

THE TRUTH ABOUT ROBERT RAY HAMILTON (1891)¹

Text. by John Randolph Spears, Correspondent of *The Sun*

Robert Ray Hamilton (1851-1890) was the great-grandson of U.S. Founding Father Alexander Hamilton. Trained as a lawyer, he entered politics, serving in the New York Assembly on five occasions between 1881 and 1889. Beset by marital trouble, Hamilton moved west in 1890, where he purchased a half-share in a remote ranch near Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and built a tourist lodge. That September he was reported dead, but doubts persisted about the truth of this claim. The following year, the Sun's reporter John Spears travelled to the lodge; there the body was exhumed and a coroner's report was issued. The identity of the corpse was confirmed and the circumstances of his death were finally established.

A Coroner's Inquest Held at the Open Grave Five Days Ago.

Surgical and Other Testimony Show Conclusively That the Body was that of Hamilton—Buried with His Spurs on in a Rude Box—Identified by the Teeth, by a fracture of the leg, and Other Decisive Evidence—Painful Rumors in the Northwest Finally Set at Rest—Driving Through a Snow Storm to Perform this Last Service—A Neglected Grave—A Sun Reporter Sent from New York Settles Forever the Question of Identity.

MARKEET LAKE, Idaho, Oct 14 [1891]. Coroner Henry Code of Evanston, Uintah county, Wy., arrived here today after a journey of two weeks' duration to Jackson's Lake in what is known as Jackson Hole in the northwest corner of Wyoming, where he held an inquest over the body of the late Robert Ray Hamilton of New York, who was drowned in Snake River more than a year ago. The story of the last days of Mr. Hamilton, already partly known to the public, is now complete.

About the 1st of July, 1890, Mr. Hamilton hired rooms in the Noll Cottage at Atlantic City. He was accompanied by a blonde woman of middle age, a nurse, and an eight-months-old baby. On Aug. 26 there was a quarrel between Hamilton's companion, then known variously as Eva Mann and Mrs. Hamilton, and the nurse, Mary Ann Donnelly. The nurse was seriously wounded in the abdomen by Mrs. Hamilton with an ivory-handled dagger, and Mrs. Hamilton was arraigned in court upon a charge of felonious and atrocious assault. Mrs. Hamilton was convicted and sentenced to serve two years in the Jersey penitentiary, but was subsequently pardoned. The nurse recovered.

Meantime it had appeared that Mrs. Hamilton, previous to her marriage to Hamilton, had led a disreputable life, and that a baby, supposed to be Hamilton's, was a child purchased for \$10 to palm off on Hamilton in order to induce him to marry the woman. Whatever the facts in the matter really were, Hamilton, for a long time, remained faithful to his wife, but eventually brought suit to annul the marriage contract on the ground that before his marriage his wife had really been the wife of one Joshua Mann. That she lived with Mann, and had been known as his wife, was not disputed, but to prove a legal marriage to him was somewhat different. While this suit was still pending Hamilton fell in with one John Dudley Sargent, who said he had been a stage driver in the

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Rockies and who had tried "*to raise Shetland ponies on a Green River, Wyoming, ranch, and failed, but who was then anxious to establish a tourist resort somewhere near the Yellowstone Park.*" Just how it came about it is not known, but Hamilton and Sargent formed a partnership, in which Hamilton contributed the capital and Sargent somewhat of experience and the two came to Market Lake, Idaho, and there secured a pack train and went up the Snake River Valley to Rixburg [modern Rexburg, Ed.], thence through the Teton Basin add over the Teton Range into Jackson's Hole, then everywhere known as a resort of horse thieves and desperadoes. At the north end of this valley lay Jackson's Lake, and on the northeast corner of this sheet of water the two pitched their tent and began building a lodge of logs. They were to establish a hotel and outfitting store at a place where not a dozen tourists passed in a season.

This was in June, 1890, and for some time Hamilton dropped out of the sight of New York people. The case at law had gone over until October, and the public not unwillingly forgot about the unpleasant details of the scandal attached to an illustrious name. So, the matter rested until the morning of Sept 15, 1890, when a dispatch to THE SUN from Helena, Mont., conveyed the startling intelligence that Robert Ray Hamilton had been accidentally drowned In Snake River, in Jackson's Hole, some three weeks before.

At first every one accepted the story as true, Mr. J. O. Green, son of President Norvin Green of the Western Union Telegraph Company, set out to go into the Yellowstone National Park. Entering by Beaver Cañon he turned south and eventually arrived at Hamilton's lodge. Hamilton's people told him that Hamilton had gone hunting, and had been gone some days, so Green started out hoping to meet him. While camped below the lake, he fell in with a party of the residents of the hotel, and was told that Hamilton was lost, and that they were searching for him. Thereupon Green undertook to assist in the search, and the next day a body was found lodged in the branches of a fallen tree in a bit of still water in Snake River, which on examination was found to be dressed in Hamilton's clothing, to have a watch and fly hook belonging to Hamilton in the pockets, and, moreover, to answer in every particular the general description of Hamilton. Although the body was much decomposed, Mr. Green believed it to be Hamilton's and made oath to that effect. However, people began to take second thought and doubts as to the identity of the corpse arose. It is true Sargent, Hamilton's partner, identified the body, and so did a couple of Mormon workmen who had been employed about the lodge: but people began to question the statements of these men and not without reason. Thus, the briefest possible announcement of the death of the young man was made at the time the news was received. The story of his death when broken to father did not fall apparently like an overwhelming blow. Inquirers were told that he had no further facts to impart. The funeral notice was not published until Oct. 6, for the apparently insufficient reason that the father had been ill for some time and no opportunity had been afforded. Further than this, it was learned that Hamilton in the March preceding had made his will and had selected Gilbert M. Speir as one of the executors, and that Mr. Speir, with a friend, Mr. C. D. R. Moore, had arrived at the ranch just a day too late to be present when Hamilton was buried. Now, although the weather was pleasant and likely to remain so for at least three months, three personal friends, one being the executor of the will of the deceased man, made no effort and expressed no desire to remove the body of the unfortunate man from the place in the wilderness where it had been buried. When asked why not, they said Partner Sargent had said: "*He once told me he would rather be buried here if anything should happen.*"

Moreover, it was not a little singular that these two friends, instead of hastening from home to convey the news to the bereaved family decided to remain some days at the Lodge, "*because Mr. Sargent seemed to want us to.*"

There were other curious facts about the death not necessary to mention, but the public very soon connected them with another interesting fact. Hamilton's death, if he was dead, not only annulled his marriage with the wife, Evangeline, but threw upon her the burden of proof in the legal squabble over the estate. If she were to share in the estate she must needs prove she was the widow of the deceased man. The advantage which the Hamilton family obtained through the death of Robert Ray in the contest with Evangeline was apparent when the matter came before the Surrogate.² In spite of the undisputed fact of a marriage ceremony, Evangeline was declared to be Mrs. Mann and not the widow of Robert Ray Hamilton. Of course, she took an appeal.

Later came something more definite regarding the death of Hamilton. Henry Strong of Greene, Chenango county, N. Y., who had been in the Yellowstone Park, came East and declared that he had seen Hamilton alive in the park, having recognized him by his voice as well as his features. Later came A. O. Howard of the coast survey service, who said he had been a schoolmate of the deceased man, and that he had received letters later than August from Hamilton, who was supposed to have been drowned in the latter part of August of that year. While there were inconsistencies in the full statements of those men they were not without their weight.

The Hamilton family tried to keep the matter quiet, but it would not down. On the contrary, as time passed the belief that Robert Ray Hamilton was alive grew stronger in those who thought most about the facts. Tourists returning from the region brought strange stories. The men who conducted the search were, with one or two exceptions, not acquainted with him in his lifetime, and not willing to swear the body was his. Even J. O. Green, who had examined the body after it was taken from the water, said he could not swear it was Hamilton's. He believed it was because he found certain defects on it which belonged to Hamilton. People in the East were told that seven other men had been drowned in Snake River that year, and they began to wonder whether one of these bodies had been dressed in Hamilton's clothes and passed off on the public as that of the body of the legislator. Had not a hospital or medical college subject been carried over in a trunk or a barrel and then put in the river to pose as Robert Ray Hamilton's body? Finally, a reputable young citizen of Idaho, who had been in Jackson's Hole with a party of mining engineers, returned home after having been some time in the mountains, and reported that even the residents of Jackson's Hole doubted very much the identity of the body. His report was brought to THE SUN, and an investigation that would forever settle the matter was instituted.

As THE SUN's correspondent, in his journey to the Felton region, drew near to his destination he found the public interest in the case growing stronger, and that the belief that Hamilton was alive was more firm. Leaving Market Lake, the nearest railroad station, he went back twenty-two miles to a village called Rixburg by the Mormons, who outnumber all the other inhabitants, and Kaintuck by the Post Office authorities. Here he called upon Roman Safert, one of the workmen who had testified to the identity of the body found in Snake River. Mr. Safert was still sure that the body was that of Hamilton, but when asked to describe the body he said among other things that the

² Surrogate — Judge in charge of probate, inheritance and guardianship

upper front teeth had been filled with gold in a most conspicuous fashion. He had often noticed the gleam of gold when Mr. Hamilton laughed, he said. Mrs. Lotta Springer, a young widow who had been employed as a domestic at the lodge while Hamilton was there, described the teeth of the man exactly as Safert did. In fact, the upper front teeth of Robert Ray Hamilton were noticeably large and perfect.

This fact seemed to confirm, beyond all doubt, a most startling belief prevalent throughout the community. The most intelligent and influential men here were confident not only that Hamilton was still alive, but that a man resembling him had been sent to Jackson's Hole to personate him, and had there been put out of the way by John Dudley Sargent. Indeed, when one considered the extraordinary fact that no effort had been made to remove the body to a suitable resting place, and that no inquest had been held over the body by the Coroner, it was impossible to escape the conclusion reached by the citizens living nearest the region where Hamilton was alleged to have been drowned. Accordingly, the following affidavit was filed with Coroner Code of Evanston, Wyoming, who had jurisdiction over the district:

"State of Wyoming, County of Uintah:

"The affiant, John R. Spears, after having been first duly sworn, deposes and says that there is buried in the said county and State the dead body of a man reported to be Robert Ray Hamilton, and that the said body of the person so buried was interred at or near what is known as Jackson's Hole: and that affiant is informed and believes that the person so buried came to his death by unlawful means and by violence, and that said body was buried without any inquest having been hold thereon."

Thereat, Coroner Code, with W. A. Hooker, an experienced surgeon of Evanston, joined a party organized by THE SUN correspondent, and on Thursday Oct 1, left Market Lake station in a blinding snowstorm for Jackson's Hole. Their adventures in crossing the plains and Teton Pass and in following the Sheridan trail to their destination must be told at another time. One week later, on Thursday, Oct 8, they camped on Jackson's Lake, a quarter of a mile from the Hamilton lodge, and the next morning the body was disinterred and carefully examined for such marks as would identify it if it were really the body of Robert Ray Hamilton.

Some of these marks were simple and easy to distinguish. Mr. Hamilton had glossy black hair, his upper front teeth were noticeably perfect, while those in the lower jaw were crowded and overlapped. THE SUN correspondent had an accurate description of Mr. Hamilton's teeth before leaving New York, and this served in the identification. Further than this he had, while riding in Central Park one morning, fallen from his horse and had fractured his left leg below the knee, an injury that kept him in the Presbyterian Hospital for eleven weeks. When this fracture healed the growth of the bone formed a prominent projection on the front of the shin. There were still other marks of identification, as the following statement of Dr. Hocker, made when testifying before the jury, shows:

"On Oct 9, 1891, I was called on by a Coroner's jury to examine a body supposed to be that of Robert Ray Hamilton. I made the examination, and as marks of identification found the first molar

tooth in the right lower jaw filled with gold, the second molar on the same side and jaw filled with silver or some composition, the last molar on the same side and jaw filled with gold. The second molar on the left side of lower jaw was gone, and I presume had been extracted, as the bone had filled up and absorbed in a way to show that the tooth had been gone quite a time.

"I also found the left tibia had been fractured about the middle and the leg a little shortened as a result of the fracture. I have also heard all the testimony of the witnesses examined before the Coroner's jury, and am satisfied that the body examined by me today is that of Robert Ray Hamilton."

Partner Sargent said that these teeth had been filled and the one extracted by a dentist in New York during the month of May preceding Hamilton's death. He probably told the truth, for he had a memorandum book in which were noted in Hamilton's hand the charges made by the dentist.

The other witnesses were Mrs. Sargent and John H. Holland, J. P. Cunningham, and Edward Hunter, who were of the searching party. They testified to the details of finding the body, which have already been published. The jurors were Robert E. Miller, Andrew Mattson, and C. F. Hamm. They rendered the following verdict:

"State of Wyoming, County of Uintah:

"We, the Coroner's Jury, empaneled to inquire into the cause, time, and manner of the death of the person whose body lies before us, do find that the name of the deceased was Robert Ray Hamilton, a native of the United States, aged about 30 years, and that he came to his death in the State and county aforesaid, by being accidentally drowned while attempting to cross Snake River, below Jackson's Lake. According to the evidence furnished by his watch, which had stopped when he entered the water, and by a note which he left on a tag at the south end of the lake, Robert Ray Hamilton was drowned at 9:30 o'clock on Saturday night. Aug. 23, 1890."

The picture presented to the little group of spectators when the cover of the rude box in which the remains were found had been removed was pitiful and shocking. Here lay the body of one who had served his constituents well in the Assembly, and who was, moreover, a great-grandson of one of the most distinguished statesmen. It was crowded into a box too shallow to allow the feet to remain upright. It was clothed in a rough woolen coat, waistcoat, and shirt and in trousers that had been cut off below the knee into the semblance of knickerbockers. Thick leather leggings and leather shoes were on the bare extremities, and a pair of heavy spurs were strapped over all. Around these were twined long shreds of water grass.

The kindly face and graceful form his friends had known were gone with his gentle spirit. Overwhelmed by the disgrace into which he had fallen, Robert Ray Hamilton sought seclusion and peace in the wildest regions of the Rocky Mountains. Here, while waiting the day when a trial in court would again renew the mental strain, he sought to forget his trouble by hunting and fishing. But a dire fate was to overtake him. On an evil day he left the lodge and rode to the lower end of the lake, where on the day following he shot and partly dressed an antelope. Hanging this to his saddle, he started for the lodge, but night overtook him. Instead of camping, as he might have done, he rode his horse out on a long sandy shoal projecting into a still water of the treacherous south

fork of the Snake River. When well-nigh across the water suddenly deepened far beyond the reach of horse or man, and he was pitched over the horse's head into a bed of long tough water grass that grew to the surface. His struggles for the shore were soon over, and a life, marred only by one great mistake, went out in the night. Nor did dire fate then desert him. Strangers found his body, and those who could not appreciate his worth knocked a few rough boards together for a coffin, wrapped the body in a dirty and ragged tarpaulin, loaded it into the box, and so without a tear or a prayer dumped it into a hole on a desolate hillside, under the shadow of the barren, forbidding Tetons—and there it was allowed to remain, marked only by rough pine head and footboards on which someone has scrawled with a lead pencil a tribute of praise that, when viewed in the light of all the facts, is an exasperating mockery.

A loyal friend, a true gentleman, and a brave man was Robert Ray Hamilton, but hundreds of dogs have been more decently interred by their masters than was he by the friends to whom he was loyal.

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