

## Baker County's Biggest Political Scandal

by  
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In December 1902, a political firestorm swept through the county when an audit revealed that 46-year-old Alfred "Fred" Henry Huntington had left office as sheriff and tax collector the preceding July with a deficit in his books of more than \$12,000 (about \$300,000 in today's money.)

Huntington was elected sheriff in 1898 and again in 1900. While sheriff, Huntington regularly borrowed tax money, kept in a safe in his office, for personal and office use. He often used the money to buy county warrants at a discount. Then he would turn them over to the county treasurer at face value and pocket the difference.

Many county officials and employees, including the county judge and district attorney, took advantage of the good-hearted sheriff when they needed some quick cash. Such practices were illegal but not unusual in those days. Nobody made a fuss as long as the tax fund ultimately got paid back.

In October 1902, when Huntington heard his books would be audited, he told County Judge Wallace W. Travillion that he was short about \$3,500 (\$88,000 today). He persuaded Travillion, also an ex-sheriff of Baker County, to keep the information secret while he went to Chicago to sell some mining stock in order to make good his shortage.

After Huntington left, word of a much larger shortage came from the auditors. Travillion went for advice to District Attorney Samuel White. (White was a native Georgian who had fought for the South in the Civil War. He was to become in a few years circuit court judge for Baker County.) Fearing that Huntington might never return, leaving them to take the heat, they decided to send new Sheriff Harvey K. Brown and Deputy District Attorney A. B. Winfree to Chicago to find him.

The flames of controversy were fanned to a real blaze by a young, crusading Republican newspaper called the *Baker City Herald*. The *Herald* heard rumors going around about a shortage, but, when questioned, county officials remained mum. Indignant over the secretive handling of the matter, the *Herald* broke the story and then continued applying heat with article after article lambasting Travillion and White, both Democrats.

When Huntington was returned to Baker County a couple of days before Christmas, he faced a full-blown scandal. Not only was he being pilloried in the press, but the *Herald* was also charging that "Smoothbore" and "Captain Sam," the *Herald's* nicknames for Travillion and White, had covered up Huntington's

shortage, which, if true, would make them collaborators guilty of criminal acts themselves.

Stories appeared under sensational, bold headlines such as “Here’s a Pretty Mess,” “Smoothbore Travillion Openly Violates the Law,” and “Captain Sam’s Scheme.”

The stories had their effect. In February 1903 the grand jury handed down indictments for larceny of public money against Huntington and his deputy sheriff and bookkeeper, Charles H. Whitney, age 45.

But that was not all. The grand jury shocked the *Herald* by returning twelve indictments for criminal libel against editor L. Bush Livermore, and manager Charles W. Hill.

Rather than tone down its attacks, the *Herald* charged Travillion and White with attempting to muzzle the press. It even printed a satire of the libel indictments titled “A Sensational Libel Suit,” as if it were a legitimate news item from a nonexistent town named Athlone, Oregon, apparently after a town of the same name in Ireland.

At his trial in late June 1903, Huntington was defended by no less than five attorneys, including John L. Rand, later Oregon Supreme Court Justice and father of the late Baker City attorney Irving Rand.

The defense strategy was to play on the jury’s sympathy for the well-liked Huntington and to point out that he had paid back the \$3,500 he thought he owed the county. The question of what happened to the rest of the \$12,000 was answered by pointing an accusing finger at ex-Deputy Sheriff Whitney, who did all the bookkeeping and had equal access to the safe.

Huntington’s attorneys attributed his shortage to his ineptness in business. “He knows less about business than the traditional hog knows about religion,” one of them told the jury.

The defense paraded as character witnesses for Huntington a Who’s Who of Baker County, including family names still familiar in Baker County today: Peter Basche, S. A. Heilner, George Chandler, Luther French, Sam B. Baisley, John J. Dooley, and “Uncle Dave” Littlefield, one of Baker County’s original four settlers.

In a summation, which no doubt brought tears to the eyes of more than one juror, the defense said it would be better if Huntington, his wife, and their four little children were swept away by a flood, like the one that had recently killed 247 people, when a dam broke wiping out the town of Heppner, than to brand Huntington a criminal.

But once isolated in the jury room, most of the jurors proved not to have been won over by the emotional defense presented by Huntington's defense team. At one point the vote was eleven to one to convict. A lone juror, Charles Jacobson, steadfastly held out for acquittal. After many hours of deliberation, Circuit Court Judge Robert Eakin declared the jury hung. Retrial was set for the end of November.

Whitney's trial began on the heels of Huntington's. He was found not guilty after successfully convincing the jury that he was simply an underling who did the bidding of a boss who invested heavily in mining ventures and ran racehorses on the northwestern circuit.

In October the first libel trial dealt with an article published in the *Herald* on January 22, 1903, which had accused Travillion of "complicity in the defalcation." Ironically arguing there had been too much publicity of the case in Baker County, the *Herald* managed to get the trial's venue changed to Union County. The prosecution was unable to convince the Union County jury that the *Herald* had stepped outside the bounds of responsible journalism as practiced in those days. The verdict was not guilty.

When District Attorney White went ahead immediately with prosecution of another of the libel indictments, Livermore and Hill filed on the first day of the second libel trial a \$21,500 suit for malicious prosecution against White and County Judge Travillion.

This time it took the jury just thirteen minutes to bring in a verdict of not guilty for the *Herald*. This second defeat and the civil suit caused White and Travillion to throw in the towel. The remaining ten libel indictments were never prosecuted and the civil suit was dropped.

The final chapter of the Huntington case was written in December 1903 during the ex-sheriff's second trial. Each side drew fresh blood, but the sight of Huntington breaking down on the stand and sobbing that he left office with only \$100 and now had "only one sack of flour in the house," tilted the jury his way. After a trial lasting six days, Huntington was acquitted and shortly thereafter moved out of Baker County in disgrace.

(Author's note: Huntington was born September 1, 1856. At age nine his family moved to Washington Territory. As an adult he worked in mines around Sumpter, finally settling on a ranch in Hereford Valley. He married his wife, Inez, in 1897. They had five sons and one daughter. He died at Kerman, California, west of Fresno, on March 13, 1951, at age 95. Nothing is known of his life after leaving Baker County.)

