

from Gary McCarthy's

OUR AMERICAN WEST

Tom Horn
Gun for Hire

Tom Horn, born in 1860, was reared on a farm in Memphis, Missouri. Very early in life, he became a sharpshooting backwoods varmint hunter—much later, he turned to hunting the two-legged variety. But that is getting ahead of the story. Young Horn ran away at the age of fourteen. He traveled out West where he worked odd jobs until he became an army scout. Tom Horn proved to be daring, courageous and resourceful and was promoted to the lofty position of Civilian Chief of Scouts. Never one to be reticent about his own accomplishments, the ruggedly handsome six-foot-two inch Tom Horn boasted that he was largely responsible for arranging Geronimo's surrender in 1886. If this was true, Horn negotiated the end to his own employment because after the Apache surrendered his services were no longer needed by the army.

He drifted, did a little mining and eventually took a job in Arizona as the deputy sheriff of Yavapai County. Horn was also a top-notch rodeo cowboy and supplemented his meager salary by becoming a frequent winner of both riding and roping contests around Tucson, Prescott and Phoenix. When not on the job or winning rodeos, Horn was constantly braiding intricate leather, rawhide and rope lariats, halters and fancy reins. He became renowned for his beautiful braid work and he could have made a fine living at it had he not been a man who craved excitement. In 1898, he found plenty of it with Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders in Cuba during the Spanish American War.

By 1890, Horn, a confirmed “man of action” took a job with the famous Pinkerton Detective Agency. Here, he further sharpened his marksmanship and developed detective skills while hunting down outlaws who had robbed banks, trains and the mining payrolls of stagecoaches. Horn quit the Pinkerton Detective Agency a few years later under allegations that he much preferred to “terminate” rather than “investigate”. It was at this time that the fiasco of the Johnson County War was ending and Horn, with the hunter’s instincts telling him where his gun was needed, drifted north into Wyoming. By now, his reputation alone was enough to send outlaws running and so Horn was greeted warmly by many members of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association. Up to this point, it could be said that he never killed a man except in the line of duty. But from the time of Horn’s arrival in Wyoming until the end of his life only a few years later, that story seems to have changed.

In 1901, Tom Horn became good friends with John Coble, a rancher who lived near Laramie. He also had a lady friend named Gondolene Kimmel, whose family was feuding with an unpopular sheepherder by the name of Kels Nickell. Both Coble and Miss Kimmel hated the sheepherder and at dawn on the morning of July 18, 1901, the sound of a rifle boomed across the Nickell homestead. Tragically, man-sized fourteen-year-old Willie Nickell, probably mistaken for his father, died instantly. The murderer was never caught although everyone suspected the hired gunman, Tom Horn. Horn was immediately questioned closely but his alibi was foolproof and it was determined that he wasn’t near the Nickell homestead at the time of the ambush. Later, however, he was heard to boast, *“Killing men is my specialty. I look at it as a business proposition and I think I have a corner on that market.”*

Tom Horn might have said that when he was in his cups and bragging, but it was a chilling remark that put everyone in that part of Wyoming on edge. Homesteaders and ranchers alike feared the cattle baron’s hired gun and some called Tom Horn an “angel of death” a term that Tom Horn probably found amusing. On a very fast horse, Horn spent days out on the prairie with his Model 1894 Winchester .30-.30 repeating rifle looking for

rustlers and keeping everyone in a state of near panic. Whenever Tom Horn rode within the sight of farms and little homesteads, people felt a cold shiver of fear, wondering if his sights would soon be set on them. Ambushes of suspected cattle rustlers became commonplace. The tension heightened until it was decided that something had to be done to rid Wyoming of Tom Horn.

Deputy U.S. marshal Joe LeFors befriended Horn and spoke to him about some “*gun justice*” being needed by his friends in Montana. Would Tom be interested for the right price? Horn is said to have replied that he might be. His going rate was one thousand dollars per dead rustler. Could the folks up in Montana pay that much? LeFors speculated that they probably could and it is at this point in time that events become unclear. According to most, LeFors got Tom Horn drunk and took him to the marshal’s office to further discuss the “Montana business”. Unknown to Horn, two of his deputies were hidden in the next room, listening and hastily jotting down what they considered the “*important*” parts of the conversation which might have gone something like this:

“Tom, you are the best man to cover your trail I ever saw. In the Willie Nickell killing, I could never find your trail and I pride myself on being an expert tracker.”

“I left no trail. The only way to cover up your trail is to go barefooted.”

“Then where was your horse?”

“He was a long ways off.”

Later, when confronted by this supposed admission of guilt during the trial, Tom Horn angrily denied killing young Willie Nickell and said, “*Yes he was a long ways off—and so was I!*”

Tom Horn argued passionately that he was simply “*joshing*” LeFors, “*pulling his damned leg*” and there were many in the courtroom who believed him because Horn had the reputation of bragging outrageously when drunk. But the jury ruled Tom Horn guilty as charged and he was sentenced to hang. Even then he might have had this sentence commuted except that he tried to

escape. Public sentiment was solidly against him and a few of the big Wyoming ranchers prayed that Horn would swing before he could implicate them in any hired killings.

On November 20, 1903, Tom Horn did swing from a gallows in Cheyenne, Wyoming before thousands of spectators. He died bravely, still maintaining his innocence of the Nickell boy's despicable murder. Most historians who have reviewed the transcripts of the murder trial have agreed that the Nickell family had many enemies and that Tom Horn's alibis proved beyond a doubt that he was innocent of the crime for which he was hanged.

In today's legal system, he would never have been convicted on such flimsy evidence. But Tom Horn, despite the late Steve McQueen's outstanding performance of him on the big screen, was a professional killer. As such, he was feared by all and I believe that is the real crime that got him hanged.

Gary McCarthy is a national award-winning western and historical novelist who welcomes comments about this column and can be reached through his website:

www.CanyonCountryBooks.com

