

Moro July 28th 1867
We the undersigned Jurors have come
to the conclusion that Sheldon L.
Parsons committed his death by his
own hands according to the
verdict given

J. H. Bellister - Foreman
John Bains
William Smith
John Mc Jennings
J. Cooper
Victorino Chavez
B. J. Flint
Jose Cant
W. B. Cox
B. B. B. B.

Source: The original document is in the collection of the History Society of SLO County.

The Mysterious Case of the Headless Corpse: Part 2

This is the second in a two-part series on the Mysterious Case of the Headless Corpse.

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The source of this story is the historical document whose signature page is in the image. This doc has helped us summarize the testimony provided before a coroner's jury held on July 28, 1867, in "Moro." The jury was charged with determining the cause of death of a body found on the beach by Franklin Riley, the acknowledged founder of Morro Bay. What made the body unusual is that it was **missing its head and both its hands**. Mr. Riley identified the body, based on its "boots and pants," as that of Sheldon Parsons, a neighbor who had been missing for a couple of months.

The jury of nine men heard conflicting evidence about Mr. Parsons' state of mind and intentions from the five people who provided sworn testimony. All had talked with Mr. Parsons in the days before he disappeared. Was he "melancholy" because he owed people money and the reaper he bought with the money was broken? Or was he intending to sell his horses and reaper and leave town? He had received

encouraging news from Mr. Hollister, who testified **and** was the jury foreman: the reaper wasn't damaged too badly and Mr. Hollister knew someone who could fix it.

Here are the actual words of the jury: ***We the undersigned jurors have come to the conclusion that Sheldon J. Parsons came to his death by his own hands according to the evidence given.***"

While this is a euphemism for suicide, we wonder if the jury found it as ironic as we do today. No indication was given for **how** he may have killed himself.

But the mystery continues because the following day, July 29, 1867, Dr. W.W. Hays testified before the coroner. It turns out that a head – missing its body – was found near San Simeon! Dr. Hays was asked to determine if the head belonged to the body identified as Mr. Parsons.

He examined both the body and the head and concluded that the head was not that of Mr. Parsons. His reason was that the bones did not match up and the teeth were not those of Mr. Parsons, who a year before had a cavity filled by Dr. Hays, which the head did not have.

In examining the body believed to be that of Mr. Parsons, Dr. Hays noted that there were no wounds or marks of violence. He thought the head was probably torn off by the action of the waves or by sharks. The same was true of the hands. The body was "much decomposed" and had been in the water for a long time.

As bizarre as this story is, it's true. But the mystery remains: was it the body of Sheldon Parsons? If so, did he kill himself and how? Or was it an accident or even murder? What happened to Mr. Parsons' horses, grain and reaper? Who did the head belong to? This mystery will never be solved.