

THE FATE OF THE CLEVINGER FAMILY

(By JOHN ROBERTS)

It was in March, 1886, that J. W. (old man) Clevenger concluded to sell his little place and stock on the San Pedro and move his family to Idaho. His family consisted of his wife and an adopted daughter, Jessie, who was then seventeen years of age. After reserving one span of horses, harness, wagon, cooking outfit and their bedding, the old man realized twenty-one hundred and fifty dollars from the sale of his outfit.

On the 14th day of March he left the San Pedro with his little family and a colored man, John A. Johnson, who was working for him when he sold out. Johnson was to do the chores around camp and take care of the team for his grub and transportation to Idaho.

When they arrived in Phoenix, Mr. Clevenger concluded to stop a few days to let the team rest up. They drove to the Orlando Allen ranch, about two miles out of Phoenix on the Wickenburg road, and stayed for three days. While in camp at this place a white man, who knew the colored man, Johnson, fell in with them. His name was Frank Wilson. He gained the confidence of Mr. Clevenger by telling him he knew the shortest road to Idaho and would guide them through to their destination for his board and transportation. This was agreed upon.

The trip was made through Wickenburg by way of Stanton, Peeples Valley, Kirkland Valley, Skull Valley, Tonto Springs and Williamson Valley. At Williamson Valley, or Simmons as the post office was called, a small supply of grub was obtained. From there they went to Ash Fork by way of Big Chino Valley, thence to Flagstaff by the way of Spring Valley. Jessie Clevenger wanted them to go by the way of Prescott as she wanted to see that little mountain town. The guide, Wilson, said, "No, there is no use pulling that mountain to Prescott and going that far out of the way when we have a direct road and no mountain to climb." This sounded logical to Mr. Clevenger. Wilson had an object in this. All the time Johnson and Wilson were having private talks while in camp, and at other times as they walked along the road ahead of the team.

When the outfit arrived at Spring Valley, a few miles from Flagstaff, Mr. Clevenger concluded to camp a few days to let the team rest and to do a little repairing on his wagon. The camp was made at the ranch of Harry Lyons, who will be remembered by all the old timers as a very hospitable rancher of Spring Valley.

It is quite noticeable that no stops were made on this trip in any town or thickly settled community; in fact, those places were dodged whenever possible. After four days of rest had allowed the team to graze well, the little outfit made another start. They stopped long enough at Flagstaff to put in a little supply of grub, as Johnson or Kanab, Utah, would be the next place where these supplies could be obtained. After leaving Flagstaff they took the direct road to Lee's Ferry on the Big Colorado River.

After crossing the Colorado River, Mr. Clevenger got a little suspicious of the actions of Johnson and Wilson, and every night as soon as it was dark he would dig a little hole and bury the money, which was down to two thousand dollars, one hundred and fifty dollars having been spent along the road for supplies. While the burying process was going on, Jessie Clevenger would try to keep the attention of the two men. This was done twice, but the third night, the night their camp was made near the Summit of the Buckskin Mountains, the colored fellow slipped away.

This night, the 27th of May, Mr. Clevenger dug a small hole close to a large rock, which was very noticeably close to the wagon road on the right hand side of the road, and hid his sack of money which was nearly all in currency, mostly ten and twenty dollar bills.

This road was traveled very little those days by anybody except the mail carrier, who carried the mail between Lee's Ferry and Johnson, Utah, and stockmen living in the House Rock Valley and vicinity.

That night after everything was quiet, Johnson and Wilson slipped into the tent where the old folks were asleep and killed both of them with an axe. Jessie, who was also sleeping in the tent, was awakened and was horrified when she saw what had happened. She immediately began begging for her life. They told her they would spare her provided she told no one about the murder. If she divulged the secret, her fate would be the same.

After killing the old couple, a shallow hole was dug close to the road, the remains thrown in, wood piled on top, along with the mattress and blankets, and a fire started. After the fire had burned down and the bedding was consumed, some dirt was thrown in the hole.

From here they drove into Kanab where some supplies and extra bedding were purchased. Then they proceeded on their way towards the interior of Utah. After leaving Kanab, Jessie Clevenger, under threat of death, was forced to live with both men.

They traveled through Utah into Idaho, dodging towns in Utah whenever they could. When they arrived in Idaho, Wilson rented a small house in Shoshone. Johnson went his way, always keeping tab on Wilson, for the former's share of the money kept dwindling away whenever he struck a gambling game. When his money gave out and he had no job, he would live with Wilson, who got tired of this but could say nothing as he was afraid Johnson might double-cross him. After three or four months the scare wore away; the team and wagon were disposed of and everything seemed all right, so far as any one knowing of the crime was concerned.

In September, the mail carrier, Harry Clayton, noticed that the dirt had been disturbed on the top of Buckskin Mountains, on the right side of the wagon road, going toward Kanab. He soon discovered there had been a crime committed as some of the human bones had been exposed. The fire had not consumed them entirely, and the coyotes or other wild animals had dug up the remains. Clayton immediately notified the officer at Kanab, who went to the scene of the double murder. Sensing a horrible crime the officer at once notified the Sheriff of Yavapai County by mail as there was no telegraphic communication nearer Prescott at that time than Flagstaff.

W. J. (Billy) Mulvenon, who was then sheriff, immediately made preparations for a trip of investigation. At this time Yavapai County extended from Wickenburg in the south to the Utah line on the north. What is now Coconino County was part of Yavapai County. Horseback or buckboard were the only modes of travel, and in many instances trips had to be made horseback because there were no roads. Billy Mulvenon, like George Ruffner, Bucky O'Neill, Joe Roberts and many of the old time sheriffs, was always equal to the occasion in trailing and getting his man. He wrote the Kanab officer at once, mentioning the day he would be at the place where the murder was committed. The Kanab officer was there with a box and a team.

A thorough investigation revealed to the officers that two white persons had been murdered, but that was all they knew. The remains were removed to Kanab and buried in the Kanab burying ground.

Mulvenon had got what information he could at Kanab, but could find nothing definite as to who the murdered persons were, nor any clue as to who committed the crime. He did hear of two men (one a negro) and a white woman going through Kanab several months before the discovery of the bodies.

Mulvenon made the hundred mile trip back to Lee's Ferry to find out if anyone was with the two men and woman when they crossed the ferry. Bishop Brinkerhoff was ferryman at that time, and remembered that an old couple, another man, a negro and a young girl had camped at his place before crossing the ferry; had bought hay for the horses and supplies for themselves. He also remembered that the old man paid for everything, and that the young woman called him father. He was able to give a fairly good description of the team and wagon because one of the horses was a little foolish about getting on the ferry boat.

Sheriff Mulvenon had ridden his horse four hundred miles, but he rode back to Kanab, got what other information he could and started on the trail, which was then some four months old. He was accompanied about one hundred miles into Utah by the Kanab officer. Then this officer returned home and Mulvenon made the trip from there alone. Although his horse was one of the best in the country, it was getting very leg weary from carrying a two hundred pound man, saddle, guns, and irons, which consisted of two pair of handcuffs and leg irons, so Mulvenon got a relay, leaving his horse on good feed at a Mormon ranch. The new horse gave out in less than two hundred miles as he was soft and not used to hard traveling. The next horse Mulvenon got was a little better.

He trailed the murderers through Utah into Idaho, located Wilson and the woman between Shoshone and Pocatello at a little settlement. He also located the team near this place.

As soon as he was positive as to Wilson and the woman, he took them, along with the man that had bought the team, to Pocatello, using the team and hiring the man to help him keep Wilson and the woman separated so they couldn't talk the matter over. On this trip he kept the cuffs and leg irons on Wilson. The woman was treated with all care as she was to become a mother. He gave her every assurance of good treatment and

care if she would tell the truth. She said she dared not as her life was at stake. When assured that her life was in no danger, the woman rested easier.

After placing Wilson in jail and the woman in the custody of a reliable woman who served at times as a jail matron, he began the search for Johnson, the negro. With the aid of the Pocatello officers, he located Johnson at a mining camp. When Johnson was arrested, he denied everything. He was never in Arizona, etc. Wilson did the same and the woman was mute; would say nothing in their presence.

Mulvenon wanted the man that bought the team as a witness, so hired him to take the team to Prescott. He promised to pay him the money he paid for the team and his fare back home. By doing this, he could return the two horses he had hired for the trip, get his horse home, and take the prisoners back by rail.

After landing the murderers in jail at Prescott, Mulvenon gained the confidence of the woman; got all the details of the murder, flight, etc. He then turned the woman over to Mrs. John Hartin where she had a good home and remained until February when she was removed to the hospital for confinement. When the case came up for trial, the jury was out only a few minutes bringing in a verdict of guilty. Although there were a lot of witnesses in the case, Jessie Clevenger gave the damaging evidence. Both men were sentenced to be hanged August 12, 1887.

After their attorneys sparred around for a new trial with no success, a ruse was resorted to by the two men whereby one of them would get off with life imprisonment. It was said at the time that while awaiting execution they agreed to draw straws, the loser to assume all blame for the killings and save the other's neck, who, when pardoned, was to return to Prescott and kill Jessie Clevenger for testifying against them. The white man drew the "long straw" and made an affidavit that he alone killed the Clevengers. The attorneys succeeded in getting Johnson's sentence commuted to life imprisonment. This was done by Governor Zulick who was then governor of the territory. Wilson was hanged on August 12, 1887. Johnson was pardoned a few years later and came to Prescott where he remained for some time. He is reported to have died in Phoenix some years later.

Jessie Clevenger remained with Mrs. Hartin for more than two years. Jim Vanderburg, a merchant at Stanton, Arizona, adopted Jessie's little girl when she was eighteen months old.

She was a very bright child and was the joy of the Vanderburg home, but she died at the age of three years.

In May, 1889, Jessie married John Speer and they went to Colorado. It was not generally known where they went after leaving Prescott. They made the trip overland and I saw them in Flagstaff when they passed through there.

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Mrs. Hartin was my sister, and I was well acquainted with Jessie Clevenger. She discussed details of the murder with me several times, and it was her contention that the murderers did not get the \$2,000. She described the big rock by the side of the road where her foster father had buried the money on the night he was murdered. On January 1, 1889, I was appointed deputy sheriff and deputy assessor by Bucky O'Neill, who that day had taken over the sheriff's office of Yavapai County, having been elected sheriff that fall. The following April, Bucky sent me on a trip to the northern part of the county. The object of this trip was to assess the people in that part of the county, and to subpoena witnesses for the consideration of the case by the grand jury on May 5 of the four men held for robbing the Santa Fe train at Canyon Diablo on March 21, 1889. Jessie Clevenger urged me to go to the spot where the money was buried and get it.

The night I stopped at House Rock Valley—April 29, 1889—it so happened that I fell in with Harry Clayton, who carried mail from Johnson, Utah, to Lee's Ferry. We rode together to Johnson, and I kept a sharp lookout for the place Jessie Clevenger had described as having been the place where the murder had been committed. I brought up the subject of the murder; Clayton told me all about it and pointed out the exact spot. Some of the charred bedclothing was still there, and there was the place by the big rock where the money had been buried, but the murderers had taken it; that was evident at a glance.

NOTE: In the office of Arizona's Secretary of State is a yellowed document dated forty years ago and bearing almost a hundred signatures of Arizona's leading citizens of that day; many of them prominent in Arizona today. This document is the petition for a pardon for one "John A. Johnson, a colored man, who was on the 14th day of June A. D. 1887, tried as an accomplice with one Frank Wilson in the killing of Samuel

Clevenger and wife charged to have been committed on the 21st day of May, A. D. 1887, (a palpable error in the year. Ed.), and tried in the District Court in Yavapai County, Arizona Territory . . .” The letter accompanying the petition is addressed to “N. O. Murphy, Acting Governor of Arizona, Phoenix, A. T.” It is dated at Prescott on December 4, 1890, and was filed in the executive department on December 10, of the same year.

Also, in going over the files in this office, further information on the Clevenger case is unearthed. This is in a form of a communication from Will C. Barnes, at present a resident of Washington, D. C., but, who, with Mrs. Barnes is spending the winter in Phoenix. Mr. Barnes was a prominent resident of Arizona from 1880 to 1899. He furnishes some further interesting high-lights on the closing chapters of one of the most heinous crimes ever committed in Arizona. Mr. Barnes was an eye witness to the hanging of Wilson, and this is his story:

“As I recall the Clevenger murder case, Cephas Perkins, a well known cattleman of Holbrook, and who was a prominent witness for the territory at the trial of the two men at Prescott, writes that a party consisting of himself and a Mr. and Mrs. Graves followed the Clevenger party on the road to Utah from Lee’s Ferry in May, 1886. Perkins states that in the Buckskin Mountains they camped one night near the same spot where the Clevengers had camped a few days before.

Perkins had some loose stock with him. The next morning while running them near the Clevengers’ camp his saddle horse stepped to his knees into a soft place, stumbled and fell heavily with him. He mounted and rode on after the cattle, but later they examined the spot where the horse fell and found signs of a new-made grave. A little exploring discovered the hand and part of a woman’s head. . . . They eventually unearthed the mutilated and burned bodies of the two old people. The party drove on to Kanab, reported what they had found and proceeded on their way to the west of St. George, Utah, where Perkins was to receive some cattle.

Coming back a few weeks later, when near Pipe Springs, Perkins met a sheriff from Utah looking for him with a warrant for murder. He found himself accused of the murder of his companions, Graves and his wife, due to the fact that an elderly man and woman had been killed along the road and Perkins had two such people with him on the road from Lee’s Ferry.

Having proved his innocence by the presence in life of the two, Graves and wife, Perkins went on to House Rock Valley where he turned his cattle out for the winter and camped there. Mr. and Mrs. Graves left him there. This was in the fall of 1886.

In December, 1886, Sheriff Mulvenon of Yavapai County, Arizona, passed Perkins' camp at House Rock on his way to arrest one of the men who had done the Clevenger killing. It had already been definitely established that the affair occurred in Yavapai County just below the Utah-Arizona line.

Mulvenon had previously located and arrested the white man, Wilson, and the girl, Jessie, and was now after the negro, Johnson. He asked Perkins to go with him as guide and assist in the arrest, which Perkins did.

They found their man at a farmhouse where he was living. Mulvenon covered him with his revolver while Perkins slipped the bracelets on Johnson wrists. The sheriff took his prisoner back to Prescott, via Utah, while Perkins went back to his camp and the next spring, 1887, came back to Holbrook with his cattle. When the trial came off at Prescott on June 14, 1887, he was a leading witness for the territory. The date of the murder was established as May 21, 1886.

My own connection with the case began in August, 1887, when I was in Prescott attending a meeting of the newly organized Live Stock Sanitary Board of the territory, of which I was an original member.

Governor Zulick asked the members of the board if any of us wished to witness the execution. Another member, Tom Halleck, of Mohave County, and myself agreed to be present as witnesses for the territory.

The morning of the execution, Governor Zulick told us that Wilson, the white man, had made a confession, taking all the blame for the murders on himself. Zulick said, however, that he was suspicious of the confession and meant to put both men on the scaffold together and test them out in the presence of death. He fancied that one or both would break down at the last minute and tell the truth.

The hanging took place in the little brick-walled yard on the east side of the old county court-house. There were two traps and two ropes with everything ready for a double execution.

Governor Zulick was standing at a window on the second floor of the court house overlooking the yard. He had told Mulvenon and us that if he waved his handkerchief out of the window at the last minute it meant a reprieve for the negro, Johnson.

Wilson came out first and, unassisted, marched firmly up the rather long steps leading to the platform. A little later Johnson appeared from the jail door supported by a deputy sheriff on each side. Meanwhile other guards were strapping Wilson's legs and arms and arranging the fatal noose about his neck.

It was a solemn, nervous moment. We could all hear our own and each other's hearts beating.

As Johnson and his guards reached the platform, Zulick's handkerchief waved from the window. An audible sigh went round the group at the foot of the scaffold. Quickly the men marched Johnson down the stairs and across the yard into the jail—a reprieved man.

A moment later the black cap was slipped over Wilson's head and he swung off into eternity without saying a single word. He died game to the very last.

The negro was reprieved until September 23, 1887, at which time the governor changed his sentence to imprisonment for life. He had served but six years when pardoned by Governor Zulick. Johnson lived and died at Phoenix several years after his pardon.

WILL C. BARNES.

January 5, 1930.