

Finding Treasure: Maud Johnson

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Maud Johnson was a female con artist who was active in the Northwest a century ago. She would buy a ticket on one of the new urban railways, then pretend to have been thrown to the ground when the train hit a bump. Maud would pretend to have a broken rib or worse, even vomiting fake blood on some occasions. The railways would offer her a quick cash settlement to keep the story out of the papers, and she would move on to the next town.



Maud's story was hard to tell. For most of her criminal career, Maud lived in the shadows, leaving few of the vital records that are inevitable for most people. Numerous searches only turned up one vital record for Maud, a marriage return found on the Digital Archives. Otherwise, no birth record, census records, or death record could be found.

But Maud could not always avoid the record creators. Once the law caught up with Maud (beginning with her first arrest in 1906), there was exponential growth in government documents with Maud Johnson's name on them. Washington State Archives holds two large folders containing Maud's penitentiary and pardon records. These files are not small, combined they total 345 pages. Contemporary newspapers were another source--newspapers love a lady criminal! Finally Google Books proved a surprisingly rich source, in the form of stories from the Pacific Claim Agents Association, an organization that specifically came into being to alert other railway managers about the resourceful Maud Johnson.

All of these sources were critical to telling the story of Maud. Coming soon, look forward to a Treasure of the Archives that features the infamous Maud Johnson, "Queen of the Fakirs." Also in the works is a magazine article about Johnson, forthcoming in [Nostalgia magazine](#).