

# I

## Introduction

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**A**T JUST AFTER 7 A.M. on Monday, May 7, 1906, Franz Edmund Creffield, an itinerant evangelist and self-proclaimed prophet and messiah, was shot to death at the corner of First and Cherry in downtown Seattle. His killer was George Washington Mitchell, a twenty-three-year-old mill worker from Portland. Creffield's death marked the end of his short-lived religious sect, which operated in Oregon, primarily in Corvallis, from 1903 to 1904 and briefly again in the early months of 1906. But it was just the beginning of a remarkable sequence of events that included Mitchell's trial for murder, his acquittal and almost immediate death in a revenge killing, and the proceedings against Mitchell's murderers.

The Creffield story was well known in the Pacific Northwest at the time and attained a considerable notoriety outside the region. Creffield's "spectacular career," said the *Seattle Times*, had "been read about from Maine to California"; a Salem, Oregon, newspaper similarly noted that Creffield's sect had "made the name of Corvallis famous from the Pacific to the Atlantic." It was probably an exaggeration for the *Corvallis Gazette* to claim that "there is no village, town, or city [in the United States] but that is familiar with the facts," but millions of people could have read about the sect's activities in their local newspapers.<sup>1</sup> One notorious episode, an alleged animal sacrifice in October 1903, even made it into the *Scotsman*, the major newspaper of Edinburgh, Scotland. Reflecting the tendency of rumours to inflate as they spread, that report also had the sect contemplating a human sacrifice.<sup>2</sup>

The Creffield story is immensely rich in human interest. Its principal characters are “ordinary people,” men and women of little property and rudimentary education. Yet for a brief period they made and took part in extraordinary events, impelled in some cases by intense religious beliefs, in others by a conviction that they had both the right and the duty to take the law into their own hands. We are not the first to tell their story. Stewart Holbrook did so more than sixty years ago, and he repackaged his version a number of times.<sup>3</sup> Although Holbrook’s accounts are poorly researched, sensationalistic, and lacking any explanation of context, his work has been relied on by most other writers. We have found more than two dozen renderings of the story, some in book chapters and journal articles,<sup>4</sup> most in short magazine and newspaper stories.<sup>5</sup> Like Holbrook’s accounts almost all of these are also to some extent inaccurate, and they tend to stress the sensational aspects of the story. Rather better researched are three recent book-length studies, but none provides much in the way of context.<sup>6</sup>

This story of a small group of people and the world they tried to forge involves large historical processes played out in Oregon and Washington in the early years of the twentieth century. In this book we wish not only to tell a good story but to examine its wider contexts and probe its deeper meanings, to use Creffield’s career as a window into many aspects of life and law in the Pacific Northwest at the turn of the twentieth century. The use of case studies – or “micro-history” or “history of everyday life,” as it is sometimes termed – to reconstruct past lives and social processes has become increasingly popular in the past two decades. Natalie Davis’ *The Return of Martin Guerre* was one of the earliest studies in the genre and remains perhaps the best-known example.<sup>7</sup> The case study’s principal merit, as many historians have noted, is that it brings into view particular, non-elite individuals, casting a spotlight on how they lived their lives and thought about their world – on the *mentalité* of ordinary people, as Davis puts it.<sup>8</sup> Case studies provide insight into how individuals are affected by and, as importantly, contribute to larger historical events and movements. They are not simply about “the people” writ large, and thus they constitute a valuable addition to the social history that relies more on large-scale statistical studies or on tracing peoples, communities, or institutions over time. We do not see these two ways of doing social history as being in opposition; they are complementary, providing different sight angles for viewing the past.<sup>9</sup> Micro-history, Michael Grossberg aptly notes, “traces structural changes in a society through stories of the struggles in individual lives.”<sup>10</sup> They stress individual agency and the contingency, rather than the inevitability, of the playing out of large-scale processes.

Many recent historical case studies of this type, including our own, utilize legal records. Such records provide sources through which ordinary people speak to us from the past; as Robert Finlay succinctly puts it, “the personalities and perspectives of rural people usually were recorded only when peasants ran into trouble with the law.”<sup>11</sup> While these recordings were always constructed and shaped by the legal process and thus must be treated with some caution, they are nonetheless an immensely rich source of information on everyday lives. They are also, of course, the best source for studying how law and legal institutions worked in the past. Since this book is part legal history, we also strive to explicate both criminal and civil law and process in the early twentieth-century Pacific Northwest, hoping to show, as another recent case study puts it, “how completely interwoven are the legal and the cultural.”<sup>12</sup> Legal cases are also often used for micro-historical studies because they chronicle conflict. One can learn much about a society from the clash between mainstream and aberrant values and practices.<sup>13</sup> Oregon in the early twentieth century contained thousands of ardent Christians, for example; by studying why a small number were committed to the insane asylum as a result of their beliefs we can uncover the boundaries of religious and social tolerance. As this example suggests, the magnifying glass through which we view people, places, and events in this book gives way at times to, or is employed simultaneously with, a wide-angled lens capable of focusing on broader dimensions and larger historical movements. We cannot understand why a small number of people were placed in an insane asylum for their religious beliefs without understanding the ways in which asylums were generally used and viewed in the early twentieth century. Nor can we appreciate why many people in Seattle approved of George Mitchell’s deliberate murder of Creffield without trying to understand, among other things, the deep appeal to ideas about masculinity and family honour that his crime evoked. In turn these particular events add to our existing store of knowledge about larger social and legal questions.

Among other things, our story illustrates the profound hopes that people could pin on the promise of salvation in a period of religious upheaval. It shows also how that upheaval could produce intense conflict within one community, conflict that produced various forms of repression. That repression was both legal and extra-legal, and this book tells us how, when, and why some Americans in the period turned to vigilantism when they deemed the law inadequate for their needs. The manipulation of law and legal systems – insanity commitment procedures and the defence of insanity – is also crucial to our story, especially in the later stages.

Although some of the key figures in this story are men, many of the participants are women, and ultimately the narrative has a great deal to tell us about the lives of women in early twentieth-century Oregon. Indeed, gender is a common thread running through our analysis of all the large historical processes discussed here. This book is about women; the individual lives of the women of the Creffield sect, and society's expectations of them and other women. It is about what women could and could not do, and about what they tried to do despite strictures on their behaviour.

In a recent case study located in the same period as this one, Linda Gordon aptly notes that the case study offers, at the same time, "universal and local knowledge." All "rich narratives," she reminds us, "take on their meanings from the way in which universal motives interact with local contexts." Gordon expresses the hope that her story of orphan abduction in the Southwest "possesses great powers of revelation."<sup>14</sup> We have the same hope. And we should start our story with the central figure, Franz Edmund Creffield, a man who believed that he possessed the greatest of all powers of revelation.

#### FRANZ EDMUND CREFFIELD

We know very little about Franz Creffield's early years. He was of German origin, and probably born around 1873.<sup>15</sup> He likely came to the United States in 1884, as a child or young adult, and one press report from 1904 refers to his having a mother living in one of the eastern states; if he came as a young boy, it seems reasonable that at least one parent would have come with him.<sup>16</sup> He was not only literate in English but had good command of grammar and syntax, although he never became a US citizen. He was of a small build even for the period, standing no more than five feet three inches tall and weighing about 135 pounds, with fair hair and blue eyes.<sup>17</sup> A mild-looking man, his name was not originally Creffield, which was an anglicization of Crefeld.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond these few details nothing is known of Creffield prior to 1899.<sup>19</sup> In that year he became an officer in the Salvation Army in Portland, Oregon, although he may have previously been a "soldier" in the Army in Seattle.<sup>20</sup> The Army had been active in Portland since 1886, a few years after its establishment in the United States. During its early years there, not untypically, the Army had been derided and its members both assaulted by opponents and prosecuted for violating municipal ordinances, but by the mid- to late 1890s opposition had died down and the organization

was flourishing.<sup>21</sup> In a 1904 interview two Portland area officers – Ensign Maud Bigney and Captain Bertha Holeman – claimed to have known Creffield well, although they were reluctant to speak about him, for by that time he was a notorious adulterer. A few years previously he had been a “common street listener,” but “was led to see the light of Jesus” and “from that time on he was an earnest worker in the Army.”<sup>22</sup> Creffield preached at a variety of meetings, and while he was “never considered a clever man in a high degree,” he was “above the average” and made a number of converts. Employment in the Army meant that he had rejected the religion he had been brought up in – Catholicism.<sup>23</sup> In 1899 he was promoted from cadet to lieutenant.<sup>24</sup>

In November 1899 the new Lieutenant Creffield was posted to Grant’s Pass, in southern Oregon, where from January 1900 he worked with an officer named Garden.<sup>25</sup> He served in Grant’s Pass until late May 1900, at which point he was transferred to Corvallis. Further postings followed – to The Dalles in August 1900, on the Columbia River some sixty miles east of Portland in Wasco County, and in November 1900 to Oregon City, just south of Portland. Possibly he lived briefly in Seattle between the Corvallis and The Dalles postings, for in June or July of that year he was captured on the census as a Seattle resident.<sup>26</sup> In February 1901 he was posted to McMinnville, Yamhill County, some thirty miles south and a little west of Portland. A few days later, on February 14, he was promoted to captain. His final posting, officially recorded as June 26, 1901, was to Heppner. Such short tours of duty were common in the Army of this period, officers frequently moving from place to place.<sup>27</sup> In October 1901 Creffield resigned from the Salvation Army in order to search for what he considered a more authentic way to follow God’s word. As he put it later, “God called me to preach His will,”<sup>28</sup> and just before he left, he published in the Salvation Army newspaper the first of only two articles he is known to have written, a strident call to live a life of complete holiness.<sup>29</sup>

We cannot follow Creffield’s movements precisely in the year or so after his resignation, but it appears that he moved from town to town as an itinerant preacher, presumably looking for converts. He went mostly to places he had worked as an Army officer, perhaps because he had contacts among the more fervently religious in those communities. He may have returned to McMinnville; a later story has him driven out of the town, presumably for his radicalism, but we are inclined to doubt this. McMinnville press stories about Creffield after he had become notorious do not refer to his earlier presence there.<sup>30</sup> He was in Portland for a time in July 1902 – it was there that his future wife Maud Hurt first heard him speak, and another

follower, Esther Mitchell, may also have encountered him for the first time.<sup>31</sup> Creffield spent some time in 1902 in the state capital, Salem, in the Willamette Valley to the south of Portland, a place he had not visited with the Army. He was drawn to Salem because of his interest in the Apostolic Holiness Mission led by M.L. Ryan, a group that operated in the city from the turn of the century until at least late 1906, and that became one of the first Pentecostal churches in Oregon. It was in Salem, Creffield later said, that after months of prayer God first instructed him to take up his own brand of evangelism.<sup>32</sup> A Salem newspaper carried a story some four years later about him preaching in a tent and “making a big fuss and jumping up in the air.”<sup>33</sup>

Creffield probably spent most of 1902, however, in The Dalles. He had some success there in persuading twenty or so people to leave their churches and join a mission – the Peniel Mission – headed by Creffield and, probably, two other evangelists, Frank Cooper and James van Zandt. His teachings in The Dalles bore a marked similarity to those he later enunciated in Corvallis, explained in the next chapter, and while there he published an article detailing his own version of radical Christianity. Creffield probably left The Dalles when his adherents made it clear that they found him extreme. His group engaged in noisy worship, and it was later suggested that he caused an “uproar.”<sup>34</sup> Disillusioned with the Salvation Army and seeking and advocating a stricter approach to religion, late in 1902 the itinerant evangelist’s travels took him to Corvallis, another community he had served in with the Salvation Army. It is to that period of his ministry that we now turn.