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THE WEST'S BEST HIDDEN HORROR
—Interview with Jim Gilliland's Niece

A CRACKED HEAD & A BROKEN HEART



JOHN COX
"Fingers Crossed and Praying"

JIM GILLILAND'S name appears prominently in all accounts of the Colonel A. J. Fountain mystery of 1896. Gilliland was tried at Hillsboro, New Mexico, along with Oliver Lee and Bill McNew, for the murder of Fountain and his eight-year-old son Henry. All were acquitted. Jim's sister, Lucy Gilliland Raley, has also been mentioned frequently in stories that have been written about this famous case.

Mary Wright, Lucy's daughter, is living today in a sunny little house in a New Mexico community with her husband, Ellis. Before their retirement, the

wrote for a Columbus newspaper owned at that time by the well-known publisher, Bill McGaw.

Mary, born in 1902 and Lucy's first child, had four sisters and two brothers. Lucy was destined to raise these children by herself, as best she could, on their ranch just outside the little town of Oro Grande [Orogrande], New Mexico.

"My father, Bob Raley, was killed in 1915 when I was thirteen years old," Mary tells. "He and Bill McNew had had trouble. I don't know what it was about and I doubt if they knew—over horses or something—there were lots of feuds



Mary Wright in 1974.

THE WEST'S BEST HIDDEN HORROR

By **GLADYS RODEHAVER**
Photos Courtesy Author

— Interview with Jim Gilliland's niece

Wrights owned a store and warehouse at Red Rock. She was the postmistress there, was the Red Rock news reporter for the Silver City *Enterprise*, and also



in those days. Papa had taken a shot at Bill in a saloon; he didn't hit him but the bullet was close enough to leave powder burns. They took my father up to jail and he stayed there all summer. They had the trial that fall and he was turned loose.

"On the day Papa was killed he was going into the telegraph office in the post office at Oro Grande to send a telegram to his attorney in Alamogordo. Bill McNew, who was inside, took a shot at him through the glass door and my father just dropped. My mother was with him. As he fell she grabbed him and it jerked her down and another bullet went right past her neck.

"My father was armed and she started to pick up his gun, but Bill said, 'Don't touch it, Lucy, if you do I'll kill you.' She knew he meant it and she thought about her children who were still small and she knew that there would be nobody to take care of them."

Ellis Wright spoke up, "It was a good thing that old Bill didn't kill her for if he had, Jim Gilliland would've eat him up like a turnip!"

MARY continued, "The telegraph office and post office were in the Colthorpe home. Colthorpe was the postmaster. There may have been a telephone there, but I never heard that they were called to the telephone as a ruse, as some accounts say, although it could have

been; however, that is not the story as I remember it.

"In those days, if it wasn't for your friends and neighbors in time of trouble, you would be in a bad fix. Mr. Vorhees, who drove the school bus, got the bus and drove my father's body and my

At left, Ellis Wright in 1974. Below, Albert J. Fountain who mysteriously disappeared with his son.

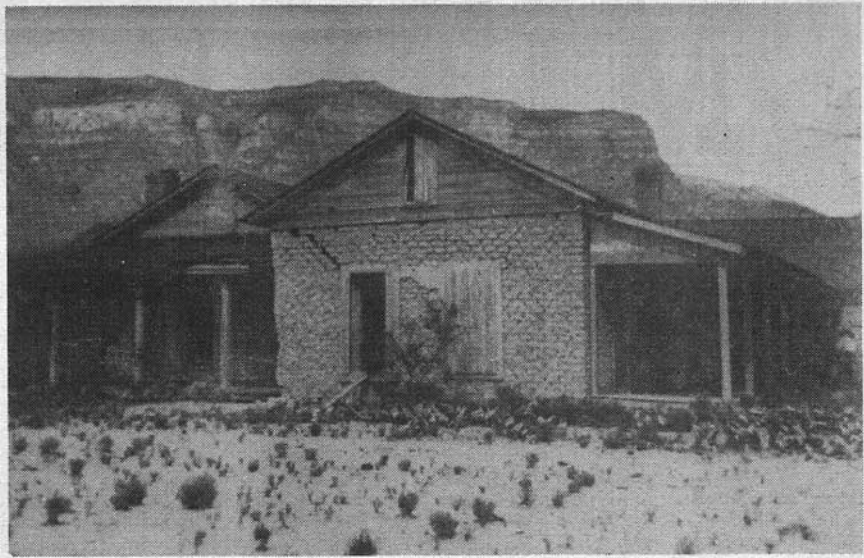


Courtesy Museum of New Mexico

mother to our home. There were no undertakers, so Mr. Vorhees and the telegrapher at the depot laid my father out and got him ready for burial. They buried him at Oro Grande the next day.

"The mine workers were mostly Mexican, and as my father lived in Mexico for twenty years, he spoke the language fluently. He got along with them very well and had taken care of a number of them who had been injured in the mine. They worked for a dollar a day, ten hours a day, and when they got hurt the property owners didn't take care of them.

"On the day my father was buried



Courtesy Alamogordo, New Mexico Library

Above, Oliver Lee's ranch house at the mouth of Dog Canyon. At left, Oliver Lee.

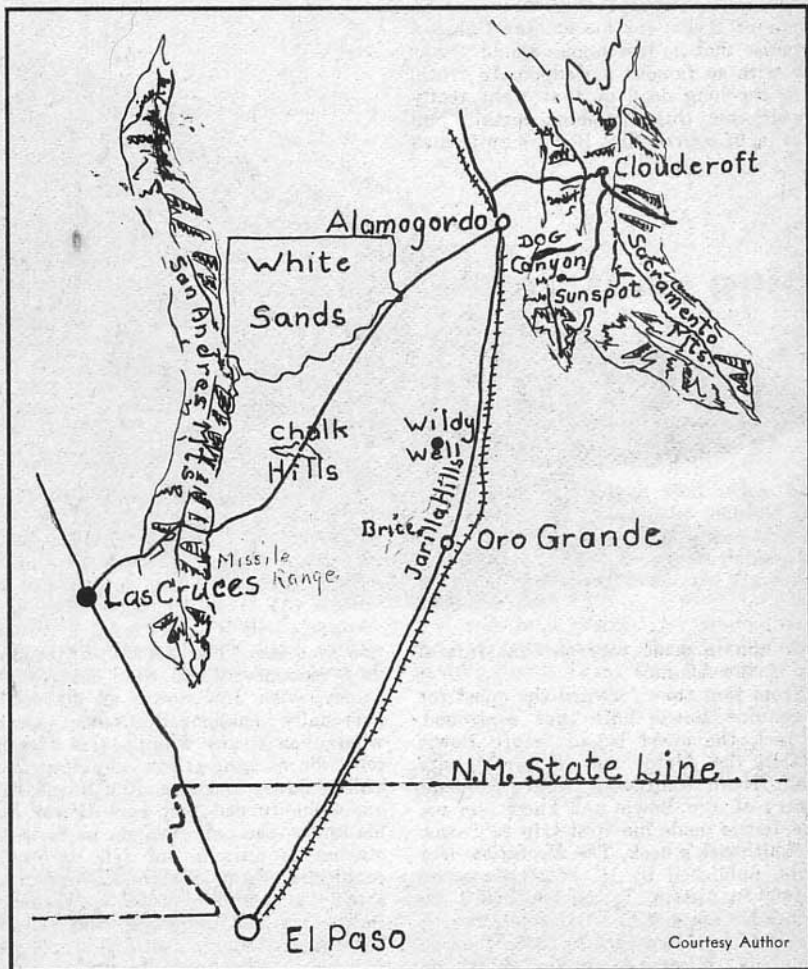


Courtesy Rio Grande Historical Collection, Alamogordo, New Mexico Library

they were told to work as usual, but when the whistle blew no one showed up and those Mexicans all got in a gang and walked from Brice—up in the hills where the mines were—to Oro Grande to the funeral. One of the Mexican women in Oro Grande raised cosmos and she picked huge bouquets of them and they were the only flowers at the funeral.

"Bill McNew was given a trial in Alamogordo for killing my father but he was acquitted, probably pleading self-defense; however, my father didn't even know McNew was at the post office when he went there, and he was shot before he got to the door.

"At the time Bill McNew shot my father he was a rich cattleman—he was



Courtesy Author

flourishing—but later on he lost everything. When he started going downhill he left his wife, and then his sons turned against him. A Mexican woman took care of him in Alamogordo until he got very low and then Mrs. McNew, who

was a wonderful woman—my mother liked her real well—finally took care of him until he died.

"My mother didn't want my brothers to associate with the McNew boys, but
(Continued on page 46)



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Smithwick's Bowie Knife

(Continued from page 16)

This was indeed a banner day in our study of Texas history, and one that I will always associate with the feeling shared by all treasure hunters when they discover something too good to be true.

I suppose one might say that I also shared one of the fatal errors of treasure finders. I talked! One of my listeners was a man of much wealth and a goodly knowledge of history to-boot. The knife and owners were tracked down, and "hunter," as we shall call my listener, confirmed what I already knew—that the knife was genuine and the student was a grandson of the Smithwick who perished in his cell at Huntsville.

Money in quantity—most of the time—is a great and powerful mover, so the Smithwick Bowie found its way from the old family trunk to the plush glass-covered case where it rested with the "hunter" for a number of years. During this time, tests made on the metal proved its age beyond all doubt, and its mode of fashioning further established the genuineness of the Smithwick Bowie. The "hunter" was still at work, however, in his quest through museums and prime collections of edged weapons seeking to find if there might exist still another Smithwick Bowie knife. To my knowledge he never did locate one.

Finally death overcame the "hunter" and the Smithwick Bowie went on the block in a somewhat strange manner. The family heirs were anxious to be rid of those strange things dear to the "hunter" but not negotiable at the bank, so they piled up mounds of guns, knives, swords, and Indian relics in a jumble and sought out appraisers and buyers in a much hurried fashion.

By this time I had moved to North Texas and was located within easy driving distance from the "hunter" with whom I had often visited. When the materials were gathered for sale, I was called along with others to appraise and to buy.

On short notice wealthy buyers are not always readily available, and the selling went slowly in the opinion of the heirs. In their haste many items were bunched for fast sale and did not bring the hundreds or thousands they could have commanded even then. In short, I acquired the Smithwick Bowie at something less than the price the "hunter" had paid—which was generous to be sure, and lavish to the Smithwicks who were much concerned with daily bread.

The Smithwick Bowie is a gold mine in terms of Texas history, particularly when it is shown and explained to students. Should it rest in a museum under lights and on a backdrop of green velvet? Perhaps, but not just now. I often think that I am not unlike the "hunter"!

The West's Best Hidden Horror

(Continued from page 13)

They were very good friends and all except Bill were good people. I think Bill was bad before he came to this country. Ellis' father told me, before he was my father-in-law, tales about McNew's wild life. He said the first man

he killed was a shepherd. 'McNew, even as a boy, was a renegade', Ellis' father said. 'You know where the last of the nineteen men he killed is buried (that was my father), and I know where the first one is buried, the shepherd he drug to death in Texas.'

"One thing I'll always appreciate my Uncle Jim Gilliland for is this: my mother had goats and sheep to take care of and although we had Mexican herders, she herded them herself and we children also herded when we weren't in school. It was lonely but that was our livelihood. Bill McNew had a ranch at Oro Grande. He used to have one on the Sacramento River, up in the mountains next to the Oliver Lee ranch, but he sold it to Ellis' father. McNew knew my mother very well, he knew her before she married, and after my father was dead he kept coming around. She was alone, with no one to protect her, and so he kept pestering her, saying such things as, 'Lucy, now you know we could be friends; let's let bygones be bygones.'

"Finally my Uncle Jim Gilliland told McNew, 'Bob Raley and I didn't get along but I'm going to tell you something: you'd better let Lucy and the children alone—if you don't, you'll answer to me.' McNew didn't bother Mother any more after that.

Mr. Wright broke in and said, "You know about that Fountain killing? Well, what Jim said to McNew was, 'If you don't leave them alone, you won't get off like you did cutting the Fountain kid's throat.'"

Mary interrupted quietly, "The Fountain killing took place before my time, and the accounts of it were just stories to me. But my father's killing—I actually lived that. My Uncle Jim was only seventeen or eighteen when the Fountains were killed. He ran with Oliver Lee when he was just a big kid and Lee told him what to do and A. B. Fall told Lee what to do, I guess."

Mary was asked if her mother wrote a letter to the Fountain family after her husband, Bob Raley, was killed, as some accounts state, in which her mother reportedly said that if she had testified at the trial—as she should have—maybe her husband would still be alive.

"I think somebody got mixed up there," Mary replied. "If my mother wrote to the Fountains after my father was killed, I didn't know anything about it. However, she knew that Bill McNew was involved in the Fountain killing. She worked for Mrs. McNew for awhile, but my mother would only have been seventeen in 1896 when the Fountain trouble took place. She was twenty-two when she married in 1901."

Mr. Wright interjected, "You see there were no bodies ever found, and I asked George Gilliland, Jim's younger brother, what they done with them. I said, 'You know durn well the posse come up there from Cruces and they couldn't have buried them that fast going across that sand without leaving enough signs for them to follow.' George said they never were buried, that they carried them to Wildy [Wilde] Well. A steam pump was there and McNew said, 'Cut them up and burn the pieces in the boiler.'"

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"Uncle George was the one that was told to haul the mesquite wood and pile it out there," Mary said. "They ran the boiler with mesquite wood fires. I've been at Wildy Well quite a lot of times; the boiler was used to pump water. Uncle George told Ellis that he hauled the wood and he said the others didn't tell him anything—he was just about fifteen—but he would listen to them talking. Of course this is just hearsay, it was before my time, but we did hear it from Uncle George."

Mr. Wright added, "George also told me the posse trailed them to Wildy Well, but 500 head of cattle were running there and the cattle were driven over the trail. When the men at Wildy Well left for Lee's Dog Canyon ranch, George said they left one at a time on the cow trail."

"Ellis and I once worked for Mr. Lee and he was always good to us," said Mary Wright. "I don't think he was an angel, I never saw any halo over his head, but he helped a lot of people and he was nice in lots of ways. If a Mexican needed work Lee would give him work—anybody needing anything, they could go to Lee and would always get it. He was involved in this—we can't doubt that—but later on he got to be a well-respected man and he was our representative from Otero County for several years. His family was respected too; Ellis went to school with his oldest boy, Hop Lee."

"Mr. Lee had a home on the Sacra-

mento River; he built a wonderful ranch house there after he moved up from Dog Canyon, but he sold out eventually to the old Circle Cross Cattle Company, and became their general manager. That was an enormous spread—it reached from Cloudercroft to the Texas line. We worked for him on his ranch for two and a half years before he sold out."

In conclusion, Mary Wright gave some particulars on Jim Gilliland's final days. "In his late years Uncle Jim settled down and bought a ranch in the San Andres Mountains which the government later bought up for the White Sands Missile Range. While he had the ranch he almost lost his eyesight. There was a big drought and he would have to burn the thorns off the prickly pear cactus with a gasoline torch so his cattle could eat them. This affected his eyes so that he had to have one of his nephews or some of the neighbors drive him around. He died in Hot Springs, now Truth or Consequences, about 1946."

"Struck Oil"

(Continued from page 23)

year Williamson signed a contract with Andrew Birrell, a theatrical agent, that was to take him and his new wife first to Australia and then on around the world.

Williamson was looking for new material to take with him on his tour when he was approached by an old miner, Sam

W. Smith, who when he wasn't chopping wood, splitting out railroad ties and the like, often wrote plays. Smith, born in Fayette County, Indiana, in 1831 was educated for the law. He taught school for a while. Then when the gold fever broke out, he went to California. After varied experiences he enlisted in Company A, 4th Infantry California Volunteers in 1861, and served until 1866. He was commissioned Lieutenant of his company by Governor Low, but he was popularly called "Captain" Smith by old Californians.

IN 1870 Captain Smith made quite a rich strike in the gold diggings but three years later he went to San Francisco where he lost everything in one of James C. Flood's big stock deals. While walking the streets trying to devise means to get a meal, he decided to try to sell one of his plays.

He approached several actors around the city but they showed no interest in his manuscripts and he was about to burn them in despair when he met Jimmy Williamson and showed him "The Blue and Grey" about the Civil War. Although Williamson did not care for the play he asked if Smith had any others to offer.

"Well," replied Smith, "I have another piece if you'll let me read it. It's called 'The Deed, or Five Years Away.'" (Coincidentally it was set in the oil dis-