

**GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER
ON THE TEXAS FRONTIER**



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TEXAS FRONTIER**



— **Notorious Killings & Celebrated Trials** —

BILL ★ NEAL

Foreword by Gordon Morris Bakken

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PROLOGUE

A loyal son of Texas
Went out upon a spree—
Perpetrated six murders,
Some rape and burglaree.
They swung him from the gallows—
A proper end, of course;
But the reason that they hung him was—
That bastard stole a horse.

Texas' Uncommon Laws

By Corwin W. Johnson

University of Texas Law Professor

(Sung to the tune of "The Yellow Rose of Texas")¹

DURING A 1916 jury trial in the tiny West Texas town of Benjamin, a gunman slipped into the crowded courtroom and touched off wall-to-wall pandemonium when he sneaked up behind the defendant (who was being tried for murder) and shot him in the back—fatally. For good measure he then proceeded to wound a witness and a defense attorney before being subdued. There was no doubt about the shooter's identity. He was not insane; he was not under threat of any immediate harm to himself. Yet he sailed through four jury trials with nary a conviction for murder, or for attempting to murder the witness or the attorney, or even for carrying a concealed weapon into a courtroom. He never served a day's time.

THE 1890S WELLS FARGO MURDER TRIALS

The Bloody Rampages of “Hell’s Fringe” Outlaws

AN ALL-STAR CAST OF LAWMEN, OUTLAWS, AND LAWYERS

AFTER NEWS of the murder of their sheriff swept through the community, several folks came forward with important information. They all recalled seeing four strangers riding across the open prairie along the South Canadian River earlier that fateful day. Traveling westward, the four came from “Hell’s Fringe,” the wild and lawless Oklahoma Territory, headed toward the Texas Panhandle village of Canadian. Those who happened to cross their path paid particular attention to the strangers because they were all well armed and well mounted, because they weren’t traveling on any existing road or trail, and because they all had grain sacks (“morrals”) dangling from their saddle horns—long-riders for sure. Overcoats were buttoned against the bite of the High Plains autumn, overshoes lashed behind their saddles. And, instead of returning customary greetings, the riders just glared at folks.

Plus one other thing: one of the observers, by pure chance, happened to know, and thus recognize, one of the four horsemen—Will “Tulsa Jack” Blake, a lieutenant in Bill Doolin’s notorious Oklahoma Territory outlaw gang.¹

Later that day, two of the four were seen hanging out at Paul Hoefler’s saloon in Canadian, a scant two hundred

THE 1890S WELLS FARGO MURDER TRIALS

yards from the railroad depot.² Indeed, on that day, Friday, November 23, 1894, the Santa Fe depot seemed to be a magnet attracting the famous and the infamous—an unlikely assortment of heroes and villains . . . and losers. The depot also proved to be a lightning rod for an impending storm of events, both dramatic and tragic.

The previous day, however, at the Wells Fargo office in Kansas City, a mighty peculiar thing happened. A man whom nobody seemed to know (at least nobody in the law-abiding community) appeared claiming his five money packets contained more cash money than the Wells Fargo clerk had ever before handled. The stranger identified himself as George Isaacs and proceeded to make a most unusual request. He wanted Wells Fargo to ship his cash (via the Santa Fe Railroad) to himself at Canadian, Texas.

The next day George boarded the same Santa Fe train that was carrying his money packets. The train arrived that evening at about 8:00 at the Canadian depot. George disembarked, but, instead of going to the Wells Fargo office in the depot, he started walking toward downtown Canadian in search of a hotel room. Although George's three brothers lived in the Canadian area, he was unfamiliar with the town (or at least claimed to be), so he asked directions to the nearest hotel. Strangely enough, the man he chanced to ask was none other than the most famous lawman in all of the Panhandle and West Texas: Texas Ranger Captain G. W. "Cap" Arrington.

The Canadian Wells Fargo agent, A. B. Harding, having learned of the huge money shipment to be delivered into his safekeeping, summoned Hemphill County Sheriff Tom T. McGee to help guard the money. The stage was set, and the curtain about to rise on a drama of far-reaching consequences. Before the curtain rang down on this improbable and bizarre drama there would be two murders that, in turn, resulted in eight murder trials in Texas and Oklahoma Territory.

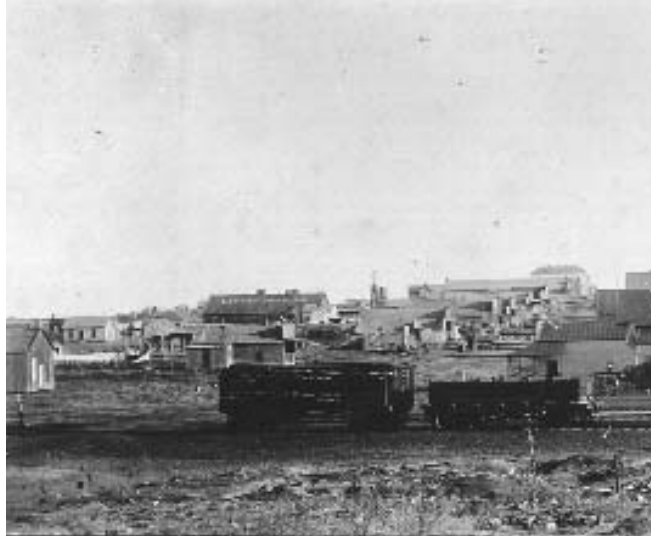
The Players

This frontier drama featured an all-star cast of Texas and Oklahoma Territory outlaws, lawmen, and trial lawyers. The headliners in the case included outlaw Bill Doolin and his gang; the junk-yard-dog mean A. J.

GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER

The depot and the fledgling town of Canadian shortly after the railroad arrived in 1887. Just seven years later it would be the site of Sheriff Tom T. McGee's murder.

(Courtesy of the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum, Canyon, Texas.)



Fires, the eloquent and eccentric Temple Houston, W. B. Plemons, Lorenzo Dow Miller, and H. E. Hoover as flamboyant criminal trial lawyers; and law officers Texas Ranger Captain G. W. “Cap” Arrington and U.S. Deputy Marshal Chris Madsen of Oklahoma Territory; plus a number of other famous men of the era. Ironically, George Isaacs, who started it all, was one of the few pygmies in this cast of giants.

Captain G. W. “Cap” Arrington was known as the “iron-handed” Texas Ranger and was acclaimed as “the first and greatest peace officer” in the Panhandle and West Texas. A battle-scarred Civil War veteran, Arrington joined the Texas Rangers in 1875. His combat and leadership skills were quickly recognized. He first gained fame as an Indian fighter on the West Texas frontier. Later, he teamed up with the venerable Colonel Charles Goodnight in an unrelenting war on cattle rustlers. Still later, he was drafted as sheriff of Wheeler County, Texas, when that county along with fourteen other attached, but still unorganized, counties covered about half of the Texas Panhandle.⁵

In Oklahoma Territory where, because of widespread corruption, many U.S. Marshals were viewed by the general populace as a curse worse than the outlaws they pursued, U.S. Deputy Marshal Chris Mad-

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Texas Ranger Captain George W. Arrington gained fame first as an Indian fighter and later as a relentless foe of cattle rustlers and the outlaw element. Although he was not an official law enforcement officer in November 1894 when outlaws killed Hemphill County Sheriff Tom T. McGee in Canadian, Texas, Arrington nevertheless organized a posse the next day, tracked the killers more than ninety miles into Oklahoma Territory, arrested one of the gang, and obtained incriminating statements from witnesses.

(Courtesy of the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum, Canyon, Texas.)