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AN EXAMINATION OF FRANZ EDMUND CREFFIELD AND THE HOLY ROLLERS,  
1900-1907

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AN EXAMINATION OF FRANZ EDMUND CREFFIELD AND THE HOLY ROLLERS,  
1900-1907

Despite what some may think, something exciting actually happened in Corvallis. About one hundred years ago, a religious sect called the Holy Rollers caused havoc in the small town of Oregon, all thanks to the cult's creator, Edmund Creffield. Through clever persuasion and a willing following, Creffield created a group of extremely loyal individuals who gave up their sanity to please their new leader. With this, Edmund Creffield and the Holy Rollers upset the community of Corvallis, and eventually, the entire Pacific Northwest.

Franz Edmund Creffield arrived in Portland, Oregon in 1899 after immigrating from Germany in the 1880s. His involvement in the Salvation Army was the beginning of his religious crusade, leading to the events of the next several years. In the Salvation Army he was known for being concerned about money and claiming his connections with God himself. After parting with the Salvation Army, he began to proclaim that he was "God's elect" and that it was his job to spread God's words as a messenger. He later described his time in the Salvation Army to a reporter from the *Roseburg Plaindealer*:

While in the Salvation Army I had the light, but I did not have the power. I was teaching his works, but was still in the darkness. I did not experience the fullness of his power until I had tarried long before God in prayer. Then the light came. The Holy Ghost told

me that I should live a life of pure faith. I was to do everything by faith. I could no longer work for the Army, because its people are not entirely of God. I could not take part in soliciting for funds. I was directed by the Holy Ghost not to solicit for money. It is not right to hold ice cream socials and other social gatherings where money is taken.<sup>1</sup>

After separating from the Salvation Army, Creffield moved around to different cities preaching his radical take on Christianity, most of which were places he had previously worked as a soldier and had connections to. People from cities like The Dalles and McMinnville dismissed Creffield for being too extreme, leading to his eventual arrival in Corvallis in 1903. Although the population was fairly poor, the community was close-knit and dominantly religious. These characteristics, as well as any connections he gained in the Salvation Army, likely prompted Creffield's faith in the people of Corvallis. It would be easy to convince this small group of people to see Creffield as the messiah he claimed himself to be, and not any more difficult to take advantage of them.

Creffield began his preachings with subtlety, and slowly increased his own power by teaching more radical ideas. Creffield's role as a messenger brought stories of his direct interactions with God, and he claimed that anyone could reach this level of "spiritual perfection".<sup>2</sup> This is the idea that drove his listeners to follow him in the coming years and become so closely attached to his form of religion. The idea that he could give any person, even an ordinary person from Corvallis, the ability to talk to God Himself is likely what convinced such a large number of people of his magnificent power. He claimed that those chosen to be

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<sup>1</sup> "Holy Roller Faith," *The Roseburg Plaindealer*, 36:63 (August 8, 1904), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Robert B. Blodgett and T. McCracken, *Holy Rollers: Murder and Madness in Oregon's Love Cult* (Caldwell ID: Caxton Press, 2002), 9.

“God’s Anointed” would have their names “inscribed on a Holy Roll in Heaven,”<sup>3</sup> likely leading to the group’s name the “Holy Rollers.”<sup>4</sup> Creffield’s clever abilities to seduce and motivate the people of Corvallis led to a large following that was sustained for the next three years, creating a cult that changed Corvallis forever.

Edmund Creffield was described as being physically unattractive and “homely,” but very persuasive and attractive for other reasons.<sup>5</sup> His personality was said to be “magnetic.” Many claimed that he had power over others, especially women, that put them under a spell and led to his eventual status as the “second coming of Christ.” Those who interacted with him but were not persuaded by him described Creffield as a “hypnotist” and explained that his followers were “dead to all human sympathies.”<sup>6</sup> Because hypnotism was popular at the time and Creffield had taken classes in mental telepathy, many claimed that he was actually putting his followers under some kind of spell. Whether he had this in mind when making his case or not, Creffield persuaded a shocking number in Corvallis to believe what he preached.

Edmund Creffield did not hesitate to utilize his leadership as soon as he gained a healthy following of more than a dozen people. He led prayer sessions, sometimes lasting up to twenty-four hours. These hours consisted of intense sermons where listeners yelled at God pleading for his recognition, while flailing their arms and rolling on the floor, often collapsing by the end. Creffield told them that rolling on the floor would rid them of their sins. After this became too

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> The term “holy roller” has been used commonly for evangelical Christians who practice fanatic and frenzied religion, often as a negative criticism.

<sup>5</sup> See Figure 1 in Appendix.

<sup>6</sup> Blodgett, 2.

disruptive in the summer of 1903, city officials forbade the Holy Rollers from holding meetings in Corvallis. Although there was some opposition from the public because of this, it was not a lot, and press attention at this time was minimal.

To continue his new church, Creffield invited his followers to join him on an island that was three miles outside of Corvallis called Smith Island, also known as Robinson's Island, which Creffield claimed to be "the same as in the Garden of Eden."<sup>7</sup> For the next year, Creffield led these frenetic sermons, convincing the Rollers that they would soon achieve a "personal purity" that allowed them to fully connect with God.<sup>8</sup> One major value of the Holy Rollers was to shun those outside their own, including other churches and people who did not agree with their activity. Although this kept the group to themselves, not everyone wholeheartedly trusted Creffield. Many developed a fear of leaving the group, thinking leaving would result in consequences both from Creffield and God.

Creffield quickly initiated his next step, renaming himself "Joshua"<sup>9</sup> and declaring that his female followers could become "Brides of Christ" if they followed his instruction. Declaring a title for himself further removed him and the group from the real world, making it easier to convince his followers of his holiness and prove their necessity to be loyal to him. This also translated into easy way for Creffield to abuse and take advantage of the women in the cult

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> See Figure 2 in Appendix.

<sup>9</sup> Joshua, a figure in the Old Testament, led the Israelites to the Promised Land. Because Joshua was under direct orders of God, the people trusted him and followed his rules. Joshua and his followers then destroy and conquer cities in the region of Canaan, killing many people in the process. The only way that Joshua and the Israelites are able to win these battles is by directly asking God for his help.

without resistance; he was Joshua, and they would not oppose anything God told Joshua to do. If they did not agree to his terms, they believed they would be damned to Hell. During this time, Creffield also convinced many of his followers to sell their valuables, separate from their partners and families, and devote their entire life to their religion. With these clever actions, Creffield continued to disconnect the Holy Rollers from the rest of the world and increase his own power.

The belief that these followers, especially females, were “hypnotized” or losing their sanity was becoming more popular among the public as the group continued to thrive. One citizen of Corvallis, a young girl named Minerva Kiger Reynolds, remembered the Holy Rollers in 1903:<sup>10</sup>

As we passed through the ‘Holy Roller’ camp, [my father] picked up one of these peaches and threw it at the first woman we passed lying under a sheet. It splashed all over the sheet. But she didn't move. The same thing happened as we passed two more. Not one of them so much as flinched when the peach struck. Father didn't do that to annoy them. He believed these women were hypnotized, and when they failed to move when hit by a peach, he felt sure he was right.<sup>11</sup>

As the Rollers continued to increase their crazed behavior, those around them began to believe that the women were being mentally altered, whether by hypnotism or insanity. When looking at these events through a gender focused perspective, it's easy to see the arguments that were made because many of the Holy Rollers were women. There was a consensus agreement that Creffield

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<sup>10</sup> Reynolds's father, R.C. Kiger, was a peach farmer who had peach orchards near Smith Island. The Holy Rollers would sneak into his orchards and steal peaches after dark, leaving buckets and fallen peaches as evidence. That was likely one of the only things they ate, as Creffield tried to teach his followers to give up luxuries and comforts of daily life, one being food.

<sup>11</sup> Minerva Kiger Reynolds, “Corvallis in 1900,” n.d., 53.

was “preying on weak-minded women” as a way to succeed as Joshua.<sup>12</sup> The *Morning Oregonian* described this general public opinion: “That Creffield so-called religion was a cloak for the basest practices is not doubted. That a sort of occult power, hypnotic or otherwise, enabled him to exercise powerful control over his female followers is universally believed here.”<sup>13</sup> Everyone agreed that Creffield was taking advantage of his female followers, whether by mental telepathy, preying on the “weak-minded,” or a combination of the two.

Despite their more disadvantaged social role in the time, many people outside of the group were very angry that Creffield was taking advantage of females in particular. The newspapers showed this opinion, siding with the public when blaming Creffield in misleading the women of Corvallis. The *Corvallis Times* reassured the public of their feelings, saying that they had good reason to be against Creffield for “leading women, girls, and others into delusions and unnatural conditions... into a state of mind where there is more frenzy than reason, more folly than sense.”<sup>14</sup> People were not angry that he had female followers, but that they were only female. The *Corvallis Times* also explained why this aspect was so significant, claiming that the idea of women freely running around and abandoning their husbands, fathers, and brothers was what made it so maddening: “She was out of the world, and he was of the earth, and she would have nothing to do with him.”<sup>15</sup> The fact that women were engaging in such wild behavior

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<sup>12</sup> Gerald J. Baldasty, *Vigilante Newspapers: Tales of Sex, Religion, and Murder in the Northwest* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 42.

<sup>13</sup> “Holy Roller Shot Down Like a Dog,” *Morning Oregonian*, 46:14,169 (May 8, 1906), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Baldasty, 41-42.

<sup>15</sup> “Flight of the Apostles,” *The Corvallis Times*, 16:35 (November 4, 1903), 3.



without men threw off the balance of Corvallis, both in perceptions of social roles and in daily life. Creffield was altering the community already, and this was just the beginning.

Life on Smith Island soon became less than comfortable for the Rollers, leading to their move to the home of O.V. Hurt, which was just outside of Corvallis city limits. Hurt was the father of two of Creffield's female followers and did not want anything to do with the group, however, his daughters persuaded him to let them stay. The group living in civilization was no better this time than before, as Creffield continued to use his title as Joshua to give orders, often ridiculous, to the Holy Rollers. They continued to have loud and intense meetings, which mainly involved yelling and rolling around on the floor. These gatherings could apparently "be heard from a quarter of a mile away from the Hurts' house."<sup>16</sup> Orgies were also said to have taken place in the home. Creffield began to put many rules in place, including everyone sleeping on the floor in one room with little to no clothing. He also convinced the group to take all of the Hurts' furniture outside to burn, which led to many followers going into others' homes to raid even more objects and valuables to burn in the fire in the next few days. This was a shocking event and unlike anything that had ever happened in Corvallis. A crowd of nearly two hundred people gathered around the Hurt home that night, and even more came in the next few days, as many had to see what was happening to believe the rumors.

Talk of the Holy Rollers in the streets of Corvallis continued to heighten, as many knew that something had to be done to stop Creffield once and for all. One night, a group of twenty men calling themselves "The White Caps" planned to confront Creffield and the rest of the Rollers at a house that O.V. Hurt's son, Frank Hurt, had rented for the group. They preceded to

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<sup>16</sup> Blodgett, 34.

tar and feather Creffield and the two other male followers, warning them to never return to Corvallis. The *Times* described this event: “There was no attempt at secrecy by those who took part in the affair. None wore masks and none affected a disguise. The identity of many of the party is known, and these are men of standing and character... not a boy or hoodlum in the party.”<sup>17</sup> Although the identities of the vigilantes were known and their actions were illegal, no one was charged for these actions because of how strong the public opinion against Creffield was becoming. The next day, Creffield was married to Maud Hurt and promised that he would not let the White Caps’ “criminal methods drive him away from God’s Work,” ignoring their threats. Although Maud Hurt soon was forced to give up this marriage by her father’s demands, Creffield and the other Rollers did not give up their practice and instead decided to move to Portland.<sup>18</sup>

After Creffield arrived in Portland, Burgess Starr filed a complaint against Creffield, claiming that Creffield had committed adultery with Starr’s wife. Donna Starr had been in the Rollers since the beginning, and was related to Maud Hurt, Sarah Hurt, and Esther Mitchell. She was forcibly removed from the group by her husband who took her with him to Portland, however, she fell back under Creffield’s spell as soon as he arrived in Portland from Corvallis. Following Burgess Starr’s complaint, twenty more men came forward to claim similar cases against Creffield. This prompted a race to capture Creffield, involving both police officers and citizens. Nobody had any idea where Creffield may have been hiding, as described in an article in the *Corvallis Times*, which called for the search of Creffield:

Sheriff Burnett is sending circulars abroad in the effort to locate Creffield. The circulars give notice that a reward of \$350 is in the

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<sup>17</sup> “Tarred and Feathered,” *The Corvallis Times*, 16:45 (January 6, 1904), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Blodgett, 60.

sheriff's hands to be paid for the arrest and conviction of the fugitive apostle...Contrary to reports current, the officers have no clue to his whereabouts, and , but a vague idea of where he might be. Brooks and Levens are known to be at Seattle, but the officers are Convinced that their chief is not with them...<sup>19</sup>

Creffield had yet again fled, but this time he was not found for months. Many took part in the search for the reward money, but others just wanted Creffield stopped for good.

Although Creffield was not in contact with the rest of the Holy Rollers, many continued to practice their religion back in Corvallis and elsewhere. They claimed to be in contact with God even without Joshua, continuing behavior that was nothing less than ridiculous. They were also no less noisy than before. The *Oregon Daily Journal* interviewed a patrolman who was fed up with the noise:

[There are] Holy Roller exercises every night lasting several hours. They sing, pray and preach, groan and scream at the top of their voices. The noise they make can be heard for two blocks, and roomers in the vicinity complain of being unable to eat or sleep because of this nuisance.<sup>20</sup>

The surrounding public remained in opposition with good reason, which the *Morning Oregonian* explained: "The outrages that have been committed by the Holy Roller in Corvallis and in the vicinity of Oregon City have been too numerous to mention. They have broken up dozens of families with their doctrines of free love."<sup>21</sup> *The Gazette* described the general opinion as, "a strong sentiment in favor of stopping the practices of the Holy Rollers, even if heroic measures

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<sup>19</sup> "The Creffield Reward," *The Corvallis Times*, 17:18 (June 22, 1904), 2.

<sup>20</sup> "Says Holy Rollers Are Noisy Worshippers," *The Oregon Daily Journal*, 4:238 (December 8, 1905), 5.

<sup>21</sup> "Holy Roller Shot Down Like A Dog", 1.

have to be adopted.”<sup>22</sup> It was difficult for anyone to find “heroic measures” that would do any good, as there was not anything legally wrong with what the Rollers were doing. This made the opposition of the those around them even worse, as no legal action could be taken against Creffield. The mental state of the group was the focus of prosecutions from this point on, claiming their insanity in hopes that they could be put into a insane asylum instead of continuing their disruptive and disturbing practices. A Salem newspaper called the *Daily Oregon Statesman* said, “It seems to be the opinion of those who have come in contact with them that the only way of breaking up the movement, which threatened to undermine a certain element in society, is to send them to the asylum.”<sup>23</sup> The people of Corvallis were ready for this to end, after all of the disorder and embarrassment they had experienced in the last year.

One by one, the Rollers were admitted either to the Oregon Insane Asylum or the Boys’ and Girls’ Aid Society depending on their age. Reasons for insanity ranged from having “hallucinations” of communication with God to wearing one’s hair down or walking around town barefoot. Although this may seem silly to someone today, a woman that walked around with no shoes and nothing pulling up her hair was seen as out of her mind. Minerva Kiger Reynolds explained that one day, her and her family were “shocked when we saw the women pass our house, their hair hanging down their backs, barefooted.”<sup>24</sup> Because of how confined women were to their social roles, if they did not keep up their image even to the smallest detail of tying up their hair, the public might believe they were crazy. Some, including Esther Mitchell

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<sup>22</sup> Blodgett, 71.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>24</sup> Mcdonald, 53.

and Donna Starr, were taken to other places by their families or partners to separate them from the lifestyle of the Holy Rollers and Edmund Creffield.

Four months after his disappearance, Creffield was found underneath O.V. Hurt's house by his younger son, Roy Hurt.<sup>25</sup> By this time it was 1904, and Creffield was described as looking "more beast than man" after living in a small hole for the last four months.<sup>26</sup> He had been cared for by Hurt's wife Sarah until she was admitted to the insane asylum a month before he was found. *The Roseburg Plaindealer* recounted his capture:

Naked as a new-born babe and emaciated from starvation, Edmund Creffield, the former sleek and sanctimonious leader of the Holy Rollers, was hauled out from under O. V. Hurt's house at 10 o'clock this morning by officers of the law....The place where the apostle has been hidden is under a floor about 18 inches from the ground in a cave 15 inches deep and 6 feet long. A blanket, a pillow and about two dozen empty fruit cans comprised his worldly possessions. Not a stitch of clothing of any kind could be found, except a soiled shirt. His only remark when captured was to raise his hands to heaven and exclaim : 'I am Elijah'...At first when accosted by the officers Creffield refused to come out from under the house, but at last yielded and crawled out alone.<sup>27</sup>

Creffield was taken into custody and described as "demented" after being examined. As the news began to spread that Creffield was found, many people raced to Corvallis in hopes of lynching or killing Creffield, which created a mob outside of the jail that he was being held at. Days later, he was moved to the Multnomah County Jail in Portland. By train, he passed through many excited towns who had heard the story of the Holy Rollers. His trial did not take place immediately, as he was very weak. The Lane County *Bohemia Nugget* described his time in custody:

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<sup>25</sup> See Figure 4 in Appendix.

<sup>26</sup> Blodgett, 78.

<sup>27</sup> "Apostle Creffield Captured," *The Roseburg Plaindealer*, 36:61 (August 1, 1904), 1.

At the County Jail, where he is confined, he lies on his cot nearly all of the time. During the day he sleeps a great deal. At his request he has been furnished a Bible, out of which he reads during the time he is awake...Creffield in his present condition is a subject more fit for the hospital than for a jail. He is harmless and it does not require strong iron bars to keep him a captive. Three months of what was practically starvation worked wonders in weakening his system and skeletonizing his form.<sup>28</sup>

Although he was completely emaciated and weak when he first arrived, he quickly gained back his strength. Just a week after his arrival at the county jail, a reporter explained, “He does not look like the man who was brought here from Corvallis one week ago.”<sup>29</sup>

When the Holy Rollers at the asylum heard of Creffield’s arrest, they did not lose any hope or faith in their leader. His capture did not signify anything against his connection to God, but it rather riled them together to believe in him more than ever. They saw his arrest as a “rescue” from the dangerous state he was in prior to being found, and recognized it as an act of God. Meanwhile, authorities now claimed that Sarah Hurt was “hopelessly insane”.

Edmund Creffield’s trial took place on September 16, 1904 at the Multnomah County Circuit Court. He was tried for:

...unlawfully and feloniously [committing] the crime of adultery with on Mrs. D. Starr, a female person, she the said Mrs. D. Starr then and there being a married woman and the wife of one B.E. Starr, and he the said [Edmund] Creffield not being then and there the husband of said Mrs. D. Starr.<sup>30</sup>

Appearing before Judge Alfred F. Sears, Creffield continued to speak as Joshua in court. He claimed that he did not need a lawyer, and that God would will whatever was meant to happen. If

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<sup>28</sup> “Holy Roller”.

<sup>29</sup> “Holy Roller Faith”.

<sup>30</sup> Blodgett, 89; implies that it is from trial transcript.

he was found guilty, he would “‘receive it joyfully’.”<sup>31</sup> Donna Starr admitted to the actions that Creffield was accused of, claiming that she was “‘inspired by God’”<sup>32</sup> and truly believed that relations with Creffield allowed her to purify herself. Four other witnesses testified against Creffield, claiming not only that he had committed adultery with many women, but also that the reason their mothers, daughters, and sisters were going insane was because he had made them “‘Brides of Christ.’” The *Evening Telegram* described the courtroom as being “‘crowded to the doors all forenoon by a staring, morbid crowd... bent on catching a glance of the religious crank’”.<sup>33</sup>

Although Creffield did not call any witnesses to the trial, he still asked the jury to listen to what he had to say. He mainly quoted from the Bible and claimed the words of God. He admitted to having engaged in sexual acts with Donna Starr as a “‘purification rite.’” Unsurprisingly, he was still found guilty. Towards the end of his trial, he admitted to committing the crimes under God’s orders. However, when asked his opinions on the matter, he explained:

In the eyes of your law, yes, I am guilty. In the eyes of God I am innocent. I know He is on my side. And while you may lock me in my prison cell, I can still cry ‘Glory to God!’ and rest secure in the knowledge that when my time comes God will plead my case!<sup>34</sup>

Now, all there was to do was decide whether Creffield was guilty or insane. After twenty-five minutes of jury deliberation, he was found guilty and sentenced to two years in the Salem State Penitentiary. All Creffield had to say to the judge and jury was “‘God bless you’”.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>32</sup> Gartner, 63.

<sup>33</sup> Gartner, 63.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 106; implies that it is from trial transcript.

Seventeen months later, Edmund Creffield was let out of jail for good behavior and community service. He wasted no time in reuniting with Frank Hurt and his wife and quickly made communication with Maud Hurt as well. Although she was forced to divorce Creffield in the time that he was locked up, she was still completely faithful to him and they were soon remarried. All of the Holy Rollers had been released from whatever asylum or institution that they were being held in, even though many were not said to be “cured” of their insanity. Esther Mitchell was also notified that Creffield had been released. She made her way to Oregon from Illinois, where she had been taken by her father after being released from the Boys’ and Girls’ Aid Society. When admitted to the society, she was said to be one of the worst cases of the Holy Rollers and was only released to live with her father because they believed that living with family would be more effective in her improvement. Mitchell was completely convinced that Creffield was not only an apostle, but that he was God himself, and her loyalty to Creffield was quick to resurface once she heard of his release.

Soon after his release, Creffield decided that he wanted to find a new “Eden”, similar to the one he created on Smith Island. This holy place was located near the Yachats River, south of Newport and close to the Oregon Coast. After notifying all of his previous Brides of Christ, Creffield, Frank Hurt and his family, and the women who had been in the sect traveled to the coast. All women returned to the group except Sarah Hurt, who had been readmitted to the asylum after being unable to recover from her crazed state. As men were experiencing their wives and daughters abandoning them to follow Creffield for a second time, anger rose again among those in Corvallis. Many were plotting against Creffield, some half-heartedly and some very seriously. Lewis Hartley, a father of one of the Brides, attempted to shoot Creffield five times but each time the gun failed to shoot a bullet. Now there was a belief within the cult that



Creffield, being Joshua, could not be killed. During this time he also convinced his followers that he had caused the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 and could do the same in any other city.

The Holy Rollers, led by Creffield, trekked more than twenty miles from Newport to reach their destination on the Yachats River. After arriving, they were soon driven out by neighboring people who found their practices disturbing and disruptive. Creffield decided that he would go North to find a better place for the Rollers to reside and told Maud Hart to meet him in Seattle, while the rest of the group found a beach down the coast where they would live until Joshua returned for them. At this point, there were multiple men from Corvallis racing to the beach on trains in hopes of finding Creffield and killing him. Creffield knew that this would become his reality, and told his followers prior to his departure that if death was his fate, they were to eat the flesh and drink the blood of his murderer.

Meanwhile, two men, George Mitchell and Edwin Baldwin, were on the hunt for Creffield. Both had family in the Holy Rollers, which had all suffered mental consequences from worshipping Creffield and his teachings. George Mitchell was especially connected, as one of his sisters, Esther, was to be the “Second Mother of Christ.” His other sister, Donna Starr, did not lack influence from Creffield either. Although he was never a Holy Roller himself, Mitchell felt that he was approached by God as well. Mitchell believed that he was “chosen by God” to kill Creffield. Baldwin clearly voiced his ambitions to kill him, however, Mitchell insisted that he had to do it himself.

After following Maud Hart to Seattle, Mitchell walked up and down the streets for a week, hoping that he would come across the man he was looking for. He finally spotted Creffield and Hart at a convenience store, where Mitchell pulled out a revolver, pointed it at the back of

Creffield's head, and pulled the trigger. The bullet "entered the back of the neck, breaking the spinal cord at the base of the brain and then ranging through to the right jaw, which it shattered."<sup>35</sup> On May 7, 1906, Edmund Creffield, Joshua, the leader of the Holy Rollers, was killed.

Most automatically assume that the people involved in the sect were not in their right mind. It's difficult to understand why anyone would roll on the floor for hours at a time, detach themselves from their family and lives, and put everything they have into a cult like the Holy Rollers. People observing the events, whether in Corvallis or through newspapers, could not comprehend this either. In 1904, the *Bohemia Nugget* recounted:

Those who have seen Edmund Creffield, Holy Roller chieftain, since his arrest, wonder wherein lies his power to attract. They cannot understand why a religion invented by him and said to teach many things not usually considered orthodox, should be accepted, even by a very few, for the man does not appear to be of striking mind or personality.<sup>36</sup>

People outside of the sect, "normal" people, had no concept of why the followers would listen to what Creffield was preaching. Newspapers believed that what he advocated for was illegitimate and "posed a danger to the mental health and morals of its followers," which assured the public that their confusion was justified.<sup>37</sup> Unsurprisingly, the fact that so many people believed him was unsettling and likely even alarming to many. Even now, it's unthinkable that a group of people followed a man like Creffield.

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<sup>35</sup> "Holy Roller Shot Down Like A Dog", 1.

<sup>36</sup> "Holy Roller".

<sup>37</sup> Baldasty, 44.

There was no debate over whether his followers were seen as completely out of their minds, but there was a much more significant reason that sanity was such an important theme throughout the press and public. By claiming the women in the sect were weak and taken advantage of, they were able to both justify the females' actions and demonize Edmund Creffield. Gerald J. Baldasty argued these motives beginning in 1904:

Over the course of the next two years, the notion of insanity as regarded the Creffieldites would become an elastic concept, stretched one way or the other to justify retaliation against Creffield and his followers. It was invoked repeatedly as a way of controlling women who acted outside social norms, but never applied to Creffield himself, despite ample evidence of mental imbalance. This type of effort to control the women was not altogether unusual for that era; the behavior of women who challenged social norms at the turn of the century was often interpreted as evidence of mental instability.<sup>38</sup>

As Baldasty explained, the gender aspect of this series of events are necessary to understand when looking at public opinion. The fact that women were still considered the lesser sex created a role that helped to make an enemy out of Creffield while withholding any power given to his female followers for straying from their social role. Arguments of the time included that by leaving their home and husband “overtaxed” their brains and that their “mental agitation” caused “wounds that would never heal.”<sup>39</sup> Women were not blamed, however, for leaving their families and previous lives. There was a general agreement throughout the public and press that these Brides of Christ were “not to blame for their misguided devotion to him, because by nature they were weak creatures easily led astray.”<sup>40</sup> Baldasty observed that the press took on these bases for

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<sup>38</sup> Baldasty, 59.

<sup>39</sup> “Flight of the Apostles”.

<sup>40</sup> Baldasty, 49.

their stories in order to convince the public of Creffield's immorality and convince them to take action:

*Weak women and opportunistic fanatics:* that became the Creffield story in the Corvallis press during the weeks and months ahead. This story provided a framework for attacking Creffield while allowing forgiveness of his followers. Weak by nature, women were not free agents in whatever choices they made about religion, and so were not to blame for taking part in dubious or even sordid activities. The blame belonged instead to the male outsiders -- 'comparative strangers' -- who were exploiting women's inherent weaknesses. Within this calculus, it was the duty of the 'stronger sex' to protect and defend women.<sup>41</sup>

The public was not against Creffield's female followers, as they could see that it was his persuasion that led them to act so irrationally. If anything, the men of Corvallis were blamed for not taking proper action to stop the continuation of the cult. The question is why the Holy Rollers agreed to a life of such extreme and absurd religious practices in the first place.

Many have wondered how Creffield could gain such a following, especially pulling from one small town in Oregon. Newspapers during the time mainly stuck to claims of hypnotism and insanity. One article in the *Morning Oregonian* tried to explain the cult's success in a form of psychological reason:

If anyone should ask why Creffield's power of suggestion could be exercised only upon certain men and women, it might be answered that some persons are sensitive to hypnotic influence while others are not; some experience conviction of sin at revivals and become converted annually, while others are wholly immune to the influence of the evangelist.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>42</sup> "Edmund Creffield," *Morning Oregonian*, 46:14,170 (May 9, 1906), 8.

While this argument makes some unlikely suggestions such as hypnotism, the continuation of the idea of his followers being more “weak-minded” than others is something that should be discussed. What made some agree with Creffield’s teachings while others didn’t? Besides the fact that people naturally choose different religions and hold different opinions, there is something to be wondered about what was different about his followers that allowed him to convince them of his religion. In the early twentieth century, women’s social role was very much blamed for their incapacity to resist Creffield. Many still believed that women were inherently weak minded. Even a psychologist in 1906 called his followers “hyperemotional victims,” claiming that he would never be able to convince a “conscientiously moral person.”<sup>43</sup> Although we know now that women are not inherently weaker than man, it’s still useful to look back to where Creffield’s followers were before his teachings. Many of the young women that joined came from broken families in tough or boring lives.<sup>44</sup> Esther Mitchell and Donna Starr were essentially orphans, other followers like Attie Bray and Rose Seeley worked as “servant girls” prior to joining the Rollers, Maud Hurt was dysfunctionally insistent on becoming the perfect Christian, as well as many others. Even those who were in upstanding and well-off families felt that they needed something more, and Creffield filled that hole. Marlene McDonald explained that “everyone who became caught up with Creffield, especially the women, were lonely, needy, felt abandoned, or were left to themselves for long periods of time. . . . All these followers

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<sup>43</sup> Baldasty, 88.

<sup>44</sup> The practice of recruiting vulnerable, needy followers is highly common throughout religious cults and sects. Groups like the Church of Bible Understanding have been known to exclusively take in runaway or troubled youth, while others like Children of God simply attract troubled people with practices that make people feel like they belong. Many then find ways to take advantage of their willing followers who would not want to return to their previous life.

seemed to be looking for security, a sense of belonging, and perhaps freedom from the strictures of prim and proper Victorian society."<sup>45</sup> There was a multitude of circumstances throughout the group that gave Creffield the opportunity to convince them of his religion, which is why he chose Corvallis as his target in the first place. Along with their specific pasts, Corvallis was described as a boring town with a curfew at nine o'clock.<sup>46</sup> As a socially restricted gender living in a dull town while their husbands were gone farming all day, it's clear why Creffield's female followers wanted to break out of their social confines. This group was easy to persuade, and they surely had no hesitation to call Creffield their leader.

To explain why these women strayed from their social roles, many in the early twentieth century described their actions in terms of hysteria. In the nineteenth century, hysteria was a common diagnosis for one's actions that could not be explained by medical reasoning. This was a largely female identification as it was thought to be related to the uterus and was often "cured" by a hysterectomy. In its prime, the word encompassed a wide variety of symptoms. Anything could be hysteria, and it became what people would turn to when there wasn't an illness to blame women's unexplainable or radical actions on. In her work "The Race of Hysteria", Laura Briggs described hysteria as the way that people "made sense of women's changing roles"<sup>47</sup> and that the believed syndrome "participated in powerful narratives of cultural crisis."<sup>48</sup> Although popularity

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<sup>45</sup> Marlene McDonald, *Roll, Ye Sinners, Roll: The Story of the Creffield Cult* (Philomath, OR: Benton County Historical Museum, privately printed, 2002), 10.

<sup>46</sup> Reynolds, 14.

<sup>47</sup> Laura Briggs, "The Race of Hysteria: 'Overcivilization' and the 'Savage' Woman in Late Nineteenth-Century Obstetrics and Gynecology," *American Quarterly*, 52:2 (June 2000), 246.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

of the diagnosis declined because of medical advances, rigid social ideas at the turn of the twentieth century allowed for a continuation of similar terms and descriptions, such as fanatic and hypnotized, when other medical diagnoses could not explain symptoms. Branding their women as hysteric was yet another device that allowed Corvallis to place women in the role of the victim and blame their break from classic social ideas on something besides the possibility that women could gain more equality.

Although the press and public used sanity as a way to demonize Creffield, this should not take away from the mental repercussions that his followers experienced. They did, in fact, go insane when that emotional and psychological reliance was formed. None of the women he pulled in were freed until his death, and even then many were still under his influence. Some, including Esther Mitchell, were again admitted to insane asylums even when separated from the group. Creffield was able to utilize his clever ways to introduce the religion and place himself in the role of an apostle, convincing his followers to become submerged into an alternate reality. The way that he transformed what he preached from subtle religion to absurd practices and values is what made it so easy for Creffield to create Holy Rollerism and for the people of Corvallis to unknowingly fall into his trap. The public was right to demonize Creffield, as he did take advantage of a more vulnerable population whom he knew would worship him and his preachings. His ability to persuade was not hypnotism, but clever subtlety that allowed him to produce such an extreme form of religion.

## APPENDIX

Figure 1:  
Edmund Creffield, 1906.



Figure 2:  
The Holy Rollers on Smith Island, 1903.





Figure 3:  
The Oregon Daily Journal, January 13, 1907.

THE OREGON DAILY JOURNAL PORTLAND, SUNDAY MORNING, JANUARY 13, 1907.

## MADNESS and MISERY in the DOWNFALL of the STRANGE RELIGIONS.

### Blood on Holy Tables

The Holy Communion is the sacrament of the New Testament, which is often referred to as the Eucharist. It is a sacred rite, in which the bread and wine are consecrated and eaten and drunk, in commemoration of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. The bread is broken and the wine is poured, and the communicants receive the body and blood of Christ, as a spiritual food and drink. The sacrament is a symbol of the unity of the church and of the communion of saints. It is a mystery, which is beyond human understanding, and which is often referred to as the "mystery of faith."

### When Babel Was Organized

The Babel Tower was a structure of brick and stone, which was built by the people of Babel in the land of Shinar. It was a symbol of human pride and ambition, and of the desire of man to reach the heavens. The Lord God confounded the language of the people, and they were scattered abroad in many parts of the world. This event is often referred to as the Tower of Babel, and it is a warning to man against pride and ambition.

**GEORGE MITCHELL, WHO KILLED PROPAGATOR OF FREE RELIGION.**

**ESTHER MITCHELL, WHO KILLED HER BROTHER GEORGE.**

**WOMAN OF THE RINGING.**

The woman of the ringing was a woman of the name of Ringing, who was famous for her singing. She was a member of the Ringing Society, and she was known for her beautiful voice. She was often referred to as the Ringing Woman, and she was a source of pride and honor to her family and community.

**AMERICAN GIRL WEDS AGED, POVERTY-TOUCHED PEER**

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### Long Pedigree, Short Fun

The Long Pedigree is a term used to describe a family with a long and distinguished lineage. It is often used to describe a family that has been prominent in society for many generations. The Long Pedigree is a source of pride and honor for the family, and it is often used to describe a family that has achieved great success and wealth.

### Women of Many Husbands

The Women of Many Husbands are women who have been married to more than one man. They are often referred to as polygamists, and they are a source of controversy and debate in many societies. The Women of Many Husbands are often seen as a sign of moral decay and of the breakdown of the family structure.

**THE NEW LADY BELLSWORTH**

**LADY BELLSWORTH**

By a Staff Correspondent.

Lady Bellsworth was a woman of the name of Bellsworth, who was famous for her beauty and her wealth. She was a member of the Bellsworth family, and she was known for her kind and generous nature. She was often referred to as the New Lady Bellsworth, and she was a source of pride and honor to her family and community.

Figure 4:  
Edmund Creffield after being found under the Hurt house, 1904.



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