Daniel Norman Williams was the first person to be convicted of murder without having a body as evidence and the last man to be publicly hanged in Oregon. Williams was executed at the Wasco County Courthouse in The Dalles, on July 21, 1905.

Williams "colorful" past included serving three years in a Nebraska prison for assaulting and nearly killing his sister-in-law. After his release, Williams traveled to Colwell, Iowa, where he met Alma Nesbitt. The pair traveled to Oregon where they filed adjoining homestead claims twenty miles outside Hood River before being secretly married on July 25, 1899, in Vancouver, Washington. In October 1899, Alma was joined by her mother, Louisa J. Nesbitt and they spent the winter in Portland where Alma worked as a housekeeper. On March 8, 1900, Alma and her mother took a train to Hood River and proceeded on towards Alma's homestead. Alma and Louisa were never heard from again.

Shortly after their "disappearance" Daniel Williams forged Alma's name on a relinquishment, after he realized that his house and barn had been mistakenly built on Alma's claim to which he had no rights. In desperation, Williams had presented it to the land office on June 23, 1900, but an employee recognized Alma's signature as a forgery and the federal court issued an indictment for D. Norman Williams. In early 1904, George Nesbitt arrived in Oregon to investigate the disappearance of his mother and sister. While digging around on Williams' property, he discovered bloody gunnysacks, chunks of long gray hair, and a piece of scalp with long brunette hair still attached. The Wasco County grand jury issued an indictment for first-degree murder against Williams who was arrested in Bellingham, Washington, and escorted back to Hood River.

At the trial, which began on May 27, 1904, defense attorney Henry McGinn argued that there could be no murder without a body. Prosecutor Frank Menefee, however had a surprise witness—Dr. L. Victoria Hampton, a young Portland chemist. She proved that the hair attached to the scalp was human and testified that it belonged to Alma Nesbitt. Using the new "serum" test that had been discovered in Germany a year earlier, Dr. Hampton established that the blood on the gunnysacks was from a human being, not an animal. During the trial it was revealed that Williams had been married multiple times prior to Alma, and was actually still married to a wife in Nebraska. It was also discovered that two of his wives had died of poison. In May 1904, the jury made legal history by convicting a man of murder without having a body as evidence. In a legal system based on precedent, the case continues to be cited in murder cases today.

Austin Schulz, Reference Archivist
Oregon State Archives

For more information on facebook go to