Creffield, Edmund, and the Brides of Christ Church

Born in Germany in the 1860s, Edmund Franz Creffield immigrated as a young man to the United States to avoid mandatory military service. In 1903, after spending some time in Vermont, he went to Oregon as a commander of the Salvation Army, working in The Dalles, Grants Pass, and eventually Corvallis.

In Corvallis, Creffield was struck by what he called a “vision” and “revelation” from God to form a new religious sect. He took on a new persona—Joshua Elija Creffield—formed the Brides of Christ, and began recruiting members to his church. Services included chanting, swaying, rolling on the ground (leading some to call the group “Holy Rollers”), and speaking in tongues. At one service, he called out, “Vile clothes, begone.…Roll, ye sinners, roll!” Creffield undressed, and his followers obediently did likewise.

In 1903, Creffield persuaded some twenty Salvation Army members in Corvallis to join his church. He preached that one of his followers was destined to be the mother of the second Christ and that he needed to purify them by “laying his hands” on them during their ritualistic rolling. Community members expressed concern, and some family members of Creffield's followers had their wives and daughters committed to insane asylums or sent out of town to live with relatives as a form of protection.

Creffield defended himself, claiming that many of the published charges about him were untrue. On January 4, 1904, a group of angry people tarred and feathered Creffield and his chief disciple, Brother Brooks, and ordered them to leave town. Brooks fled, but Creffield refused. The next day he married Maud Hurt, one of his followers.

By March, Creffield was in legal trouble. Donna Starr, Maud Hurt’s aunt, at her husband’s urgings, signed a claim admitting to an adulterous affair with Creffield. Authorities issued a warrant for Creffield's arrest, and he went into hiding as a statewide manhunt ensued. Maud secured a divorce. In June, Creffield was found nude and starving in a hole under the Hurt family home. He was convicted of adultery and sentenced to two years in the Oregon State Penitentiary.

When Creffield was released in 1906, he declared himself Christ raised from the dead. From a self-imposed exile in California, he wrote Maud, who was living with her brother Frank in Seattle. The couple remarried, and Creffield sent notice to his followers in Corvallis to join him on the Oregon Coast near Waldport, where he planned to create a “Garden of Eden.” Creffield's female followers hurried to join him, but the Creffields left the group at the beachside camp to find another place to establish a colony.

George Mitchell, the brother of follower Esther Mitchell, tracked the couple to Seattle, where he shot and killed Creffield in front of witnesses. At the trial, the defense argued that George murdered Creffield because he had “lusted” after eighteen-year-old Esther, selecting her to be the mother of the next Christ. After a short but excitable trial, George was acquitted. In the excitement of the verdict, Maud and Esther slipped out of the courtroom.

George and his brothers stayed in Seattle, hoping to locate Esther. When they could not find her, they planned their return home. Unexpectedly, Esther met her brothers at the train depot. As George boarded a train to Portland, she killed him using a pistol she and Maud had purchased with their witness fees. Maud committed suicide, and Esther was found not guilty by reason of insanity and committed to Western State Hospital in Steilacoom, Washington. After her release in 1910, Esther returned to Waldport, where she took her own life in 1914.

Written by Theresa McCracken

Further Reading:

Baldasty, Gerald J. *Vigilante Newspapers: A Tale of Sex, Religion, & Murder in the Northwest*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005.

McCracken, T. and Robert B. Blodgett. *Holy Rollers: Murder and Madness in Oregon’s Love Cult* . Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Press, 2002.

Phillips, Jim and Rosemary Gartner. *Murdering Holiness: The Trials of Franz Creffield and George Mitchell.* Vancouver, B.C.: UBC Press, 2003.

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