

Remembering Timothy Pettis: July 6, 2024



"My Dreams Float on Night Waves"
by artist Sachi Rome

You are invited to join with people of good will at Sunset Memorial Park—south of Coos Bay, Oregon—for a memorial service to remember Timothy Pettis. Recovering the story of Timothy's unsolved and brutal murder July 6, 1924 on the docks of Coos Bay has called together people of good will to provide him the burial service he never received. The memorial will

be a time of reflection and prayer for Mr. Pettis—and for ourselves as we mourn and recognize the ongoing moral blight of racism that continues steal, kill, and destroy in our own time.

EVENTS:

Self-guided walking tour of Timothy Pettis's last night. Brochures available at Coos History Museum and the Coos Bay Visitor Center. An interpreter will be available in the Wells Fargo Bank block 10:00–11:30am. The Memorial Service will begin at 1:30pm at Sunset Memorial Park.

Sponsored by: Oregon Remembrance Project, Oregon Black Pioneers, Coos History Museum, Emmanuel Episcopal Church, and the Truth and Reconciliation Working Group of the Episcopal Diocese in Western Oregon.

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Who was Timothy “Frank” Pettis?

Timothy Pettis was a World War I Army veteran, working as janitor for the Bank of Southwestern Oregon. He grew up in Florida, where his father was a Baptist preacher and his mother and sisters were teachers. His marriage at the Coos County Courthouse to a local woman of color was remarkable enough that the Coquille Valley Sentinel wrote a short article about it on April 4, 1924.

Two months later, on the night of July 6, he played pool with some friends, including a white man with whom he had served overseas in the war. He later crossed Front Street to the Right Café, a 24-hour restaurant that was filled with sailors off the USS Shirk, a destroyer which had just docked that day. Despite prohibition laws, many of the young men had been drinking. A sailor named “Slim” suddenly cried out that Timothy Pettis had a knife (a claim that his companions denied). A local taxi driver who was passing outside the door of the café heard the claim and reported it to the police. When Timothy—who had already exited the café with a friend—saw the police running towards him, he ran to the back of the bank building where he worked, and then down the train tracks on Front Street. He was last seen alive being chased by the police.

On the morning of July 12, a tugboat operator for the local lumber mill found his body floating in Isthmus Slough with no marks of violence on it...except that he had been castrated. Despite state-wide attention after an appeal to the governor from local citizens, the murder has never been solved, and Mr. Pettis’s story slipped into obscurity for a century.

An archived presentation of Timothy Pettis’s story, done as part of “Black History Quest,” is viewable on the YouTube channel of Oregon Black Pioneers. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLLZQ3lep5U>

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