

# Old West Stories

---

## Harry Cornwall Wheeler

The early years of the twentieth century saw law and order come to almost all of the western states. Arizona was still a Territory and contained vast wilderness areas, more mountains than any other state, a huge desert and it bordered on Mexico. All this and the fact that it was very thinly populated made it an ideal place for the displaced rustlers, thieves, murders, and other outlaws to seek safe harbor. In 1901, the state legislature finally gave in to the pressure to form a state police force based on the proven concept of the Texas Rangers. Harry Wheeler would become the third and last Captain of the Rangers and the only Ranger to ever hold every rank, private, sergeant, lieutenant and captain, within the organization.

Harry Cornwall Wheeler was born in Jacksonville, Florida, on January 23, 1875, to Army 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant William Baker Wheeler and his wife Annie Cornwall Wheeler. Harry was the older brother of Sallie and William D. Harry's father was a career soldier and an 1871 West Point graduate. He would serve a few years in the troubled south during the post-Civil War era and in 1878 he would be sent into the western frontier and serve on posts in Montana, Kansas and Texas. Most all of this service was after the Indians were on reservations and skirmishes were rare.

Growing up in a military family, and on military posts, instilled in Harry a deep and abiding sense of "Duty, Honor, Country" that would guide his decisions throughout his lifetime. It also gave him the opportunity to acquire skills with weapons that would serve him well as long as he lived and allow him to become one of America's foremost marksmen with rifle and pistol.

It was a bitter disappointment to Harry when he could not gain acceptance to West Point. All the education that he received on the military posts, while good, was not good enough to get the appointment that he so dearly wanted. He was determined to serve his country. When he turned 21 he traveled from Fort Sam Houston, Texas, where his father was stationed to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. He was an avid horseman and felt this gave him the best chance to get into the cavalry. On April 1, 1897, he became Private Harry Wheeler of Company H. Two famous Indian chiefs were still living on the Ft. Sill reservation at the time. Quanah Parker had brought his Comanche band there in 1875 and remained until he died in 1911. Geronimo had been brought there in 1894 and spent much time in the guardhouse near where Harry was quartered.

Early in his tour at Ft. Sill, he met, courted, impregnated and married on February 14, 1898, a California native by the name of Mamie Olivia Stafford. William Allyn Wheeler was born on August 11, 1898. The day after the wedding the USS Maine blew up in Havana, Cuba's harbor and the Spanish American War was soon on. Now it is believed that the explosion on the Maine may have been an internal accident. There is no conclusive evidence that Harry saw any action in the conflict. On the other side of the world, Captain Wheeler and Harry's 16-year-old brother, Private William Wheeler, sailed into the Philippines on the USS Colon and the US took possession of that country from Spain.

When his three year enlistment was up, Harry returned to civilian life, but only for three months. He rejoined his old unit which was now in South Dakota. The Army was expanding the cavalry and Harry was recruited by the commanding office of the new Fourteenth Cavalry to be his sergeant. The new unit was sent to Fort Grant in the Arizona Territory and he would remain in Arizona for the rest of his life. On October 9, 1901, he would be kicked in the stomach by a horse. He thought he would recover quickly, but internal injuries would affect his digestion system and he was medically discharged.

Arizona was still the wild frontier and seemed to be a place of opportunity for Harry. He first tried working as a laborer in Willcox and then as a miner in Tombstone. Harry was still consumed with the desire to serve and on July 6, 1903, his application to join the Arizona Rangers was accepted and once again he was Private Harry Wheeler. Over the life of the Rangers, 107 men would carry the title, but the greatest of them all was Harry.

## Old West Stories

---

Four months after his enlistment, the twenty-seven-year-old would be promoted to sergeant and be stationed in Willcox. On October 23, 1904, Sergeant Wheeler was in Tucson and dining in Wanda's Restaurant when Joe Bostwick and a partner decided to hold up the nearby Palace Saloon. Bostwick entered the saloon and left his partner outside as a lookout. One of the saloon patrons slipped away and ran into Wheeler as he was leaving the restaurant. Upon learning of the holdup, Wheeler drew his Colt .45 and headed for the Palace. Somehow Wheeler entered the saloon without the lookout spotting him. Bostwick saw Wheeler and turned to fire, but Wheeler was faster. His first bullet only grazed Bostwick's forehead and the robber got off a wild shot. Wheeler's second shot hit him in the chest. The lookout, upon hearing the shots, fired a wild shot that struck the leg of the roulette table. In the excitement Wheeler did not realize until later there was another shooter. It was determined that the lookout had taken a train east and Wheeler caught a train to chase him. He had to abandon the chase when Bostwick died and he was recalled to Tucson.

Less than a year after his promotion to sergeant, Harry Wheeler (**Photo at left**) was promoted to Lieutenant upon the resignation of Lieutenant Johnny Brooks on July 6, 1905.



Later that same year he would participate in one of the most grueling manhunts in the history of Arizona law enforcement. On July 12, 1905, two elderly ranchers were brutally slain outside the small town of Livingston. Their heads had been crushed with an iron bar and both were stabbed numerous times. The suspects were two Mexican employees that were missing along with \$100 in cash, a gold watch and a revolver. Private William S. Peterson headed up the investigation and with the help of Al Sieber (**see Volume One**) and two Indian trackers the killers were tracked to Globe where they had received assistance from a local bartender. Months passed with no progress on finding the two. Then Wheeler received word from an informant that the pair was working the mines in the state of Sonora, Mexico. Wheeler, Sergeant Billy Old (**see Volume One**) and two new recruits, Dick Hickey and Eugene Shute, went into Mexico in search of the killers. They rode trains and stage coaches from mining camp to mining camp with no luck. In

Ortiz, they procured a wagon, horses and supplies and were going to travel 90 miles to LaDura. The Mexican Army arrived and forbade them from going on as the Yaqui Indians were on the warpath and the roads unsafe. The army officer promised an escort for them as a cavalry squadron was nearby. After waiting all day for the escort, as night fell they hitched up the wagon and left. They encountered another squadron of Mexican Cavalry who took them into custody for their own protection. They spent four days in a blockhouse before the Mexicans received orders to escort them to LaDura. The fugitives were not in LaDura, so after a ten day round trip they were back at the blockhouse. They then proceeded to Guayamas and Empalme with the same results.

Maybe the murderers were working on the railroad being built across the most deserted areas of Sonora. The Rangers rode the train to the end of the track and then set out on foot. They headed off into the night for a few hours and then tried to sleep through the rest of the cold December night. In the morning they ate the rest of their food, started

## Old West Stories

---

rationing the water and headed down the railroad right-of-way. Later in the day Hickey was so footsore he took off his shoes and hung them around his neck. The others laughed at him, but the next day their shoes were hanging around their neck. After three days their water was gone, thirst was extreme and they had seen no humans or signs of civilization. Wheeler ordered them to march on through the night. Finally Hickey spotted a bit of light and cried out, "that's a house." It was a one-room shack and the occupants were frightened to death that they were being attacked by Yaquis.

Inside the shack were seven men, three women and half a dozen children huddled in a corner frozen with fear. They finally understood that they were not in danger and became perfect hosts. The lawmen's bleeding feet were cleaned and bandaged and the women prepared tortillas, beans, cheese, goat's milk and coffee. Then they slept until the middle of the next afternoon. The Rangers learned that the construction crew would return in three days and they remained with their hosts while their feet healed. When the crew returned there were no murderers.

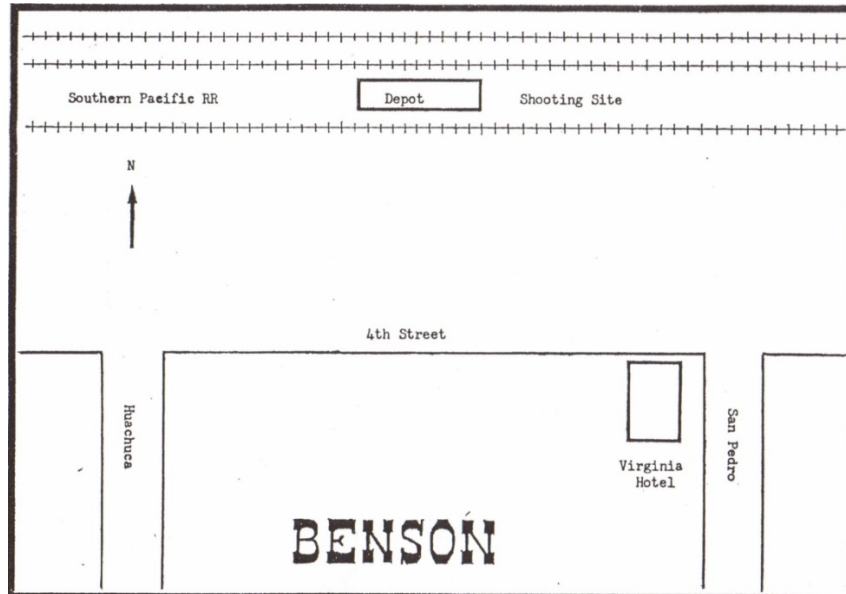
The Rangers decided to try Minas Prietas where they finally received a solid clue. The fugitives had been there but left a few days earlier for Nogales. The wanted men were not in Nogales and the entire Ranger force was notified to be on alert as they had likely returned to Arizona. Wheeler returned to Willcox and on a rainy night he stumbled upon the pair sitting on the railroad track. As he approached them, they stood up and moved away. He informed them they were under arrest and they pulled knives, Wheeler pulled a pistol. The arrest was easy. One willingly confessed that he had only watched as the other did the killing and he was released. The other was jailed and escaped, but soon committed suicide.

On Thursday, February 28, 1907, Wheeler became involved in a classic *mano a mano* gunfight because of a love triangle. Wheeler was only involved in the gunfight, not the love triangle. A fellow by the name of J. A. Tracy traveled to Benson to confront Mr. and Mrs. D. W. Silverton who had checked into the Virginia Hotel on Wednesday. They claimed to have been married six weeks earlier in Phoenix by a preacher named McComa. No one knew the preacher and no license could be found. Tracy and the woman had apparently been married for a while back in 1905 in Nevada. Thursday morning Silverton emerged from the hotel and spotted Tracy by the Bisbee train. He informed the hotel proprietor that he needed a gun for protection. The owner suggested he seek assistance from a law officer. It just happened that the two top law officers in the state were staying in the hotel at the time. Captain Tom Rynning (**see Volume One**) had recently suffered a bad back and hip injury when he fell from his horse. He was receiving medical treatment from a Benson doctor. Wheeler, acting as captain, was there to receive further instructions. The hotel owner sent for Wheeler who was having breakfast.

Wheeler listened to the Silverton's story and was shown a photograph of Tracy. He made sure Silverton was unarmed and then headed to the depot to disarm Tracy. Tracy was sitting on the depot steps and as Wheeler approached, Tracy saw the Silverton's emerge from the hotel, jumped up and pulled his revolver from his pocket. Wheeler yelled at him to "Hold on there. I arrest you. Give me that gun." Tracy began firing and Wheeler advanced firing his revolver. Tracy's third round entered Wheeler's left thigh near the groin. Tracy was hit four times and knocked on his back. He was hit under the heart, in the neck, arm and thigh and he gasped, "I am all in. My gun is empty." Wheeler's gun was empty and he dropped it as he limped forward to secure the prisoner. Tracy still had two rounds and he opened fire again, striking Wheeler in the heel. Now the gun was empty and Wheeler began throwing rocks at Tracy

## Old West Stories

---



**Source: *Captain Harry Wheeler: Arizona Lawman*, by Bill O'Neal**

Wheeler released Tracy to a Benson police officer then shook his hand and said, "Well, it was a great fight while it lasted, wasn't it, old man?" Tracy replied with a smile, "I'll get you yet."

Tracy was placed on a train to the Tucson hospital, but he died before he got there. His remains were shipped to Chicago. It was learned that Tracy was wanted for two murders in Nevada and that there was a \$500 reward. One of the victims was the brother of Dick Hickey, and Wheeler requested the reward go to the widowed Mrs. Hickey.

In less than a month following the Tracy incident, Captain Rynning was named to be the Superintendent of the Yuma Territorial Prison and, on March 25, 1907, Wheeler took the oath as the new captain. In less than four years he had pursued and arrested dozens of lawbreakers, killed two men in face-to-face gunfights, and now he had worked his way through the ranks from bottom to the top.

Being at the top would not keep Wheeler out of the field. In May 1908, he was closing in on a horse thief named George Arnett (aka George Wood). Arnett was stealing horses in Cochise County, running them across the border and selling them in Mexico. Wheeler and Cochise County Deputy Sheriff George Humm set a trap for Arnett in a canyon. For four nights nothing happened. On the fifth night, they met and tied their horses away from the canyon and walked to their trap, each man carrying a powerful lamp. About an hour later a man on a horse, leading a second horse, came into view. Wheeler and Humm lit him up with the lamps and ordered him to throw up his hands. Instead, he wheeled his horse, snapped a shot and fled. The lawmen returned fire and continued to fire until the rider disappeared. Wheeler and Humm had to retrieve their horses and headed back to the canyon believing the thief escaped unharmed. As they topped a ridge, they spotted the two horses, one which had been wounded. Knowing the horse thief must have been wounded, they began a careful search. They found Arnett's corpse about a quarter of a mile from the shooting. With the help of informants and the cooperation of Mexican authorities, Wheeler and Humm were able to go into Mexico, arrest numerous members of Arnett's band and return to Arizona with some of the stolen horses.

The Arizona Rangers were working themselves out of a job. Lawlessness was definitely on the decline. The Rangers were an organization that had been born in a Republican regime. In 1909, the state government was overwhelmingly Democrats and they wanted to repeal the law that established the Rangers. On February 15, 1909, the governor's veto was overridden and the Rangers ceased to exist. For a few days there were Rangers in the field that had no idea they were no longer Rangers. Fortunately none were killed and they killed none.



## Old West Stories

---

Wheeler hired on as deputy sheriff of Cochise County for a while to provide a paycheck. After a few months he applied for and became a mounted inspector in the U.S. Customs Service. After riding the border for more than a year he resigned to run for election as the Cochise County Sheriff. On Wednesday, February 14, 1912, he was sworn in as county sheriff. He would serve three terms as county sheriff, but they would be some of the most troublesome years of his life. Early in 1913, Mamie's sister would die in Oakland, California. The Wheeler marriage was already in trouble and now they had a niece named Sunshine to take care of.

Wheeler continued to make criminal arrests at every opportunity. He chased one man who killed his father-in-law south toward Mexico and arrested him in Douglas. A fight broke out in front of him, one of the combatants pulled a knife, and Sheriff Wheeler pulled his revolver and struck the arm with the knife. A city constable then knocked the man unconscious with a rock. Then he investigated his first auto theft and chased the bandits all the way to El Paso before finally catching the thieves and the car in Albuquerque, a week after the theft.

During Wheeler's terms as sheriff, the Mexican Revolution was still being waged just south of the border, and occasionally north of the border. Wheeler was fired upon as he rode along the border with a soldier on October 6, 1914.

Arizona voters approved prohibition in the 1914 general election, a measure which was narrowly opposed by Cochise county voters. It went into effect in January, 1915, and Wheeler waged a determined war against bootleggers. One of the prime offenders was a fellow named Starr Williams. Each time he would arrest Williams or capture one of his shipments of booze, Williams would attempt to harass or intimidate Wheeler with a suit for false arrest.

On March 22, 1915, Allyn Wheeler and some friends drove from their home in Tombstone to Bisbee for a big party. Apparently they were able to obtain some of the illegal alcohol. On the way home they had an accident which did not at first seem to be all that serious. They were taken to the hospital with some minor injuries. Allyn had some bad abrasions and cuts about the face. Eleven days after the accident Wheeler reported that Allyn had been quite sick but was well on the road to recovery and would be out of the hospital soon. By August there was still no recovery and the Wheelers took him to a hospital in Los Angeles. On October 22 Allyn died and the Wheelers suffered the worst tragedy that can befall parents. His body was brought back to Tombstone and buried in the Tombstone City Cemetery.

Wheeler dealt with his loss by redoubling his efforts as the sheriff. Mamie made numerous visits to out of town friends. The marriage continued to deteriorate.

In 1917, and in his final term as sheriff, Wheeler participated in some interesting bootlegger interdictions. In February Wheeler and Constable Lafe Gibson intercepted a bootlegger who bailed out of his big, new automobile and emptied his revolver at them before running off into the desert. The lawmen did not shoot back but did confiscate his fine automobile and 1,800 bottles of whiskey. Gibson had never driven a car, but after a quick lesson he drove back to Tombstone where the whiskey was destroyed publicly. Two weeks later the pair intercepted a Buick and another bootlegger fled on foot. Gibson was getting lots of driving practice. On the night of March 6, the two lawmen were scouting for bootleggers near the New Mexico border. They pulled off the road and rolled up into their blankets beside the car. The crack of a rifle sent a bullet through the windshield of their car and the two lawmen scrambling for their weapons. A nearby railroad grade provided them some breastwork. They saw some movement ahead of them and they opened fire. They were fired upon in return by four men about 50 to 75 yards away. The two parties exchanged at least 100 rounds and the bootleggers turned out to be Mexicans who were shouting insults as well as bullets. One bootlegger crept real close and when he fired, Wheeler pumped six rapid-fire rounds at the gun flash. He heard a moan and there was no more gunfire. At daylight the officers discovered a large pool of blood at that spot and evidence that the culprit had been dragged away. The abandoned camp was discovered with four burros loaded with ten cases of whiskey. The following day Wheeler and Gibson returned to the area and in Apache Pass found two of the

## Old West Stories

---

Mexicans with whiskey laden burros. When told to halt one Mexican pulled a pistol but decided it was better if he dropped it. The shootout was the last gunfight for Wheeler.

War erupted in Europe in 1914 and the demand for, and the price of, copper was skyrocketing. And Arizona had led the world in copper production since 1909. On April 6, 1917, President Wilson signed a declaration of war. Wheeler was now 42 years old and his lifelong sense of "Duty, Honor, and Country" demanded that he go and serve his country. He had passed the age where he could enlist, but he could still be an officer. He offered himself in any manner that his country could use him. He received notice to report to the Officers Reserve Training Quarters at the Presidio in San Francisco. He applied for and received a 60 day leave of absence from the county. His initial examinations were all easily passed. But on June 7, a doctor rejected him because of the old injury from Ft. Grant. Wheeler was not about to give up and he immediately filed a new application and returned to his duties as Sheriff.

Events surrounding the war effort and the booming copper industry in Arizona were just about to bring Wheeler as close as he would ever come to having his sterling reputation blemished. A socialist organization known as the International Workers of the World (IWW) was hell bent on disrupting the copper industry in Arizona and embarrassing the federal government. They were fairly small in number and were referred to as "Wobblies" and IWW was said to mean "I Won't Work." Their sole intention was to overthrow industrial capitalism and for worker control of mines and factories. Their methods were to use violence and sabotage to achieve their goals. The IWW called for a strike of the Bisbee mines for June 27, 1917. When Wheeler became convinced that the strike was not to benefit workers, but rather to embarrass the government and disrupt its efforts to prepare for war, he allowed approximately 1200 men to be deputized to prevent the strike. The Wobblies were holding nightly meetings, gathering weapons of various kinds, and harassing and committing violence upon citizens during the day. A Wobbly leader told the mayor he could not control his people, Sheriff Wheeler declared that he could control them.

On Thursday, July 12, Wheeler announced that he had a posse of 1,200 men in Bisbee and 1,000 in Douglas. He mounted a machine gun on a Ford and distributed eight other machine guns among his men. One machine gun was placed at the door of IWW headquarters. Wheeler entered the hall and emerged with several leaders of the socialist group. In nearby Warren, a fenced-in baseball field had been set up as a detention camp. The IWW pickets and leaders were rounded up and taken to the detention center. Only one act of violence occurred and that happened when a card carrying Wobbly was awakened and shot and killed one of the posse members who in turn shot and killed the Wobbly. About 2,000 men and three women were placed in confinement. A heavily armed body of men guarded the compound. The prisoners were allowed to call for other citizens who could confirm that the person held was not IWW connected. Most men that wanted to return to work were allowed to do so. About 1,186 were marched to a nearby train and loaded into boxcars. The train took them to Columbus, New Mexico, where local officials turned them away. The train went back to a place near Hermosa where they were camped out until President Wilson made room for them at Camp Furlong.

The IWW leaders were screaming "kidnap" and requesting a reason as to why the men were deported. The Arizona governor received a strongly worded letter from the president as to the "why" of the situation. During all the legal hassles, Wheeler was called to California where his wandering wife was suffering a severe illness. A recall petition was started, but it went nowhere. The sheriff was a hero to most of the folks of Cochise County.

Wheeler continued his efforts to get a commission and go to war. After he had tried many avenues, in January, 1918, he applied for and was granted another 60 day leave of absence. He was headed to Washington with an impressive collection of letters of recommendations. The 308 Cavalry Regiment was being formed in Arizona and Wheeler was determined to be a part of it. On March 9 word was out that Wheeler had been given a captain's commission in the 308<sup>th</sup>. IWW officials did their best to get the appointment rescinded.

Wheeler could not have been happier. He was sent to Camp Merritt in New Jersey for training. Late in March, he was exhilarated to learn he was headed for France and would, at

## Old West Stories

---

last, be in the war. Upon arrival there, he was discouraged to learn that his assignment was to train men that were going to the front lines. In mid-July he finally received the orders he had wanted. He was to be sent to the front. But first, he had to return to Arizona to answer charges in a case titled *United States v. Harry Wheeler*. The case drug on and, at one point, he was ordered back to France, but within a few miles he received a telegram ordering him back to Douglas. On November 11, the war ended and Wheeler immediately asked for and received a discharge.

The war was over, the federals dropped their case against him and turned it to the state, he was in an unhappy marriage and as 1919 began he was a policeman in Douglas. And he fell in love with an 18-year-old waitress named Jessie Leona Wills. The divorce battle was bitter and was finally settled on October 30, 1919. In Arizona, divorced people had to wait a year to remarry. Harry and Jessie headed for El Paso and married on December 10. On January 21, 1920, Harry's name was dropped from the states deportation lawsuit.

Harry and Jessie had their first child, a boy, in 1921. In 1922, he announced that he was running for sheriff again. The deportation affair probably cost him the election as he lost by 600 votes in the primary. In 1923, the couple had a daughter. The couple had another son in 1924, but he only lived three months.

In early December, 1925, Harry fell ill and in a few days it turned into pneumonia and on December 17<sup>th</sup> he died. Jessie would meet and marry a border patrolman in 1929. Never losing her love of Harry, the marriage only lasted half a dozen years. She remained a widow until she died on July 5, 1977. Harry, Jessie and the baby, Bobby, are buried side-by-side in the Evergreen Cemetery in Bisbee, Arizona.



**Source: *Captain Harry Wheeler: Arizona Lawman*, by Bill O'Neal**