

What Happened to Shorty Davis?

Dead men tell no tales

STORY & PHOTOS BY KATIE WENNERSTROM

The secrets held within the Crooked River valley whisper the rumblings of a cold-hearted past. A history filled with turmoil, conflict and vigilante justice.

Many local historians believe a casualty of the long since passed cattle and sheep wars was a man known as Shorty Davis.

His disappearance has been threaded through the rumors of history – keeping the specifics of his vanishing buried with those who may have known the committed sin, but sealed a pact in the darkness of night. His life was a fascinating journey, and his death... a mystery unsolved.

Theories have floated across the desert like tumbleweed with most concluding in a clandestine strategy carried out among the Sheep Shooters. If a smoking gun was ever found, the killer was never traced and the case has turned colder with every passing year.

The man, known in this area as Elias “Shorty” Davis, grew up in the village of Evdilos on the small island of Ikaria in the Mediterranean. Leonidas Douris, his given name, was the child of a prosperous landowner and the second of six sons.

In 1877 while he was in his early twenties, he left the island, which at the

time was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, and made his way to America.

Now, with the facts obscured by time, his grandniece, Anastasia “Topsy” Douris, is trying to trace the footsteps of her long-lost relative. In her search, she recently traveled from Greece to Oregon in an effort to piece together the puzzle of Shorty’s vanishing.

With her cultured European accent, Topsy described the spark that initially ignited her curiosity. “Shorty’s grandmother had been given a dowry of a large plot of land in Galiskari, a place further along the coast from Evdilos,” she said. “Around the early 1980s the original dowry document was uncovered and that set the whole family tree search off, as it was important to know who the descendants actually were before the land could be claimed back.”

While searching through the years of history looking for relatives of the grandmother, Topsy became fascinated with the tale of her great uncle. “The story of Shorty has been known in the family for a long time,” she continued. “The version we had was that he had gone to America, had a ranch, and was killed by cowboys and that my grandfather had gone over to settle



SHEEPMAN ON HORSE - COURTESY A.R. BOWMAN MEMORIAL MUSEUM



his affairs. I was again intrigued by the story of my great uncle. At that stage he was just a name on the tree, I could put no further information about him into the tree. It was also important to me as my own father had his name and I felt that he should not be forgotten completely and wanted to be able to put more than just a name on the tree."

With Douris family members living in the same homes of several generations past, forgotten relics came to light. "In my grandfather's original house, my brother found two letters," Topsy said. "One was from the America Embassy in Ismere, dated 1906, saying that giving power of attorney to A.J. Derby would be the best way. The other letter was from A.J. Derby. That was in 1910. It was a follow-up letter – a social letter, saying that they often remembered my grandfather. Those two letters were exhilarating."

From there, Topsy was captivated and decided to find the answers to the burning questions. Without much to go on, she turned to an expert.

In hopes of tracking down Attorney A.J. Derby and her great uncle Leonidas Douris in northwestern Oregon, Topsy found Peggy Baldwin of Family Passages in Portland. Slowly, but surely, Peggy was able to gather documents confirming that Leonidas Douris of Ikaria was in fact the naturalized United States citizen who was known as Elias "Shorty" Davis.



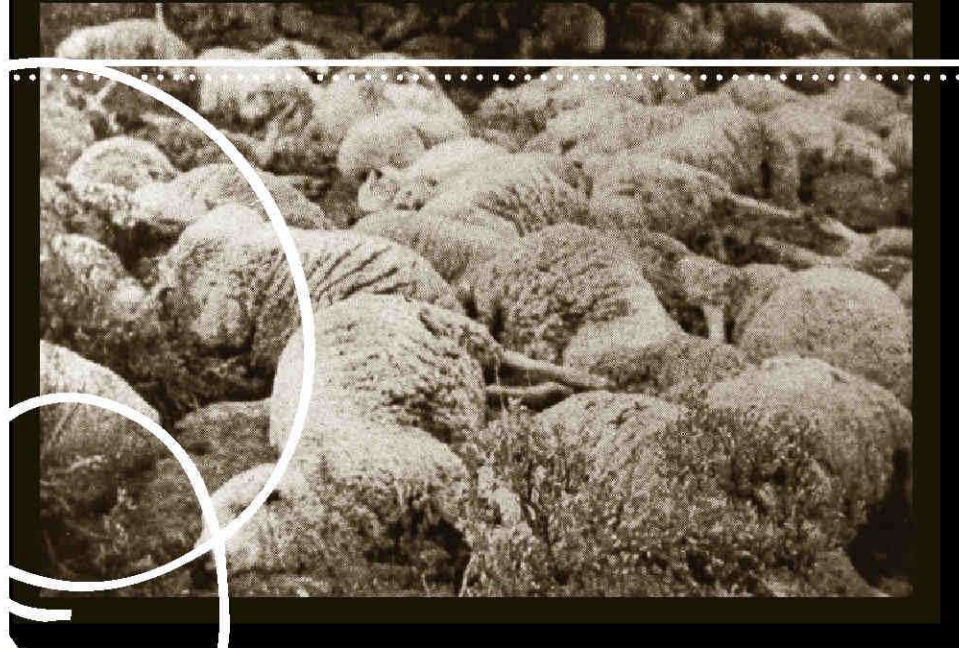
EVDILOS VILLAGE IKARIA. 1900

While the circumstances which brought Shorty to the United States remain a mystery, one account mentions that Shorty made his way from Ikaria to rid himself of friends and family who would borrow his money and never return it.

"They said he tried to get away from people that were borrowing money from him. That wouldn't have been in Greece, because he was the son of a landowner," Topsy said. "If they wanted to borrow money, they'd have been going to the landowner, not the son. In Greece, the parents don't actually hand anything over until they die."

Topsy speculated that the turbulence caused by the Ottoman Empire during that time could have been the motive behind Shorty's departure from the island.

"The reason for him leaving, we've no idea," she said. "It could have very easily been that he was in trouble with the Ottoman authorities on the island. The main



SHEEP KILLED AT BENJAMIN LAKE - COURTESY A.R. BOWMAN MEMORIAL MUSEUM

land had already started to be liberated. Men in other areas of Greece tried to get free. It could have been that he had gotten involved in something like that."

Shorty's reasoning for coming to the United States appears to be just another element that adds to his mystery, however, undeniable facts remain. "He was ambitious. He just got on a boat and came to America," Crook County Genealogical Society Librarian Vivian Zimmerlee said. "He left his family to come here. Maybe he knew what he was coming to, but I just can't imagine doing that."

The three to four years immediately following Shorty's arrival in the United States are plagued by more vagueness. Peggy was able to find traces of him in San Francisco and Portland, identifying friends in each city.

In an article dated in 1907, Derby identified John Saphos as a lifelong friend of Shorty's. Derby also mentioned that Shorty had lived with Saphos in San Francisco prior to moving to Oregon.

In another possibility to track the lost time, Portland restaurant owner Harry Mavrikes and his brothers initially lived on the same Mediterranean island as Shorty's family, making an instant connection likely in the newfound land.

"The Douris family is from the Evdilos side of the island, the north side," Topsy said. "The Mavrikes family is from the other side of the island from a village called Mavrikato on the south side. Shorty's father married Lemonia Papanikolaou who was from the village of Mavrikato. Though, as yet, we have not found the exact relationship, it is more than likely that Shorty was related to the Mavrikes brothers through his mother or at very least would have visited that village to see his maternal grandparents."

What is known is that upon his arrival in Crook County, Shorty's stature made him a noticeable character in the community.

Derby said, "Douris appeared in Prineville in 1881 looking for work. He is said by those who knew him to have been a misshapen fellow, with long powerful arms, but so short and stocky of build as to have been almost a dwarf, which aided in establishing his identity."

"He made some friends here and he went to work for a sheepman," Zimmerlee said. "He just worked and saved."

According to Derby, at the end of each year, Shorty's boss, a man named Lyttle, would give him "a number of sheep in return for his services. Douris was a hard worker and saver, and soon commenced to make money and buy land."

As Shorty accumulated property, the infamous range wars of the high desert gained momentum. "The cattlemen were here first. So then when the sheep starting coming in, the cattlemen didn't like it," said Zimmerlee. "The range was open. There were no fences. These big cattlemen had the free range. They ran their cows over it all and they didn't want these sheep people in here. The cattlemen didn't like it – it was cutting in on their profits. They just thought they were here first and they could have free rein. So that's what caused the terrible fights. There were lots of murders during that time."

"It's a pretty sensitive issue, even to this day," Bowman Museum Assistant Director Steve Lent added. "The early families won't talk about it. After all these years, even though they're not associated with it anymore, they still don't like to talk about it."

The legendary cattle and sheep wars of Crook County gripped the area with fear and panic. Men lost their lives and livelihoods to be on one side of the fence or the other. In those days, you were either a sheepman or a cattleman, and whichever stance you chose could bring your death.

As the local law enforcement turned the other cheek, and in some instances reportedly assisted the cattlemen, the Crook County Sheep Shooter Association of Eastern Oregon was formed. They were a vigilante gang, mostly made up of high-profile cattlemen whose prosperous earnings were

threatened by the incoming flocks of sheep. The men would gather for midnight conversations at a lone pine tree on Wolf Creek near Paulina to determine the fate of the sheep and their herders.

After an influential editorial was placed in the *Oregonian Newspaper*, the unidentified secretary of the local Sheep Shooter association submitted a reply.

"We are the direct and effective means of controlling the range in our jurisdiction," the secretary claimed. "If we want more range, we simply fence it in and live up to the maximum of the golden rule that possession represents nine points of the law. When sheepmen fail to observe these peaceable obstructions we delegate a committee to notify offenders. These mild and peaceful means are usually effective, but in cases where they are not, our executive committee takes the matter in hand, and being men of high ideals as well as good shots by moonlight, they promptly enforce the edicts of the association."

As the Sheep Shooter's secretary continued to demand that the newspaper and Governor "desist from publishing matter derogatory to the reputation of sheep-shooters," the secretary's subsequent boasting could only be summed up as brash arrogance.

"Our annual report shows that we have slaughtered between 8,000 and 10,000 head during the last shooting season and expect to increase this respectable showing during the next season providing the sheep hold out and the Governor and the *Oregonian* observe the customary laws of neutral-

ity," the secretary declared. "In some instances the Wool-growers of Eastern Oregon have been so unwise as to offer rewards for the arrest and conviction of sheep-shooters and for assaults of herders. We have therefore warned them by publication of the danger of such action, as it might have to result in our organization having to proceed on the lines that dead men tell no tales."

With that written proclamation, the Sheep Shooters confirmed their vigilante justice and condescendingly reminded the already anxiety-ridden citizens of Crook County that the cattlemen assumed they would win the war.

"It was hectic times," Lent said. "It was not uncommon to hear about murders and disappearances."

Among the many presumed casualties of the range wars was Shorty Davis. At the time of his vanishing, he owned 2,900 head of sheep, making him an easy target for the Sheep Shooters.

"Everybody seems to think that he was murdered," Zimmerlee said. "They didn't think that he would just walk away. There are not very many people that would have believed that."

While the theories remain even without the bones of truth coming to light, at some point, on Friday, August 17, 1900, Shorty vanished without a trace. At the time, it was reported that neighbors heard the farm animals wailing and went over to investigate. Everything appeared to be in place, except for the fact that Shorty was missing.

DAVIS RANCH, APRIL 13, 2008



"There are different accounts – lots and lots out there, bits and pieces," Zimmerlee said. "There are all kinds of stories about what could have happened to him. It's such a mystery."

Ivan Porfily, whose father Ralph purchased Shorty's ranch after he vanished, remembered the stories following the disappearance. "My mother was always telling about how the people would come to look for him," he said. "People scattered everywhere looking for him."

"Back then everybody looked for him," Zimmerlee said. "It wasn't like he disappeared and nobody cared. Everybody looked for him and wondered what happened to him."

One of the most widely remembered tales was that of Shorty being killed, thrown into an old well and covered with dirt. "There was this old fella, I think he was a drinking guy, he'd get to talking about things and he would enhance them," Zimmerlee said. "He said that they could find Shorty's body in some well. The Sheriff and some others got in there to dig. One person got down and scooped the dirt out, and the other person emptied and threw the bucket down again. They found the remains of a dog, but they didn't find any person."

The rumors persisted with seemingly endless conclusions. The only connection in each of the tales was that the blame was always placed on the Sheep Shooters. In the 1950s, Ivan's brother and his family settled into the old Shorty Davis house. Frank Porfily, a junior high school student at the time, remembered the old house along with the stories that were attached to it. The house was respectable for originally being built in the late 1800s, compact and practical, with essentials, like indoor plumbing, added as the years went on.

"I remember the house well," Porfily said. "Instead of the things we know in houses today, it was built out of one by twelves. They were straight up and down and then it had newspaper as the insulation. The house was not real big. The living room went into a kitchen and there was a pantry where we kept all the fruit and all the canned stuff. There was one bathroom in it. Then there were two bedrooms in the original house, either one or two rooms. I would say it was probably 20 feet wide and maybe close to 50 feet the other way. It would have been 1,000 to 1,200 square feet, somewhere in that neighborhood."

A common occurrence to the ranch, even the 1950s, were curious searchers hoping to finally solve the mystery. "Shorty had his farm there and the rumor was that he was cooking something on the stove and it was still there – uneaten, and he was gone," Porfily said. "Through the years, people talked about a rock. It's where Sanford Creek runs into Prineville Reservoir – there's a big rock there. It was rumored that in those rocks is where he was killed and buried. The water backs right up to the bottom of that rimrock where everyone thought he was. As I remember, people would come out and talk to my dad about it, and he'd send them down there. They'd do their little pack trip to try to find his bones, but nobody ever found anything. It was all rumors. Nobody really ever knew what happened to him."

With constant chatter circulating throughout the Crooked River valley, Shorty's demise was speculated upon frequently. "They couldn't find anything, but they found some guy's saddle up there around Wickiup Creek," Ivan said. "Right





DOURIS HOUSE IN IKARIA

ON Point

after this happened, when he disappeared, there come a big rain storm. They say that if he fell in the canyon or something, maybe the mud washed over him."

"There's one account that said he got on his horse with his dog and his gun and he just rode out into the desert," Zimmerlee said. "Nobody ever saw him again. Of course, there are some people that think he was burnt up. There was a huge fire. People saw the smoke from this fire in the Ochocos for days. It was quite a large fire, but they never found the gun or the horseshoes. There's another story about a place like a bog or quick sand. They say that he was probably put down in there."

The most committed reference came from a book written by Dorothy Lawson McCall, entitled *Ranch Under the Rimrock*. Her account not only theorized what happened to Shorty, but also named the presumed killer.

"Her family had lived here about that time. They had a ranch out on the lower Crooked River," Lent said. "She said in there that everybody acknowledged that one of his neighbors was the one who killed him. The guy's name was Charlie Colby, and his place was right at the head of Sanford Creek. She said that she was afraid to be around the guy because he was reported to have been the one who killed Shorty Davis."

"There was a guy who lived near him," Ivan added. "They had words before everything happened. He was a guy that had cows and Shorty Davis had sheep. All I know is what my mother told me. We always thought maybe something would turn up later in life, but it never did."

"Circumstantial evidence indicated that Davis was last seen dicker-ing with Charlie Colby, who was renowned for his violent temper," McCall wrote in her book. According to her narrative, years later in a rage of anger brought on by debt and the impending loss of his own ranch, Colby made a drastic decision.

In her book, McCall wrote, "Straight through Prineville he thundered, murder in his heart, on up Crooked River to the ranch where his devoted wife was waiting for him at the gate. Jerking his spent and sweating horse to a halt, he answered her glad cry of 'Charlie!' with a

single shot. The crack of a second report brought to a close the explosive and tormented existence of Charlie Colby."

Soon after Shorty's disappearance, a \$1,000 reward was posted for information leading to his whereabouts. On September 15, 1900, less than a month after his vanishing, a notice to creditors was printed in the local newspaper. Shorty was labeled as deceased and all persons having claims against his estate were to notify the officials within six months. Claims were presented and allowed in the amount of \$3,760.

"The animals, the livestock were auctioned off so somebody didn't have to take care of them," Zimmerlee said. "Whatever belongings he had – the land and his personal items were all auctioned off." Among the large ticket items in Shorty's possession were 800 acres, which at auction sold to the highest bidders for a mere \$2,600, even though it was valued at \$10,296.30. In addition, he had several thousand sheep, five dozen cattle and 14,000 pounds of wool, which in total appraised at \$9,000.

In 1905, Hood River attorney Andrew J. Derby became fascinated by the story. In previous years, he had lived near Harry Mavrikes' restaurant in downtown Portland and considered the business owner a friend. Mavrikes explained the troubling circumstances of Shorty's disappearance and directed Derby to Shorty's childhood friend John Saphos in San Francisco.

"Through a friend in Portland, I learned of the escheating of the estate of Leonidas Douris, who was known in Prineville country under the name of Elias Davis," Derby was quoted as saying. "When I learned through (Mavrikes) that Douris had a friend in San Francisco named Saphos, I learned his real name. Through the American Consul at Symrna, I finally succeeded in locating the Douris family."

On July 6, 1906, Derby filed a petition with the Crook County Circuit Court claiming that proceeds from the estate be directed to Shorty's relatives living in Ikaria. The state maintained that there was no proof of Leonidas and Shorty being the same person, and left that verification up to Derby.

The ability to confirm Shorty's childhood and adult life could come easily through stateside friends, and Saphos was chosen to make the appearance at the Crook County Court hearing. In addition, Shorty's five brothers decided that Constantine, Topsy's grandfather, would make the trip to represent the family and hopefully collect the proceeds from the estate. He arrived on Ellis Island, from Ikaria, on January 14, 1907. By May 9 of that year, Derby, having what he needed through written testimony and witnesses, brought the case to court.

Derby said, "At the recent term of court in Prineville, (Constantine) established his relationship completely, and the heirs will get the money received by the state for their brother's property."


Although it was reported at the time that the estate was worth \$75,000 to \$100,000, that amount has been proven to be an inaccurate assumption. The state sold off Shorty's possessions to the highest bidder, which appears, even in those days, to be bargain prices. However, the estimated value of the items would not have reached even close to the reported sum. In the end, the records attest that the Douris family received a total of \$8057.64, the actual and more reasonable amount for that day in age.

Around May 16, 1907, Constantine left Oregon for the long trip back to Evdilos, Ikaria.

"It has only recently come to light that before dividing the money, a sum was kept back," Topsy said. "My grandfather was to use that money to bring the water supply into the Douris neighborhood, which he did." With water successfully brought in, the five brothers divided the remaining funds.

"They all had a house on land at the time because their father had lots of land," Topsy said. "When they got the money, they all built two more houses each. Those houses are still there, you can still see them. The brothers had all built houses round a central courtyard, all in the same place and a relative still lives in each of them."

While Topsy has yet to find all the answers, the journey to track her missing relative has revealed facts which were unknown up until now, leaving her humbled. "Originally, I thought that he was shot and there would be a grave," Topsy said. "I just felt it would be nice to put some flowers on the grave and say thank you." Now, more than a century since Shorty vanished from his ranch, all she can do is speak her thoughts at an old fireplace believed to be the only object remaining from Shorty's time in the United States.

"It's just fantastic up here," she said. "The scenery is very much like the island he came from. These trees and this little valley – coming up here was so like the island. He was here and he walked this land. That is fantastic to see." 



TOPSY VISITING ORIGINAL DAVIS HOMESTEAD