

Jerry McKelvy's
WAY BACK WHEN

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THE TRAGIC DEATH OF MARY HOLT

As reported in the 12-20-1871 and 1-3-1872 issues of The Washington Telegraph

A tragedy took place in the Pine Grove community of Hempstead County, Arkansas on December 13, 1871. The body of 15-year-old Mary Teresa “Mollie” Holt was found badly mangled and shot through on a Wednesday afternoon not far from her home.

I don't have a picture of Mollie, but this description of her was printed in the newspaper article: *“Mollie was beautiful in form, in figure, and in grace; possessed of inestimable virtues and devoted piety. Kind and gentle as a dove. She was idolized by her relatives, beloved by her friends, and admired by all with whom she became acquainted, captivating in manners and disposition, loving, and magnanimous, she was indeed the star of the social circle and the flower of her family”.*

Mollie was the youngest daughter of Jesse Washington Holt and Harriet C. Holt. Her father had died about four years earlier and her older siblings had probably already left home by 1871.

Mollie Holt was engaged to be married to Robert Norwood, age 20, also from the same community. Robert was described as having a light complexion, heavy weight, about five feet four inches tall, and weighing about 145 pounds.

The date set for the marriage was November 9, but for some reason, her family wanted the marriage to be postponed until the next fall. On that fateful day in 1871, Mollie had gone to a neighbor's house for the day. While there, Robert came to see her and wanted to know the reason for the postponing of the marriage. They had a long talk and Mollie told him she would let him know the next day and he finally left.

Robert later decided to wait along the roadside until Mollie started for home riding her horse and make one more attempt to get her to tell him the reason why they could not be married. Mollie was frightened at first when Robert stopped her on the way home. He approached her horse and held the bridle saying that he was not going to hurt her. Nobody knows the details of what that encounter was like, but Mollie still refused to give

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him an answer as to why they could not be married. Some thought she might have broken off the engagement. Robert became angry and pulled out his pistol and fired four shots at her causing her to fall from her horse. He then hit her over the head with the barrel of his pistol. He started to leave but thought she might possibly still be alive so he returned and cut her throat.

A neighbor working nearby heard the gun shots and some screams, but didn't check it out. When he got home, his wife told him he should go and see what had happened. On the way, he came across a loose horse and then discovered the body of the young girl. He knew she needed help, so he immediately ran to get a doctor. He had not gone far when he met Robert Norwood. He told Robert what he had found and told him to attend to the girl while he went for a doctor. Instead of tending to the girl, Robert Norwood left the scene, stopping at a nearby creek to wash his hands, and threw his pistol into the woods. He later retrieved the pistol and hid it in a corn crib.

When the news spread in the community, about 150 men began a full-scale search for the person who had killed the young girl who was much admired and loved by the community. Friends gathered to comfort her family and Robert Norwood joined in with his family and others who were weeping and trying to console Mollie's family. Nobody suspected that he was the killer. Robert Norwood was also from a reputable family and had been regarded as a worthy and deserving young man. The neighbors felt bad for him knowing that he and Mollie had been engaged to be married.

A coroner's inquest was held. The attending physician reported in detail on the attack. He said there was one shot on the right side of her neck, one shot in the left forearm, one shot on left side of her chest, four cuts on the left side of her neck, one of which severed the jugular vein and penetrated the carotid artery, one cut over her left eye, several large cuts on top of her head exposing the skull which was fractured, and minor cuts to her wrists and hands. He said her body from the waist up was a mass of gore and blood and was almost unrecognizable.

During the investigation, a main spring from a pistol and a vest button were found at the scene of the murder. It was decided that everyone in the community with that type pistol should show it. Robert Norwood knew that his pistol was broken so he went to

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Murfreesboro and borrowed the same type pistol from a friend and showed it instead of the one he had used in the murder. The pistol he showed was one that was recognized as belonging to a man in Murfreesboro. The man was sent for and he told about loaning it to Robert Norwood. Also, the vest button found at the scene matched a missing button on Robert Norwood's vest. Seeing that he was caught, Robert Norwood confessed to the crime.

The community was so enraged that many wanted to hang Norwood right then, but some influential citizens persuaded the crowd to wait. Norwood was placed under a guard of twelve men who were to guard him night and day to protect him from being taken and hanged. Where he was being held was not specified. About 11:00 on Sunday morning, four days after the murder, a crowd of about 100 armed men took Norwood from his guards and hung him from a tree about a mile and a half from where Mollie Holt had been murdered. As they saw it, justice had been served as the Scripture says, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed"—Genesis 9:6.

Robert Norwood's detailed written confession was printed in the January 3, 1872 issue of The Washington Telegraph. He told his side of the story, but of course, Mollie's version of what happened could not be told.

The Confession

Myself and Miss Holt were in the room together at Mrs. Nelsons, (13th,) she promised to send me a note. She had wrote me a note before that stating that she would send me another in a few days and tell me what she would do. I asked her to tell me then what her reasons were for putting it off. She told me she would send me an answer next morning. She told me there had been a great deal said about it more than I know. I asked her to tell me what it was but she would not tell me. She told me that she had told some of her people what she would do, but would not tell me. I asked her if she intended to marry me. She told me that she would do it if she could do it in peace. I came home and put up my mule and staid at home a little while, and then went down to the corner of Mrs. Nelson's field. Stayed there until she came. I walked to the road and spoke to her I told her I wanted her to tell me that evening what she had promised. She told me she could not tell me then. She become [sic] frightened when I came up to her. I told her to please tell me (several times) as I wanted to know then. She told me she could not tell me then. I, at that time was walking along side of

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her horse holding the bridle rein. I saw she was frightened. I told her not to be scared as I did not intend to hurt her (several times). She told me that she would tell on me. I told her I did not want her to do that, as I did not intend to hurt her at all. She hallowed a time or two. I saw that I had gone so far that I would have to kill her, or do something else, i.e. get out of the way. I drew my pistol out and she screamed. I told her I did not want to hurt her. She screamed and I walked around on the left-hand side of the horse. She screamed at the time. I then shot her on the horse four times. She then fell off of the horse. I think I caught her as she went to fall. She was not dead then. She said the lord save me. Not being dead and lying on the ground, I cut her throat with my knife (I think 3 cuts.) I struck her several blows over the head with the barrel of the pistol. In striking her over the head I broke my pistol. I did not bite her hand. I then left and went through the woods close to the 16th section and crossed the road half way between our house and Mr. Nelson's field, and went to the creek and washed my hands, then came on home up the creek. I threwed [sic] the pistol in the woods near the 16th section field. Early on Dec. 14th I went and got the pistol and brough[t] it home and put it in the corncrib in the yard on the left-hand side.

Mary Holt and Robert Norwood were both buried in Ozan Cemetery at Bingen in Hempstead County. We had a nice warm day recently and my wife and I decided to go to Ozan Cemetery and try to find Mary's grave. That cemetery is very large, containing about 1800 graves and has two sections divided by the highway. I knew her grave had to be in the oldest part of the cemetery. When we arrived, we saw many old markers in a section of the cemetery which probably has about 500 graves. Finding Mary's grave might take a while. We had not walked far when I noticed the name Holt on a headstone and there was Mary's grave. It was almost like something was pulling me toward her grave. Several other members of the Holt family are in the same row.

We then began to look for Robert Norwood's grave. A short distance away, we found several Norwood grave markers and there was Robert's grave only fifty feet from Mary's grave.

Life is sometimes hard. I thought of how it must have been 154 years ago when Mary's family and friends gathered at this cemetery arriving by wagons and on horseback to pay their last respects to this beautiful young girl who had been so brutally murdered. I suspect there was a large crowd of people attending this graveside service.

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Then I thought of the Norwood family gathered at the same cemetery a few days later to bury Robert Norwood and seeing Mary's freshly dug grave only 50 feet away. It must have been difficult for that family. Two young lives lost and two well-known families from the small community of Pine Grove having to deal this with this tragedy.

In 1871 when this happened, only about 17 people had been buried there according to the find a grave website. These included Mary's father, a brother who died at age 11, and a sister who died at age 13. She had four other siblings still living age 19 to 31. Mary's mother was 55 when Mary was killed. Robert Norwood's father had died when Robert was nine years old and was buried at the same cemetery. Robert had four siblings, ranging in age from 11 to 25. His mother was 50 years old in 1871.



Mary Holt's grave marker

Words engraved on marker

Daughter, thou wert mild and lovely
Gentle as the summer breeze
Pleasant as the air of evening
When it floats among the trees.



Robert Norwood's grave marker

Words engraved on marker

Let our Father's will be done

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Welcome Home, Daddy -- by Don Mathis

How is it possible to have a memory from a few months of age? When I was born at Brooke Army Hospital in 1951, the family lived in an old wooden barracks at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. It had been converted from housing for troops into a family dwelling.

Maybe it's a false memory but I recall we lived upstairs. The building number was painted on the side and it remained in place until the 1970s. After it no longer served a purpose to the Army, the structure was moved near the city hall of Selma, TX.

My second home was 776 Chaffee Road at Fort Sam, a residence more suitable for a young enlisted man's family. That Spanish Colonial Revival Structure is still standing. Is it possible I remember the white stucco and the red tile roof – and the clothesline and the garage out back? Or is that just a memory of a memory?

I couldn't have been much older than one when Daddy was sent to Korea. Mom, brother Jeff, and I moved to Arkansas to be near my grandparents. Our home in Camden was behind a flower shop at 240 N. Adams, across the street from the Frozen Delight ice cream parlor.

My first memory of my dad was traumatic. Mother got Jeff and me dressed in our Sunday best. Then she got gussied up to welcome Daddy back from the Korean War. She put on a nice dress, did her hair, and put on jewelry and lipstick.

I was about two years old and wanted to be pretty too. So just before Daddy drove in, I got in Mom's purse and put on lipstick from cheek to cheek. It was a nice, warm, and greasy texture; it felt good. I was ready to meet my dad; I thought.

I don't remember if he spanked me for getting into Mother's stuff, but I was certainly shamed for dressing like a girl. I cried, big tears of contrition flowing down my red face of regret.

And I hope it was my cuteness that compelled Daddy to pull out his new state-of-the-art camera and take a photograph to memorialize the moment of my tearful countenance. I was not amused.

