

Wham Payroll Robbery

The Wham Payroll robbery is one of the least known, least written about, yet most unbelievable crimes in Arizona territorial history. It occurred in the early morning of May 11, 1889, near Pima, Arizona. The bandits escaped with more than \$28,000 in gold and silver coins which has never been accounted for in more than 123 years. The accused gang was charged only with armed robbery, yet eight men, all U. S. soldiers, suffered gunshot wounds of varying severity. And none of the bandits ever served any time although eight of them were captured by law enforcement.

U.S. Army Paymaster, Major Joseph Washington Wham, was making his delivery of the Army payroll. The day before delivery had been made to Fort Thomas and now the paymaster was on his way to Fort Thomas, Camp San Carlos and Fort Apache where the soldiers were awaiting their pay.

Major Wham was accompanied by his clerk, William Gibbon, his servant and mule tender, and a Buffalo Soldier, Private Coldwell. Their mode of transportation was a canopied ambulance that was being driven by a Buffalo Soldier, Private Hamilton Lewis, for the trip to Fort Apache where the soldiers were awaiting their pay. The gold and silver coins were locked in an oaken strongbox inside the ambulance. Wham and his valuable cargo was also escorted by nine Buffalo Soldiers of the 24th Infantry riding on horseback. Also, with the group was a provision wagon driven by a civilian and carrying two Buffalo Soldiers of the 10th Cavalry. Only Wham, his clerk and the two drivers were not carrying weapons. Just before departure they agreed to allow a black lady gambler that wanted to be in Fort Thomas when the soldiers were paid to accompany the payroll wagon.

Around noon the payroll caravan was about 15 miles from Pima and found a huge boulder was blocking the road, bringing the party to a halt. Since the wagons could not get around the boulder, the soldiers laid their weapons down and began an effort to move the obstruction from the road. Immediately the bandits, hiding on a ledge about 60 feet above the road shouted, "Look out you black sons o bitches!" and immediately began to fire on the soldiers. The bullets killed three of the 12 mules and the remainder panicked and pulled the wagons off the road. As bullets rained down on the soldiers from three sides the soldiers scrambled for their weapons and for cover. Sergeant Benjamin Brown was wounded but was able to return fire with his revolver. Private James Young ran through heavy gunfire and carried Brown more than 100 yards to safety. Corporal Isaiah Mays then took command, ordering the entourage to retreat to a creek bed about 300 yards away, despite Major Wham's protests. The soldiers bravely fought to protect the payroll for about half an hour, but eight of the eleven soldiers were severely wounded, and the bandits decidedly had the upper hand. While the battle raged Frankie Campbell, the black lady gambler, had ridden ahead of the caravan and was thrown from her horse and taken cover.



While the soldiers were hidden and wounded it was an easy matter for five of the highwaymen to get to the ambulance, open the strongbox with an axe and get away with the bags of coins. As the bandits made their escape the soldiers counted 12 of them. At midafternoon the soldiers that were able made their way from the creek bed to the wagons. They caught some of the surviving mules, spliced harnesses together and made their way to Fort Thomas, arriving about 5:30. Frankie Campbell had been ordered to attend to the severely wounded and in a miracle all of them survived.

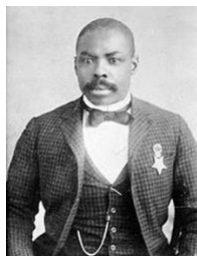
While the battle raged, and the robbery was taking place some of the bandits did not hide their faces behind masks and several were recognized and very soon U.S. Deputy Marshal William Kidder Meade and the Graham Count Sheriff had arrested 11 of the 12 men, most of them were citizens of Pima. Only seven of the eight actually went to trial and Gilbert Webb, Pima Mayor, and his son Wilfred was among those. Gilbert Webb was considered to be the leader of the gang. Father and son were suspected of many thefts in the area. Also going to trial were brothers, Lyman and Warren Follet, David Rogers, Thomas Lamb and Mark Cunningham. All of them were working cowboys for Gilbert Webb. However, justice was not to be served and the men were charged for robbery and no one was ever charged for the shootings.

The trial was held in the Tucson Federal Court and lasted for 33 days and was widely covered in the southwest. The trial was doomed by politics, religion and in-fighting and the original seated judge was removed. There were 165 testifying witnesses, including five Buffalo Soldiers who identified three of the accused bandits. Another witness testified that he had seen the robbers hiding the loot in a haystack and burning the U.S treasury sacks that held the coins. Several testified as to seeing the bandits in the area the day before when they were likely preparing their site of attack. A key witness, Frankie Campbell, stated she had recognized several of the bandits, including Gilbert Webb, was never called to testify. Noted attorney Marcus Aurelius Smith successfully defended the bandits and everyone was acquitted.

Later it was claimed that the acting governor applied political pressure to free the bandits. The entire case was a hotbed of religion, racism, and politics, as Pima, Arizona was founded as a Mormon Colony, of which Gilbert Webb was the mayor, one of the most influential men in the area, and came from a long line of pioneer Mormons. He was also known in the area as a generous man, providing jobs for struggling neighbors, extending credit, and providing provisions. Though most of the other accused men were not Mormons, they all lived in the Mormon colony, having many ties to the church through friends and relatives. To many area locals, the robbery and trial were an embarrassing disgrace to the town and its people, and to talk about it might offend friends or neighbors or bring shame upon the colony. Therefore, the robbery was not publicized to the

extent of other large robberies of the time. However; quietly, locals were said to have referred to the robbers as “Latter-Day Robin Hoods.”

The money has never been accounted for. But many folks thought that Gilbert Webb paid off his debts and paid for the defense of himself and the other defendants. The following year he was elected as a delegate to the Territorial Democratic Convention. However, sometime later, he was indicted for defrauding the Pima school district of \$160. He soon left the area, winding up in



Mexico.

Two of the Buffalo Soldiers were awarded the Medal of Honor for their heroic efforts in the battle against the bandits. Sergeant Benjamin Brown (photo at left) was severely wounded in the abdomen and continued to fire his weapon until receiving wounds in both arms. He was awarded the medal on February 19, 1890, a year after the battle. Brown was an expert rifleman and was ranked fifty-fourth in the entire U.S. Army in 1904. He was forced to retire in 1904 after being disabled by a stroke. Brown died in 1910 and was buried at the United States Soldiers' and Airmen's Home National Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

Near the end of the battle Corporal Isaiah Mays (photo at right) was shot in both legs and still managed to walk and crawl two miles to the Cottonwood Ranch and give the alarm. Mays was also awarded the MOH on February 18, 1890. After leaving the army in 1893, Mays worked as a laborer in Arizona and New Mexico. He applied for a federal pension in 1922, but was denied. He entered the Territorial Insane Asylum, now known as the Arizona State Hospital, in Phoenix, which housed not only the mentally ill but also people with tuberculosis and those living in poverty. He died at the hospital in 1925, at age sixty-seven, and was buried in the adjoining cemetery. His grave was marked with only a small stone block, etched with a number. In 2001, the marker was replaced with an official United States Department of Veterans Affairs headstone which stated his name, service history, and his status as a Medal of Honor recipient. Eight years later, in March 2009 under the care of the Old Guard Riders Inc., Cpl Mays' remains were disinterred, cremated and placed in an urn designed especially for him. On 29 May 2009, in a ceremony befitting a Medal of Honor recipient, Mays was interred in Arlington National Cemetery.



Other Buffalo Soldiers cited for bravery in the incident received the Certificate of Merit. These included Hamilton Lewis, Squire Williams, George Arrington, James Wheeler, Benjamin Burge, Thomas Hams, James Young, and Julius Harrison of the 10th Cavalry and 24th Infantry.

U.S. Deputy Marshal Meade, who would bring in the bandits, would say of the soldiers, “I am satisfied a braver or better defense could not have been made under like circumstances.”

Questions of the bandits’ guilt or innocence, as well as the final outcome of the loot, remain unanswered today. Throughout the years, the robbery has created a number of various treasure tales, suggesting that some of the coins are still hidden in the area somewhere. However; with all of the suspects set free, this would seem doubtful.



Major Wham was originally held responsible for the lost funds. He was relieved of this debt on January 21, 1891, when the U.S. Congress passed an act relieving him of responsibility. Major Joseph Wham (photo above) served the U.S. Army during the Civil War and suffered a wound. He retired from the army.

He suffered a severe cerebral hemorrhage and died in Washington, D.C. December 21, 1908. and is buried in Wham Hill Cemetery, Marion County, Illinois.

Legal troubles for the accused did not end with their acquittal. In May 1890, Mark E. Cunningham, Lyman Follett, and Warren Follett were arrested by Graham County officials on charges of cattle rustling. They were convicted of the charges and sentenced to two years in prison.^[58] An appeal of the conviction reached the Arizona Territorial Supreme Court, which granted them a new trial. The prosecution dropped the charges before the second trial could convene.^[57] Meanwhile, Gilbert and Wilfred Webb were accused of defrauding the Graham County school district.^[58] Wilfred Webb survived the accusations and later became active in territorial politics, serving as Speaker of the House during the 23rd Arizona Territorial Legislature and as a member of Arizona's constitutional convention. When asked if he was involved in the robbery, he would respond with "Twelve good men said I wasn't." At the time of his death, Webb owned the 76 Ranch. The ranch measured 20 by 50 miles (32 by 80 km) and included all of Mount Graham. The money taken during the robbery has never been recovered.