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The Mysterious Case of the Headless Corpse: Part 1

*This is the first in a two-part series on the Mysterious Case of the Headless Corpse.
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This is the story of events that occurred in "Morro" in 1867. It is based on original court records – signed statements of witnesses, the jury and the coroner – into the cause of death of a corpse found on the beach in Morro Bay. Part I is a summary of the evidence the jury heard before issuing a verdict: you can form your own opinion. Part II will share the verdict.

In July of 1867 Franklin Riley discovered a body on the beach below his house, which was close to present-day Main Street and Morro Bay Boulevard. You will recall that Mr. Riley is the acknowledged founder of Morro Bay. In 1867 Riley was living on land that became his official "homestead" in 1872. During the inquest, the coroner referred to Riley's "land" and "property," so it was already seen as his.

The body was unusual: **it was missing its head and hands**. On July 28, 1867, at 10:00 a.m. a coroner's inquest into the death was held. The foreman of the nine-member jury was Mr. J. H. Hollister a prominent landowner in San Luis Obispo County. The jury reached its verdict later that day after receiving sworn testimony from Mr. Riley, his wife Hannah, Mr. George Stone, Mr. John Bains, and Mr. Hollister (both Bains and Hollister were also on the jury, likely a conflict of interest today).

Mr. Riley testified the body was that of Mr. Sheldon Parsons – a man who lived near him and who had been missing for several months. He recognized the “boots and the pants” on the corpse. Riley and his wife knew Parsons well. He was living on Riley’s land (possibly as a boarder), he often ate with the Riley family, and they knew of his comings and goings.

The jury heard conflicting testimony about Parsons’ state of mind and his intentions. Three people saw Parsons on Monday, May 13, 1867, the day before he was last seen: Mr. Bains, Mr. Hollister, and Mr. Riley. Franklin Riley and his wife Hannah saw him on Tuesday morning when he had breakfast at the Riley house. Afterward Parsons headed toward his house and Riley spent the morning about a mile down the beach working on a log. When Riley sent his son to check on him because he didn’t appear around noon for dinner, Parsons’ door was locked and no one was apparently at home.

Mr. Riley testified that Mr. Parsons appeared to be in his right mind but “seemed very discouraged” because he was in debt. He had borrowed money, including approximately \$100 from Franklin Riley himself, to buy a reaper and mower that had subsequently broken down. Riley also testified that he told Parsons he could take his time to pay the money back. Mr. Bains testified that initially Parsons seemed discouraged, but then he became “livelier” and asked Bains to look for work for him.

Mr. Hollister reported that he looked at the damaged reaper, thought it could easily be repaired, and knew a man who could do it. Parsons thought that was a good idea but also told Hollister he might want to sell out and leave the county. He said he would take \$1,000 for all that he had, including horses, reaper, and crops.

Franklin’s wife Hannah testified that she had also talked with Parsons two days before he disappeared when she had given him a letter he had received; he seemed sad after reading the letter. Finally, Mr. Stone testified that the last time he saw Mr. Parsons he “seemed to be in good health and in good spirits.”

What’s mysterious about this case is what’s missing from the testimony. How much money did Parsons (if, indeed, the body was Parsons) borrow and from whom? What was in the letter he received? Another close friend was mentioned (Mike Ruez) but he did not provide testimony. Where was Parsons’ body between May and July? Clearly, Parsons had assets, including multiple horses, and people willing to help him. What do you think the jury decided?