

## **John Morgan (Johnny) Harris** **1864 - 1953**

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One of the wealthiest and most powerful men to ever live in Sandon, J.M. Harris was the subject of countless stories and endless speculation. A native of Loudon County, Virginia, Harris was secretive about his past history in the United States, and consistently refused to reveal more than a handful of facts about his life south of the 49th. Of course, this simply fueled the rumors, many of which grew more elaborate as the years passed. Today it is difficult to separate the many myths from the man, but certain facts are well-known.

Harris arrived in the valley from the Coeur d'Alene area of Idaho in 1892, at the age of 28. In later years, rumors circulated that he was forced to flee to Canada after killing a man in the United States, and even that Harris was not his real name, but Harris refused to either confirm or deny these stories.

What is known is that Harris was attracted to the Slovan by tales of the fabulous silver strikes

that were being discovered there. When he arrived at the junction of Carpenter and Sandon Creeks, numerous homes and stores had already been built on the valley floor to accommodate the hundreds of treasure-seekers already flooding into the valley. None of these early settlers had bothered to stake land for a townsite where they had built; legally, they were all squatters, a fact that the quick-witted Harris was soon to exploit.

Shortly after his arrival Harris staked the Loudon Claim, named after his birthplace, on the floor of the valley. After registering his claim, Harris informed the squatters, most of whom had arrived before him, that they must move their stores and dwellings off his land, or else buy them back from him. The earlier settlers were understandably outraged at this development, feelings soon ran very high, and a flurry of lawsuits and counter-lawsuits were filed. Harris had the law on his side, however, and his Loudon Claim eventually became the downtown core of the City of Sandon. Harris subdivided the surface rights to his claim, which he then sold to squatters and new arrivals alike, thus vastly increasing his wealth, virtually overnight.

With his rapidly-increasing fortune, Harris went on a building spree, constructing hotels, office blocks, and the growing city's original power plant, the Sandon Water Works and Light Company. The remains of this plant are still visible today. Eventually, his real estate empire grew to include mines such as the rich Reco Claim, which at one point in 1897 produced over \$200,000 worth of ore in a single week.

Of his many properties, probably the most elegant and well-known was the Hotel Reco. Located at the junction of Carpenter and Sandon Creeks, the Hotel Reco was certainly the most luxurious accommodations in the city, where Harris entertained millionaires and mining magnates. Four stories tall, with a tower reaching to a fifth level, the Hotel Reco featured 75 rooms with hardwood floors and tinted walls, and a 100-person capacity dining room. There was a call bell system, hot and cold water in all the rooms and a bathroom on each floor. A steam heating plant and a cold storage room were installed, and the kitchen, which featured a broiler and ranges, was located in an addition which was separate from the main building.

