

## A Fine Day for a Parade

The body still hung from the Chehalis River Bridge on the morning of the 12th. Deeming this an inappropriate spectacle for the children trundling across on their way to school, John Haney cut the rope with a hunting knife and watched the corpse flop into the muddy shallows. He was on his way to join a posse, and couldn't be bothered to pull what he assumed were the remains of Britt Smith, the local I.W.W. leader, onto shore. Only that evening, after Haney gave the wrong hand signal and was shot dead by another deputized citizen in an abandoned cabin north of town, did the coroner have the corpse taken back to the county jail for identification.

By then it was clear that the dead man was one Wesley Everest, a lumber worker and a Wobbly, but not in any notable position within the organization. The numerous gunshot wounds in his torso had drained in the river, leaving the rope burn on the pale skin around his collar the most obvious sign of injury. It had taken three tries to actually snap his neck.

The coroner determined it was suicide.

That night, inmates built a coffin of scrap wood while the National Guard stood watch in the streets. Investigators picked slowly through the blood and shattered glass along North Tower Street, stopping every once in awhile to pick up flags and ribbons left lying from the Armistice Day Parade.

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On a crisp afternoon two days before the parade, Mrs. Anna Verna Grimm dropped Shirley Ann off at the neighbors' and walked to the library. It had been too long since her last visit. Between cooking meals and taking care of Shirley Ann, she'd found time to read and re-read all seven books she'd borrowed. All of them were nonfiction. Verna's choice of literature tended to swing back and forth between fantastical novels and obsessive research of factual matters.

At that time she was fascinated with the Czar. The Czar was dead, of course, along with the rest of his family. But Verna was fascinated with the Czar in a historical context. The power. The extravagance. The imitation of Western Europe after the Grand Tour. And, of course, any rumors she or one of her acquaintances could scrounge from a newspaper about the cold-blooded murder of the Romanovs only a year earlier. Those poor children.

Verna hoped to visit Russia someday, after the civil troubles there blew over. Her husband Warren had been stationed there during the war. Not the interesting part of Russia, though. Just the frozen wastes and fishing villages north of Manchuria, with a brief stint further south in Harbin. But it was an important diplomatic mission according to president Wilson. They had to save the Czech volunteers, and keep the railroads running. Warren was only gone for a little over a year, working at the division headquarters.

When he returned to a hero's welcome, the American Legion made him head of the Centralia post. He loved being in charge. He loved being in charge so much that he had convinced his brother Huber to present his suggestions for the upcoming Armistice Day Parade to the Centralia and Chehalis city councils. Mostly he wanted to change the route, and move the two American Legion contingents to the end of the parade, with Chehalis in front of Centralia. He also suggested that Verna's library brigade take the second spot in the

lineup, right behind the initial color guard. Then everyone would see that the Centralia Carnegie Library was the crown jewel of Lewis County, WA.

Thus Verna's afternoon trip was for more than just picking up reading material; she needed to harangue a few old colleagues into walking in the parade with her. This would presumably be an easy task. Verna had been quite popular as head librarian, and since everyone would be attending the parade anyway, they might as well do their civic duty to represent the institution.

She noticed a small pamphlet pasted to the front door as she approached. It read, in large, stylized letters, IWW: WHAT WE STAND FOR. Below the title was a set of concentric circles in which were inscribed a few of the organization's goals and values, all of which smacked of Bolshevism. She tore it down and stuffed the crumpled paper into her bag. Lining the bottom of Sarge's cage was about all it was good for.

Once inside the library, she proceeded immediately to the front desk to ask George Clark, the circulation clerk, if he would be willing to help carry a banner in the parade.

"We have a banner?" he asked.

Eleanor Beatty overheard their conversation and offered to hold up the other end of the banner, which was stored in the library basement behind the card catalog, left over from the facility's grand opening. George wasn't convinced of its existence until Verna took him downstairs to retrieve it. Deeming a party of three—plus Shirley Ann—to be large enough, Verna began to browse the nonfiction section, only to stop in her tracks upon noticing that Dorothy Vanderveer was shelving in the 947s.

There was no particular reason for Verna not to talk to Dorothy. They had had a reasonably amicable professional relationship in their first few years working at the library. It was only after Warren began courting her that Verna started to wonder if she should stay out of Dorothy's line of sight. Dorothy had been close friends with Warren's previous wife, Ina, who died a mere year before Verna and Warren's marriage, and, though she had no clear evidence to back it up, Verna theorized that Dorothy saw her as trying to replace the deceased.

In truth, Verna was probably more worried about her relation to Ina than Dorothy was. She loved Warren, that was for sure, but whenever she thought about it for any length of time it started to bother her that Warren had started courting so soon after Ina's death. It didn't help that she and Ina looked rather alike.

Verna had also heard rumors lately that Dorothy had dealings with the Wobblies, Verna wondered if she had put up the pamphlet outside, but surely Dorothy couldn't have fallen so far into Bolshevism since the last time they'd talked. Could she? Ever since she found out that Elmer Smith was sympathetic to the labor union, Verna had worried that she wasn't as good at sensing people's motives as she'd thought.

She resolved that she was already fretting too much to properly talk to Dorothy, but perhaps she should try to rekindle their friendship sometime soon. Everyone's nerves would cool a little once the parade business was over.

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Late in the evening of the 11th, the lights of Centralia went out. Electrical power to the entire town abruptly cut off, perhaps due to a malfunction or accident at the nearest

distribution station. Luckily for the newly installed electric refrigerators at the drugstore downtown, the issue was resolved in a matter of minutes.

During the time the lights were out, a crowd descended on the jailhouse and convinced the guard to step aside and provide them with the keys to Wesley's cell. He had refused to tell his name to anyone who questioned him, so the crowd assumed he was Britt Smith. It didn't really matter who he was; they all knew he was the Wobbly who shot Dale Hubbard. He muttered something unintelligible to the rest of the inmates before the crowd hauled him out into the back of the mayor's Packard and drove to the Chehalis River bridge.

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Dr. Frank J. Bickford came to visit while Verna was cooking dinner the night before the parade. He had been talking with Arthur McElfresh, he said, and just wanted to drop by to iron out a few last parade issues with Warren.

Verna did not enjoy Frank's visits. He was a lying braggart, and spoke quite loudly on account of being near-deaf from his time in an artillery unit. But he was a friend of Warren's and, unfortunately, Centralia's main licensed physician, obliging him to a number of boisterous house calls during Shirley Ann's infancy.

Perhaps the greatest annoyance was that each time Frank visited, Sarge would pick up a bit more of his vocabulary and Verna would have to hear Frank's voice flowing profusely from the birdcage between dawn and noon for the next few days. She often wished that Warren had never brought the bird back from the brief time he was stationed in Manchuria. But Warren got a kick out of the myna's spot-on impressions, and insisted that all the young children he had seen in Harbin had pet birds and Shirley Ann would love having a pet bird when she was a bit older, assuming Sarge lived that long.

"How is little Shirley doing right now, Mrs. Grimm?" Frank roared upon being unleashed upon the house.

"Quite well," Verna shouted in response, and went back to preparing a rich leek soup. Frank and Warren's conversation was all too easy to eavesdrop on, even as she alternated between shuffling pots and pans and soothing the wailing Shirley Ann.

"For heaven's sake, Frank, the parade's tomorrow," Warren said. "What do you want to change this time?"

"I'm just planning ahead for a few contingencies that popped into my head."

"Carry on."

"I was wondering if the parade regiment should carry their rifles."

"Just the color guard."

"Maybe we'll have the rest of the boys carry pipes or hoses or something. You know, just in case."

Frank and Warren laughed for a bit before they noticed Verna glancing around the corner of the kitchen doorway. Warren cleared his throat and wiped a bit of sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief.

"What are you trying to do, Frank, start a war?"

"I'm just worried, that's all. Better safe than sorry."

"I guess Elmer Smith did warn me a few days back that the Wobblies are on edge."

"They're gonna try something. Knock the flag down, maybe, or steal Daniel's crutches. I don't know."

"No, I don't think they'll try anything," Warren said. "I got John Earl Watts to join our group for the parade."

Frank seemed indignant.

"He's no Legionnaire."

"At least he served. Just like you and me."

"He's still a Wobbly."

"Trust me, Frank. If we've got one of them with us, they'll think twice before trying anything. Or, in the worst case, they'll go after him first for selling out."

"Well I guess if they get in our way, we can always use The Wedge."

Warren shook his head and laughed.

The Wedge, of course, was Warren's signature move from his All-American days at the University of Washington. In his inaugural tie-up fight with the Huskies, the newly arrived Grimm had arranged his fellow freshman into a tight tactical formation to charge through the line of upperclassmen, earning him recognition and an enduring nickname. As much as he feigned embarrassment in public, Warren was really quite fond of the term.

Verna worried that Warren and Frank's conversation was drifting too close to planning a repeat of the previous year's debacle during a Red Cross parade, when the Elk's Lodge stormed the Wobbly hall and burned their pamphlets, after which they hauled the blind man who ran the press fifteen miles out of town and told him never to return. She wished this sort of thing could be dealt with cleanly and efficiently, by the National Guard or maybe by a real army regiment. Surely Warren or Huber or mayor Vanderveer could convince the state government or even President Wilson (at least whatever was left of him) of the looming threat beneath the labour union banner.

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When Wesley Everest was first set upon by the mob on the banks of the Skookumchuck river, the plan was to hang him right then and there from the nearest telegraph pole. At least two people had brought rope, and didn't want it to go to waste. Only Lillian Paulson, a lumber mill owner's daughter, had the gumption to berate the array of upstanding citizens for not letting the man have a fair trial. They sheepishly resolved to postpone their judgement, at least until later when Lillian had gone to bed and could no longer intervene.

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"I saw Dorothy Vanderveer at the library today," Verna said as they sat in bed finishing the parts of the newspaper they'd missed over breakfast.

"Oh?"

"When I went to pick up the banner. For the parade."

Warren looked up from his half of the newspaper for a moment. "How is she?"

"I don't know. I didn't speak with her."

"I see."

He returned to a news article about the Women's vote in Maine. If he realized how Verna would know he knew Dorothy, or if he realized why she might bring the topic to bear, he did not show it.

She could ask him directly. She would have to do it eventually. Maybe someday once Shirley Ann was married and away. Besides, such a confrontational approach would take far more energy than she had at this late of an hour. Thinking of confrontation reminded her, though:

“Do you really think the Wobblies will cause trouble at the parade tomorrow?”

Warren looked up again, folding the newspaper this time.

“I don’t think so. Are you ready for the library to give a fine showing?”

“Of course I am.”

Warren smiled, kissed her on the lips, set his newspaper aside, and turned off the kerosene lamp on his side of the bed.

“Goodnight, Verna.”

“Goodnight, Dear,” she replied.

Perhaps, she thought, she should read less of the news. The stories had a way of staying with her even as the years went on; a strange noise, an overheard word, and all of a sudden her mind would be thinking back to the airship crash in Chicago, to Galleani, to the Key West hurricane. If she isolated herself, perhaps she could unburden her mind. Let the horrors and headlines stay far away. Besides, local troubles and Shirley Ann were more than sufficient to keep her from a good night’s rest.

“Warren,” she asked, “do you think I worry too much?”

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Wesley Everest ran out of the back of the Roderick Hotel shortly after the Centralia post of the American Legion stormed the building. A sizable crowd pursued him, though he had a considerable head start. Only the noted athlete Dale Hubbard was able to catch him, and even then only as Wesley tried to ford the Skookumchuck River.

Dale Hubbard had a pistol in his hand. He ordered Wesley to surrender, to which Wesley responded by shooting Dale Hubbard in the chest. As it turned out, the pistol Dale Hubbard had been holding was empty. At this point Wesley also possessed an empty pistol, which was of little use as the rest of the crowd appeared and hauled him out of the water, pausing momentarily to strike his face with a rifle butt.

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Verna woke early in the morning to the sound of Sarge repeating Frank’s conversation the night before. She covered the bird’s cage in a towel to try to quiet him down as she fixed breakfast.

“We can always use The Wedge,” Sarge muttered.

Warren ate quickly and gave her a kiss on his way out the door. The American Legion was meeting early to do a few drills before the parade, just for old time’s sake. Verna washed the dishes and pans before waking and feeding Shirley Ann.

As she walked across Second Street pushing Shirley Ann along in the pram, Verna could swear she saw Reverend Wilson and mayor Vanderveer walking together towards the courthouse, each carrying a freshly tied noose.

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The Wobblies would claim during the ensuing trial that the Legionnaires charged the Roderick Hotel before any shots were fired. The American Legion would offer their own interpretation, in which three former soldiers were gunned down for merely stopping to reform ranks in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Eugene Barnett, back from an early morning of coyote hunting, saw Warren Grimm through a gap in the crowd and fired. John Joe Davis shot next with a revolver, though many would claim that Arthur McElfresh was instead killed by a .22 caliber rifle bullet fired from over 500 yards away atop Seminary Hill. Some of the Wobblies were crack shots, after all. Davis shot Ben Cassagrande next before disappearing forever, making his way out of the county before anyone could figure out exactly who he was. Wesley Everest's first contribution to the morass was shooting John Earl Watts in the side while both were inside the Roderick.

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Verna breathed a sigh of relief as she approached the end of the parade. The Wobblies hadn't caused any trouble when they passed by the union hall the first time. The route doubled back to the front of the building on North Tower Street, but the last hundred yards were packed with spectators forming a line so thick that no rabble-rousers could hope to get through. As long as there wasn't a raid like the previous year's, the whole parade could end peacefully and the town could go back to seeking legal methods of evicting the Bolsheviks.

She smiled and waved at Dorothy Vanderveer in the crowd, trying to look as friendly as possible. Maybe they could meet for afternoon coffee someday soon. She remembered that Dorothy was interested in birds, or at least hats made from birds. Perhaps she'd be more interested in the offer if informed that Sarge would be in attendance.

Shirley Ann started to cry. Verna was surprised the child had made it through this much commotion and fanfare with an even temper. She told George that she should probably take Shirley Ann home, and started walking a little quicker towards the end of the route, right on the heels of the lead color guard.

The rear color guard began to fire off a three-volley salute. They weren't particularly coordinated, as Verna could hear four or five rather unevenly timed volleys. Perhaps it was the echoes off the brick walls downtown. Perhaps it was Frank, shooting off whenever he felt necessary. Verna turned the pram safely to the side of the road and looked back at the growing commotion. The crowd of paradegoers had scattered, giving a clear view of the color guard lowering Warren to the curb as The Wedge, with Frank Bickford in the lead, charged headlong up the steps of the Roderick.