

## **Wichita Falls Bank Robbery and Double Lynching**

Foster Crawford and Elmer "Kid" Lewis had worked together for Burk Burnett on his ranch. Crawford had worked there since 1888 as a range boss and bodyguard and Lewis had only been in the county for about one year. They were well-known in the area as restless cowboys and caused trouble in Wichita Falls at times. Both wore boots by Clapp of Wichita Falls. Foster Crawford was aged 35, from a good family in McClennan County. His mother and two sisters came later to see his grave. He had a few likable qualities, liked expensive clothes, boots and gear. He was a good worker but often got drunk and fought anyone handy.

Elmer "Kid" Lewis was an 18-year old kid from Neosho, Missouri, out for excitement, fleeing from trouble in Montana. He hatched trouble and followed easily. He had been in the county about a year.

They became members of the notorious Al Jennings band. Then they worked independently and managed a piecemeal living by hold-ups and such like. But they decided to make a big haul and then lead an easy life for a while. That conclusion led to concentration on the City National Bank of Wichita Falls, Texas. Such specimens of humanity were possessed with a spirit of braggadocio. In accordance, they notified the bankers from time to time to beware of a robbery. Upon repeated threats, the bank officials sent for Texas Rangers and Bill McDonald.

The City National Bank was in a three-story brick building on the southeast corner of Seventh and Ohio, across the alley from the St. James Hotel and with two outside entrances, one at the rear of the bank and the other at the corner.

Rumors of a robbery had been current for some time. Because northwest Texas had a poor record of law enforcement and was near Indian Territory, a hideout for the lawless, J. A. Kemp of the bank persuaded Gov. Culbertson to send Texas Rangers to protect the bank. After ten days of dull and boring duty and nothing happening the rangers decided their presence had caused the potential robbers to abandon their plan. On February 25, 1896, Captain McDonald and his rangers boarded the 1:00 P. M. train for Ft. Worth.

Crawford and Lewis who were at the station to see the rangers off had spent the night in a dugout in the negro community. The residents there had heard persistent rumors of the robbers' plans and warned the community. Their warnings went unheeded.

When the Rangers were off, the two bandits rode down the alley east of the St. James Hotel, on horseback. They dismounted and waited for the appointed hour, 2:30 P. M. Then they walked to the bank, located at that time of the corner of Seventh and Ohio. Crawford entered at the Seventh Street entrance, Lewis at the front. In the bank around two-thirty, when the robbers entered, were only four men: Frank Dorsey, cashier; Dr. O. J. Kendall, vice-president and a director, who was reporting to Dorsey on some ranch land he had checked for the bank; P. P. Langford, bookkeeper; and John L. Nickles, the only one that did not get hurt during the robbery.. Friends said he was so thin that he took refuge in an ink bottle. The president, J. A. Kemp was on a trip with the Katy railroad president; Wiley Robertson, assistant cashier, was on his way to the bank with \$400. to deposit for Mr. Kemp; S. E. Cannon, bank runner, was at the courthouse on an errand. There were no customers.

Upon entering the bank Crawford cried out "Up, up" to the bookkeeper, J. P. Langford, and when Langford failed to comprehend, Crawford struck him over the head with his gun. This caused the gun to discharge and the exploded bullet landed in the ceiling.

Lewis had covered the cashier and one of the directors, Dr. O.J. Kendall. Upon hearing Crawford's gun explosion, he opened fire on the Cashier, Frank Dorsey. He fell to the floor dead with a bullet in the shoulder and one in the head. Then Lewis aimed a shot at Dr. Kendall's heart, but the bullet struck a pocket where he was carrying a hypodermic case. He was stunned, fell to the ground and pretended to be dead. Langford, following the hit on the head, was crawling to the back door when he was shot in the fleshy rear but got to the street and gave alarm.

In the meantime, Crawford was trying to collect all the money he could find. The bank vault was not locked, but the latch gave him trouble and the robbers abandoned it, scooping up the

contents of the cash drawer (about \$410) in a paper sack, overlooking the next drawer which contained about \$1,000.

As the robbers dashed out the back door of the bank, they pushed aside unarmed J. D. Avis and went into the alley by the St. James Hotel, where their horses were waiting. As they passed the vacant lot next to the bank, Frank Hardesty, deputy sheriff, fired, severely wounding Lewis's horse. Crawford fired back but the bullet became embedded in Hardesty's watch. The two robbers rode double to 8th and east to Holliday Creek. Twice during their ride to the Thornberry area they changed horses. The first exchange of horses were taken from William Neal, a truck farmer who was driving with his wife to Wichita Falls. Fred Crane, a railroad man, witnessed this exchange. The two worn-out horses were exchanged for some farm animals.

Lewis and Crawford crossed a river near the Knott farm, jumping their horses down a fifteen-foot bank. As their pursuers were still on this side of the river, they attacked two Bohemian farmers plowing in the field and exchanged horses. Upon arriving at the thicket in Thornberry Pasture, the robbers dismounted and attempted to escape through the underbrush. Meanwhile the posse grew, being replenished from time to time with people from the town and from the countryside. Crawford and Lewis, now on foot and surrounded by hostile posse members, refused to surrender.

Captain McDonald (Photo at right) and his Rangers were at the scene of action before the close of the day and he commenced to holler and talked about going in after them. He insisted he was going in but instead he began calling to the men. Then one of the robbers called and asked, "Is that Captain McDonald?" and receiving the answer in the affirmative, he asked the Captain if they would be protected if they would surrender. The Captain promised to protect them. There was some little talk that indicated that some of the crowd that was there wanted to kill them, but the more levelheaded ones told them it was not right; that Captain McDonald had promised to protect them and bring them back. The bandits were brought back in a farm wagon. They were tied together and placed on a plank seat in the center of the wagon. John Hester, foreman of a Clay County ranch, drove the wagon with the deputized Tony Thornberry beside him. Ranger Lieutenant Sullivan, with rifle in hand, faced them from the front seat; Will McCauley, another ranger, and Judge Edgar Scurry, sat on the back seat with shotguns and brought them to Wichita Falls and put them in the jail.



They reached the jail about two A.M. and the robbers were placed in the women's part of the jail. Those were the only keys available at the time as Hardesty and the posse had not returned. The Rangers slept in the jail that night but left on the early afternoon train. Some say they sensed a possible lynching. The robbers gave Hardesty their watches, one a lady's and the other stolen. Many people visited the jail to see the robbers. J. R. Bachman, then a schoolboy, said practically all the children and teachers visited.

Mob spirit grew gradually during the 26th, especially as the funeral of Dorsey brought out practically the entire population. Small groups met in offices to discuss lynching. Hardesty moved his wife and children from the jail to the house of a friend. District Judge George R. Miller pled moderation; Judge Huff spoke to the gathering group about having murder on their conscience for the rest of their lives; Hardesty said he was ready to defend the prisoners in the jail; the crowd, summoned by the fire bell, listened respectfully and was remarkably orderly but determined; none was masked or disguised. For light a bonfire was built at Seventh and Ohio. Stories vary as to how the prisoners were taken from the jail. But all agree that the door was battered down and that Hardesty gave only token resistance. Awaiting them was a rope thrown over an arm of the telephone pole at the corner entrance to the bank with some boxes beneath. Crawford snarled, asked for Burke Burnett, for whiskey, offered to lead them to hidden money, then collapsed. At a

pre-arranged signal someone gave a pull on the rope and kicked the boxes out. The crowd was gone in an hour.

Before dawn Tom Pickett and Nat Henderson cut the hanged men down and took their bodies to J. Seelinger's porch on Ninth and Scott. The father of Lewis wired authority for a casket, later refusing to pay for it. Lewis was buried in the casket, Crawford in the box the casket came in, and both buried in the same grave in the pauper section of Riverside Cemetery. There have been different markers, the first of wood, the latest placed in 1958. Mrs. Dean Howard for years put flowers on the grave, the person unknown until after her death. One loop of the noose was given to Seth Mayfield who sent it to Mrs. A. H. Carrigan for the local museum. She promptly gave it to Lester Jones in January 1935. The telephone pole stayed on the corner until it was taken down in late June of 1909.



Of the \$2,000 reward offered by the bank, \$800 went to the Rangers, the rest to the posse members, most of whom gave theirs to Mrs. Dorsey, who bought a home on the Charlie Road. At the insistence of Judge George Miller the grand jury met in April 1896, and indicted five or more for murder (lynching), no-billed four or five, including Hardesty, and heard twenty-six witnesses. When the five came up for a preliminary hearing, Judge Miller was told his wife was in an accident in Graham. While he was away, the lawyers selected a temporary judge, C. M. Sherrod, and had four cases transferred to Wilbarger County and one to Cooke County. No record has been found of any trial being held.