracted for the care of his sheep interest, will hereafter devote his time and attention to the cultivation of the soil. His farm is in the neighborhood of Wilford in this County.”

This is strange because Houck did not register a sheep brand until September 20, 1888 at 3:00 pm. A few days later, Fulton was murdered and his huge flock of sheep disappeared.

So, what are the chances of this happening to two shepherders, ten miles apart. There was no such thing in the law books that pertained to a sheep rustler or a mule thief but Houck had acquired both sheep and mules with no record of purchase during these time frames.

Located in the “Old West” section of the Holbrook Cemetery are approximately 139 murdered men buried with a cheap piece of lath indicating “unknown” as being the occupant. Houck and Owen both were heard to brag about having 31 notches on their pistols’ grips.

Just saying...