

Way We Were

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The dreadful demise of dear Mr. Murphy

Jerry Murphy, “always a quiet, well-behaved fellow,” died of a slit throat and four gunshot wounds on the afternoon of November 6, 1907 in his rooms above Park City’s Roy Mercantile. Local papers reported his death as a suicide committed in a fit of “mental derangement,” but it seems far more likely that someone wanted Murphy dead.

According to the Park Record, Murphy returned from a three-day bender in Salt Lake City that left him in “a melancholy and nervous state of mind.” Hours later he was found dead with a gun beside him. A bloody razor in another room and a blood-soaked handkerchief in Murphy’s pocket pointed to suicide. The Park Record reported that “after cutting his throat deep enough to sever the wind pipe,” Murphy “walked sixty feet...opened his trunk, took a box of cartridges and with a single-action 22-calibre rifle, fired four shots into his body, stopping after each, to remove the empty cartridge and re-load.” Murphy aimed for his heart with the first shot but missed. He then shot himself three more times in the head before finally dying.

To explain how someone could kill themselves this way, the Park Record stated that Murphy’s chosen modus operandi would’ve brought death on slowly, and that he still would’ve had energy to shoot himself too. Although it would not take “a few hours” to die of a slit throat, it can take up to eight minutes, and the body also blocks pain after traumatic injuries. If he lost blood slowly and didn’t feel much pain, Murphy could’ve conceivably died as reported.

A closer look at the facts and a little common sense rule out suicide though. First, the trachea is embedded in the neck with major veins and arteries on either side. If Murphy cut his throat from “ear to ear” he would’ve severed at least one artery, losing consciousness in seconds. Even if he only cut a vein and his trachea, Murphy still would’ve lost blood and suffocated simultaneously. Murphy wasn’t alone in the mercantile when he died either. Customers and employees were in the store below, and his half-brother, J.V., was the last person to see him alive.

J.V. worked hard to climb the social ladder after coming to Park City in 1896. He worked for Welsh, Driscoll, and Buck, starting out as a clerk and ascending to manager of the grocery department within a few years. He was also elected for local offices and was part of the Citizen’s Club. By April 1907 Fred Rasband, long-time manager of the Roy Mercantile, sold his share of the business and J.V. was full owner. His ship had finally come in.

A year earlier, Murphy was at the Miner’s Hospital and was unable to pay his bill. Perhaps financial problems forced him to move into the mercantile with J.V. and his family. Maybe growing family tensions, and Murphy’s dependency and drinking were ruining the perfect life J.V. had so carefully crafted for himself. We’ll never know for sure who killed Jerry Murphy, but one thing is certain. His death was no suicide.

*The Park City Historical Society & Museum is celebrating 30 years of preserving, protecting, and promoting Park City’s history and heritage.*



Image# Digi.2.15004

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Caption: Welsh, Driscoll, & Buck grocery department. Jerry Murphy's "ladder climbing" brother, J.V., is on the far left of the photograph with the mustache.