

Pastor Disappears – Turns Up As a Musician

Disappearances seem to make headlines and talking points in today's news media. However, this was also apparently true in the past. Back in 1905, there was an account about the then Mayor of Fairmont, William W. Ward, regarding his untimely disappearance. After much conjecture on the part of the locals, including suspected sightings at a number of widespread geographic locations in the United States, he was finally located in Santa Ana, California, running a cigar store. Interestingly enough, in 1914, a Fairmont pastor also mysteriously turned up among the missing. The following is based on a series of articles from the *Fairmont Sentinel* dated January 12 through February 16, 1915.

What was referred to at that time as a “baffling mystery” took place in mid-December of 1914, capturing the public's attention, as well as the attention of the national media, regarding twenty-eight year old W. R. Burton, pastor of a local church, who was married and the father of a four year old boy. On December 15, 1914, he was said to have boarded an eastbound Milwaukee train to preach at a funeral in Austin. Upon establishing the fact that he never arrived in Austin, there ensued wild speculation and gossip, including scandalous stories, as to his disappearance and whereabouts, all of which eventually proved to be false.

Ten days after his disappearance, Burton's wife received a letter from him stating that he was “fully aware of his condition, and that he would seek relief in a sanitarium, the location of which he did not disclose.” It was also later discovered that, prior to his disappearance, he had been taking treatments for a “nervous condition” that he was fearful of, and that he had a mania in which he would purchase anything he saw without any regard or concern as to how he would pay for the purchases.

The next communication from the missing pastor, Walter Burton, came in January of 1915 from a New York hospital in the form of a telegram. It read, “At New York Hospital. Here since Jan. 10. Was picked up unconscious in street. Remember nothing since Dec. 15th. Severe pains in head then. Don't know where I have been.”

Adding to the mystery, a New York newspaper printed a story about how Burton had, while suffering from amnesia, enlisted as a musician in the U. S. Navy under the name of Richard Hudd at Key West, Florida, on December 26, 1914. The newspaper account further stated that he had been transferred to the Navy Yard in Brooklyn and had been living at the YMCA since January 2, 1915. This account went on to describe Burton's collapse after which he was hospitalized. The article stated that on January 10th, a man in the afternoon throng of Fifth Avenue onlookers clapped his hands to his head, uttered a cry, and collapsed on the sidewalk of 42nd Street. After being taken to the hospital, unconscious, his identification revealed that he was Richard Hudd, a musician with the U. S. Navy, and that he was waiting for a uniform and assignment to a ship's band. In fact, the name Richard Hudd was actually his given name; however, he had adopted the name of Burton from his stepfather, who was his mother's second husband. In addition, the *New York Times* sent a telegram to the Fairmont Postmaster requesting information about Burton. It read, “Rev. Walter R. Burton found here with memory gone, enlisted in Navy. Please wire at once at our expense the story of his disappearance.”

When the unconscious Mr. Hudd, aka Pastor Burton, opened his eyes, he said: “Where am I, why am I here, and what happened?” Burton had no idea as to how he had ended up in New York. His mind had apparently been a blank from the time he left Fairmont, traveled across the United States, and enlisted in the Navy.

The January 12, 1915, edition of the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel* had an article quoting Dr. Ray M. Jones, a Fairmont osteopath who had previously treated Burton. “The medical term for his case is circular insanity with mixed forms. There are some interesting facts to be noted in connection with these symptoms and characterizations as applied to the case of Rev. Burton. You will note that the disease is most prevalent among women. I should say that Mr. Burton is one of the most effeminate men I have ever known. While he is an athlete, yet he is not of the physically strong construction usually attributed to athletes and his temperament is decidedly feminine.” So much for patient privacy in 1915.

After eventually obtaining a discharge from the Navy, which took several weeks, he encountered more problems in that he was then unable to locate his wife. She, apparently, had gone to the home of a sister in Boise, Idaho, following his disappearance. She was later found to be at the home of another relative. Finally, Burton returned to Fairmont, was reunited with his family, and his congregation was very supportive in unanimously asking him to come back to serve as pastor at his church. He continued his ministerial duties until the fall of 1915 when he and his family left for Idaho, presumably on a vacation to visit his wife’s family. However, while in Idaho, he resigned from his church in Fairmont, never to return.

Burton’s disappearance was given national publicity to some extent, and his medical condition attracted the attention of some of the nation’s most highly respected physicians and surgeons of that era. He was never able to fully explain how he traveled from Fairmont to Key West via Kansas City and then to New York as he had only \$8.00 to \$10.00 in his pocket when he left home, and a mere \$1.33 in his pocket when found on the streets of New York. As to why he resigned from the church, conjecture was that he could no longer take the scrutiny, stares, and curious questions from local citizens, even though he wrote an account of his experience for the *Sentinel* that took almost a full page of space. In addition, his story was carried by a Chicago newspaper. He was apparently tired of explaining, and felt it better to go somewhere else and get a fresh start.

So ends the mystery of the disappearing pastor, in some ways quite similar to the disappearing Fairmont Mayor of 1905. Both instances were somewhat puzzling, both attracted a degree of national attention, and both were, to some extent, unexplainable. Each traveled great distances; Pastor Burton to New York, and Mayor Ward to California. One could only speculate as to the attention and the media coverage these two mysterious events from the past would attract in today’s world of around the clock news channels and the internet.

Visit the Pioneer Museum to learn more about the disappearing pastor, the disappearing mayor, and other things of interest from the past.