



BANDERA COUNTY COURIER

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Hanging Tree Ranch incident - 150 years later

By Irene Van Winkle Special to the Courier

One of the most heinous acts of the Civil War happened just a few miles outside Bandera. While most people have forgotten this tragedy, a group of historians will commemorate the incident with a special event next month on its anniversary, courtesy of the owner of the Hanging Tree Ranch.

On July 25, 1863, eight men from Williamson County were hanged by Confederate soldiers out of Camp Verde. Versions of the story vary, noting some of them were deserters or that they may have been on furlough, among other reasons. What is known is that they were also carrying more than \$900 with them. They were strangled by a horsehair rope, and one was shot through with a ramrod.

The soldiers responsible were indicted in 1866, but never brought to justice, and the story faded away with time. Their bodies were interred by the old pioneers of Bandera including Amasa Clark, George Hay and Frank Pyka.

Today, they lie there as they were buried - in one solitary grave under the hanging tree. A tombstone was provided by the townspeople of Bandera. Their names are listed as CJ Sawyer, W M Sawyer, George Thayre, William Shumake, Jack Whitmire, Jake Kyle, John Smart and Mr. Van Winkle.

The Hanging Tree Ranch, outside Bandera on Highway 1077, will be the setting for a 150th sesquicentennial commemoration of that sad and tragic event. Descendants of those eight men, historians and those with a special interest in this event are invited to attend the remembrance, scheduled for 11 am, Sunday, July 21.

It is hoped that additional information about what really happened will be shared. Not surprisingly, some individuals dispute the real reason for the hangings, which the soldiers claimed was because those eight men were deserters.

A number of online sources reference the Hanging Tree Tragedy, including several articles published by Carolyn B. Edwards in the Bandera County Courier in 2010, as well early accounts by Marvin Hunter, publisher of the "Frontier Times" magazine.

Photographs and other information may also be found on the website www.texasescapes.com.

For more information on the event, contact Irene Van Winkle by calling 830-285-9424 or by emailing

irenebvw@yahoo.com

2013-07-25

Remembering incident at Hanging Tree Ranch

By Judith Pannebaker BCC Editor



"Eight slain men have laid in a single grave two miles south of Bandera, Texas since the Civil War. A grove of trees gracefully, somberly arcs over them, guarding, mourning and marking the spot." This paragraph opened Irene Van Winkle's article, "Bandera Hanging Tree grave site of Civil War atrocity," in the Thursday, July 4, edition of the West Kerr Current.

'No living witnesses'

On Sunday, July 20, more than 300 people attended a commemoration on Hanging Tree Ranch, located on FM 1077, to mark the July 25, 1863, deaths of CJ Sawyer, WM Sawyer, George Thayre, William Shumake, Jack Whitmire, Jake Kyle, John Smart and Mr. Van Winkle - Andrew Jackson Van Winkle.

Clearly gratified by the unexpected turnout, San Antonio attorney, Phil Watkins, who has owned Hanging Tree Ranch since 1981 told the crowd, "When Irene and I talked in May about doing this, I expected maybe 50 people to attend. Last week, we had luncheon reservations for 215." Far more than that attended the combination belated memorial service and local history tutorial.

Special invitations went out to descendants of the murdered men, with Leta Georgiopoulos of Watertown, Massachusetts traveling the farthest. She is a distant relative of WM Sawyer.

The gathering took place under a copse of live oak trees amid a gratifying breeze. Looking up, Watkins asked, "Is this the (hangman's) tree? Nobody knows. My father-in-law, who did extensive research on this incident in Austin, San Antonio and Washington. DC, believes the real tree was closer to the creek. Later, the bodies were pulled up and buried in this spot. But no living witnesses remain so we'll never really know."

Seven lynched, one shot

Also shrouded in the mists of time is the real story of what happened to the eight men, who were residents of Florence in Williamson County.

After stopping in Bandera County carrying the not-so-inconsequential sum of \$900, seven found themselves on the wrong end of a noose while an eighth was shot to death.

According to Van Winkle, one account said they were traveling to Mexico. As she wrote: "Were they deserters, or innocent men looking to get provisions? After all, at least (four) of them had served in the Confederate Army, but they claimed they were on leave. Had the records been tampered, or was the term 'deserter' not accurate?"

"Was someone envious or suspicious and then reported them as 'bushwackers?' Or was it just greed?"

The upshot was that the men were killed by a party of Confederate soldiers out of Camp Verde and the men's horses, equipment, clothing, shoes and the \$900 were missing when Amasa Clark, George Hay and other early settlers of Bandera County discovered the bodies at the grisly scene.

Escaping Johnny Reb

Only one member of the party escaped the wrath of the Johnny Rebs that day. The 15-year-old boy is thought to have been William Smart, nephew of a hanged man John Henderson Smart.

This information came via Edward "Odell" Davis of Huntsville, Arkansas. Davis descended from Kip Piper, whose brother John had married the daughter of William Martin Sawyer, one of the hanged men.

Davis came across the information in a letter, written by Henry Nowlin, he had discovered in his mother's papers. After the hanging incident, the teenager, William Smart, apparently traveled to

Kendalia and spent a night with Dr. James Crispin Nowlin, Henry Nowlin's father. Smart then began his journey back to his home.

"It took the teenager 30 days to get back to Williamson County," Van Winkle said. "The families were waiting for news of their relatives - and it wasn't good."

She said that criminal charges were eventually filed against the soldiers who instigated the lynching. Major William J. Alexander commanded the band of 25 men. Watkins has a copy of the 1866 grand jury true bill, which indicted the men for highway robbery and murder.

"The men scattered after the war and were never brought to justice," Van Winkle said. "One was later killed by law enforcement officers in New Braunfels as they attempted to arrest him for a crime, but the others got away, which was not an uncommon occurrence in those terrible days after the Civil War ended."

Interesting info

According to Watkins, in the mid-1960s, a barbed wire fence that surrounded the communal grave was replaced by a sturdy pipe fence. Apparently, a group of men, who had been 'ordered' to 'fix that fence properly,' sneaked onto the ranch and made upgrades at night. Watkins was surprised to learn that the man who actually built the new fence, Raymond Barrier Jr., was attending the ceremony with his wife, Paula.

University of Texas Austin graduate student Nick Roland is doing his dissertation on Central Texas during the Civil War, focusing on the persecution of Unionists in the Hill County. He thanked those attending the ceremony for "doing a good job preserving a history that has been ignored in larger historical records."

Roland noted that the first recorded account detailing the incident occurred in 1896 for the 50th anniversary of the founding of Fredericksburg. "It was written in German and was not translated into English until 1971," he said.

Noting the importance of written records, Roland continued, "The oral tradition says the men were on passes or furloughs when they were hung, but we need documentation. Nevertheless, he added, even had the men deserted, they were entitled to a court martial, not to be summarily hung without a trial.

Attempting to give context to the lynching, Mario Salas, professor of political science and education at University of Texas San Antonio, said that many times Confederate troops evolved into an anti-slavery stance. "Deserters from the Confederate Army had to travel to Matamoros or Mexico to join the Union Army," Salas said. "Additionally, the majority of Germans in the Hill Country had voted against succession." He referenced a shootout of several days duration that happened between Germans and Confederate troops in San Antonio.

Other descendants of the hanged men offered bits of information about the incident that had been passed down in their respective families.

'Gate always open'

Concluding the memorial, Watkins said, "I don't plan to be around for the 200th anniversary so I'm glad we were able to be here today to give respect to these brave men."

He added, "Our front gate is always open so descendants of the men can visit and pay their respects."

Pictured: Photo by Judith Pannebaker

Over 300 people attended a commemoration for eight men killed at the Hanging Tree Ranch on July 25, 1863. The memorial took place Sunday, July 21, at the ranch on FM 1077, south of Bandera. More images of the day will be published in the Thursday, August 1, edition of the Courier. In addition, during the next several weeks, the Courier will present a detailed history of the incident, written by Irene Van Winkle.

2013-08-01

Hanging Tree Ranch incident - a dark Civil War crime Part I

By Irene Van Winkle Special to the Courier

(Editor's note - Irene Van Winkle's husband is a descendant of one of the eight men killed in Bandera County during the Civil War. The Courier is pleased to present her extensive research into the Hanging Tree incident in four parts.)

Eight slain men have lain in a single grave two miles south of Bandera since the Civil War. A grove of trees gracefully, somberly arcs over them - guarding, mourning and marking that spot.

Even now, 150 years later, their deaths are still being disputed. It is a classic example of the concept "There are two sides to every story."

On Sunday, July 21, at 11 am, a commemoration of this tragedy - which some call an atrocity - was held at the Hanging Tree Ranch on FM 1077.

Ranch owner Phil Watkins, a San Antonio attorney, invited descendants of the hanged men who were all from Williamson County; historians and others interested in the history of the Civil War, the Confederacy, Hill Country, Texas and of Camp Verde; members of the Texas, Kerr and Bandera Historical Commissions, as well as the public, to the commemoration.

Explaining his purpose behind the event, Watkins said, "Our family has owned the Hanging Tree Ranch since 1981. Over the years, many descendants have called the Frontier Times Museum for directions to the ranch or to get in touch with me. It is apparent that the gravesite is important to many people as evidenced by the number of persons who visit each year.

"We consider it an honor to keep and maintain the grave and make it available to family descendants. Our hope for the commemoration is that families will share the stories passed down about the events and especially the reason for the trip to Mexico."

The modest grave, covered with rocks, is girded by protective fencing. At the head of the tiny plot sits a single stone marker, oval-shaped at the top. Above the names of the men is carved a right hand holding a few links of chain, with the index finger pointing down, holding two broken links. Below are these inscriptions:

"CJ Sawyer, WM Sawyer, George Thayre, William Shumake, Jack Whitmire, Jake Kyle, John Smart, Mr. Van Winkle.

"Died July 25, 1863.

"Remember friends as you pass by, As you are now, so once was I, As I am now, you soon will be, Prepare yourself to follow me."

A number of sources have been published, researched and orally passed along, and some facts are consistent.

It is known that these men were from Florence in Williamson County, close to Burnet County. They had stopped at Bandera, and by some accounts, brought or won a considerable sum of money - about \$900. This was no small amount, especially during the Civil War. In fact, it would be the equivalent of \$20,000 to \$25,000 in today's dollars.

What has been questioned is what was told - an account saying they had said they were traveling, heading to Mexico. Were they deserters, or innocent men looking to get provisions? After all, at least three of them had served in the Confederate Army, but they claimed they were on leave. Had the records been tampered with, or was the term "deserter" not accurate?

Was someone envious or suspicious and then reported them as "bushwhackers?"
Next week, Part II will examine the accounts of the actual hanging.

Descendants of the eight men killed at the Hanging Tree Ranch during the Civil War registered during a commemorative ceremony, held at the ranch on Saturday, July 20, and hosted by ranch owners Phil and Shirley Watkins.



Irene and David Van Winkle stand by the gravesite of Andrew Jackson, the ancestor of David Van Winkle who was one of the men killed by Confederate troops at Bandera's Hanging Tree Ranch in July 1863.

2013-08-08

Hanging Tree Ranch incident Part II - Dark Civil War crime

By Irene Van Winkle Special to the Courier



(Editor's note: The reasons for a group of Confederate soldiers from Camp Verde under the direction of Major William Alexander to hang eight men from an oak tree in Frank Pyka's pasture have long been debated. In Part II, the author looks at the hanging.)

[Were the Williamson County men deserters deserving to be hanged?]
Or was it just greed?

Leaving Bandera a few days later, the party stopped to rest along the way at Squirrel Creek. By this time, about 25 Texas State (Confederate) troops from Camp Verde, commanded by Major William J. Alexander, caught up with the band, which also included a boy of about 16 years of age.

In Pioneer History of Bandera County, Marvin Hunter wrote: "Approaching under cover to within a very short distance of where the men were camped, Maj. Alexander stepped out into an opening and swinging his saber over his head called upon them to surrender, telling them he had them surrounded and there was no chance for escape, and if they would quietly submit he would pledge his word that they should have a fair trial by court-martial at Camp Verde."

It turned out to be a lie.

Initially, it seemed the soldiers had intended to round them up as "bushwhackers," or deserters, and take them in for questioning. As they proceeded back to Camp Verde, while in Frank Pyka's pasture, events took a dark turn. Several soldiers - perhaps tempted by the money and valuables - began tossing around the notion of hanging, and Alexander did not object.

Not all of them agreed, and a few left the scene, among them Richard "Dick" W. Nowlin, who later realized his horsehair rope was missing.

Chris Emmett, in *Texas Camel Tales*" (first edition, 1932, Naylor Printing Co.), had interviewed many old timers about the history of the former camel camp. In the chapter, *The Confederacy*, one man who talked about this era was Jim "Uncle Jimmie" Walker who was in Lawhorne's company (McCord's Regiment) with Jim and Dick Nowlin.

As "the urge for execution became greater... Defying the major in command, Dick Nowlin and Benj. Patton mounted their horses and rode 17 miles straight back to Camp Verde, where they reported the conduct of the officer and men," Emmett said. "While enroute, however, Dick Nowlin discovered that he had lost his hair rope, the only one of its kind in the command, and it then became apparent to him, since he had made it known to Major Alexander that his contemplated conduct met his disdain, that his hair rope had been stolen by some of the troop so as to make it appear he had been a participant in the affair. A party went out to investigate on the strength of the representation of these two soldiers ... but before the arrival of the investigating party, the deed had been done.

"The rope had been produced, and one by one, seven of the men had been swung to a convenient tree..."

Hunter's rendition painted an equally graphic picture, "... and each one died by strangulation, being drawn up until choked to death."

Next week's Part III will take a closer look at the backgrounds of the victims.

Pictured: Stephanie Sword has been contracted by Texas A&M Forest Service to rewrite "Famous Trees of Texas," which features Bandera's 'hangin' tree' as the first entry. "The new volume will pay tribute to author John Haislet who wrote the first edition in 1970," Sword said.

Reporter Irene Van Winkle stood beneath what is believed to be the hangin' tree from which seven men met their grisly deaths during the Civil War.

2013-08-15

Hanging Tree Ranch incident - a dark Civil War crime Part III

By Irene Van Winkle Special to the Courier



(Editor's note - The reasons for a group of Confederate soldiers from Camp Verde, under the direction of Major William Alexander, to hang seven men from an oak tree in Frank Pyka's pasture - and shoot an eighth - have long been debated. In Part III the author looks at the victims' backgrounds.)

[Each man was pulled up over a branch of the oak tree using a horsehair rope.]

"When life was extinct the victim was let down, and the rope cut, leaving the noose still about his neck." Historian Paul Burrier of Leakey said that the eighth man, William Sawyer, begged to be shot and his wish was granted; another version said that they had run out of rope.

"A five-man firing squad was organized," Burrier said. "... They fired, but only one shot hit Sawyer and it was in the arm. A sixth man, seeing Sawyer was only wounded, walked up to where he was laying. He loaded and capped his rifle and fired. In his haste he forgot to remove the ramrod from the rifle barrel and it penetrated Sawyer's body and went about 10-12 inches into the ground."

The teenage boy, however, was spared, Emmett said, "probably because of his weakness; and he

escaped to the residence of Dr. JC Nowlin on the same day and there told the story of the massacre, while being given protection and comfort for the night by this venerable man. He went back to Williamson County."

His identity was not confirmed at the time, but his descendants think they know. More on this later.

Meanwhile, the bodies were discovered by a man named Joseph Poor, a resident of West Verde Creek, who ran and fetched Amasa Clark and others to the grisly scene.

"Some of the clothing and shoes of the dead men had been taken off and carried away, and I have been told that they were robbed of several hundred dollars as well as their horses and equipment," Emmett wrote.

Most of the hanged men were connected, related by blood to at least one or another. The Sawyers were brothers, and George Thayer was the brother of WM Sawyer's wife, Catherine.

Jake (Jacob) Kyle, born around 1840, was a cousin of Jack Whitmire. John Smart was believed to be the uncle of Mr. (Andrew Jackson) Van Winkle. At this writing, it is unclear if William Shumake was related to the others. Most of them were farmers, and several were married.

They ranged in age from 18-42 years of age, of those whose birth year was known.

At least three - the Sawyers and Van Winkle - have records online showing they had served in the CSA. Andrew Jackson Van Winkle had enlisted as a private in 1861 at Lampasas County in the 27th Brigade, under Capt. RY Cross. He enlisted in Belton for a year on Jan. 15, 1862, and joined Co. D 18th Regt., Texas Vol. Cav (CSA) of Bell County, Tex, under Capt. Milton Damron.

Coston J. Sawyer served in Co. A. Morgan's Regiment, Texas Cavalry. Records show he served from March-June, 1862, re-enlisting from June-August, 1862, showing up on another muster roll from August 30-Oct., 30, 1862, then again from Nov. 1862-Feb. 1863.

Sadly, official "rebel archive" records noted that William Sawyer was a "deserter." They said that he was "hanged," which is wrong. Descendant Stanley Sawyer, of Denton, shared some personal details of William's poignant story.

In the spring of 1863, shortly before he was killed, William wrote from a hospital in Columbus, Texas to his wife, Catherine (nee Thayer), while recuperating from illness. One of these letters survives and reflects the difficulty of dealing with prolonged illness and separation from family. Here is an excerpt, spelling and punctuation intact:

"Well Catherine I hope that you will rite a little offener I rite I to you. I want to see you and the babes so bad that I don't (know) what to do. I hope this will find all of you well and plenty to eat. But I drank plenty such as it is but it don't soot (suit) Bill. I don't study about nothin else but you and the children. I think that my head is sewelled for it feels so. If I was there I would get well I know and I am coming before long girl or will only if I live. But that is uncertain look now the way they dy (die) here. Do the best you can and tend the post office and you shall here from me a long as I stay har. There are a grate many of our regiment here sum sick and sum well. My water an't took from me yet. I haven't been to the table yet. I get better to brought to mes and when the bell rings they're all going too fast and they wood run over me. Don't bee un easy bout me I will do the best I can. I can walk twise the length of that lane. I think that will let me off againt the first of next month. Try to have plenty of milk and butter and pees if you well anuff. I remain your husband until death." WM Sawyer

Next week, a look at the young survivor of the massacre.

Pictured: Numerous descendants of WM Sawyer attended a commemoration of the Civil War incident, held July 20 at the Hanging Tree Ranch, located south of Bandera on FM 1077.

Bottom: William Martin Sawyer

2013-08-22

Hanging Tree Ranch incident-Part IV

By Irene Van Winkle Special to the Courier

(Editor's note: The reasons for a group of Confederate soldiers from Camp Verde under the direction of Major William Alexander to hang eight men from an oak tree in Frank Pyka's pasture have long been debated. In Part IV, the author shares information about the young boy who escaped the hanging and the names of descendants of the victims.)

After years of speculation about the identity of the young boy who was released, there was news uncovered in 1941 pertaining to the incident, said Stanley Sawyer, adding new perspective about what happened to the lone eyewitness.

Stanley said that he received information from the son of Dr. James Crispin Nowlin, settlers of the Camp Verde area. A letter written by Henry Moore Nowlin, Dick's half-brother, Stanley said, was the basis for information he got from Edward "Odell" Davis of Huntsville, Arkansas. Davis is descended from Kip Piper (who Dr. Nowlin delivered on the same day he delivered his son, Henry Nowlin), whose brother, John, married William Martin Sawyer's daughter, Ellen. Henry noted that "The young fellow ... when released by the mob on Julian (Creek) came directly to Curry's Creek and spent the night with us."

Stanley added more details:

"Odell tells the story that the surviving boy's last name was Smart," he said. "He was kin to John Smart, who was hanged. My research leads me to believe that the hanged man was John Henderson Smart, who lived at Burnet at the time. John's brother, Bryce, had a son, William, who was the age of the boy who escaped hanging."

There was a Smart community in Williamson County, near Florence. It took the boy 30 days to relay the sad news to his family, none of whom knew of the deaths. Catherine was living on the San Gabriel River near Georgetown.

Here is the likely connection of the Smart family to the Van Winkles, found through Melanie Hester of Lexington, Texas. The hanged John (actually Jonathan) Smart was likely the brother of Elizabeth White Smart Van Winkle, mother of "Mr. (Andrew Jackson) Van Winkle," and wife of Thomas Benton Van Winkle. Thomas B. shows up in the Van Winkle family tree as the son of Jesse and Mary Ann Bra(e)den Van Winkle. This family group had settled in South Carolina, and then Jesse and his children scattered. Thomas went to Indiana and Missouri, and came to Texas in a 16-wagon train, settling in Williamson County. He was buried at Browns Creek Cemetery but when the US Government bought the land for Camp Hood in 1942, Thomas's remains were moved to Restland Cemetery in Gatesville, Coryell County.

One of Thomas Benton's youngest siblings was David Lawson "DL" Van Winkle (1821-1909), born in South Carolina, who took his family (with wife Dorcas Ann Inman and sister Rebecca) first to Mississippi, and by 1856, to Hill County (near the Steiner Valley, Peoria and Huron). His descendants lived around Hillsboro and Blum, later mostly moving on after the home places had been sold.

One of DL's local descendants is David Van Winkle of Kerrville. Other Van Winkle kin in the area, though not necessarily directly from that line, include Michael, Randi, Kerry Buford and Curtis Morris.

As for criminal charges filed against the soldiers or Major Alexander, Watkins said he located an original document in the Bandera District Clerk's office - the indictment dated 25th of April, 1866. Written on page 123 was: "The Grand Jury came into Court and brought in the following Polls of Indictment - The State of Texas vs. Wm. J. Alexander, et als - Murder; Highway robbery."

However, citing their inability to locate Alexander or the others, the courts were unable to bring them to justice.

So, regardless of their reasons for the hangings, a good number of people believe they got away with murder - not an uncommon occurrence during that terrible war.



In the mid-1960s, Raymond Barrier Jr. and his friends, under the dark of night, "fixed the fence properly" that surrounded the communal grave of the men who had been killed during the Civil War at what was to become Bandera's Hanging Tree Ranch. Barrier is pictured with his wife, Paula.



San Antonio attorney Phil Watkins, owner of the Hanging Tree Ranch, invited descendants of the hanged men, as well as historians and others, to the commemoration on Sunday, July 21.



This gravestone marks the communal grave of the men killed on July 25, 1863. A recent commemoration marked the 150th anniversary of the act.