

TOMBSTONE BY TOMBSTONE

Last Lynching in Arizona

By the year 1917 most of the Old West had become largely civilized. Arizona still had quite a bit of lawbreaking and lawkeeping going on in the large wide-open spaces that was attractive to the lawless. In fact, it would be almost a year after this incident that the bloodiest gun battle in Arizona history would take place. With lawlessness and concerned citizens in close proximity, there was still occasional vigilante and lynching activity.

In 1917, the people of Florence and Phoenix, Arizona had to drive a rough, dusty dirt road 61 miles to reach each other. The dirt road ran eighteen miles East and a little to the west of south of Phoenix to Mesa where it turned to the south and a bit west for forty-three miles to Florence. The primary reason for most all travel going to Florence was doing business with the Arizona State Prison. Travel by automobile along this nearly deserted road was slow, rough and dusty as the noisy vehicles pushed horse drawn vehicles off the road.

Late in the afternoon of May 4th of that year, Mr. and Mrs. James Gibson of Tucson, Arizona were on the road between Florence and Mesa trying to get to Phoenix. Gibson was a young salesman and he looked up at the gathering darkness and suggested to his wife that the road was too rough to drive at night in the dark. They decided to pull off the road and camp for the night.

They were prepared for just such a situation. They chose a spot near a large mesquite tree and while Gibson gathered fire wood for a fire, Mrs. Gibson unloaded their cots, blankets and food.

In the early evening, around 7 o'clock, they were surprised to find a stranger leading a horse into their camp. A tall, good looking young man explained that he was hungry and that both he and his horse were tired out.

The hospitable young couple invited the young man to join them. The stranger introduced himself as Starr Daley and the trio were quite friendly. Mrs. Gibson sensed that Daley wanted to tell them something that was bothering him but was hesitant to speak out. After a little bit he asked Mr. Gibson to take a walk with him. While still in hearing range of Mrs. Gibson, she heard Daley say, "You don't know it, but I attacked a woman back in Florence. I guess all Pinal and Maricopa County is looking fer me by now!"

This obviously upset Gibson and he headed back to camp. Daley asked him, "What's your name, Mister?" The reply was, "Gibson."

With a cold and threatening voice Daley stated, a man named Gibson ruined my sister back in Juarez. "You been in Juarez, Mister?" Gibson replied that he had not. "Don't lie to me, Mister. I swore I'd git him and it looks like I have."

"Look, Mister, you're crazy!" Gibson managed to say in a fearful voice. "My wife can tell you I've never been to Juarez."

Mrs. Gibson was making coffee when her husband walked back into camp and headed straight for his cot with his opened luggage. As he reached inside his bag, four bullets ripped into his back. Her screams were competing with the echo of the gunshots as Daley walked into the camp and calmly fired two more rounds into Gibson's body.

"That's to make sure he's dead!" As he pointed his gun at Mrs. Gibson he growled, "Now you shut up or you'll get the same! Now you do jist like I tell you an' you won't get hurt."

Daley drug Gibson's body outside the camp and left it. When he returned to camp he helped himself to some of the dead man's clothing and started to undress. "You take your clothes off, too." He growled, "an' do like I say or I'll do to you jist whut I done to him." The rest of the night was a horror to Mrs. Gibson. She was the victim of repeated rapes and unnatural sex acts.

When morning finally came, Daley began to bury the body. He told Mrs. Gibson, "We'll get married, sell the car and go to Oklahoma an' if you don't, you'll be put in the same hole as him."

She agreed to go with him if he would take her husband's body to Mesa and leave it with a funeral home. Daley agreed and the two of them loaded the body into the car and headed for Mesa.

As luck would have it, the car ran out of gas a few miles from Mesa. Not having any options, Daley left Mrs. Gibson with the body and the car and began a trek to Mesa. Without any luck, she tried to hail passing autos. At length a man named Phelps rode up on a bicycle. She told him her

TOMBSTONE BY TOMBSTONE

terrible story and showed him the body. Phelps rushed off to Mesa in hopes of nabbing the murderer before he got back to the car. Mesa's Marshal Peyton heard the story from Phelps and immediately set out to capture Daley before he could get back to Mrs. Gibson. Just outside the Mesa city limits, Peyton arrested Daley without any resistance. Later that day, Daley was transferred to Sheriff William Wilky of Phoenix and placed in the Maricopa County Jail.

Newspapers headlines were screaming about the heinous act the next day. The *Arizona Republic* headline read: "**Terrible Crime Committed Near Apache Trail in Dead of Night**" and one of the things they called Daley was "a young degenerate." He was placed in a cell with John Groff, another murderer, who shouted out, "Get that degenerate away from me."

Daley was bragging that he would never be hanged because the state of Arizona had just abolished the death penalty. He was soon to learn that that tune didn't play well with Arizona citizens.

As the news and the details of the gross crime spread through Mesa, more and more citizens began to gather together around street corners and favorite meeting places. Their conversations were all about the murder and the terrible acts of rape the woman had to suffer.

When the citizens of Phoenix learned from the jailors about Daley's boast that he would never be hanged, the talk became even more angry. As they discussed that the state couldn't hang him, they began discussing the fact that they could. The group that met in the Hotel Adams were all prominent citizens of the area and as they broke up and left the building, their last words were, "Let's get Daley."

Sheriff Wilky (photo at right) first heard of the citizens' talk of vigilantism around 8:30 PM. And by then a small group of citizens had already assembled at the jail. Wilky was very concerned with the possibility that the mob would take the prisoner and hang him in the streets of Phoenix. Wilky decided that he would pull a little trick on the crowd and get Daley safely out of town. He put a different prisoner into one of the department autos and started it in the direction of Florence. The plan was for the car to draw the mob into following it. The car would then double back, pick up Daley and be behind the mob cars going to Florence. What followed was almost like a Keystone Cops movie.

The plan didn't quite work. Some of the crowd did fall for it and took out after the sheriff's car. Some did not leave and the crowd was growing bigger and bigger. By midnight, the crowd was growing more determined and louder. Sheriff Wilky decided he better act and act quickly. By this time, Daley was cowering in a corner of his cell crying and whimpering and the sheriff told him he had only one chance. "Quit your damned crying and listen to me," said the sheriff. "We're going to walk out of here and get into a car. I'm not going to handcuff you and you walk nice and easy just like you are one of us. If you make one move to run for it. Either I'll get you or that mob will."

Walking as casually as his rubber legs would permit, Daley and two deputies got into a car parked at the curb. As soon as Daley and the deputies got into the car, the mob realized what was happening and piled into four cars they had waiting.

The race was on with the Daley car in a big lead over the mob who were bouncing around and breathing dust in their vehicle. An oil leak in the sheriff's car as it sped through Mesa caused the first hitch in the plan. They quickly pulled into a garage for repairs. While in the garage the trio watched through the window as the vigilantes raced by. When the repairs were finished they were back on their way to Florence.

By this time, two carloads of vigilantes from Mesa, determined to lynch Daley, had joined the chase.

So we now have the original group of four cars from Phoenix filled with vigilantes in the lead car chasing the murdering rapist who is behind them. Not far behind the sheriff's car are the two cars full of Mesa's vigilantes.



TOMBSTONE BY TOMBSTONE

When Deputies Barrett and Musgrove round a curve and are out of visual contact from the two cars behind them, they tried one more trick. They quickly pulled off the road, doused their headlights and with their hearts in their throats watched the two cars speed by in a cloud of dust. Now, the wanted man is the last car in this line in this almost comedic chase.

Around 2 AM, the Phoenix vigilantes decided that there was no one in front of them. Just outside of Florence, they turned around and created a road block under a railroad bridge. They exited their cars and, with guns at the ready waited for their quarry to arrive. Soon there were approaching headlights coming from the Florence area. The vigilantes assumed it was Florence police officers coming to assist the deputies. Phoenix men were determined not to let the car pass. The car stopped and with guns pointed at them the occupants were ordered to get out and keep their hands in the air. The two groups faced each for a short time and then broke into laughter as they realized they were both after the same thing. Two more cars were stopped and told to keep their hands in the air. This turned out to be the Mesa gang. The three groups joined forces and waited for the wanted man to arrive.

In a short while another set of headlights was approaching from Mesa. The car with the deputies came around a curve in the road and spotted the road block. The driver managed to bring the car to a halt in a cloud of dust, turn it around and headed back in the direction from which it came.

The vigilantes quickly jumped back into their cars and went in pursuit of their objective. Daley was overtaken and the car forced to stop. Before the car could stop moving, five of the armed vigilantes had the car surrounded.

“What do you want,” asked Deputy Barrett. “We want Daley!” was the response. Barrett quickly replied, “Well we can’t let you have him.”

Two masked men then opened Daley’s car door and motioned him to get out. Without a word he got out of the car. He was told that if he tried to run that he was a dead man.

“Gennlemun, I want to make a statement,” said Daley. Without receiving permission, he began his statement. “I—uh— I want you to know that my mother made me what I am. Sh—”

The crowd began calling for getting this S.O.B. out of here. Daley was forced into a car between two armed guards and was told to take them to the scene of the crimes and that he would be hanged there.

The deputies, having done all they could to save their prisoner, had already left the scene. The vigilantes headed back toward Mesa, but at a much slower speed. Daley wanted to talk and told of his childhood in Oklahoma and told the following tale:

I was raised near Bartlesville, Oklahoma. My stepfather was “Red” Melvin who is known all over as a bank robber. He and my mother killed my baby brother by pouring boiling water all over him. They used to make me go out and seduce girls for my mother’s brothel. That’s right, she ran a brothel.”

“I helped my stepfather rob banks, too. I guess I killed a man. I was shootin’ at a posse that was chasing us and I’m sure I got one of ‘em.”

“My real name is Van Ashmore. When I got out of the reformatory, I came West. I enlisted in the Army and was sent to Schofield Barracks in Honolulu. A few months later, I was dishonorably discharged.” (*The Arizona Republic* reported that the reason for his discharge could not be printed and was in line with his other offenses.)

“When I got back to this country, I went to Oklahoma and got a job on a ranch. While there, I pulled off several holdups and had to shoot one man. I had made plans to run away with the rancher’s wife, but he got wind of it and told me to beat it. I made my way to Arizona and got a job at Lukes Ranch near Peoria.” There was not much doing there, so I struck out again. I went to Florence, but I did not assault the wife of a rancher there...like they said. I got scared off, took a horse and saddle and started for Mesa.”

About 7 o’clock I came upon the Gibsons. When he told me his name was Gibson I figured he was the man who had ruined my sister, so I shot him.”

TOMBSTONE BY TOMBSTONE

Someone asked him where his sister was when this man ruined her. He replied, "She was working in a brothel down in Juarez"

"Now, I want to tell you gennelmun, I know I am guilty but I think the ones that brought me up are more to blame than me. I hope they hear of this and someone punishes them, too. I'm willing to be hanged but I hope you won't burn me or shoot me fulla holes." Daley then asked if he could be buried in Oklahoma and was told it was up to the coroner.

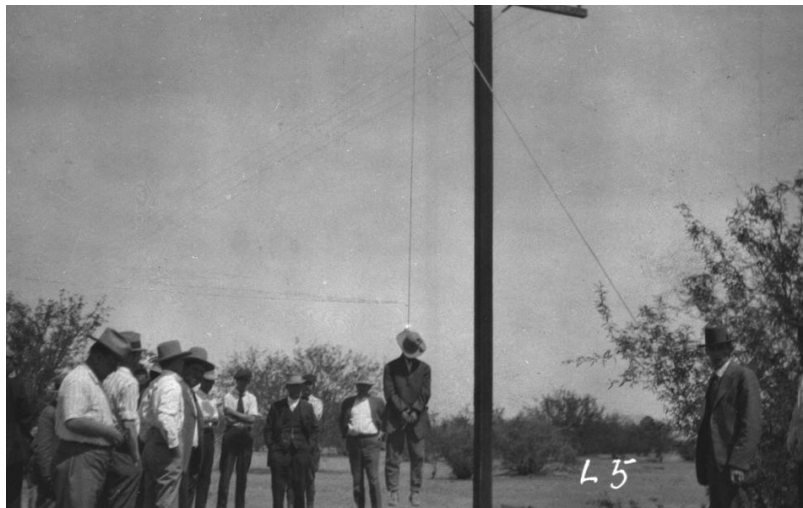
At the scene of his crimes, the car he was in pulled up to a nearby telephone pole. The other cars formed a circle around them. As the vigilantes silently formed a circle around the car, Daley stepped out into the circle, and when he asked for a drink he was told the crowd was "dry."

It was 4:00 and the morning was very cold in the desert air. Just a few yards from where he had murdered Gibson and repeatedly raped his wife, Daley fell to his knees and said "Oh, God, God." The vigilantes began to repeat the lord's Prayer. Again Daley said, "Oh, God, God, I don't know all the words." At the conclusion of the prayer, Daley was placed on a car under the pole's cross arm. A rope was thrown over the cross arm and a hangman's noose placed around his neck. Asked if he had any last words, he said "I hope this will be a lesson to all men like me. I am not to blame. It is the result of having a mother who worked in a brothel... Help me up there."

At his request, his hat was placed on his head and the car drove away and Daley was swinging in space having dropped about three feet. His feet almost touched the ground, so the men pulled him up as he choked to death. A doctor in the crowd felt his pulse and announced he would be dead shortly. His hat never fell off.

The mob leader asked that no one shoot or mutilate the body. Two minutes later all that could be seen was the hanging body and disappearing tail lights.

The next morning a coroner's jury assembled at the scene. They cut him down and held a brief inquest. A grave was dug and the body thrown into it. The inquest reported the following verdict: "Justifiable homicide by hanging at the hands of unknown parties. In the next election, the people voted overwhelming to restore the death penalty. So the last hanging would be held several years later.



The scene the morning after Daley was lynched

TOMBSTONE BY TOMBSTONE
