

# Armstrong Hanged 100 Years Ago\*

## Baker County's Only Legal Execution

by  
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### Four Violent Deaths

In the opening decade of the twentieth century, the lives of four persons in the Northwest were forever linked by their violent deaths, even though the deaths were separated in both time and place. The death of Baker County Sheriff H. K. Brown, who unsuccessfully ran for governor of Oregon in 1906, forms the hub to which the other three deaths are connected.

In the cold, early light of January 22, 1904, up to 500 men, all bearing black-bordered invitations signed by Baker County Sheriff Harvey K. Brown, stood shivering and apprehensive in the snow inside a fourteen-foot-high enclosure attached to the south side of the jail on the grounds of the Baker County Courthouse in Baker City, Oregon. At the west end of the enclosure stood a gallows which held the executioner, hidden behind a black curtain, and sheriffs from around the Northwest. Upwards of fifteen-hundred people were gathered outside the enclosure, kept back by deputies armed with Winchester rifles.



*Gallows Constructed for the Hanging of Pleasant Armstrong*

Shortly before seven o'clock, an entourage of men—led by Sheriff Brown, followed by the condemned man Pleasant Armstrong, Catholic priest Father Olivetti, and jail personnel—emerged from the jail and ascended the thirteen steps to the gallows platform. By ten minutes after seven o'clock a group of Baker City physicians pronounced the twenty-seven-year-old Armstrong dead.

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Ironically just three years later Sheriff Brown would also die violently. At ten o'clock on the evening of September 30, 1907, just as Brown pushed open the gate of the picket fence in front of his home across the street from South Baker Elementary School, a tremendous explosion shattered the gate post, the front windows of his modest house, and the lower part of Brown's body. He died the next day just thirty-six years old. Authorities investigating his death found a wire running from the front of the house around the corner. Brown had been blown up by a dynamite bomb attached to the gate post and tripped remotely by a person in the bushes.



*Site of Sheriff Brown's Assassination*

Many believe Brown's assassination was ordered by the persons who had directed the similar murder of former governor of Idaho Frank Steunenberg on the evening of December 30, 1905, when a dynamite bomb exploded as Steunenberg opened the gate to his large home in Caldwell, Idaho. By chance Brown had been involved in the arrest of Harry Orchard, the confessed assassin of Steunenberg, and later participated in other aspects of the Steunenberg case against mining union executives accused of ordering Steunenberg's assassination. Brown's murder remains unsolved.

Perhaps the most tragic of the four deaths was that of Minnie Ensminger, a grade school teacher at rural Muddy Creek School at the foot of the Elkhorn Mountains. Early on Christmas morning 1902, Minnie was shot twice by her boyfriend, Pleasant Armstrong. At the time of her death two days later, Minnie was just twenty-one years old.

### **Minnie and Pleas**

Minnie lived with her parents on a farm on the south side of Antelope Butte a mile north of the Muddy Creek school house.

In 1863 Jacob Ensminger, age sixteen, and Johanna Ziegler, age eight, had arrived in Baker County in separate wagon trains. Ten years later they married and subsequently raised eleven children, of which Minnie, born September 21, 1881, was the fifth oldest.



*Minnie Ensminger*

Pleasant “Pleas” Armstrong was a handsome and likeable but uneducated laborer and a relative newcomer, having arrived in Baker County in 1899. Born August 31, 1877, in the small community of Dayton in southeastern Washington, Pleas was orphaned at age four. After spending years in a succession of foster homes, he struck out on his own following mining at age thirteen. Nothing further is known of his life until he showed up in Baker County at age twenty-two working as a miner, farmhand, and laborer for ditch companies.

In December 1902 Minnie was teaching at Muddy Creek School and Pleas was working at the Maxwell Mine located at high elevation on the west side of the Elkhorn Mountains. The nearest communities to both work sites were Rock Creek and Haines. It’s not known when Pleas and Minnie first made each other’s acquaintance, but since Pleas was a fiddle player at dances in the area, perhaps that’s how they met.

Pleas was a good looking, eligible bachelor and Minnie an attractive, educated young lady. It’s not surprising that a friendship developed between the two and eventually led to talk of marriage. But there were serious obstacles in the form of societal norms respected by Minnie’s parents. Jacob and Hanna Ensminger were successful pioneer farmers, who no doubt held positions high in the social hierarchy of the Haines-Rock Creek area. As could be expected, the Ensmingers did not consider a penniless newcomer and common laborer a suitable match for their daughter.

In addition, a couple of rumors revealed a possible dark side to Pleas' character. One rumor had him chasing with a knife a young woman who spurned his attention. It was also rumored that he showed up drunk at a Haines church supper. There was some gunplay, and he ended up in jail. Although love may have blinded Minnie's eyes, such rumors, true or not, would not have been overlooked by her parents.

### **Christmas Morning 1902**

At one o'clock Christmas morning, a festive Christmas Eve dance at the farm house of Joseph and Mary Henner—Mary was Minnie's older sister—had just broken up and most of the guests had left the Henner's house and headed into the barnyard, where their sleighs awaited them. Just as Minnie, one of the last to leave the house, entered the barnyard to get into a sleigh for the one-mile ride home, Pleas bounded out of the shadows, fired two rapid, poorly aimed pistol shots into Minnie's back, then in the middle of the barnyard, holding the pistol in both hands, fired at his forehead.



*Pleasant Armstrong*

Pandemonium broke out among the many guests who were in various stages of leaving for home. Some of them attended to the still-conscious Minnie by carrying her into the house and placing her on a couch earlier occupied by Pleas, who had quit playing his fiddle, saying he wasn't feeling well. With blood trickling down his face and into the snow, Pleas lay on his back in the middle of the barnyard. Other guests ran to Pleas, who was unconscious but not seriously injured, the bullet having bounced off his skull.

Minnie was not so fortunate. Although one bullet just grazed her spine doing no real damage, the other bullet, entering near the point of her left shoulder, had coursed through her left lung and penetrated her diaphragm. Attended around the clock to no avail by Dr. Charles Francis of Haines, Minnie died two days later.



*Henner barnyard where Pleasant shot Minnie*

Under guard at the nearby Relling farm house awaiting the arrival of Baker County Deputy Sheriff Jess Snow, Pleas asked to be informed if Minnie died and, in reference to his attempted suicide, added, "I'm sorry the last shot was not sure." Later that Christmas morning Deputy Jesse Snow arrived from Baker City and transported Pleas without incident the seventeen miles to the Baker County Jail. Right away word on the street was that the Haines-Rock Creek men were plotting to lynch Pleas in the event of Minnie's death.

### **Lynching Bee**

At Pleas' December 30<sup>th</sup> preliminary hearing on a charge of first degree murder, the courtroom was "crowded to the doors." Showing special interest were a number of young women who had read in the newspapers that Pleas, who showed up handcuffed and with a bandage on his head, was "an Adonis." At the end of the hearing as Pleas was being escorted from the courtroom, someone shouted, "There he is! String him up now! String him up now!"

Two months later, just before midnight on March 3, about seventy-five men from the Haines and Rock Creek area, augmented by about the same number from Baker City, marched from downtown taverns to the Baker County Jail. With faces concealed by bandanas and pistols in hand, their spokesman demanded, "Mr. Sheriff, in the name of Baker County and the taxpayers we demand Armstrong, the murderer." Obliging Deputy Snow allowed two of the men to search the jail. Search as they might, they could not find Armstrong. Dejected the lynching party put away their weapons and filed out of the jail.

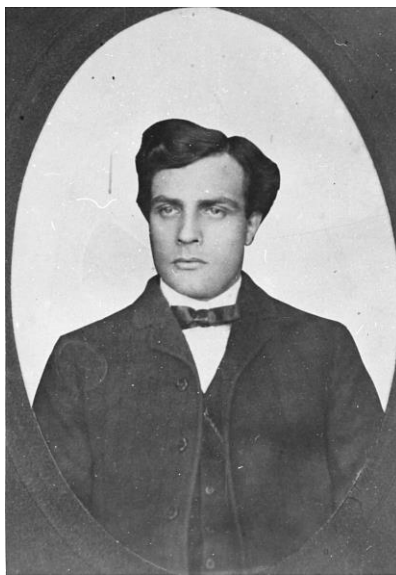
Those men having become, as a newspaper reported, "drunk...and too loquacious before the hour of attack," word had reached Sheriff Brown earlier in the evening that a lynching was in the works. By the time the mob showed up,

Sheriff Brown was on his way with Pleas via train to the Multnomah County Jail, where Pleas remained until shortly before the trial.

### **Guilty!**

Obtaining an unbiased jury to hear the first degree murder case took longer than the trial itself. Since Baker Valley residents had been bombarded with sensational newspaper stories, the first jury pool was exhausted by the end of the first day, Monday, March 23, with just one juror seated who claimed he had not prejudged the case. Circuit Judge Robert Eakin of Union ordered the sheriff to recruit from Richland and Halfway the next pool of forty men who might be less biased.

With twelve jurors seated by Thursday afternoon, the trial moved along so quickly that it was almost anticlimactic. Eyewitnesses, including Minnie's sister Blanche, who had seen Pleas shoot Minnie right in front of her, easily established the state's case against Pleas. The defense called just two witnesses: Catherine Relling, Pleas' landlady, and Pleas himself. But Judge Eakin upheld the state's objection when the defense tried to elicit from Relling her opinion about the mutual affection between Pleas and Minnie. That left just Pleas to establish the defense's case that Pleas acted impulsively and without premeditation, which would preclude a death sentence.



*Pleasant Armstrong*

Crucial to Pleas' testimony was his telling of a letter, which he later destroyed, received from Minnie shortly before Christmas. Minnie wrote that she would have to break her promise to marry him. "People have objected to us getting married," Pleas testified paraphrasing her letter, "but she would die before she would go back on me." Pleas professed his love for Minnie and stated that, "Up

to the time I fired the shot I never had at any time any evil intentions toward Minnie Ensminger.” He said his sole intention was to take his own life.

After being sequestered overnight at the Sagamore Hotel across the street from the courthouse, the jury did not bring in a verdict until late Saturday: “Guilty as charged in the indictment.” The following Tuesday, Judge Eakin pronounced sentence. “It is the sentence of the court that you, Pleasant Armstrong...be hanged by the neck until you are dead.” The judge set May 8, 1903, as the execution date.

### **Execution Postponed**

Pleas’ attorneys immediately appealed on various grounds. Ten days before the execution date, word came from the Oregon Supreme Court that it would hear the appeal at its October session.

In the meantime Pleas sat in the Baker County Jail. He proved to be an amiable fellow whom jail staff grew to like and whom old friends stopped by to visit. Pleas often played his fiddle for visitors and jail staff. A frequent visitor was Father Olivetti of the Catholic Church, which in June 1903 became the seat of a new diocese. Father Olivetti instructed Pleas in the Catholic faith.



*Harvey K. Brown's Election Poster  
(Brown ran for governor in 1906)*

In October the Oregon Supreme Court denied Pleas’ appeal. By the end of November, Judge Eakin had set January 22, 1904, as the new execution date. Pleas’ attorneys filed a further appeal on different grounds. Just two days before the scheduled execution, the Oregon Supreme Court heard oral arguments then issued its opinion the next day affirming the trial court. The same day a writ of

*habeas corpus* filed in U. S. District Court was also rejected. With less than twenty-four hours before execution time, all legal doors slammed shut.

**“I forgive you all.”**

In the gray dawn of January 22, 1904, Pleas received with bended knee on the gallows the last benediction from Father Olivetti. He had just delivered a speech, which Father Olivetti had helped him prepare. Among other statements, he admonished parents who had daughters, “When a man comes to you loving her truly, even if he wear an old pair of shoes and is in rags, if they love truly, you cannot burst that love.” “She [Minnie] knows,” he said, “that I was not responsible when I shot.” He concluded, “I am sorry for the things I have done. I sincerely repent of all my sins, especially of the great crime I must now suffer for.... Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.”

After his arms and legs were bound and final adjustments made to hood and noose, Pleas cried out, “Did you ever see a brave man? Look at me. I forgive you all.” Then, at Sheriff Brown’s instruction, Pleas stepped forward without hesitation, and the trap was sprung at 6:58 a.m. The grim crowd dispersed.

That afternoon Pleasant Armstrong, baptized “Samuel Armstrong” the day before his execution, was buried in a grave—to this day still unmarked—in the far northwest corner of the Catholic section of Mount Hope Cemetery.