



Jesse A. Keck

Milwaukie's Marshal-of-All-Trades

(born 1868, died 1934)

Milwaukie in 1903 had come a long way since Lot Whitcomb and the Lewelling brothers settled on the eastern bank of the Willamette River half-a-century earlier. Log cabins and ancient forest had been replaced by somewhat sturdier wood-frame structures and farmland, and the community now boasted a population of a couple hundred people when the Town of Milwaukie was incorporated by the state legislature. Although somewhat developed, it was still not that far removed from the pioneer era and the first Common Council knew they had their work cut out for them, and they turned to Jesse Keck for help.

On February 14, 1868, the ninth anniversary of Oregon's statehood, Jesse A. Keck was born in rural Livingston County, Illinois. Nine years later, in 1877, Dr. James and Mrs. Delilah Keck moved their family to the growing community of Milwaukie, on the eastern shore of the Willamette River in Oregon. It wasn't too long before the Keck's son Jesse quit school in pursuit of the art of making candy. With the passing of Dr. Keck in 1884, Delilah remarried to a Mr. F. A. Sargent and the family moved to the eastern Oregon town of Mitchell where Jesse landed a job driving 265 horses a thousand miles away to Cheyenne, Wyoming. Their time east of the Cascades lasted just five years, as Jesse was back in Milwaukie celebrating his 20th birthday in 1888. Delilah operated a boardinghouse to support the family while Jesse pursued and held several different jobs in the North Clackamas area. He worked at two different furniture stores before one burned down and the other moved north, he hauled cords of wood for Hawley Pulp and Paper, and served as a deck hand on the steamer ship *Volunteer* which plied the waters of the Willamette between Milwaukie and Portland.

Despite his various professional pursuits, young Jesse Keck found time to court a young girl he had met back in Mitchell, and on November 20, 1891 he married Gussie Augusta Meyer. He was 23 and she was 16. Their marriage would produce four children: Adam born in 1893, Hattie born in 1895, Bessie born in 1896 and Daisy born in 1898. The young Keck family settled into a home at 1906 Jefferson in Milwaukie, across today's McLoughlin Blvd from the Riverfront Park boat ramp; he would live there for the rest of his life. To support his growing family, Jesse continued his pursuit of many different trades including five years fishing for Salmon on the Willamette River, three years working for the Oregon Water Power & Railway Company, and one year as a watchman at the California Powder Company, one of Milwaukie's infamous powder houses. By 1900, the Kecks had been married for nine years, produced four children, purchased a family home and had seen Jesse through numerous careers, one of which according to the Census Report of that year was as an 'electrician'.

With the establishment of an incorporated town government in Milwaukie, Jesse knew enough of the right people to be nominated along with the first Mayor, William Shindler and most of the first Common Council on the Citizens Ticket. Jesse Keck was elected the first Town Marshal and was present in his official capacity at the Council's first formal business meeting on June 2, 1903. As Marshal, he was responsible for collecting the poll taxes established by the first Council, enforcing town ordinances – including Ordinance No. 1 which regulated dynamite and explosives stored in the powder houses he had previously kept watch at – and

generally keeping the peace. The fledgling town government asked Marshal Keck to invest his own money to purchase a badge and gun with the understanding that once they could afford to do so, he would be reimbursed. Soon after being elected the first Recorder, F. H. Lechler resigned and the Council looked to Marshal Keck to serve as Recorder, which he did until 1905, when he resigned to pursue other career options. Following his appointment as Recorder in 1903, W. E. Kelso replaced Keck as Marshal.

Following his first stint in public office, Jesse Keck took a job with J. S. Grapton's Milwaukie Country Club bar, where he worked until it closed in 1907. The bar's closure forced the 39 year old former Marshal to seek employment at the amusement park at Oaks Park in Portland, where he worked for a year-and-a-half before engaging in work as a plumber and then a printer, bringing to the table the funds to pursue these trades but little experience. He contracted with several partners, who lacked the money but had the experience as plumbers and printers. In both cases Jesse learned a lot, but lost his money.

While seeking new careers, Jesse remained active in local politics and was once again a candidate for the position of Marshal in 1908, being nominated again by the Citizens Ticket. Although it seems he was unsuccessful in his electoral bid, the Council turned to Jesse and asked him to return to public office, appointing him to serve as Acting Marshal from 1908-1909 and as Recorder Pro-Tem from 1910-1911, filling in vacancies created with the departure of other civic leaders. As a man engaged in and serving his community, Marshal Keck was involved in the many aspects of building up the town, including the early efforts to fix the town's stump-filled and muddy streets. Upon completing a petition drive to gather support for street improvements, he provided an early snapshot of the civic views of early residents of downtown Milwaukie by remarking that there were too many widows living on Main Street who would object to contributing even one cent to improving the streets.

After his brief returns to public service and failed plumbing and printing careers, Jesse Keck found employment, starting in 1911, as a barkeeper. He tended bar until he had saved enough money to purchase a launch boat big enough to carry 24 passengers and the U.S. Mail for rural Route #3, which he did under a contract with a B. L. Haggeman. Starting in the spring of 1917 Jesse worked for Willamette Iron and Steel for two years, followed by another stint at Hawley Paper. In the fall of 1919, perhaps seeking a change of scenery, the 51 year old Jesse Keck signed on to the ship *West Hartley* and later transferred to the ship *Raritan* bound for Armenia by way of the Panama Canal. However, the journey was cut short at the West Indies, where the crew was ordered to instead return to Portland after a stop in Baltimore.

Once landed from his world travels, Jesse again worked at Hawley Pulp and Paper until in 1921, at the age of 53, the Milwaukie City Council appointed him Chief of Police. Since he had last served as Town Marshal, Milwaukie had created a Police Department (in 1917) and had begun the process of creating a professional paid force to keep the peace. Despite the move to a professional force, Milwaukie still had no jail, so it was not uncommon for riders on the Oregon City to Portland Interurban trolley to see Chief Keck with an individual sitting on the floor with his head held tightly between the Chief's knees while escorting the arrested person to the jail at Oregon City. Chief Keck, or Marshal Keck as he was sometimes still referred to, served as the head of the Milwaukie Police Department for 13 years, the rest of his life as it turned out. He passed away in 1934, at the age of 66, survived by his wife Gussie, his four children and four grand-daughters.

Jesse A. Keck was a dedicated and willing public servant of the newly incorporated town. He led a life of many different pursuits and was a key figure in shaping the early character Milwaukie municipal government.